Substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) has flowed into Ivory Coast, or Côte D’Ivoire as it is known in French, at a record rate since 2012, when the new government of President Alassane Ouattara embraced economic diversification and created a comprehensive 2012-2015 national development plan (NDP) aimed at establishing the country of 22 million people as an emerging economy by 2020.

Centered on a $22 billion infrastructure investment program—60% of which will come from the private sector—market liberalization and modernization, and normalization of administrations and institutions, the NDP is on course to transform Ivory Coast into the golden gateway to West Africa and the 300 million people who live in the nations that comprise the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The bright new dawn which broke over the republic two years ago has sparked strong and consistent annual economic growth that reached double figures in 2013, and is predicted to stay above 10% in 2014 and 2015 due to major sectoral reforms and high growth prospects.

Minister of Post and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and government spokesman, Bruno Nabagné Koné has been a key figure in this success story and says the country is well positioned to take advantage of its vast wealth of natural resources and strategic location.

“It was hard, but I am proud we led the transition to democracy with balance and serenity,” says Koné. “We established the example of patience essential to democratic coexistence, engrained the winds of freedom sweeping the whole country, and began the institutional changes promoted without hesitation. The economic rebirth of the Ivory Coast is officially underway. Our strategy involves three priorities. The first is peace and security, and we now have everything in place for that. The second is national reconciliation, and the third is the rebirth of our economy. The results are excellent and the situation is good. We invite foreign tourists and foreign investors to come.”

Earlier this year, the bustling capital of Abidjan hosted the International Forum for Investments in Ivory Coast, which attracted a high-profile audience of global investors and finance chiefs eager to hear about the many opportunities available across its many sectors.

Makhtar Diop, World Bank vice president for the Africa Region, used the event as a platform to praise the Ivory Coast for the major reforms it has implemented to support and encourage new investments in the private sector. “We all know the private sector is the engine of wealth and job creation, and Ivory Coast offers a host of opportunities, particularly in the agribusiness sector,” he said.

Koné welcomes such international recognition and reveals more about the business openings available. “The most growth since 2012 has been in the mining sector, where we granted a record number of licenses, and the oil industry, which we believe can be reborn. Our goal is to return to the 100,000 barrels per day [bpd] from the current 35,000 bpd. The agriculture sector is now a crucial sector and an area where we have made great progress. We are the world’s largest producer of cocoa, and coffee production will restart strongly as we were once the world’s third-largest coffee producer and want to return to that level. We are the largest rubber producer in Africa, the second-largest for palm oil, and the third-largest for cotton, where we can reach up to 500,000 metric
ton/year of production. “We have always been a large agricultural producer, but the majority of our produce has been exported,” Koné adds. “Now we want to transform the production sector here. For example, in cashews we would like to reach 35% in processing and by 2020 process all our production here. Cotton production will also increase and we plan to revive old factories to transform local production of cotton. The entire food industry continues to be developed by the private sector.”

Agriculture remains the main contributor to gross domestic product (GDP), but just behind is the ICT industry, which generates around 7% and employs large numbers of people. Ivory Coast is determined to focus on new technology and revamp the sector to stimulate further growth and fresh FDI. Koné says: “ICT is an important and essential sector that stretches across all industries. When we improve the phone and Internet network it benefits and impacts other sectors, so ICT is a growth accelerator. This is an important sector, a key sector, and this is why we have major ambitions. We already have foreign investors in the industry.”

The digital revolution spreading across Africa has found a home in Ivory Coast as the government revamps the ICT sector, forming new regulatory bodies to facilitate commerce. As part of this plan, the Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications de Côte d’Ivoire (ARTCI) replaced two predecessor organizations and was given financial autonomy and independent administrative authority.

Established in 2012, ARTCI was formed by the merger of the Telecommunications Council of Côte d’Ivoire (CTCI) and the Telecommunications Agency of Côte d’Ivoire (ATCI). An independent administrative body with legal rights and financial autonomy, ARTCI is at the center of the government’s plan to grow the digital economy and extend state-of-the-art services to millions of Ivoirians. In all its activities, ARTCI emphasizes consumer protection.

