
Commonwealth Diplomacy in Africa: A Case for Trusted Partnerships and Soft Power

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of a meeting and questions and answers session held at Chatham House on 20 May 2014 that focused on the role of the Commonwealth in Africa.

The speaker discussed the values of the Commonwealth in Africa, as well as some of the challenges it faces. She focused on two key areas of the organization's soft-power engagement in Africa – elections and the democratic process, and supporting a separation of powers within member states' governments. The organization has also prioritized its engagement with the youth, which it has redeveloped from a hierarchical relationship to an equal partnership. One of the challenges the Commonwealth faces is maintaining relevance, and the organization is looking at member states to proactively increase their engagement. The speaker also discussed the possibility of the Commonwealth withdrawing from certain sectors, and developing strategic partnerships with other organizations instead. A number of African countries are looking to join the organization, due in part to the role it plays in increasing the ease of regional cooperation, as well as in facilitating the sharing of expertise.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

The speaker began by describing her first impressions of the Commonwealth. She detailed how there is a real sense of diversity in the Commonwealth, which can be seen at all levels of the organization. The staff, the management team and the board of governors are made up of various nationalities and have a variety of backgrounds, experience and positions on issues. Alongside this, the member states differ in their financial abilities, development challenges and methods of engagement with the organization. The speaker described how the organization also has a sense of family, which is apparent in the high levels of commitment to make such diversity work. This underpins the organization's notions of soft power, and involves an acknowledgement that, while the organization is diverse, with differing responses to challenges by the member states, there are certain key values that are held in common. The speaker stated that this sense of family was clear at the first Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting that she attended. The meeting represented an attempt to reach a meaningful agreement on climate change between leaders who are challengers of climate change, leaders who represent small communities threatened by climate change, and leaders who feel they are shouldering a disproportionate burden. This meeting was held a few months before the global summit on climate change, and there was an understanding that if an agreement could be reached by such a diverse group, then this could pave the way for a global agreement.

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba discussed the value of the Commonwealth, which includes its ability to contribute to the global discourse, as seen on the issue of climate change. The Commonwealth spirit and its shared values are further positive aspects of the organization. She explained that an area in which all members of the organization possess a common wealth is the youth dividend, with the number of youth ranging from 40 to 70 per cent of the member states' populations. She stated that this youth dividend is particularly important. She acknowledged that there are challenges to the organization, such as human rights issues and bilateral issues, with a particular difficulty created by states focusing on their individual positions rather than the Commonwealth as a whole. A further challenge is due to the environment in

which the Commonwealth operates. She described how the rise of the unelected and the civil society signals a shift from the previous tendency for heads of states to dictate on matters within the organization. The organization now functions in the presence of an audience that may disagree, one that is globally connected, and one that desires greater accountability and transparency. This has resulted in more being expected from the Commonwealth.

Eighteen of the Commonwealth member states are African, and Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba noted how a number of other African states have also shown an interest in joining the organization. This indicates the relevance of the Commonwealth within regional and sub-regional frameworks, as many of the interested states wish to participate in order to better engage with their Commonwealth neighbours. She stated that Commonwealth African states tend to perform better in a number of areas, and she highlighted how they consistently form the majority of the top ten countries in the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance. In 2013, seven of the top ten were Commonwealth members. However, she explained that development and democracy in the continent are variable, as seen in the progress of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as the various challenges to democracy.

The speaker highlighted two areas in which the Commonwealth can use soft power and its status as a trusted power to engage with Africa. The first of these is the electoral cycle and democratic transitions. The speaker described how 12 out of the 18 African member states have transitioned from a one-party regime to multiparty democracy since 1991, with the Commonwealth present as observers, and assisting in the preparation of many of these elections. Since 1994, it has observed 54 elections on the continent. There is currently an election monitoring team in Malawi, which is holding its local, presidential and parliamentary elections simultaneously for the first time. The Commonwealth was able to draw on the experience of other countries that have held similar elections and arrange for some assistance. However, the speaker explained that elections are not an end in themselves. What is most important is the country's ability to entrench a culture of democracy and embrace Commonwealth values, such as political tolerance and accountability. Elections act as important indicators of the challenges that countries may face, and the Commonwealth uses them as a basis for discussion and engagement with countries. The speaker stated that the link between development and democracy becomes apparent here, and she explained that it is necessary to ensure that there is political will in the countries, as well as infrastructure and functioning institutions with the resources and ability to hold the leadership accountable. As part of its work on elections, the organization has created the Commonwealth Election Network, which allows elections supervisors from throughout the Commonwealth to support each other and share ideas. Election management bodies are often relatively new and are frequently put under extreme pressure to not fulfil their role correctly, so the speaker stressed that the peer network of support can be very helpful.

