

Ground Breaker

Ismaila Dieng profiles Leonard Wantchekon, a former activist who plans to train the next generation of African economists

PRISON breaks are rarely worth the effort. Most escapees are back behind bars within hours. But in 1986 when Leonard Wantchekon escaped from the jail where Mathieu Kérékou, then president of the small West African country of Benin, locked up political opponents, it paid off. Thirty years ago, the young activist fled jail for neighboring Nigeria. By the time he returned home after a decade, Wantchekon had earned a doctorate. Later, he taught at Ivy League universities in the United States, published articles in leading academic journals, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, one of the oldest and most prestigious learned societies in the United States.

His escape was daring, but not dramatic. One day, in December 1986, he asked to see a doctor outside the prison to treat his arthritis, the result of 18 months of torture for daring to call for an end to Kérékou's dictatorial regime. The prison's director trusted the 30-year-old leftist student; he had been to the same doctor twice before. But this time, Wantchekon, who faced the prospect of many more years of incarceration, had no intention of returning. He arranged for a car and a motorbike to take him to Nigeria.

Wantchekon, now a professor at Princeton University, is one of the few African economists teaching at a top U.S. university. His research, which has received considerable attention from development economists, focuses on the political and historical roots of economic development in Africa. He studies the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on contemporary African economic developments and examines how citizen engagement can reduce cronyism, improve democratic governance, and lay the groundwork for policies conducive to economic growth.



“Wantchekon’s research provides a unique perspective on economic development. It covers big and important topics, while still using rigorous statistical techniques and empirical methods,” says Harvard’s Nathan Nunn, one of Wantchekon’s coauthors and editor of the *Journal of Development Economics*. “His focus on politics and its role in the development process helps fill a giant gap that currently exists in development economics.”

Giving back to the continent

Wantchekon, who has lived in the United States for 24 years, follows the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team and is a big fan of its star LeBron James, who, like Wantchekon, is driven by a desire to give back to his community. James was determined to win the National Basketball Association championship for his hometown of Akron and home state of Ohio; Wantchekon aspires to train the next generation of African economists. After four years of planning, he opened the African School of Economics to provide first-class academic training to the continent’s young economists two years ago. Down the road, he plans to open undergraduate programs in economics, finance, management, statistics, and computer science. His goal is to build a critical mass of Africans with the training necessary to tackle the most pressing development issues facing the continent.

“When you live in Africa, the wonderful thing is that some of the most interesting challenges and puzzles of economic development are right at your window,” notes Wantchekon in an interview with *F&D*. The puzzles abound, but to date they have been dissected mainly outside the continent. Africa’s economic history is extensively researched worldwide, but few African-born researchers are involved in that research effort.

Last year, Grieve Chelwa, a Zambian postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, wrote in a widely read blog that “economics might have an Africa problem.” She noted that Oxford University’s *Journal of African Economies*, a prestigious and influential publication on African economic development issues, has only one Africa-based scholar on its 27-member editorial board. (Since the blog was written, the number has grown to two.) And none of the 64 academics on the editorial board of the *Journal of Development Economics* is based in Africa.

According to Wantchekon, there are two factors that contribute to this sparse African representation. First is the lack of liberal-arts-type training in undergraduate education in most African countries. “Undergraduate or high-school-level education tend to be overly specialized, whereas in economics you need students to be versatile,” Wantchekon says. Second, “the level of training in mathematics and statistics in social sciences curriculums is weak.”

The small number of African economists is a “loss” to the profession, says Wantchekon. “We don’t realize how damaging it is” to the study of development economics in Africa to have so few “Africans be involved in economic research at the highest level.” They bring an understanding of local conditions and an “intrinsic interest” that can bolster research results.

To illustrate that point, he described his surprise at how much poorer his mother’s village had become in 2009 since his previous visit in the mid-1970s. He became consumed with understanding the reasons for the degeneration, which went beyond the collapse of the bridge that linked the village to neighboring communities. The economist in him prompted an inquiry into the root cause of such a decline, which resulted in his first paper on agricultural economics, “The Curse of Good Soil? Land Fertility, Roads, and Rural Poverty in Africa,” coauthored with Piero Stanig from Bocconi University. Wantchekon and Stanig find that the combination of very fertile land and a lack of infrastructure makes people poorer. How does that happen? “When you are isolated with no infrastructure and the land is poor, you send your kids to school because the land is so poor that the kids cannot make it work. But if the land is rich, you may want to have more kids and send all of them to farm,” he says.

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“When you train people, you allow them to turn their personal motivation into advanced economic research. Africans can make an important contribution to economic knowledge by leveraging their cultural awareness and their intrinsic motivation to really get to the bottom of the challenges the continent faces.”

