

“DIPLOMACY IN ACTION: PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS FOR BUSINESS”.

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What is Diplomacy?

‘Diplomacy’ and ‘Diplomatic’ are two very widely used words in conversation. The more careful with words, gestures, and behaviour among us – it does not matter whether they are Ambassadors or High Commissioners – would often be described as being “Diplomatic”. For instance, instead of using a rude epithet in an exchange, I say, “I’m so sorry, but I’m still a bit lost regarding what you are putting across”, that, I believe would be a diplomatic way of putting it. Diplomatically speaking you should not be considered brusque, discourteous, impolite or impetuous.

Those among us who employ conciliatory or mild mannered methods in our approach to disagreements and conflict situations would be referred to approvingly as having deployed diplomacy to avoid crisis or to enable reconciliation. This simple interpretation is at the individual level, but the world we live in involves states parties, working together to maintain international peace and security.

“Diplomacy in Action” is essentially how nations relate with one another to achieve their strategic objectives and national interests. Often we talk of a country’s Foreign Policy interchangeably with Diplomacy. They are related, but also independent. The dictionary meaning of Diplomacy is threefold:

- i. The conduct by government officials of negotiations and other relations between nations;
- ii. The art or science of conducting such negotiations;

iii. Skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc., so that there is little or no ill will; tact:

While Foreign Policy on the other hand is defined as a policy pursued by a nation in its dealings with other nations, designed to achieve national objectives. So, if ‘Diplomacy is the name of the game, so to speak, the Foreign Policy is the team’s ‘Gameplan’. Foreign policy formulation and implementation by convention, is the task of the Foreign Ministry. In Ghana, we call that ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration (MFA&RI). In Namibia, it is the Ministry of International Relations and Cooperation (MIRCO). In the UK, it is called the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and in the US, it is simply The State Department. So important is this function that in some jurisdictions, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is, in terms of executive hierarchy, next after the President, Vice President and Prime Minister.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates through “Departments” to handle different regions of the world or subjects. So, one would usually find Directors for Africa, Europe, Middle East, etc., generally called ‘Political Bureaux or Desks. In Ghana there is even a Department for “Diaspora Affairs”. As the title suggests, the Department coordinates and monitors the country’s Diaspora populations. The African Diaspora plays a very significant role in the continent’s fortunes, a fact that is not lost on the African Union, which acknowledges the African Diaspora as the 6th Region of the continent, after the East, West, North, South and Central regions of the Continent.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs therefore “has a special role in partnering all branches of government, since each has its external activity, goals, and priorities.” For example in trade, environment, education and security...

Foreign ministries are staffed by highly educated and well trained personnel with a variety of skills sets and expertise. They are the work horses of the country’s foreign policy implementation. Often referred to as career diplomats they can rise up their particular career ladder to become Heads of Missions. The Head of Mission level however is open to non-career persons such as ‘yours truly’ who are appointed for reasons other than civil service progression; therefore not all diplomats or diplomatic passport holders are staff of the Foreign Ministry. By convention some very senior public servants, military personnel, police, academics or business people are issued with diplomatic passports and these add to the mix of diplomatic activity.

Diplomacy is multifaceted and complex and defies one definition because each situation calls for an appropriate kind of diplomatic approach to adopt – sometimes new paradigms necessitate entirely new language registers. It however is not that straight-laced. Many anecdotes abound and diplomats at all levels would no doubt have their own nail-biting or side-splitting tales to tell. Narrate own experience at credential presentation to President Khama of Botswana...

The world has travelled quite a distance since the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961. The Convention regulates diplomatic relations between countries but diplomacy itself has continued reforming and morphing during the time. The drafters of the Vienna Convention were at work within two decades after the WWII and the establishment of the UN and just two years before the establishment of the OAU, which itself has since remodelled itself into the AU. Diplomacy therefore is as fluid and dynamic as the ebbs and flows of human activity. Who talks of the League of Nations these days? The United Nations, which replaced it after WWII keeps reinventing itself in a world that gets ever more complex by the day.

About 16 years ago, it was decided that the best way to develop was by means of the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs, today, the world is embarking on achieving what we are calling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Both the MDGs and SDGs were the outcomes of detailed diplomatic negotiations involving not only governments but other stakeholders. I recall in early 2015 I happened to be in Nairobi to participate in a seminar organised by the Africa Media Initiative and Global Forum for Media Development to contribute to the negotiations on SDG 16. For those not already aware, SDG 16 specifically enjoins all member states to “ensure public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” SDG 16 links human development and progress to the prioritisation of accountable and fair practises.

