ASE Opening Ceremony
August 29, 2014
ASE celebrates inauguration of the School and opening of the 2014-15 academic year

On Friday August 29, 2014, Africa’s largest center for training and research in economics and management, the African School of Economics (ASE), was launched with distinguished guests from around the world. Over 300 people, including government officials, members of the international community, current and past faculty, friends, and family gathered at the Benin Marina Hotel in Cotonou to celebrate this joyous occasion.

The evening was hosted by Dônklam Abalo, a local radio personality from Radio Tokpa. The spirit of Benin came to life with an energetic performance from the 3L Ifede dance troop and a soulful rendition from Don Metok.

After marking the official opening of ASE with a toast, the audience welcomed ASE’s Director General, Professor Léonard Wantchékon, to the podium to share his vision for this ground-breaking institution. His remarks highlighted ASE’s strong analytical foundation and its unique position of understanding into the past and present realities of Africa. As a Pan-African institution, three ASE students from Benin, Cameroon, and Kenya described ASE’s exceptional capacity to lead the continent to new heights.

Wantchékon’s praise for ASE was reiterated by a number of honored guests. Moïse Mensah, the High Commissioner for Collaborative Governance in Benin, shared his dream that by 2020 the alumni of ASE will present the world with new models of development. Benin’s Secretary General of Government, Alassane Tigri, expressed his hope that ASE will grow in size, quality and reputation. Similar sentiments were shared by Aurèle Houngbédji, the President of Benin’s Advisor on Investment, as he encouraged ASE students to develop essential skills in mathematics. These inspiring addresses demonstrated the vast potential of ASE to develop analytical solutions for the people of Benin, Africa, and the World. The evening festivities concluded with a banquet and many laughs on the dance floor.
Agenda

Welcoming Remarks and Introduction
- Dônklam Abalo, Radio Tokpa

Speakers
- Léonard Wantchékon, ASE founder and president
- Appalo Appolinaire, Wilfried Fotso Youmbi (MMES, class of 2016); Anne Khatali Ojoyi (MBA class of 2016)
- Moïse Mensah, High Commissioner for Collaborative Governance in Benin
- Alassane Tigri, Secretary General of the Government of Benin
- Aurèle Houngbédji, Advisor on Investment to the President of Benin
- Ignace Yétchenou, poet

Closing Remarks
- Léonard Wantchékon, ASE founder and president
Photo highlights from the Opening Ceremony

Dônklam Abalo (Radio Tokpa) welcomes the audience

Guests watch a video of ASE’s prospective campus while Léonard Wanchékón, founder and president of ASE, offers a comprehensive explanation of the future facilities
Group picture of MBA and MMES students
Instant of 3L Ifede’s performance

Don Metok performing during the gala
Ifede’s performance included dancing, singing and some acrobatics.
Léonard Wantchékon (founder and president of ASE) giving his speech

Moïse Mensah (High Commissioner for Collaborative Governance in Benin)
Alassane Tigri (Benin's Secretary General of Government)

Aurèle Houngbédji (Advisor on Investment to the President of Benin)
Ifede’s repertoire added the perfect mix of color and culture to the night.
Three ASE students (class of 2016) shared some thoughts with the audience. Left: Wilfried Fotso Youmbi (MMES); right, Anne Khatali Ojoyi (MBA)

Appalo Appolinaire (MMES)

Ignace Yétchenou
I am deeply moved by such a warm introduction. Let me begin by greeting Mr. Allassani Tigri, the Secretary General of the government; my high school French teacher, Mr. Moïse Mensah, High Commissioner of Collaborative Governance in Benin and also one of my idols; Professor Paulin Hountondji, the president of the National Council of Education; Professor Cruz, the vice rector of the University of Abomey Calavi; Professor Biaou, vice rector of the University of Parakou; and Professor Aboubacar Marcos, the representative of the director of the Institute of Math and Physical Sciences of Porto-Novo. Let me continue by greeting all of the professors the Institute of Empirical Research and Political Economy (IREPE), all of the professors of the African School of Economics (ASE), and all of the representatives of government institutions, international organizations, and diplomatic bodies currently present. Again, I am incredibly moved by the fact that you are all present at this important ceremony.

I have to tell you that today is a big day for Africa, for Benin, and for me. We are about to launch what will be the largest research center in Economy and Management in Africa. I want to profit of this occasion to thank everyone who by their love, their efforts, and their investment made who I am today. First off, my parents Innocent Wantchékon and Virginie Boko, my wife Catherine Kossou, my daughter Kristia, my son Travis, my sister Isabelle, and my brother Ferdinand. Thanks as well to my childhood friends including those present here from the Lycée Bouk. It’s them, through their friendship and camaraderie, who created in me the drive that allowed a young student from Zagnanado to be today a Professor at Princeton University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The African School of Economics is born in response to the current gap between the need for training in Economics and Management in Africa and the current level of our universities’ training in those fields. A study showed that to launch and sustain full economic development in Africa, we would need at least one million administrators trained to the international standard. Right now, Africa only produces 500 graduates a year coming from the ten or so MBA programs that meet the international standard.

