

WE MAY NEED A SUMMIT TO THRASH OUT NEPAD

The Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) held its 2003 Policy Forum last week in Accra, Ghana, under the theme “Nepad and Security”.

The GCA, a tripartite forum that brings together top Africa policy makers, African non-state actors and the global donor community, aims to deepen dialogue and build consensus on Africa’s development issues.

Its plenary meetings, held every five years, and its annual policy forums are normally attended by African presidents, ministers and senior government officials. Parliamentarians, representatives of the private sector, non-governmental organisations and the media also attended.

The policy direction of the GCA is in the hands of its co-chairmen. These are president Festus Mogae of Botswana, Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi, former Malian president Alpha Konare, South African speaker Frene Ginwala, Britain’s secretary of state Clare Short, Canada’s Susan Whelan and Norway’s Hilde Johnson.

Sir Ketumile Masire and former World Bank president Robert McNamara are its co-chairmen emeritus.

The Accra Policy Forum will be remembered for the debate by participants on what Nepad (the New Plan for African’s Development) really is. The debate was sparked by Zenawi’s remarks that Nepad was not a programme of action as well as a set of projects but merely a framework to be considered by countries in the formulation of their national policies.

For Zenawi, Ethiopia’s national economic plan is his country’s sole contribution to Nepad.

Mogae fuelled the controversy from a different angle. He argued Botswana subscribes fully to Nepad but has not acceded to the African Peer Review Mechanism because of the “reservations” they have.

Mogae said Botswana was happy to continue complying with existing continental mechanisms aimed at promoting democracy and good governance, but did not see the necessity for another body such as the envisaged review mechanism.

The remarks by the two leaders were not well received by many participants, for a number of reasons. First of all, both Botswana and Ethiopia are active and committed members of the Nepad Heads of State Implementation Committee, yet their views seem to contradict what many understand Nepad to be.

They seem to confuse what is contained in the Nepad base document – a framework – with developments taking place in the Nepad process. Nepad is a developmental programme of the African Union with a substantial number of sub-regional projects.

Can a country claim to belong to the Nepad process yet opt out of the review mechanism?

Secondly, their remarks reflect the difficulty some African countries experience with finding a balance between the protection of national sovereignty and the need for collective action at the continental level.

The suggestion that Nepad is but a framework is informed by concerns with national sovereignty, but also undermines the extent to which African countries can mobilise their collective effort to push for a common agenda, such as around issues of debt and market access, and put forward common positions.

From this perspective, Nepad is not only a programme of action for the recovery of our continent, but is also a platform for common action by African countries on issues that affect Africa.

Many of us believed Nepad needed to be made popular among African civil society, but it is now clear leaders themselves need to do a lot of work too.

There is no problem in disagreeing on Nepad, but there must certainly be consensus on the basics and the fundamentals. That Nepad is more than a framework is part of the basics; and that the review mechanism is part and parcel of the Nepad process is also fundamental.

The commitment of both Botswana and Ethiopia to Nepad cannot be doubted, but leaders need to talk more among themselves. President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria was one of the dignitaries who attended the opening ceremony of the Accra Policy Forum. His interventions on Nepad were consistent with what we have always understood it to be.

Perhaps Botswana's argument, as one could infer from Mogae, is informed by the fact the country has since its independence practiced democracy when most of our continent was under authoritarian rule. It is also possible Botswana could disagree with the suggested variables for the measurement of good and corporate governance.

Some countries, such as Ethiopia, could be concerned Nepad must not mean countries will get order from above on development projects. These concerns are genuine, and must not be dismissed.

But at the same time, Mogae's view needs to take into account that the review mechanism is not for catching "culprits" and exposing the "bad guys". It is primarily for showcasing Africa's examples of best practice.

Botswana's participation in the review mechanism will be an encouragement to countries that are still struggling with practices taken for granted by the Botswana.

Perhaps there is a need for a continental, all-inclusive summit on Nepad.

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