



MILLENNIUM
CHALLENGE CORPORATION
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Transcript

May 28, 2009 | www.mcc.gov

A Vision for Africa

MCC Hosts a Public Outreach Meeting

Speakers

Rodney Bent,
Acting Chief Executive Officer,
Millennium Challenge Corporation

H.E. Aziz Mekouar,
Moroccan Ambassador to the United States

David Beckmann,
President,
Bread for the World

Kenneth Hackett,
President,
Catholic Relief Services

Gayle Smith,
Special Assistant to the President,
National Security Council

Ambassador Johnnie Carson,
Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

H.E. Amina S. Ali,
Permanent Representative of the African Union to the United States

Transcript

[*]

(JOINED IN PROGRESS)

BENT: ... Although you don't know it, it's a birthday party, or maybe you have guessed it. It's the 46th anniversary plus a few days. Could we have a round of applause for Africa?

(APPLAUSE)

I'm Rodney Bent. I'm the acting chief executive officer of the MCC. It's my pleasure to welcome you all here. My main duty, however, is to introduce you to Ambassador Mekouar, so I'm going to do that with a thank you.

MEKOUAR: Thank you. Thank you very much, the president, CEO. And thank you for organizing this.

We are the MCC. It's a very important place for Africa, and particularly for Morocco, I think, that I can give you the experience of Morocco. Morocco signed I think one of the biggest compacts, at \$697 million. But what was interesting was the way how the compact — how we worked the compact, how the MCC team and the Moroccan team worked the compact.

First of all, it was a teamwork; it was not a (inaudible) team's work. It was a teamwork and we went through a very interesting, let's say, process. And at the point that we, in Morocco, the ministry of finance, is he (ph) really thinking to spend its own money by using the process that was invented during the MCA negotiations between Morocco and the MCC.

So this was a great experience. I think that for Africa the MCA and many countries of Africa have benefited from the MCA. I think that other countries will have money from the MCA, and I think it's a great, great way to bring the development aid to our countries.

And let me tell you that each time I go to the Hill, I really love it for the MCC, even if you already signed the compact. So thank you very much, and it's a pleasure to be here again.

(APPLAUSE)

BECKMANN: Hello. I'm David Beckmann, from Bread for the World. We have a lot to celebrate this Africa Day. Most people in Africa are still suffering significant hardships, but compared to where Africa was 10 or 15 years ago, the situation — political situation, the economic situation, the human situation in general — is just much better. And the Millennium Challenge account has been part of Africa's success story over the last 10 or 15 years.

I'm the president of Bread for the World. We're an advocacy movement, and we're really proud that we've been involved in advocating for the MCA since the idea was in embryo.

Now we're working on our broad reform of foreign assistance. Partly we want to get our government to use the various instruments of development in a more coordinated way, and partly what we want to do is draw lessons from the MCA's experience that can be applied to U.S. foreign assistance more generally.

So for example, I think the MCA has shown us the effectiveness of being responsive to local people, local officials, open to public consultation. That works, to actually ask people what they want to do.

And I think maybe most importantly, the MCA has shown the power: If you want development you have to have some money that is single-mindedly focused on development. So the countries that have money from the MCA don't have that money because they're strategically important to the United States; they have money from the MCA because they're doing things that are important to growth and poverty reduction in their countries.

And a lot of African countries have been doing things that are good for their own people, and people, even in the midst of this economic crisis, are reaping the fruits of all those efforts, and that's why we have a lot to celebrate today.

(APPLAUSE)

HACKETT: Thank you. I'm Ken Hackett. I'm the president of Catholic Relief Services, and I see many of the same things David sees, except I've been seeing them longer.

Forty-one years ago I put my toe in West Africa — 41 years. And things have changed and improved, and opportunities have been increased for all kinds of people. Yes, there are still problems. We have problems in this country.

MCC, for me, and I said this at a previous lodge meeting we had, is the culmination of kind of a dream. When we used to sit around as young people in West Africa, or East Africa where we served, and talk about what it should be like to provide foreign assistance and to engage with countries and people, the model that MCC has presented was really what most people were dreaming about — engagement, country ownership, involvement of civil society.

I serve as a board member — one of four board members on the Millennium Challenge Corporation. And I think that's reflective of the engagement of civil society.

And now we see in many of the African countries that have MCC compacts true — not superficial engagement, but true engagement, where civil society has something to say and can contribute, and are invited to the table. So it's a special day — Africa Day — and it's a special day for the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

SMITH: Good afternoon, everybody. This is kind of like a high school reunion, but better. It's really wonderful to see everyone, and I just want to say a few words of thanks and then make one point.

I'm Gayle Smith. I'm now working for President Obama at the National Security Council with the brief for economic development. And it's particularly exciting because this is a man who understands development and, in fact, has lived it, by virtue of his own upbringing, but also what he's done with his life.