“The telecoms sector has made huge strides over the years,” explains ARTCI CEO Bilé Diéméléou. “We have put in place a stronger legal framework with a new structure. Our first mission is regulating. It’s an industry with six mobile providers, with about 20 million subscribers and significant revenues. We ensure there is fair and honest competition and try to organize ourselves so that there is a healthy business climate. Accordingly, users will make smart choices.”

While mobile technology has taken off, the Internet in Ivory Coast requires significant investment to reach the same level of widespread adoption, and there also exists a gap in the services available to residents in rural areas.

“One of the country’s strong points is its cellular market,” Bilé continues. “In 2003, Ivory Coast had just over seven mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, according to World Bank figures. In less than a decade, this number exploded to more than 96 out of 100. Today, we see the industry evolving because the providers have been doing great business. ICT is present in all active industries: trade, education, and health care. ICT allows you to boost up and move forward.”

Agence Nationale du Service Universel des Télécommunications/TIC (ANSUT) is a public agency dedicated to ensuring universal provision of telecommunications services for individuals and businesses. The agency runs a number of initiatives and projects that aim to greatly improve access to ICT services, with such provision seen as vital to improving the well-being of citizens and the national investment environment. ANSUT is currently targeting international investors for $150 million to fund the major expansion project of its fiber-optic network, as it looks to create an influx of e-solutions for banking, health, and education services.

“Today, there are companies, banks, and farms that do not want to settle in areas simply because there are no telecommunications. This is unacceptable.

“Putting these means of communication throughout the country will ensure the majority of people will have access to ICT. The territory will be covered, and we can enable these companies to do business everywhere they want,” says Euloge Soro-Kipeya, general director of ANSUT.

“Without ICT, you will have electricity, roads, and water, but you will not have the full potential in terms of development and well-being. We
are a structure that provides strong guarantees in terms of repayments. So people are interested in making money with us.”

Soro-Kipeya says, thanks to its growing budget, one of ANSUT’s biggest investments is the optimization of transmission equipment and infrastructure, hence the agency’s focus on expanding and creating a faster network with fiber-optic technology. The addition of devices is also vital, he maintains, pointing out that the government has pledged to add more than 500,000 units, in addition to providing grants.

“A cornerstone of our work is helping private companies make services available to individuals or businesses, either through direct investment or grants to operators,” Soro-Kipeya states, before adding this upbeat message to foreign investors: “Ivory Coast represents an opportunity for investment that must be seized now. If you come in three or four years, people will already be positioned. Now is the right time, as we have a government that has a clear vision. The potential is here and we are ambitious to succeed; let’s make this happen together.”

Increased ICT provision is set to improve the way the country’s post offices operate, with the goal of economically empowering millions of people and introducing banking services, and stimulating financial inclusion. National postal operator La Poste is growing stronger and stronger thanks to the financial support of the government, and is now bringing a more innovative range of mail and postal services to branches across the country.

“A digital revolution is happening in Ivory Coast, where a digital economy is being put in place,” says La Poste general director Mamadou Konate. “La Poste has a very important role to play in the digital economy and will be completely involved in ICT, meaning a postal service that is more open and closer to clients. It will distribute innovative products that will make it easier for citizens by enabling them to do everything at the same place close to them.”

The ICT sector is undergoing a series of major reforms that are not only investor-friendly but also feature measures that reinforce the protection of customers of all sizes and their transactions. Several new laws on cybercrime and electronic transactions have been introduced recently.

A specialist in GSM communications, wireless data networks, VoIP, and Internet service provision, Koz-Comium is a Lebanese company with a fast-growing presence in Africa and the Middle East. “We offer better prices and better quality than our competitors because we don’t have the same cost structure of much larger groups,” states Michel Hebert, general director of Koz-Comium Côte D’Ivoire.

“Despite some of the challenges the country has in infrastructure, ICT is advancing rapidly and is already widely available and accessible. Any company or individual that wishes to do business here can find very good communications and a very good support for every ICT need. Koz-Comium plays a very important role in that.”

