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Interview with Charlie Mballa

Donald Charles McKinnon

Commonwealth Secretary-General (2000-2008)

The challenge internally which has to be promoted by donors and developed countries is to ensure that returns go into infrastructure and jobs to benefit all the people.

Charlie Mballa : *Globalization and continentalization seem to have imposed integration as a path to development, how does this imperative of development fit into the Commonwealth's strategies vis-à-vis Africa?*

Donald Charles McKinnon: In any development strategy you have to deal with what's there not with what you want to have there. Globalisation is a fact of life and any International Organization must take that into account as any strategy must be able to be reconfigured to respond to any changes taking place. That globalization has brought many benefits is without doubt, but you do have to look intimately at local communities in the developing world and ensure that any negatives can be ameliorated. Globalisation in a broad sense does not respect national borders and this fact alone may impose revenue losses on respective governments where traders are bypassing border and customs taxes. In such an event the strategies for development must recognize that fact and look for other revenue raising possibilities but ensuring that all people are benefited by lower cost goods. Whilst I can not speak for the Commonwealth with any authority today, I would see as a positive that Africa is joined up within rather than through the historical land and sea lanes constructed and imposed by the colonial powers.

CM : *How successful have the Commonwealth strategies to build a common identity among its members States been, so as to serve today as a gateway to the unity of Africa?*

DCMcK : Again I can not speak for today. However the work I was doing in the field of governance was designed to ensure that within Commonwealth Africa all could speak with the same governing voice. Meaning that the structures of Parliaments, Judiciaries, Education and Health

systems, etc. were all similar and hence open for comparisons. I would also say that within Francophone Africa similar values as to governance prevail and so there remains an overall environment to pursue best practices to the benefit of many. I have witnessed attempts by many including the late Muammar Gaddafi to be the "President of Africa" but such a role will not occur whilst there is divided opinion on such a role. African unity can best emerge from within, through the Regional Organisations and of course through the African Union (AU). For outsiders to build on the similarities and diminish the differences is the only fertile ground available.

CM : *As far as international trade issues are concerned, how do you assess the role of the Commonwealth for Africa and its contribution to the African's leaders quest to speak with one voice in world diplomacy?*

DCMcK : As per the above, policy implemented by force will never take root and be effectively owned by the people. My discussions with African leaders in the privacy of the Leaders Lounge at the AU meetings made more progress with the leaders when I highlighted deficiencies that should be rectified in whatever field. Underlining what others had achieved at low political cost, never megafoned, always paid dividends. During the first few years of the Doha Trade Round I set up programs to help sovereign states in Africa understand what was going on and how best to limit the downside due to the actions or agreements of larger economies. A major trade initiative between two large country groups could have very negative effects on small African economies and hence we could help prepare them for such a move. This was because I was fully aware the main decision makers in that round were the big players of which none were African. To that extent, even though that trade round failed, our support for the G20 ensued the AU voice was at the table.

CM : *How does the Commonwealth diplomacy towards African Regional Economic Communities compare with its diplomacy towards the African Union? What impact assessment practices best describe the results achieved?*

DCMcK : Again going back to my years (2000-08) the Commonwealth relationships with the regional organizations was very mixed. Some invited the Commonwealth to their annual meetings and others didn't. So although more time was spent with SADC and ECOWAS it would be hard to measure the real benefits that emerged through such interactions. The meeting with the Leaders was always most useful.

CM : *Looking at regional dynamics from the point of view of public policies, how do you see the response of African integration strategies to the thorny social issues such as precarious health, uncontrolled hunger, widespread unemployment, especially affecting younger generation, as well as other crucial issues such as insecurity and economic crime? Is it an exaggeration to speak of an African 'elitist integration'? How does the Commonwealth address these issues in its strategies for Africa?*

DCMcK : There are many People, Organisations, Neighbouring Countries, Friendly but distant Countries etc. all who want to help and have the best possible motives. All the above are doing what they can through out Africa and not always with success but not without a good purpose. It must be said that some are motivated by the source of their funds which is not always helpful. For me it was important that all the donors knew what everyone was doing. This was to ensure an agreed upon strategy and where possible prevent unnecessary duplication. This is not to take away from the recipient countries as they should also be part of the debate, it is a case of getting "best bangs for the buck". I can't comment on an elitist integration.