I want to thank, in particular, the African Diplomatic Corps. I know how hard you work. I know how much your governments and your people count on you to deliver. I know that you all have massive numbers of staff and unlimited resources to do your jobs...

(LAUGHTER)

... But I know from working with you on AGOA in the early days and on other things how hard you worked and how effective you are.

I also want to thank our friends at the MCC for doing what they do and doing it so well, and also just give a little bit of a shout out to the public board members — Ken is one. And you may recall, we recently had a fairly spicy election, and one of the high points for me — I was supporting President Obama at the time — was to talk to some members of the public board who were interested to make sure that whether it was President Obama, or President Clinton, or President McCain, or Ron Paul, that whoever it was would support the mission of the MCC. And one of the things that was very striking, and we laughed about it at the time, but I sat, actually in a bar, with a very political Republican and a very political Democrat — I threatened to call the Washington Post because it was kind of unprecedented — who were there together because they care about Africa, care about development, and care about this institution.

President Obama cares very, very much, and he understands that right now you're facing a particular challenge in the wake of some significant progress, in terms of growth on the continent. You are feeling the pain, as we all are, but I think it particular ways, of the global financial crisis.

And that's why one of the first things we did at the G-20 was to announce that we will double our assistance to agricultural development. Having seen what happened during the spike in world food prices, we've subsequently announced a fund for countries worst affected by the global financial crisis, a commitment to increasing the resources of the international financial institutions, and a six-year commitment on global health that will double the size of PEPFAR and add, significantly, \$12 billion for maternal and child health. That was in about the first 120 days, so I think that's a sign of how serious this president and this administration is.

If I may, I'd like to close with one appeal to you, as my friends. I grew up twice — once in Columbus, Ohio, and the second time in Africa. I've had the good fortune in my life to live there for 21 years, and you all taught me things that I could never, ever learn in school, and have served me extremely well, because it makes me sound like I know what I'm talking about.

And what I've seen, and what I think the moment we are standing on is about is the fact that what is politically strategic in Africa right now is economics. It is the ability of you and your colleagues and your brothers and sisters to deliver together to your people, to make your government strong and capable. And in the end, I believe, as we see here all of the time — look at what this

But let me just share one vision with you that I think is extraordinarily important — one vision that has been somewhat neglected in the last one or two decades in the recent past. As you all know, the most important economic sector in Africa today is agriculture. Some 60 to 70 percent of all of Africans — all African households — depend primarily or secondarily on agriculture as a source of income. Some 30 to 40 percent of the gross domestic product of most African countries is derived from agricultural production.

This is an area where Africa should be a leader. It should be a continent which is a net exporter of food and agricultural products, but yet, in 2009, Africa is increasingly an importer of food. Whether you look at Africa's most populous state of Nigeria, which spends approximately \$1.3 billion or \$1.4 billion a year just on rice imports, or whether you look further south to a place like South Africa, which, until very recently, was a net food exporter and has now become a net food importer.

It is important that if, in fact, we are going to see long-term, sustainable development in Africa, agriculture has to be made a greater priority — a greater priority for the partners of Africa, like the United States and the G-20, but also a priority for African countries themselves. We, in this country, have to spend substantially more resources and more money, and if you have noticed the AID budget over the last two decades, the amount of money spent on agriculture has significantly declined.

If there is going to be long-term, sustainable development, we have to begin to think about agricultural productivity. We have to think not only in terms of food security, but food exports and agri-business. And I hope that one of the things that we all, here, will think about more is trying to help Africa — we, as partners in the United States — help Africa, work with Africa to make food security, agricultural productivity, a greater and higher priority in what we do.

Last comment on this subject — I know that I spend a lot of time in Africa, and again, many people say, “You know, America is great because of its educational institutions, because of its enormous technology, because of its military prowess, because of its enormous ingenuity.” Actually, America is great today, as it was 100 years ago, as it was 200 years ago, as it was 230 years ago, because we have had a basis of strong agriculture.

We're as strong and powerful on the agricultural side today as we were 200 years ago. America is strong for a lot of reasons, but clearly, one of those is because of the strength not only of our education, our technology, our innovation, but also because of our agriculture. And we should let some of that education, some of that innovation, some of that technology that continues to drive the success of our agricultural industry be a part of what we help to partner with Africa in driving its renewed agricultural growth as well.

I'm going stop. It's probably far too long — exceeded my three minutes. Probably shared a vision that I shouldn't have shared. But that's one vision, but it's an important vision. We've got to think about this as well as we think about all of the other important topics that I'm sure others have discussed.

Again, I'm glad to be here with Ambassador Ali, and my good friend from Morocco as well. I've got lots of good...

(APPLAUSE)

Could I do this? I'm not failing to do this, and Gayle sort of did this. It is my great pleasure to introduce, as the next speaker, the ambassador to the African Union, a distinguished diplomat representing the Diplomatic Corps and the Africa Union, Ambassador Ali, who is a friend and colleague from the great state — country of Tanzania, a place where I started my service many, many years ago.