Unusual ride

Wantchekon was born and raised in a small village in central Benin, where his family was abused by the government. In 1968, his father, a subsistence farmer, was arrested, humiliated, and detained for several days for failing to pay a poll tax—a flat tax levied on every adult that amounted to about 80 percent of his family’s monetary income.

The episode stayed with him during his primary school years, and in 1971 he joined the leftist student movement to fight for democracy and against unjust taxes on the poor. In 1976, when he was in 11th grade, he was arrested for writing an article critical of the regime in his student newspaper. The following year he organized his first student protest.

Wantchekon once dreamed of being an algebra teacher. He was very good at math. But his studies were seriously compromised by his political activism, which only intensified after he entered the University of Benin in 1979. He put together a clandestine campus group to fight for freedom and democracy in the country. He did not last long at the university. The authorities expelled him following the students’ first general strike, forcing him into hiding for five years. But he remained close to the school and continued to organize student activities covertly from the outside.

In the mid-1980s, the government came under pressure to be less oppressive. Wantchekon returned to the campus,



but he and his friends did not see the political change they had expected. They organized a large protest that involved university students, high school students, and civil servants. Within three months of coming out of hiding, Wantchekon was arrested again and spent the rest of his time in Benin as a prisoner—until his 1986 escape.

Many accomplished scholars are well into a teaching career in their early 30s. Wantchekon had yet to earn an undergraduate degree by age 32. After his escape from prison, he went to Canada as a political refugee and immediately enrolled in Laval University in Quebec City. There he bypassed many undergraduate courses to go straight to an M.A. in economics, despite having no background in the discipline. Gérard Gaudet, then an economics professor at Laval, says that “because of his impressive determination and his advanced age for that level, the university decided to give him a chance to prove himself by doing one year of carefully selected undergraduate courses. He went through that with flying colors.”

“The master’s is actually my first university degree,” laughs Wantchekon, who went on to spend two years as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 1992, before switching to Northwestern University near Chicago, where he earned a Ph.D. in economics in 1995, specializing in political economics and development economics.

But it was not without difficulty. He struggled with the qualifying examinations, which should have resulted in his expulsion from the doctoral program. Luckily for Wantchekon, though, the university took into account mitigating circumstances, including his wife’s brush with death during the birth of their son and the fact that he had almost completed his dissertation. But his poor performance restricted his job prospects. Then he stumbled on an ad in the *American Political Science Review*: Yale University was looking for an assistant professor of political science with a specialty in game theory.

The application deadline was the next day. He ran home, put an application together, and mailed it the same day. He was called for an interview. Wantchekon had to borrow \$2,000 from one of his professors to buy a suit and a plane ticket for the interview—which went well. Within a week, Yale made him an offer, and he taught there from 1995 to 2001. He then taught for a decade at New York University, until Princeton lured him away in 2011. He now divides his time between the Ivy League campus in New Jersey and Benin, where Wantchekon’s dream of training African economists is taking shape.

A fledgling training ground

The African School of Economics, in a temporary facility near Benin’s economic capital, Cotonou, currently offers master’s degrees in mathematics, economics, statistics, and business administration. It also offers a Ph.D. in economics. Its first master’s students will graduate in December 2016. The school boasts a dozen academic partners, including Princeton, which has partly subsidized the school for four years, and the World Bank, which funds about 20 scholarships for students in the mathematics, economics, and statistics programs.

Wantchekon describes his plans for expansion and the modern 18.5-hectare campus he intends to build with a botanical garden, an African art museum, sports grounds, and all the amenities of a North American university such as Princeton. Wantchekon envisions opening campuses in East Africa (Nairobi) and West Africa (Abidjan)—eventually serving 15,000 students.

Wantchekon has designed a curriculum he thinks will allow his students to compete with the best in the world. It focuses heavily on quantitative methods and research skills. Students will also be acquainted with the basics of African economic history. “One of the things that separates us from other continents is that we know less about ourselves. He says, for example, few Africans have heard of the Amazons—an all-women elite military unit within the Kingdom of Dahomey, the African kingdom that occupied what is now Benin. The unit was created in 1645 by King Houegbadja and continued until it was disbanded by the French colonial administration in 1894.

Wantchekon currently spends four months a year in his homeland, but as the school grows, Wantchekon, 60, intends to spend more time in Benin. “I see my role being there to stimulate research, not to manage things on a daily basis,” he says. But he also wants to remain closely connected with Princeton and other U.S. universities. “Even after my retirement, I will always to some degree want to be part of a place like this. It is a way to be grateful for the opportunities I was offered. And remaining connected with a university like Princeton and contributing to knowledge is something I’d like to continue,” he says.