Société Nationale de Développement Informatique (SNDI) is a government-owned company that assists parastatal structures, organizations and institutions, communities, and private companies in all ICT spheres.

In close collaboration with ministries and other specialized government agencies, SNDI is working hard to implement ICT solutions in every government activity, ranging from public finance management, health care management, the education system, and secure electronic transaction systems. According to SNDI general director Nongolougo Soro, government services provided online in developed countries will be available in Ivory Coast by 2020. For example, citizens can request online copies of birth certificates and have them delivered anywhere in
the world in days.

“The education system is returning to international standards so that the universities will provide qualified engineers in all fields, but mainly in the ICT sector,” Soro says. “We have a lot of smart people and our ambition is to have companies such as Microsoft, Oracle, and Google develop parts of their software applications or products in Ivory Coast by 2020.

“About 4,000 state employees use our ‘e-government’ applications. Two years ago, the government undertook a nationwide fiber-optic project that will allow high speed data services by private companies and state agencies. This is a solid foundation to quickly transform our country into a modern 21st-century nation through the efficient use of ICT solutions.” Ivory Coast’s impressive financial revolution continues to gather pace, and in July 2014 the country attracted nearly $5 billion of orders in its first return to international bond markets in a clear sign of increased confidence and optimism about its economic well-being.

The banking and financial services sector offers huge potential to international investors, as the industry is crucial to maintaining the strong inward flow of FDI, and rising living standards create openings in a country where over 85% of the population does not have a bank account or access to modern banking instruments.

“We have a liberal economy and the government has set up a new privatization committee for projects that can be supported by the private sector and can be done more efficiently by the private sector,” says Nialé Kaba, Minister of Economy and Finance. “In the banking sector we are working on the financing of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which is very important to us.

“The country is doing well, the economy is healthier, the reforms are on their way, we are not sitting on only the coffee and cocoa sector, the industrial spirit is growing, and we are on the right track. We have made great strides in the mining sector and hope that in the short term the sector will match the agricultural sector in terms of revenue.”

Ivory Coast’s banking sector has undergone a steady transformation since President Alassane Ouattara’s election win in 2011, with financial firms looking to make the most of new financing opportunities and enable more economic growth. As one of the country’s major financial players, Banque Nationale d’Investissement (BNI) has experienced much of this development firsthand.

The state-owned institution was established more than 50 years ago and underwent further commercial expansion in 2004, but managing director Eugène Kassi N’d’a says he has ambitious plans to develop the bank and the ways it can assist the wider economy. Although personal banking among Ivoirians remains relatively low, the burgeoning busi-

nesses that are powering GDP growth are increasingly demanding high-quality, secure, and efficient financial services.

The senior executive says that BNI’s activities today, particularly with firms from the country’s large SME sector, will help to improve the accountability and trustworthiness of those businesses and develop the economy. “BNI is a public bank but is run as a private operation,” N’d’a explains. “That means we’re not entitled to make any losses and we have to respect all regulatory ratios. There are also no civil servants within our current staff of 500 people. There are many investment opportunities here, but the capital is not available,” he adds. “We want to play our role in this range of opportunities and are calling on financial institutions that have the resources, and we are now waiting for their input.”

Bile-Aka, Brizoua-Bi & Associates is a leading law firm with an international suitability installed in Abidjan. The firm aims to maximize legal certainty for projects or transactions of its institutional and private clients. To meet the growing needs of its customers in international operations, the firm has developed close working relationships with the continent’s most-respected firms, and those in other major financial centers of the world. “Ivory Coast is one of the rare countries where foreign investors can have 100% ownership of an entity without being obligated to have a local partner, except in some regulated sectors such as mining and oil,” says Michel K. Brizoua-Bi, managing partner. “We have flexible laws that can be very attractive to foreign investors. There are also incentives in the investment code.”

A major player in the insurance market, La Loyale Assurances comprises two companies that provide a range of insurance products: Life Loyal covers individuals, and Loyal Insurance covers property and goods.

“Only 1.6% of the population is insured, this is not normal,” discloses Bernard Osso Abouo, general director of La Loyal Assurances. “The biggest challenge is the culture, not money. We need to show people that it’s important to get insurance.”
Diversification drives growth

Ivory Coast’s wealth of natural assets and valuable raw materials are attracting major FDI.