Ambassador Ali?

(APPLAUSE)

ALI: Thank you very much, Ambassador Carson.

My fellow ambassadors, my sisters and brothers from Africa, and friends of Africa, I would like first of all to thank MCC for organizing this important event, and I could say it is very successful. And this is the first time, so I think we should express our appreciation and gratitude for creating this opportunity to commemorate Africa Day.

Secondly, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of African Union, to really express our appreciation, to his Excellency, President Obama, for allocating \$1.8 billion or \$1.9 billion to MCC, and this shows how this (inaudible) and the official is committed toward encouraging investment (inaudible) economy for Africa.

Today we are celebrating Africa Day, and we all know the history of Africa Day. But the theme for today, for this year Africa Day commemoration, is toward united, peaceful, and prosperous Africa.

So when I talk about vision, I will talk about united, peaceful, and prosperous Africa. Now, when you talk about united, in our vision we all hope that Africa will be united, integrated, and to form one African government. We don't have it here yet, but we are moving toward that goal.

Secondly, when you talk about peace, peaceful Africa, because even today Africa is challenged because of so many conflicts, and the (inaudible) now days the conflict — the shape of the conflicts is change. Now we are seeing conflict because of (inaudible), and we are seeing conflict because of change of government, especially due to contesting (ph) election. So when you talk about peace, we are working toward an Africa that would really follow the democratic practices of governance, and allowing election to go untested, so that we'll have — the will (ph) now will be accepted and the government will transition from one party to the other with peaceful news (ph).

And as you know, peace is further (inaudible) of economics. Economic development, you need to have peace to be able to (inaudible) the economic development. And for the last 10 years, Africa has really seen a lot of economic growth. Some countries have achieved events (ph) of 10 percent of economic growth because we are building peaceful transition, we are building peaceful Africa towards economic development.

Now, when you talk about prosperity, prosperity is our vision. We would like to see Africa enjoy the benefit — enjoy the opportunity for our people, like any other citizen of any other continent, in terms of health. We would like to see Africans enjoy universal access of health services by 2016. That is our vision.

(APPLAUSE)

We would like to see Africa's economics are integrated, and in that respect, there are issue of, we have to get support from — a little bit (ph) from our friends and partners to be able to (inaudible) our country economically. Therefore, I would like to cite to projects.

The first on is a program for infrastructure development for Africa. This is our vision. This is a comprehensive program that will include infrastructure — all aspects of infrastructure — transportation, power, telecommunication. We are going to create a superhighway of information and put (ph) investment in Africa. This is our vision.

The second vision is CAADP — Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Program. This is a program whereby Africa will attain self-sufficence (ph). When you call (ph) about, please listen to our African initiatives, these two are African initiatives.

We have seen quite a lot of time, Africa is importing \$28 billion of food imports — \$28 billion. Now, let's try to do mathematics. If we'll put, inside Africa, \$28 billion investment in Africa, that will make a change, and Africa will be the net food exporter. And agriculture is one of a potential area of development. And we have potential, have capability to develop agriculture.

Therefore, CAADP is one of the African initiatives, a comprehensive program that would include not only agriculture, but it will also include (inaudible) investment, it will also include issues of transport, corridors to be able the farmers to have access to markets for their commodities. These are our visions.

Lastly, I would like to (inaudible) Ambassador Carson and the rest of our partners here that — who would like to seek to see deliberate division (ph) from both Congress and our executive part of our government — of U.S. government, especially to authorize MCC to be able to really look into regional projects, because regional projects are key for development. To open up Africa, we'll talk about investment in agriculture, we're talking about original projects for infrastructure development.

That will also include the private sector. We're not saying only government to government. That will also include private sector.

We talk about AGOA. AGOA should also be looked into as an investment opportunity, not only trade, because when we talk about trade, don't forget trade is impacted by investment. So these two things, I would like AGOA (inaudible) to include those investment aspects of AGOA, and also for audience (ph) like MCC to be given power to also deal with original projects. Original integration projects are key for development for Africa.

I would like to end by saying, thank you very much, MCC. (inaudible)...

(APPLAUSE)

... and I believe (inaudible) will follow your example, and this shows how committed you are for Africa, and really you are our partner, and we are ready to work with you.

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

BENT: On behalf of the MCC, let me say thank you. I think the vision of a peaceful and prosperous Africa is one we all share.

I'd like to thank my partners in development, plus other agencies who I think are in the room, USAID, the Peace Corps, African Development Foundation, and others, we are all working together; we are all trying to do what we can do to help Africa be as prosperous, as educated, as healthy, as well-fed, as well-housed as it can possibly be.

So again, thank you very much, and please continue enjoying the afternoon.

END