

A Report Of The Commonwealth Chat Facilitated by: Kareem Folajaiye

Occupation: Student

Date:-29th, October 2009

Venue Social Sciences, Basement, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile- Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.

Time: (4:30-6:15) pm

Minutes by: Ogunfowoke Tunde

Agenda for the Commonwealth chat.

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Warm Up
- 3 What do you think about the commonwealth?
- 4 Commonwealth quiz
- 5 Finding out a bit more about the commonwealth
- 6 The Commonwealth's role and value
- 7 Refreshments
- 8 The benefits of membership
- 9 The future of the commonwealth- Your ideas and suggestions
- 10 What do you think about the commonwealth again? / Closing.

Attendance Information

I invited the students of my university to the chat through word of mouth (to intimate friends) and by invitation leaflets (to interested participants). I got down relevant information of the participants by making them fill a form before the programme commenced. The invitation was thrown out to involve more people so as to avoid low turn out if some of the invitees end up not showing up therefore, I expected more than 8 participants but prepared only for the first 8 attendees. On the long run, 12 participants showed up. These are the basic information of all the attendees:

Age group of all participants: (18-25)

Nationality of participants: Nigerian

What all participants do for a living: Study

Course of study of each participant: Psychology, Political science, Accounting, Medicine, Sociology, Geology, Microbiology, Law and Mechanical engineering.

Introduction

I introduced myself to the group and I went straight to introduce chat following the exact procedures of the discussion guide. We set ground rules and I urged the participants to sign the consent form.

Warm Up

At first we had an icebreaker called Totty Totty which was fun. I asserted that if we could laugh together then we could work together. I later split the participants into two groups to work on the "get to know each other" icebreaker. In return, every individual reported back the information they got from their partner. From the icebreaker, we discovered the participants had interest mostly in reading, music, sports, writing and gardening as part of their hobbies.

What the group thinks about the commonwealth

After I stated the objectives of this section, I asked them the questions in the discussion guide. Here is what I gathered from their thoughts in the discussion; Some of the members knew a little about the Commonwealth, more than half had some knowledge of the Commonwealth while only a few had picked interest in the Commonwealth as a result of their course of study. Those who had a little knowledge of the Commonwealth all said the first thing that came through their minds when they heard of the Commonwealth was 1. British colonies, 2. The queen of England who they think decides all the things that happen in the Commonwealth. The participant who claimed to have a standard knowledge of the Commonwealth said the Commonwealth is an international organization that has both British and non British countries as their members but he immediately announced his dislike for the Commonwealth, its formation and principles. His view immediately made me ask about the groups overall impressions of the commonwealth.

A participant who is a fresh student of Sociology stated that he thinks Nigeria's membership has brought about the growth of capitalism in the country which has been a negative impact to the nation. He stood his grounds as negative to the Commonwealth.

An Accounting student on the other hand declared his love for the Commonwealth because he believes Nigeria has gained a lot of economic assistance from the association.

The Mechanical Engineering student who admitted he did not know too much about the Commonwealth however believes that it is better for a country to be enveloped under an umbrella of countries than for it to stand alone and thus he supports the association's involvement of lots of countries.

One of the Political Science students believes that Nigeria benefits from the Commonwealth in terms of security since the association would want to defend its members in times of distress.

Another Political Science student individually concludes that he only enjoys the sporting benefits derived from the Commonwealth but disagrees with the Commonwealth's actions because he believes it has not met its aims and objectives over the years. He prefers to be against the Commonwealth rather than being neutral.

I moved on to ask how and where they got to know about the Commonwealth. Majority of the participants claimed they heard about the organization through their Secondary Schools. One participant said he was made to learn about the commonwealth and its benefits in his primary school through quiz competitions while another learnt of the association as part of his school curriculum and course of study. Majority of the group believe that the Commonwealth has not gained enough publicity, as they do not hear about it as often as they hear about other international organizations.

The Commonwealth Quiz

I divided the group into two equal groups and we made an icebreaker out of 5 questions from the discussion guide. The group that got most of the answers was rewarded with extra refreshments. Both groups did not know the number of countries and people in the commonwealth, the venue of next the commonwealth heads of government meeting. The group that named majority of the events undertaken by the Commonwealth won the quiz.