In terms of research outputs, the need for economists of international caliber is also clear, whether that be for fundamental research in Economics or for applied research. For example, in terms of applied research, one study showed that in the last 10 years the World Bank has done 258 impact evaluation studies and only 11% of the studies included African co-authors. Since 2002, only 7% of the 401 publications on Africa in the Journal of Development Economics are co-authored by Africans.

There is thus a fundamental problem of lack of representation of Africa and Africans in the debates on the future of Africa. This gap, this need, is what pushed me to take the initiative to create the African School of Economics.

What is the difference between the African School and Economics and what is currently
being done in Africa and in the world? First of all, the training that we are going to offer will be grounded in Mathematics and Statistics, Microeconomic Analysis, and also the Social and Economic History of Africa. In addition, if you compare the contents of the training we will be offering here at the African School of Economics with the contents of the training in Economics at most American universities, you will note that the training is very similar. Therefore, we don’t offer a degree that we’re trying to raise to the international standard; instead, we offer a degree that it already at the international standard as it’s being put in place. I firmly believe that this program will be the best in Africa.

There is something that we offer that wouldn’t be available in the best programs in North America and Europe. Our students will directly experience African realities. Therefore, our training is not one from the outside that you’ll then have to try and adapt to African realities; instead, you’ll be able to implement your training to African realities immediately. Here, you will have access to data, access to African men and women, and like I said earlier, you will have access to the social and economic history of Africa and African culture. Consequently, if you’re a student in Economics and Management and you want to work on research questions in African economic development, there is something that we can offer that even the most prestigious universities in America cannot offer: you can look out the window of your classroom and you’ll have a direct look into African life. It will be a source of inspiration and will allow you to adapt the theory that you are learning, the analysis you are doing, to African reality. It will allow you to directly implement the results of your work to the realities of the continent. Therefore, it’s not surprising that we have started to receive applications from students not only in Africa, but many from countries outside of the continent. We received applications from American students and students from the Middle East which signifies that our message is spreading.

At the African School of Economics we want to develop love for Africa, patriotism, and teamwork. This will allow our students to push through difficult times and constraints. Let me tell this short story of the amazing experience I had at Lycée Bouke during the 1977 school year. I was in the science concentration and because of issues that took place during the school year, our Mathematics professors were absent for more than 5 of the 9 months of schools. In the face of this situation, the students decided to protest and organize to face the challenge. We formed study groups to work together. The best among us became Algebra, Physics, and Philosophy professors for the group. The result? Even though the national average on the baccalaureate was 12%, the average in our at our school in our concentration was 77%. Stories like this demonstrate how the power of teamwork and camaraderie can help you confront the most difficult obstacles. This spirit is already growing at the African School of Economics and we will continue to foster this growth.
Finally, given that we are a global university, we will be a university that will build partnerships across the world. These partnerships will be partnerships of both give and take; they won’t be one-sided and open-palmed. When we ask for financial support from a partner, that partner will receive something in return. That could include things like student interns or research and training collaborations. When we work with businesses we don’t just ask that they help fund our activities, we also ask that they present their problems to our professors and students and use them to help develop solutions.

Finally, to finish, I wanted tonight’s ceremony to have a particular significance. For this, we have invited Beninese artist, Don Metock. Why this artist? We chose him because I was touched by the lyrics of one of his songs on his last album. The title of the song is “Juste le meilleur” or “Simply the Best”. One part that especially touched me is the following, “No matter how long the night, the sun always rises. Therefore, it’s better to wake up early.” In applying this to my own beliefs, I take it to mean that the development of Africa is inevitable, as inevitable as the rising of the sun. What remains for us to do is prepare for the inevitable; doing this will help us bring the rise even sooner. If this development is meant to happen in, let’s say, 50 years, by our work, by our spirit, we can make it happen in 10 years. This message of this song is why I wanted him here today. I hope it’s the first song he will sing for us because that’s exactly what I want for Africa and the futures of our future ASE graduates, “Simply the Best.”
Thank you very much. I thank Professor Wantchékon for having me involved in this beautiful opening ceremony of the African School of Economics.