Blessed with a great climate and stunning scenery that includes spectacular national parks full of rare wildlife, Ivory Coast’s natural, cultural, and historic charms have long sustained a tourism industry even in the country’s darker days.

With a cosmopolitan capital city, Abidjan, widely known as the “Paris of West Africa,” the country is focusing on maximizing the potential of its tourism offerings as it looks to achieve its target of 500,000 visitors in 2015 and 1 million in 2020. At least 450,000 visitors are expected to arrive in 2014, versus 290,000 in 2012.

Tourism Minister Roger Kacou is upbeat about the industry’s chances as new investment in transport infrastructure and new hotels widens its appeal to vacationers looking to experience the “real” Africa. “Ivory Coast is a beautiful country rich in tourism attractions such as nearly 500 kilometers of beautiful beaches, but we also have the cultural aspect, ecological parks, the religious aspect—including the largest basilica in the world. We are working on sports tourism through our golf and sport fishing, where we have a record number of blue marlin, and we also want to work on agricultural tourism with our main agricultural products, coffee and cocoa. Europeans consume a lot of chocolate and often they don’t know where it comes from or how it is processed, so we want to develop a circuit where people can learn more about agricultural production.”

So where do all these visitors originate? Kacou is only too happy to answer: “Traditionally, there is the Franco-European market with France and the history between the two countries. So it is a natural market for us. Then there is the African market, as the Inter-African market is increasing both for business and leisure.

“There are also the European francophone countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, and also Great Britain and Germany. For now, there are very few tourists from the U.S., but as soon as Abidjan airport receives its international certification from civil aviation authorities in the U.S., there will be direct flights between the U.S. and Abidjan, and then we’ll be able to work on leisure tourism from North America. Another area where we see strong growth is the Nigerian market, where there is a certain clientele that has a lot of money, and they want to spend it here.”

Spearheading this drive to boost the sector’s contribution to GDP and employment creation is Côte d’Ivoire Tourism, an entity that operates under the government to provide information concerning all areas of culture and tourism: hotels, activities, trips, practical information, etc.

“The tourism potential of the country has never been exploited,” says Santiero Jean-Marie Somet, general director of Côte d’Ivoire Tourism.

“The primary goal is to establish a regulatory framework and establish a code of tourism, which has never existed. This code will benefit investors and promote the sector. Anyone who wants to build hotels and travel agencies will benefit from it. Ivory Coast has all the possibilities to do great tourism business, such as conferences, forums, and conventions. Ivory Coast also has the opportunity to create agricultural-tourism activities.”

Sodertour Lacs is a state-owned company created in April 2008 for the development of tourism in the famous lakes region, and provides regulatory assistance and technical advice to public entities related to tourism. The company supports the creation and implementation of policies, plans, programs, and projects for tourism development, and operation of resorts and places of interest to tourists. Sodertour’s broad accommodation portfolio includes top-of-the-range hotels and luxury resorts such as Hôtel Président Yamoussoukro, Hôtel des Parlementaires Hotel Yamoussoukro, Hôtel Carrefour Séguela, Président Golf Club Yamousoukro, Banks of Lake Kossou, and Wildlife Reserve of Abokouamékro.
“Sodertour Lacs plays the role of facilitator, and any promoter or investor in the tourism sector can go through us so we can help and assist them,” says Malékah Mourad-Condé, general director. “Currently, our main focus is the Hibiscus Project, which aims to combine leisure and real estate in Yamoussoukro in a resort that features amusement parks such as water parks, racetracks, and casinos. With this project, it’s not only Sodertour Lacs who will increase their capacity, it also offers the potential for private hotels to come establish themselves, as well.”

Overlooking the beautiful Ebrié Lagoon and the Plateau business district in Abidjan, Sofitel Hotel Ivoire blends French luxury with African charm, with the prestigious international five-star hotel rising majestically over an idyllic setting of water and flora.