As a flagship project of the UN, last year, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, appointed Ghana’s President as co-Chair with the Norwegian Prime Minister of the SDG Advocacy Group. Clearly more diplomacy is going to be required in implementing and monitoring of the 17 Goals.

Diplomacy in action

It used to be that diplomacy was called “Champagne diplomacy”, that diplomats accredited to Missions abroad engaged in endless diplomatic cocktails, lunches, dinners and cosmetic appearances at functions. In practising diplomacy, there are three main media by which we earn our keep. We are to represent our Heads of State, negotiate on behalf of and in the best interest of our state, and observe policies and affairs of the host country to advise our country accordingly. These are carried out through meetings, cocktails, receptions, dinners, lectures (like this one) and so on. Some are figuratively back-breaking assignments that keep the cogs of international relations working.

The practice of diplomacy has become so subject-specific that all that one has to do is choose a subject, add the word ‘diplomacy’ to it and it becomes a functioning inter-state enterprise. We therefore hear of economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, enterprise diplomacy, or even for those with distant memories, “Ping-Pong Diplomacy”, which arose from the Henry Kissinger/Richard Nixon “Détente” policy towards China. Even physical economic locations can throw up their own brands of diplomatic activity: The Suez and Panama Canals, for example, provide Egypt and Panama, respectively, the platforms to pursue highly specialised forms of ‘enterprise diplomacy’. Every vessel passing through these two waterways is participating in the global economy and such passage is subject to several international agreements and conventions.

There are many tiers of diplomatic activity, evidenced by the myriad of acronyms that now paper international relationships. Just click a finger and they will come tumbling down: ECOWAS, SADC, EU, WTO, WHO, ASEAN, NATO, COMESA, G7, TICAD, UNESCO, ACP, OPEC, ICO and many, many more! Let us look at the Bilateral, Multilateral and Plurilateral tiers – there are others; of course we cannot go into all of them in this 30-minute lecture. Though perhaps you could each test yourselves to see how much you know.

Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations, the everyday practices are the more familiar diplomatic activities to many people. 'Bi' as you may be aware is the Greek word for 'two', bilateral relations refer to the diplomatic relationship between two states. Therefore one can say that Ghana and Namibia enjoy friendly bilateral relations. That is where officials like myself and other "Excellencies" accredited to a country weigh in with flags of our countries fluttering on our representational cars.

As an Ambassador or High Commissioner – same function – we represent one of the cogs in the structures that work the relations between nations. These structures are activated by (PJCCs) or (JPCCs), Permanent Joint Commissions of Cooperation. Through these PJCCs, memoranda, agreements and other instruments are drawn up between institutions of the reciprocal sectors to give meaning to the intentions and aspirations of the two countries. There may be general or specific memorandums or agreements. For example, a Memorandum of Understanding on Political Consultation would spell out areas of political interest between the two countries and an Agreement on Scientific Cooperation would also detail how the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Ghana could collaborate with a similar institution in Namibia to develop together.

Within multilateral settings, individual countries would often use their bilateral relations to gain leverage on any number of interests. It is not unusual for bilateral relations to work on a reciprocal basis for a post or position in a multilateral organization such as the UN or AU. In the very recently held AU elections, Ghana put forward a candidate, and apart from Heads of Missions like myself bringing our need for support to the attention of my colleagues, Special Envoys were dispatched by President John Mahama to AU Member States to solicit support. There is also concurrent accreditation in which case a Head of Mission is accredited to more than one country, for example, I am accredited to Namibia and Botswana. This should not be confused with multilateral accreditation.

Multilateral Relations

Multilateral relations are founded on what one may describe as group membership or simply put, relations between three or more countries, for example the UN, the AU, SADC, ECOWAS, the EU, etc. What we call multilateral postings are therefore to be found in New York and Geneva (UN), Brussels (EU-ACP), Addis Ababa (AU) and other regional groupings like Abuja (ECOWAS) and Gaborone (SADC).

The AU Agenda 2063 is a multilateral pact which all AU Member States have signed into and this year many African countries have also signed up to the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union. The different UN Agencies like the WHO, FAO, UNESCO also fall within these multilateral relations through their mother organization, the UN. Ghana's Ambassador to France is also accredited to UNESCO, because that is where UNESCO is headquartered. In the US we have our Ambassador to the US whose duty post in Washington and our Permanent Representative to the UN who is also the Head of Mission, has her duty post in New York.