The second area of soft power that the speaker discussed was the separation of powers, an area in which a number of Commonwealth countries are still struggling. The Commonwealth Latimer House Principles set the organization's standards for this, and describe how the three separate branches should be a basis for collaboration, and support and safeguard each other. The organization addresses the challenges by assisting the judiciary, working with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to strengthen legislature, and ensuring the opposition and government have a method to engage in dialogue with each other. The speaker indicated that it is necessary to strike a balance between ensuring that each arm of the government is independent and respected, and upholding the principles of accountability and professionalism. She explained that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has been renewed in Africa, and it now examines violations of Commonwealth values, such as the unjustified postponement of the elections and human rights abuses, alongside its previous focus on the illegal overthrow of heads of government. A closer relationship has been developed between the offices of the secretary-general and CMAG, and this ensures that sanctioned members are still supported and given

guidance by the secretary-general. The speaker noted that a number of African countries, such as Nigeria and Sierra Leone, have been sanctioned by CMAG, and she stated that this was possible because of the organization's status as a trusted partner. She highlighted Gambia's decision to leave the Commonwealth two years ago, and explained that the organization had always used the CMAG agenda to appraise the country's developments, and was looking forward to its return in the future. Zimbabwe also left the Commonwealth, but this was following its suspension. While the organization has maintained an active interest, the speaker stressed that Zimbabwe must lead the process of re-engagement.

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba concluded by acknowledging how there is a diverse number of perspectives on the Commonwealth, and stressed the need to understand how these can all be consolidated and brought together. She described how the Commonwealth plays the role of advisor, amplifying the voice of small states; provides brokerage while emphasizing home-grown solutions and south-south cooperation; plays an important role in consensus building; advocates for inclusive dialogue within diplomacy; and works to engage and empower the youth, as seen through the creation of the Commonwealth Youth Development Index.

Summary of questions and answers

Bob Dewar

What advice would the speaker give her successor in terms of furthering the role of the Commonwealth, through greater engagement in diplomacy and advocating for the values of the organization?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba stated that there is a need for member states to do more for themselves. She explained that they should view engagement with the Commonwealth as an opportunity, and the focus should now be on member states' engagement. She described how the organization is often criticized for its image, and that it does not sufficiently advertise itself and the work it does. However, the organization is membership-based, so members need to be encouraged to champion the organization themselves. This will appear less defensive, and it will help highlight the areas that are of the greatest importance to members so that the organization can better engage in these. While there is room for the organization to increase its activity, the nature of the Commonwealth's engagement with member states is to encourage the countries to act themselves.

Comment and questions

The main issue is how to make the organization more relevant. The role of the Commonwealth has changed dramatically since the 1960s, when the majority of diplomacy took place through the organization. There are now alternative frameworks for diplomacy and engagement, such as the African Union and other sub-regional groupings. Member states need to work out how to make the Commonwealth more relevant given these changes, as the organization will face major problems if this is not addressed.

While issues of democracy and human rights are relevant, economic development and trade-related issues are now the priorities for the majority of member states. How is the Commonwealth going to address these areas?

It is projected that by 2050 the population of sub-Saharan Africa will have reached two billion. What should the Commonwealth do to ensure that this is a dividend for its member states?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

The speaker stated that she agreed on the issue of relevancy. The dependency on the Commonwealth has lessened over the past 50 years, with a greater number of regional and sub-regional organizations now, as well as closer market integration. However, she noted that the organization remains well positioned to help member states address challenges through shared experiences. She highlighted the example of the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting, where challenges resulting from cyber crimes were addressed, as all countries need to ensure that they have the necessary legal instruments to tackle these. The Commonwealth plays an important role in ensuring mutual cooperation and assisting member states develop techniques and legal frameworks. The speaker stressed that the challenge for the organization is to decide which specific areas it should continue to engage on, and where it should withdraw. Withdrawing from some areas would provide the organization with a comparative advantage in its remaining focus areas.

