



AMOAKO CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT AFRICAN UNION AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Interview of K.Y. Amoako by AllAfrica.com's Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, 8 march 2002
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The third African Development Forum closes its doors Friday in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, after a week of debate on regional integration in Africa, organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Steering the discussion -- involving 1000 or more delegates from the world of politics, economics, academia and civil society -- was the UN agency's executive secretary, K.Y. Amoako of Ghana.

With the high-profile NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa's Development) initiative taking centre stage and the African Union (the replacement of the Organisation of African Unity) a priority on the agenda in Addis, allAfrica.com's Ofeibea Quist-Arcton asked Amoako how he sees the future of the continent.

OAU/AU -- the challenges ahead

Q: Let's start with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which has in many ways signally failed citizens of the continent, with perhaps the exception of the fight against apartheid. When you look at the conflicts raging all over Africa and see that the OAU has been unable to resolve them, you ask will the African Union (AU) be able to do any better?

A: I think that's the discussion we are having now at the ADF here in Addis. Whether the AU will do better or not depends on how we set up the African Union. I'm an economist, but I'm also an historian at the same time. I like to look back. Why didn't certain things work, what lessons do you draw from them?

In building the African Union, so that it can perform these functions better than the OAU did -- granted the OAU did a lot of good things in some areas, but still there are some failures too -- we need to draw lessons.

To me, looking at the African Union, the institutions are important. How do you sequence them? We cannot do everything at the same time. So, if conflict prevention is important, how do you set up the parliament? How do you set up some of the commissions etc to tackle some of these problems?

If the architecture is right, and if the commitment and the will are there, I think they will be able to do better than the OAU.

Q: Are the commitment and the political will there, assuming the architecture -- the building blocks are in the right place at the right time?

A: It depends at what level you are talking about. If you're talking about the political will, the political commitment, I think it's mixed.

Q: How mixed?

A: (LAUGHS). I think you have some leaders who are very committed to this, who have been driving this process. But as long as we have poor governments in our own countries, as long as we have leaders who are motivated by personal greed -- or whatever you call it -- they can never have the political will, and, unfortunately, we have quite a few.

Q: But doesn't that doom the African Union to failure before it's even been set up, because greedy leaders are not going to change, or are they?

A: Let's see how things move within the next year. I think in a year from now, let's talk about it seriously. Because, look, we are having this debate now, here. Tremendous issues are being raised and a number of recommendations are being put on the table. All these issues you and I have been talking about are being raised by hundreds of people here. We are going to get some results, some analysis, that are going to go to the (OAU) Council of Ministers in the next two weeks. They have to take it up. We have to take this to Pretoria (where the OAU leaders are to meet to usher in the AU in July).

The real test, in my view, now that we have tried to open up the process of consultations, of discourse, the real test is going to be how -- over the next year -- the leadership of this continent are going to hear the voices of the people, their recommendations, and put them to the test.

Defining priorities for regional integration

Q: Next to ADF III, the third African Development Forum. Regional integration being the theme, how realistic is that in Africa? When you look at the regional organisations around the continent, some are strong, some are weak, some duplicate, some are non-existent.

A: Somebody asked me a question and I said it's something we should do. The imperatives of regional integration have always been a dream; sometimes it's been an

ambitious dream, sometimes it's been a false dream. But if you start with the founding fathers to where we've come today, it's clear that Africa cannot really be a major player on the world scene unless we cooperate more regionally, unless we build larger markets, unless we exploit our economies of scale.

All these wars cannot be effectively stopped until we begin to learn to live together. So, I think in the long term, in the medium and short term, for the economic and political development of this continent, we need to move towards that.

The problem -- and that's what this conference is all about and that's why we've decided to do this annual report on regional integration -- we need to draw lessons from the past. What have been our failures, what have been our experiences? How can we build upon our successes and move forward to this goal? All this is very important. That's the way we are defining this ADF.