I must say that our continent, Africa, will have in 2020 or 2050, depending on how you look at it, more than a billion people, about one point two or one point five. This will mean the need to feed, house, clothe, educate and care for all these people. And in terms of work, they will need to work in a world that is becoming cruelly competitive. So we need leaders who can solve the problems of this new world and I think ASE is one of the centers capable of training this elite of tomorrow. I am convinced that ASE will be able to enhance the image of Africa in the world and to secure its place in the comity of nations while also bringing something new, as the development paradigms that we currently have around the world are in my opinion a bit stalled and it is good that ASE has provided in its program outside mathematical sciences, outside economic knowledge in general, a particular dimension which is not only the knowledge of the African economy, but I would say the knowledge of the African Governance, which must learn from its past. My dream is that ASE, tomorrow, will train scholars who bring to the world new development models that take into account not only the reality of the world of tomorrow, but also the history of our country. That is why I am very happy to participate in the launching ceremony wishing good luck to ASE, but above all by saying a very big thank you to Professor Wantchékon who is a worthy son of Benin and Africa; thanks to this initiative we are already seeing a nursery of pan-African leaders.

There are here today young people from Kenya, Central Africa, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone... who are already part of the team of the new Africa of which we can be proud as it will play full score in the comity of nations.

Once again I wish great success to ASE and congratulations to Professor Wantchékon. May God grant you all with health and happiness and long live the African School of Economics. Thank you.
I would like congratulate Professor Léonard Wantchékon. I met him several years ago in the United States. Professor Wantchékon is a pride for the Beninese diaspora living in the United States. Having lived in the U.S. for 18 years before returning to Cotonou two years ago, I have had the opportunity to discuss the African School of Economics as a project, come true today. My message goes in two ways: to congratulate the Professor, and to encourage the Beninese diaspora to do as he did, to accompany him. A professor at Princeton is not anyone. Princeton is a prestigious University in the United States. Before joining Princeton he was at Yale and Chicago. It is a pride for our country and we must acknowledge this, and I call all the authorities present here today to encourage the Beninese who make these kind of effort for our country, with some of their heart still attached to their country. I am here today after 18 years in the United States because I have a part of my heart still attached to my country. The second message is to the students who are here today. I studied Mathematics here in Benin Calavi from 1986 to 1990. In this period, studying math meant only teaching, there were no other opportunities. I left Benin and went to Côte d'Ivoire because I wanted to do applied mathematics and it was the same thing, there was no market. It has been 20 years, I left Benin to the United States to do applied mathematics. I did a PhD in financial mathematics, I am a financial manager in the U.S. I taught financial mathematics, finance and quantitative finance in MBA programs in American universities.

I started in Benin, Calavi, but if there had been a University or School such as the African School of Economics in 1994, I would not have gone to the other side. So I want to tell you that with math, you can do anything. It's a lesson I learned in CEG Davie. We must continue to encourage Professor Wantchékon to continue working on the success of this project, which is already a reality today. The Government met with him two weeks ago in Washington while the USA-Africa summit was taking place, and we discussed the project with the President. The General Secretary of the Government was also there, we all work for the presidency... I will ask him that altogether we support a project that will 20 years from today be a pride for our country and for generations to come. Thank you.
I salute respectfully Moïse Mensah, I salute all the teachers and students of ASE. I also welcome all the elder and everyone who honored with their presence this ceremony. I just want to say that two months ago there was in Paris a roundtable that after the insistence of the President of the Republic turned into a whole day event devoted to the diaspora. I mention this event to say it was a moment when everyone agreed that the Beninese are great, and are doing great things when they are outside their country. But I would like to note today that the time has come when the people of Benin, either from the outside or from the inside, can achieve great things at home. And I see that ASE is a testimony. It's not a coincidence that Professor Léonard Wantchékon is one of the pioneers of the return of the diaspora to achieve great things in Africa. But it does not surprise me because, as he said, I had the honor to be his teacher, he is certainly one of the best students in French that I had. But this was just the first time I met Professor Wantchékon. The second time, he was a freedom fighter; if today we have democratic freedoms in our country, I think it is because Wantchékon was a fighter. It is because of the sacrifices that people like Wantchékon agreed to make that today we enjoy democratic freedoms. Wantchékon sacrificed nearly two years of his life in the prisons of the dictatorship because he was defending the ideals of freedom. But if he was able to rebuild himself, it is because his fight was based on three loves: love for our country, our beautiful homeland Benin; love for our great and beautiful continent of Africa, and finally the love for knowledge. And I can tell you that ASE is nothing other than the synthesis of these three loves. Because of the love he has for Benin, he returned to establish ASE; on behalf of his love for Africa, there are more than thirteen nationalities represented at ASE; and because of his love for knowledge, he based in Benin and in Africa a center devoted to knowledge. I will conclude by simply saying God bless the ASE so that it may grow in size, quality and reputation. Thank you.
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