An eclectic researcher

Dahomey was a major supplier of slaves to European slave traders during the 17th and 18th centuries. So many Africans were put in bondage from Dahomey that it was called the Slave Coast. Wantchekon says the legacy of slavery is pervasive. He remembers when he was growing up, hearing friends joking that “this person will sell you” or “make you disap-

pear.” Those attitudes seemed to bespeak a general societal condition that puzzled Wantchekon: a lack of trust between people who sometimes had lived decades together as friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Intuitively, he says, he thought that “this must have some connection with the slave trade,” and later he became captivated with that idea.

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To get a better understanding of the mistrust, he got in touch with Harvard’s Nunn, who had been studying the long-term effects of slave trade on economic development. They began to exchange views and eventually coauthored what would be one of Wantchekon’s most influential papers, “The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa,” which was published in the *American Economic Review* in 2011 and has been cited by other scholarly research more than 700 times since. Nunn and Wantchekon combined contemporary survey data with historical data on slave shipments by ethnic group to show that Africans whose ancestors were heavily raided by Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave traders are less trusting today than those whose ancestors escaped slave raids. “The research provided valuable evidence showing that historical shocks can have lasting and persistent impacts on the cultural fabric of a society. It added to our understanding of the detrimental impacts of the slave trade,” says Nunn. “Given that trust is fundamentally important for economic transactions, the paper provided evidence for one channel underlying the long-run detrimental impacts of the slave trade on economic development.”

Field experiments

Wantchekon was attracted to economics because of his interest in mathematics and logical reasoning. But his passion for activism brought him back to his first love: politics. His doctoral adviser at Northwestern, Roger Myerson, who won the 2007 Nobel economics prize, urged his students to invest their analytical skills in political engineering, which seeks to design social institutions.

Wantchekon took the advice seriously. Myerson’s theoretical work inspired Wantchekon to “imagine” specific institutional fixes to political problems and test them empirically and rigorously. One of his papers, which reported the results of a field experiment on clientelist, or patronage-based, electoral strategies, was the first randomized control trial in political economy research that involved real candidates competing in real elections.

Wantchekon persuaded four candidates in the first round of Benin’s March 2001 presidential elections to allow his team to write campaign messages for each of them and test them on villagers. The team created two types of messages. One used specific opportunistic and targeted promises—to build roads, schools, and clinics in a village, for example. The other presented broad messages on the need to improve the nation’s prosperity. Voters in villages that received regular campaign messages from candidates rather than those prepared for

the experiment served as a control group. The experiment empirically validated the argument that clientelist appeals, such as targeted promises to build roads and clinics, are more effective than broad public policy appeals. However, clientelism becomes electorally less appealing when candidates run town-hall meeting–based campaigns.

Wantchekon is now an eclectic and hybrid development economist, happily navigating political science and economics. Wantchekon’s “work appears in journals both in economics and political science, which is extremely rare. Being able to navigate those two fields with such ease and to bridge a gap between them is in itself an important contribution to economics, and I would think to political science as well,” says Gaudet, his professor at Laval, who is now retired.

“He is an incredibly creative social scientist, always focused on the most important issues of development, be they politics or education. In the 1990s, he worked on how elections work when the loser refuses to accept the result. It turned out to be a central issue in emerging democracies in Africa,” says Harvard’s Andrei Shleifer.

Wantchekon is writing a book on economic development and long-term social mobility. He plans to use data from a sample of three generations of families to document social and economic progress from precolonial to present-day Benin. The data go back to the late 19th century. (Dahomey became a French colony in 1904 and gained independence as the Republic of Benin in 1960.) He aims to uncover the role of education and various forms of investment by families and governments in development outcomes.

The book is a follow-up to an education and social mobility project that led to his 2015 paper—published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*—that showed how missionary schools a century ago led to the education of a future elite and profoundly affected the structure of society and the economy in Benin after independence. “Missionary schools still play an important role in Africa, but I don’t think anybody has realized their enormous significance for building what economists call “upper-tail” human capital,” says Shleifer.

On a beautiful June day, on an almost empty Princeton campus, Wantchekon reflects on the journey from student activist to founder of a school to train African economists: “It was not an easy journey, but it has ended well.”

Luck played a role, he says. His carefully designed plan to escape to Nigeria almost unraveled at the last minute. When he reached the border crossing, a police officer who knew him well was on duty. Terrified, the young activist—who knew a bit about incentives—paused, reached in his pocket, and pressed a wad of bank notes into the policeman’s hand. The officer grabbed the bribe and urged the driver to proceed.

Within minutes, which seemed like an eternity on the dirt road from Benin, he reached Nigeria. Wantchekon did not know it then, but he was making history—pulling off one of the most productive prison breaks ever. ■

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