Built by Moshe Mayer in 1963 and renovated in 2011, the hotel envelops guests with its contemporary atmosphere and fiery colors, while African art and cocoa add a touch of the exotic. The hotel has six modern conference rooms featuring state-of-the-art equipment, and 207 rooms that include 41 suites. The Toit d’Abidjan restaurant on the 23rd guest floor offers authentic French cuisine, international dishes, and a range of cocktails. Owner Accor operates three other luxury hotels in Ivory Coast.

“We want to make this place once again the center of life in Abidjan, but not necessarily as it used to be. We want to bring new opportunities and new attractions to people. Some of them will be the same; we have a beautiful swimming pool, but we don’t plan to install an ice rink again. Our main target right now is the meetings and events market. There are a lot of congresses and business events. People come here to work, but we are also developing many markets such as the arts. We are also working on attracting some festivals.”

Ivory Coast’s impressive macroeconomic success has not only caught the eye of foreign investors, but also global financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the African Development Bank (ADB).

In June 2014, the IMF issued an upbeat outlook for the country’s financial prospects, saying its macroeconomic prospects for 2014 remain positive. “A broad stabilization of growth at a high level (8.5%) is projected, supported by sustained strong domestic demand,” the Washington D.C.-based organization stated. “Average annual inflation is expected to decline to 1.2%. The overall fiscal deficit would remain moderate at 2.3%, while higher FDI inflows and project loans are projected to finance a widening of the external current account deficit. The main challenges are to sustain the growth momentum and improve inclusiveness through...”

“We want to develop not only the rice sector, but also bananas and corn.”

Sidiki Cisse, General Director, ANADER
The Ministry of Commerce, Arts and Crafts and SMEs Promotion is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the governmental policies on these three important aspects of Ivorian economy and the nation’s cultural identity.

“We have to catch up in education, infrastructure, roads and airports, public transportation, health, and so on,” says Jean-Louis Billon, Minister of Commerce. “The changes in infrastructure cannot happen overnight, but we are going very fast. Abidjan and the whole country is under construction. We are talking about huge infrastructure investments in areas such as bridges, roads, and airports. On the education side, a new university is being created. On the health side, new health centers and new hospitals are being built. We are trying to go as fast as we can, but can’t catch up on 15-20 years of nondevelopment overnight. We need stability in order to build it all up again.”

Billon underlines the government’s focus on diversifying the economy with the help of small businesses, and highlights the move toward privatization to boost national competitiveness.

“It’s not the goal of the state to keep managing companies. We are very liberal-minded and have state-owned banks, equities, and so on that we will sell one day. We want a strong private sector and the government is only here to give the best to the private sector, and we hope it becomes more competitive.”

Spearheading rural development is Agence Nationale d’Appui au Développement Rural (ANADER), an agency that aims to contribute to improving the living conditions of the rural world by training professionals, implementing appropriate tools and programs designed to ensure a sustainable and controlled development. The public entity aims to promote professionalism of farmers, ranchers, and foresters, enhance the quality of products, increase productivity and income, ensure the promotion of agricultural cooperatives and producer associations, carry out agricultural projects, and respond to customer demand.

ANADER also runs any program or project entrusted to it by the state, and advises ministers and government officials on matters related to the promotion of the rural world: training, credit, research/development, rural amenities, tenure security, among others.

The agency’s areas of expertise are: agricultural consulting, training, local development planning, rural engineering, monitoring and impact studies projects, environmental management, feasibility studies, surveys and agricultural statistics, structure of middle and micro-finance, and production of related agricultural equipment. “ANADER is the instrument of the agricultural industry. We advise the population and are present across the entire country,” says Sidiki Cisse, general director of ANADER.

“President Ouattara said that by 2020 we must be self-sufficient in food and especially in rice, because that is our weakest aspect of the food industry. We want to develop not only the rice sector, but also bananas and corn. There is a lot of work in the food processing aspect that is about to take place. The country needs expertise and capital. If we have the expertise and the necessary capital, we can work with the labor aspect.”

The executive continues, “For the capital, we have some public-private partnerships [PPP] and there are banks that can help us. Investors need to see that all the winning conditions are in place so there is a return on investment. Once the investor comes, we must ensure that the raw material is there. The ultimate goal is to build a system where there is a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the private and the public sector.”