As I said in my speech, the record has been very mixed. But we are beginning to understand why. Too many institutions are under-funded, reliant on donors, countries not meeting their obligations, countries belonging to too many organisations, organisations duplicating each others' functions. We need to recognise that and to rationalise them

Q: But which country is going to agree to pull out of, for instance, SADC (Southern African Development Community) and COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) or ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and the West African regional monetary organisation, UEMOA (Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine), surely individual nations are going to think that if they relinquish membership, they may lose opportunities, so let me be a member of as many regional organisations as possible to benefit my country as much as possible. So how can you convince them that this, in fact, weakens regional groupings?

A: (LAUGHS) That's our job. And that's what we are trying to do. And that's why I've said we've created this new study on regional integration. This is the first time somebody has actually -- there have been a lot of studies on regional integration before, don't get me wrong -- but at least in this process we are looking at it comprehensively, we come up with the indicators, we begin the dialogue. The question is what is the next step -- where do we go from here?

How do we bring these issues on the table, onto the agendas of the regional economic committees, at the summit of the Organisation of African Union or the African Union and engage in a serious debate?

Already, for example, COMESA and SADC have decided to try to rationalise. So, some of that has already started to happen. You look at West Africa and I think the most encouraging thing over the last three or four years is the realisation by the West African countries that we need to move together to bring more harmony between UEMOA and ECOWAS. In that process, Ghana and Nigeria and others are trying to bring in convergence criteria and all that, to move so that at least you have two organisations

within ECOWAS, the non UEMOA members and the UEMOA members, eventually bringing them together to form one currency.

So I think the realisation is coming. It is up to institutions like ours to provide the underpinnings to help it work and to bring the issues onto the agendas for debate and for decision making.

Q: Any deadlines, timetables? Do you feel that nations need to make decisions by a certain time?

A: Well certain decisions have to be made, it depends upon what decisions you're talking about. Take HIV/Aids, we need to make those decisions on that today, today, today. There's no deadline there, it's imperative. So, it's disappointing the pace we are going, compared to the magnitude of the challenge we face. So, decisions have to be made, based upon the analysis and the nature of the problem.

I'm impatient sometimes about some of these issues. From where I sit, I look at Africa and the declining terms of trade that we're facing, you look at the poverty, we look at the millennium development goals -- we're not going to meet them -- so we don't have much time on our side.

So, in that sense we need to be impatient, we need to think big, we need to drive each other, we need to push. But then, our ability to move depends upon several things, one of them being capacity, institutions. How do we create and strengthen our institutions that have to do the analysis that leads to the implementation of programmes? How do you open up, get the creativity of the people involved? It's a very complex question you've asked.

NEPAD -- a truly new partnership for African development?

Q: You wrote what one might call a 'policy statement', that you delivered in London last year, about NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) and the future for Africa, for the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. At that point it seemed that the G8 was going to fund NEPAD, but now it appears that they are back pedalling. Am I right?

A: I am not sure they are back pedalling. I think it's a process of consultation. I think there is still commitment on the part of people like Tony Blair, the Canadians -- I've just visited Canada. You know they've put up a US\$500m fund specially for Africa, in the context of NEPAD. My understanding now is that the G8 is in the process of deciding what the priority areas are, what are the criteria to use, who supports what. I think there's going to be a commitment to market access for example. Tony Blair is very strong on that. There is going to be a commitment on ICTs. The question I think is about money. (LAUGHS). And if so, how much money?

Q: But that is the bottom line isn't it. Without money, without the proper funding, NEPAD fails before it has started, surely?

A: I think money is important, very important. But I think NEPAD, if you really look at it, calls for a transformation of relationships. So it's a paradigm shift. And, to the extent that we can extend that, we can encourage that paradigm shift and transform those relationships, in the long run more money will flow. So, the two go together.

If you're talking about NEPAD as just getting resources for huge projects tomorrow, that may not happen. But, over time, if you're talking about more resources, more effective use of the resources, if you're talking about getting our development partners to change some of their behaviours which impede aid effectiveness, to harmonise their programmes on Africa, to put African governments at centre-stage, to reduce more conditionality, these things are very, very important, as important as money.