CM : *Does it sound too optimistic to imagine international and transnational development partners such as Commonwealth, La Francophonie, United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, eventually harmonizing their vision and development strategies with Africa? What, in your opinion, are some hopeful experiences or the concrete measures necessary to achieve this?*

DCMcK : Yes, I can imagine it happening but I would not be too optimistic. I have participated in similar events and it is with great reluctance that the genuinely large organizations really wish to work together and give up some of "their own sovereignty" in the process of agreeing to work together. Also

one has to remember who the big donors are within those large organizations and are they prepared to forfeit some leverage for the greater good. Organisations led by strong confident people who can see what is required for the greater good even if opposed by significant donors would be the only way such unity and benefits will prevail if such determine people can step up to the plate.

CM : *How do you assess the Commonwealth's work in promoting the free movement of goods and people between its African member States?*

DCMcK : The Commonwealth's capacity to achieve such an outcome can only be the result of effective diplomacy in encouraging other International Organisations to work together as described earlier. However what is equally important is for developed countries to drop their trade barriers to goods and services from Africa. Remembering that flowers grown in Kenya and airfreighted to Europe put less carbon in the atmosphere than those same flowers grown under glass in the Netherlands. If the developed world wants to really help there is much more they can do.

CM : *Africa is often considered a mosaic of cultures (languages and traditions sometimes heterogeneous), even justifying the evocation of the spelling "Africas". Don't you consider the given cultural heterogeneity a major challenge for any integration endeavours? What has the Commonwealth's recipe so far been for meeting this challenge?*

DCMcK : It is a challenge that has been met in many parts of the world where that mosaic of languages and cultures is also found. Yes, it imposes enormous challenges but is not insurmountable. In fact it is surprising in the current world of instant communications how much the internet has penetrated some of the most isolated societies and so becoming the common denominator of many societies. I would repeat what I've said earlier that to capitalize on the similarities, look at what the younger people are mostly engaged in and highlighting the need for governments to ensure access to mass communications. In Papua New Guinea, which has upwards of 800 separate languages, the promotion of development through modern communication has not been prevented by those divisions which have lasted a 1000 years. Not easy but not impossible.

CM : *Could you name any best practices of integration transferable in Africa in order to prevent the region from repeating some common mistakes in this process?*

DCMcK : No, but I would suggest that those practices which are working are those that have been developed with both donors and recipients involved and have been nurtured over time.

CM : *Would you easily come to the conclusion that the "Emerging Africa", a very attractive concept in the region, has established itself as a structuring paradigm of Commonwealth economic diplomacy, in particular and that of development of Africa in general?*

DCMcK : No, but I would suggest that where the Commonwealth and other International Organisations who have worked together over many years in conjunction with national and local governments pursuing those governing democratic fundamentals of free and fair elections, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and separation of powers. I would cite Ghana and Lesotho as two I am familiar with. It is hoped that such examples will spread to others. Africa generally is moving forward relentlessly and only occasionally are there real setbacks. Far fewer dictators or one party states than there were 20 years ago. A look at growth rates across Africa over the years since 2000 are envied by most of the developed world. This in turn encourages further investment. The challenge internally which has to be promoted by donors and developed countries is to ensure that returns go into infrastructure and jobs to benefit all the people.

CM : *The awareness of African integration is not new, if one refers to the Nkrumah's and other late prophets of African unity's faith. By taking a retrospective look at the African march towards integration, what achievements do you consider most as the legacy that has been preserved and strengthened over time? What would have been lost on the way and which, for you, remains to be found back?*

DCMcK : I much admire the aspirations of the early leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa to bring Africa together. However the challenges imposed by multi colonial powers with their different legacies, principle cities linked by sea and not by land, air routes between many African cities through Europe and African country boundaries determined by a meeting in Berlin in the 1870's without an African voice carving through the middle of many long cohesive tribes raised barriers of almost insurmountable heights to achieve any African integration. So the first accolade I would grant the African leaders was to generally accept those imposed boundaries. Secondly I would say that African leadership has learned more from mistakes than by their successes. Nigeria and Ghana which lurched from democracy to military dictatorship to one party states eventually

concluded that democracy did allow all people to be involved and hence we have seen in both close to 20 years of regular elections and accepted results. What has been lost are those community values which held many together. However in this day of modern communications and the internet, those characteristics are breaking down all round the world. Hence my opening comments that you have to deal with what's there not what you hope would be there.