The Ivorian Enterprise Institute (INIE) was formed in 1997 and achievements include the creation of a network of SMEs through cloning its successful models of established businesses, INIE’s areas of activity include designing and implementing programs to promote entrepreneurship, managing specific programs for young entrepreneurs, and programs and projects to promote SMEs entrusted by the state, donors, and agen-
cies. As Ivory Coast aims to become an emerging market by 2020, INIE plays an important role in cultivating the country’s SMEs to ensure that the economy develops in a way that will provide jobs, capital, and goods and services. INIE is dedicated to promoting entrepreneurship, with a main goal of increasing the number of SMEs. To achieve this, INIE needs financial resources and investments.

Mouramane Fofana, general director of INIE, says, “Our problem is the majority of the economy is centered on Abidjan; we are talking about nearly 80%. Aside from banks and phone companies, there is virtually nothing in the regions. If we are to emerge, there must be some SMEs in the regions. Our program aims to create 165 SMEs, which means five SMEs per region in each of our 33 regions, so we can show people how to do things. Once these first five SMEs have been created in each area, a dynamic overshoot will also be established, and we already have the banking system in place.”

An industrial giant, the Société pour le Développement Minier de la Côte d’Ivoire (SODEMI) is responsible for researching and exploring the national territory to find important and valuable raw materials such as iron ore, nickel, manganese, bauxite, gold, and diamonds.

The government-controlled firm has close links with several major international mining and metals companies, such as France’s Compagnie Minière d’Or SA (COMINOR) and Indian multinational steel manufacturer Tata Steel Limited.

Kadjo Kouamé, CEO of SODEMI, is quick to explain just how important to the country’s economic health the mining sector is, and welcomes new legislation that aims to attract new FDI to the industry. “You rehabilitate the country’s image by rehabilitating trust,” he states. “Our role is to act as originators of projects, but once the project is started, we look for a private partner without us having the majority. The government does not want our presence in the project to constitute a barrier to the private sector. On the contrary, we need to be a good catalyst for mining projects.

“Our knowledge of the country as technicians of the mines has to be a tool upon which the private investor can rely. A lot of investors, even though they have their own projects, come to us for support. Companies that have a permit still come to us to hire one of our teams, simply because we have the required know-how and experience. We are pioneers in this region, and the model everyone wants to copy.”

Founded in 1979, the Yeshi Group today consists of a private retail and industrial conglomerate with activities in four principal areas: manufacturing, construction, trading, and distribution. With a huge inventory of close to 15,000 competitively priced products, coupled with a strong sales position, Yeshi Group has become a leader in the West African market. “I strongly believe in the business world of tomorrow, and I’m optimistic for Yeshi Group and its forthcoming interests; mainly the fields of finance, general trading, processing, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG),” says Yeshi Group president A.H. Beydoun. “Ivory Coast requires industrial development and new end-products and services. Yeshi Group is ready for that development, and is always striving toward new ideas.”

Founded in 1974, Soroubat-CI is the local arm of Tunisia’s Soroubat Group and is involved in road and infrastructure construction in Ivory Coast. The firm has completed a key transport project—the 75.8 kilometer extension of the northern motorway linking Abidjan to Yamousoukro—that has drastically improved the nation’s logistics infrastructure.

“We have a lot of interest in the Ivory Coast as it’s our second base after Tunisia and has served as a starting point for several other countries in the region,” states Talel Sahli, general director of Soroubat-CI. “We provide our expertise and know-how in the construction and implementation of roads, and are always available for the completion of any project.”

Established in 1978, Office de Sécurité Routière (OSER) is the main government organization in charge of road safety, and its remit includes the study, research, and implementation of road safety measures to prevent accidents, and driver education programs. “Roads are being repaired, new roads and bridges are being built. We try to control traffic, we want a fluid circulation once all the construction is done, and we will also build new railroads. We are doing all this to show investors we are serious and have a lot of ambition to make it happen, to reach our goal, and to bring Ivory Coast back,” says Aka Désiré Echui, general director of OSER.