Multilateral relations are noted for complicated negotiations on a variety of issues involving many actors. Thus, reaching agreements under these circumstances can be daunting. Often unanimous positions are forged for the benefit of the general good. It is for these nature that real diplomatic techniques come into play, with states using their best cards to win over others. Negotiations leading to the establishment of the WTO, come to mind and even in its day to day activities. We see multilateralism at work with the EPA negotiations even as each individual country involved in the negotiations has its national interest to safeguard, Multilateralism is therefore very significant in state to state relations.

Plurilateral Relations

Plurilateral relations "share common resources". Here we are referring to organizations such as OPEC, the Coffee Producers Association or the International Cocoa Organization. One can also refer to the level of the economy, for example G-77, OECD and ACP. Another way is to look at proximity on important issues, e.g. the Cairns group of agricultural product exporters or interestingly, historical legacy: the Commonwealth, La Francophonie, the Ibero-American Summit. I say 'interestingly' because, though non-English speaking, Cameroon and Mozambique are members of the Commonwealth and non-French speaking Ghana is a member of the Francophonie. The practice of diplomacy as already observed, is fluid and dynamic.

There are numerous other "lateral" relationships as we can see from the growing compendium of acronyms. In addition to those already mentioned, we have TICAD, SACU, WAMV, LDC, OECD, WTO, BRICS, NEPAD, NATO etc. The BRICS acronym of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa recognised as a growing world power bloc with growing economic power. All these organizations are staffed by different shades, colours shapes and sizes of the diplomatic

world. Some are professionals from foreign ministries while the majority of them are technical experts from specialised fields and institutions. Diplomats may work upfront or behind the scenes facilitating, for example, “summits” of Heads of State/Government. They prepare and attend technical meetings; they participate in ministerial conferences; they participate in specialised meetings and hold negotiations on all manner of subjects, themes and concerns.

As nations become interdependent in this so-called “globalised” environment, relations are at once insular and at the same time ecumenical. Each country considers its “national interest” first, even as it promotes bilateralism, regionalism or plurilateralism to reap the benefits of economies of scale, wider markets, cooperation on security and defence and facilitation of doing business.

Three regional groupings will illustrate the perspectives and insights for business. These are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the European Union. Inherent in their names are the clues as to what they stand for: Economic, Development and Union. Plurilateral bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO), Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) are examples of global organizations that sprung up as a result of specific needs in the global economy. Their mandates are clear: To get business of the world working.

ECOWAS

In my own West African sub-region, ECOWAS was established on May 28 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos. It is a 15-member regional group with a mandate of promoting economic integration in all fields of activity of the constituting countries. Member countries include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo.

ECOWAS over the years has come to represent one of the more stable regional groupings of Africa. As a trading union, it is also meant to create a single, large trading bloc through economic cooperation. The Community has been grappling with the idea of a common currency for example, but issues of convergence and other political handicaps have stalled that particular initiative. However, one success story has been ECOBANK, a private initiative which derived its inspiration from the ideas put forward by ECOWAS, the sub-regional financial institution that straddles the entire sub-region and has now moved into Africa with a presence in 30 African countries including South Africa. Other areas of cooperation include the West Africa Gas

Pipeline Project, the Trans West Africa Highway and others. Last year when the Ebola epidemic threatened the sub-region, the member states rallied and with Ghana as the coordinating centre for the international assistance that poured in, the epidemic was stemmed and confined to the endemic countries...

SADC

Shifting southwards, The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a Regional Economic Community comprising 15 Member States; Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Much recent than ECOWAS, SADC was established in 1992, and “committed to Regional Integration and poverty eradication within Southern Africa through economic development and ensuring peace and security.”

Here in Namibia, within walking distance of this University, we have the headquarters of the Southern Africa Customs Union, SACU. An interesting observation, for me, is how the many members of this grouping look like clones of one another in terms of the shopping malls and the franchises that dominate them. We also notice how the Namibian Dollar is closely tied to the South African Rand. The Trans-Kalahari Corridor, with the Trans Kalahari Highway is a potent symbol of sub-regional economic activity.

Many countries within this sub-region are currently undergoing debilitating drought conditions – a major hindrance to economic activity. With this common existential threat, one can observe plurilateral relations at play as they have come together to declare a drought emergency. Some of the initiatives on offer include, the setting up of desalinization plants to convert sea water into fresh water. And why not? After all, thousands of kilometers of pipelines carry oil and gas throughout Europe, why not do the same with water in the thirsty parts of Africa

EU

The European Union or EU, Brexit notwithstanding, is a unique economic and political union that exists between 28, soon to be 27 European countries that together cover much of the continent. It was created in the aftermath of the Second World War. The very original concept

sketched was merely to do with cooperation on coal iron and steel. Those first steps “were to foster economic cooperation: the idea being that countries that trade with one another become economically interdependent and so more likely to avoid conflict. The result was the European Economic Community (EEC), created in 1958, and initially increasing economic cooperation between six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Since then, a huge single market has been created and continues to develop towards its full potential.” Only two years shy of its 60th anniversary, the Union has achieved the single currency – the Euro, a common visa regime for most members – Schengen and several areas of rationalized trade, agricultural and political policies.