Q: So, you're not concerned in a perceived shift by the G8?

A: No, not yet. (LAUGHS). I don't have any basis to be disappointed yet. Because they are leading towards this meeting in Canada (of the G8). So it's a preparatory process. Nothing has been determined, nothing has been finally decided. There's a debate going on about how best to support NEPAD, So, I haven't given up hope yet.

Q: But the murmurings coming out aren't as positive and optimistic as they were say 6 months ago, are they?

A: Like I said, I've been around a lot. I've been to visit with the Canadians, I've seen Tony Blair, I talk to some of these guys all the time. I haven't seen any shift yet.

The Economic Commission for Africa

Q: The ECA, the Economic Commission for Africa which you head, is 44 years old. Its inception was in 1958, and yet it is not a high profile UN agency, although it is the UN's only agency specifically for Africa. Why?

A: I've heard that question so many times. What do you mean by high profile? The UN is a combination of many agencies. We all have our different mandates. We fit together as an organisation. At the country level, you have UNDP, WFP, UNICEF -- those are country based. So, in any African country, you are bound to hear more about UNDP or UNICEF, because they provide programmes, they support governments specifically.

We are a knowledge organisation, a continental organisation. We do studies, we do analyses. We bring ministers together, we focus on issues. These things normally don't make the public attention and they don't come into the public eye. We don't come up with concrete projects or programmes as such. But in that context, we are very much part of the system.

We have a coordination function for the UN. Right now, in the context of NEPAD for example, we have been asked by the UN system at the highest level to help pull the UN

together. And we are doing that. We had a meeting here to decide how best the UN system can support the whole NEPAD process, so that's our role.

The African Development Forum initiative

The African Development Forum for example -- that you are attending -- to me, and you can make up your own mind, it's a very powerful way of building consensus around key issues facing Africa.

We did one last year for HIV/Aids. It was through the discussions here that led to the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, coming up with the Global (Health) Fund for Aids.

Two years ago, we had one on ICTs, to bring the ICT revolution to our policy makers, to make sure they understood what it meant and the challenges and the opportunities. So, that's our function. So we do have a role and I hope we are playing that role quite effectively. It may not be a necessarily very high-profile one, in terms of the public eye, but our policy makers, I can assure you, value what we do. And increasingly, we are bringing in civil society and the private sector. We are the only organisation that pools civil society and the private sector in this kind of environment, so I'm quite pleased with what we're doing.

Q: But does it concern you that the average African, in any given country except perhaps Ethiopia where you have your headquarters, if you were to mention the UN Economic Commission for Africa would not know what it was?

A: It doesn't bother me as such, to the extent that we were not set up that way. The UN, in its wisdom, created the structure and that structure calls for the ECA to play a certain role, deal with policy makers, help build consensus, help make Africa's positions. For example, at the WTO (World Trade Organisation meeting) in Doha, for the first time, people said Africa came out very well.

I am very proud of the work we did. We brought the African negotiators here. We had seminars for them. We prepared policy papers for them. We worked with them very hard. Now, in the context of the implementation of what came out of Doha, they want us to do more, build capacity. This may not get into the newspapers in Ghana or Sierra Leone or Tanzania, but that's the nature of the job.

And, to the extent that we are having an impact and we are playing the role we're supposed to play, that's fine.

Q: So, you're happy to be a behind-the-scenes UN agency?

A: I am quite happy to be a behind-the-scenes UN agency as long as we have the credibility, where it counts, with the people. And, for example, at the country level we are known. Most ministers of finance or planning -- I have about thirty transport ministers here and about 15 central bank governors here -- so at that level, we are known.

Right now we are building networks with all the African research institutions on the continent. If you go to Ghana for example, there is CEPA (Centre for Policy Analysis), if you go to other countries, there are other organisations. In fact, we are in the process of trying to inter-connect them. So, we are known in the countries also, at certain levels, by certain institutions and certain people, given the role we play

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