Question

From which areas would the Commonwealth withdraw?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

This is a question that needs to be asked of the member states. The speaker explained that it is difficult to determine on a secretariat level, because states rely on different areas of the Commonwealth to varying degrees. She suggested that even if the organization no longer played such an active role in some sectors, the Commonwealth would continue its publications, maintain its network and broker the aid given to member states by other organizations.

The speaker stressed that economic development cannot take place without addressing political and human rights issues. These are interdependent issues, and the development of one area cannot take place without the other. In countries where the focus has been solely on economic development, there are problems with sustainability. Early economic development successes in these countries will be compromised if democratic developments have not also taken place. The speaker emphasized the necessity of addressing the two sectors within the context of each other. She explained that this has underscored the organization's engagement with leaders, civil society, and media. However, she acknowledged the possibility that the Commonwealth has focused too much on just one of the issues.

The youth dividend is an area of focus within the Commonwealth, and there have been developments in this area. The organization created a youth-led entity, the Commonwealth Youth Council, to engage with, and respond to, the youth on a broader level. The council has spoken with the heads of government to better inform the organization about how they wish the youth voice to be heard in the Commonwealth. The speaker stressed that there is a need to change the way in which the organization engages with the youth, as the youth wish to be treated as partners, not as recipients of the development programme. The hierarchical relationship must end.

Questions

What is the role of the Commonwealth in tackling terrorism and cyber terrorism?

Equatorial Guinea is lobbying for membership of the Commonwealth, and the Zimbabwean tourism minister has stated that, while Zimbabwe would rejoin the organization, it is too expensive. Why are countries interested in becoming members of the Commonwealth, and what is the cost of joining it?

What scope does the speaker see for closer partnerships with sub-regional organizations? Can the speaker envisage the Commonwealth developing partnerships in areas such as elections, instead of withdrawing?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba noted that terrorism is a growing challenge and it is a concern for all states. She explained that the Commonwealth is trying to address some of the underlying factors, and she highlighted the example of corruption. The Commonwealth has opened an anti-corruption center in Botswana, which is a network for the heads of anti-corruption units in Africa. This allows increased engagement through shared experiences. She explained that this is very useful, as the challenges of terrorism, crime and corruption are frequently isolated, and anti-corruption units are often not aware of similar issues taking place elsewhere. The sharing of experiences is an important area for the Commonwealth, as seen in the Law Ministers Meeting. Discussions here included issues regarding sharing evidence, as well as methods of ensuring that the funding of illegal actions and terrorism does not take place. She also described how the Commonwealth has facilitated practical collaborations, and gave the example of Nigeria's economic crime team meeting with their British and Australian counterparts.

The speaker described how states are often interested in joining the Commonwealth because of the increased ease of regional integration that the organization provides. Becoming a member of the Commonwealth helps ensure that the countries' systems are more aligned through out the region, the issues of language and common law are ameliorated, and the ability to share experiences is enhanced. In terms of expenses, she explained that members' contributions are based on a percentage of their GDP, so all the states pay the same proportion.

Bob Dewar

So the membership is affordable?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba clarified that it is affordable. She suggested that there are different reasons for Zimbabwe not becoming a member.

The Commonwealth is currently looking at strategic partnerships. The organization is underfunded, so it makes practical sense to develop such partnerships to help deliver on the needs of its member states. It is also increasing its cooperation with organizations such as the *Organization internationale de la Francophonie*, with whom it is working to strengthen the position and relevancy of the 77 member states that are not in the G20. She acknowledged that it may be time for the organization to step back from its electoral work. The Commonwealth election monitoring teams are often joined by individuals from other organizations, and she described how the Commonwealth could take less of a leadership role when working with these organizations. She suggested that the small size of the monitoring team means that it may be best to package its experience in election monitoring in a way that allows organizations with more funding to be more prominent. However, she explained that the Commonwealth wants to retain its involvement in the election process because the organization uses it as an indicator for deciding which areas require further engagement.

Question

What role can the Commonwealth play in resolving disputes between members, such as the strained relationship between South Africa and Rwanda?

Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba

Although there are a number of disputes between members, such as between India and Pakistan, the speaker indicated that the Commonwealth is not well positioned to work on such issues due to its nature as an intergovernmental organization. She stressed that while it is possible for the space for this to open up, this would first require further engagement from member states and a commitment to broadening the role of the Commonwealth. Member states must see the organization as an opportunity and ask it to play a facilitating role in such negotiations themselves.