The Business Perspective of Diplomacy

This is now an overarching imperative requiring all diplomats to explore ways and means of gaining advantage for their countries’ trade and economies. The nexus between diplomacy and business can be seen in the practice of including captains of business and industry in Presidential delegations to seize opportunities provided by diplomatic forays to promote commercial interests.

PJCCs provide frameworks for leveraging diplomatic initiatives to create opportunities for private sector operatives of two countries to engage one another to promote business. PJCCs also provide fora for resolving business disputes before they become intractable. Diplomacy includes the study of cultures and ways of life of other countries which, properly leveraged by business operatives, provide useful instruments for engaging partners abroad. When referenced in the proper context, this defines the "dos and don'ts", "breaking the ice", projects, respect and conveys appreciation, all of which go a long way to promote successful business exchanges. It is for this reason that businesses find it pragmatic to consult the Foreign Ministry of their country before they venture abroad. A further link between diplomacy and business is the very work of the High Commission which, on a regular basis, interacts with host economic institutions like the Ministry of Trade and Chamber of Commerce to promote business goals.

The business perspective could be micro, eg give examples of Air Namibia and the MOU being prepared by the Ghana Chamber of Commerce and the Namibian and Botswana Chambers (verbatim)..., or macro and these are the major trade deals negotiated by the likes of the WTO or the current Africa Free Trade area being discussed and negotiated at the AU...

Namibia

And now a few observations regarding some Namibian giants in diplomacy to whom we owe so much. The Land of the Brave may be one of the youngest African countries, but surely, one of the most experienced in ‘diplomacy in action’.

His Excellency Dr. Sam Nujoma, the Founding Father of the Republic of Namibia, to use an Olympic sounding turn of phrase, is one of the gold medallists in diplomacy. Some of us were very young, many in this audience were not even born, when the Founding Father fought and negotiated for the independence of the Land of the Brave. It is a privilege to have witnessed the iconic image of the black beard metamorphose into the grey that it has become today in the service of the liberation struggle...

One hears of Namibia being referred to as a “Child of the International Community”. True, because, even as the freedom fighters struggled in the bush, there were behind the scenes intense diplomatic negotiations at the UN, AU and other multilateral and bilateral platforms to midwife and eventually deliver the state of Namibia. The Founding Father led a crack team of diplomats and negotiators to deliver the goods.

Former President Dr. Hifikepunye Pohamba, current President Dr. Hage Geingob, former Speaker of Parliament, Dr. Theo Ben Gurirab, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, former Prime Minister the Rt. Hon. Nahas Angula are all part of the pioneering corps of Namibian diplomacy. Of course a later generation, including The Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of MIRCO, Netumbo Nandi-Ndeitwah, Ambassador Kalomoh Advisor at MIRCO, former AU Commissioner Advocate Bience Gawanas and many others have paid and continue to pay their dues in the fashioning and prosecution of Namibian diplomacy. I cannot name all of them here, but I salute them all. Their diplomatic and negotiating skills have brought Namibia so far and would no doubt take her even farther.

Final words

Diplomacy may not always produce successful results, but in several instances, continued engagement in diplomacy provides the only buffer to conflict - a situation that plays out time and time again in the Middle East. We saw it in Kosovo after the bloodletting there, and now in Syria, after almost five years of bloody carnage, diplomacy may yet be given the chance. Stalemate in Ukraine means regular flare-ups but a window has been kept open for diplomacy to work. On our own continent, Southern Sudan has become a basket case, but diplomacy is still being given a chance. Perhaps the best known diplomatic failure was when Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich waving a piece of paper proclaiming “Peace in our Time”. Not long after that WWII flared up and left the world with over 50 million dead.

All the major economic agreements that facilitate trade and business at regional (eg ECOWAS free movement of persons and goods) and global (WTO, G7, BRICS, etc) deploy diplomacy and tact to achieve their goals. Even the UK and EU would need diplomacy to negotiate BREXIT!

Diplomats are therefore not the partying privileged class that they are perceived by some people to be, but actually, the arbiters in a world that has become exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to handle.

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5. Reference material from ECOWAS, SADC and EU Sources