Finding out more about the commonwealth.

After the quiz, I explained the objective of the next item on the agenda to the group. Immediately I handed out copies of the maps and appendix two leaflets to each participant. I gave them time to read through and study the materials in their possession and then I asked them questions based on their reactions towards the new information they have just gotten. A few of the participants were surprised to know the Commonwealth had 53 member countries. A member in the group was happy to see that India and Malaysia are now considered fast growing industrializing nations. Another participant was pleased to see that the Commonwealth had a lot of programmes that encourage youth involvements. Majority of the participants were marvelled by the amount of small countries, the diversity and the percentage of the number of people that form the commonwealth.

The Commonwealth's role and value

I moved on to the roles and values of the commonwealth quickly as the group was beginning to take more time to study the materials I gave to them. In order to manage time, I quickly gave out copies of the appendix three leaflets and read the information to the group. After I stopped reading most of the members became itchy to ask questions. I urged them to give honest opinions about the information they have just acquired and relate it to what they have known before the chat.

When I asked if the information was surprising, the aspiring sociologist speaking with personal concerns referred to the portion in the appendix where it stated that all the commonwealth nations have equal voices and disagreed with the fact. He said the voice of small and underdeveloped countries do not count. His reasons being that, the backward growth of the economy of these nations shows they have little or no say in making major decisions for themselves in the international scene. He drew examples from the trade issues, the International monetary fund and the G5 countries. He said if the commonwealth has raising a common voice with their member countries as their goal, then it should have won some critical battles that has led to the crumbling of small countries by standing for them in one voice. One of the aspiring political science students, who grew bitter, was moved to say that all they have read in the appendix three were either notes to paint the commonwealth white or visions the commonwealth have not been able to accomplish a huge part of. The sociologist went on to say the information on was an over-glorification of the Commonwealth and an expedient action to becloud partakers of the Commonwealth Conversation about the true happenings of the commonwealth.

The group all listened and drew reasons from what the two participants had said. Someone else then said it would have been preferable if they were provided with more information about the achievements and failings of the commonwealth so as to enable the group draw out true opinions on how to improve the Commonwealth. He said, the results of the declarations written in appendix three succeeded in telling them about the dreams of the Commonwealth was not close to achieving.

Some others were totally against the suspension of erring countries from the Commonwealth, because this country would lose the support it gets from the organization to solve the problems that caused the suspension in the first place.

When I asked if the information from appendix three fits with their impressions of the Commonwealth, those who had totally negative views about the association said, seeing that the information shows that the declarations are totally positive and equal, they have partially positively changed views about the association but they maintain their negative stance until they see a Commonwealth with perfect outcomes that match their visions.

When I asked what the group would do to help address these issues the main answer that was echoed was that the Commonwealth should judiciously follow up all they have set in their declarations by making the right decisions and policies made and sticking to them. They recommended that democratic principles and due process be followed to ensure true equity between all members. A member of the group also added that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group should have foreign ministers from all the countries that are strictly adhering to the values of the Commonwealth, rather than just nine foreign ministers whose criteria of selection is not made know to us.

The Strengths of the commonwealth according to the group are its:

- Sincere desire to promote unity amongst all members.
- Ability to monitor and take major actions on countries that violate the values of the association.
- The outstanding publicity of the Commonwealth Games and the beauty of its core values.
- Flexible policy that allows members to join the Commonwealth at free will and also bring small countries together to be heard as one voice.

The weaknesses of the commonwealth according to the group are its:

- Inability to promote the association's good aim to convince a major part of the industrialized part of the world to the Commonwealth leading to the increased dependency of the numerous small and underdeveloped nations on the very few developed and industrialized nations in the association.
- Low rates of scholarships offered considering the amount of those who would be empowered through it and the increasing amount of people who are stagnated as a result of lack of opportunity, bearing in mind that over half of the Commonwealth populations are youths to be empowered through the scheme.
- Inability to make more impacting decisions over issues with urgent attention from the international community. For instance, in the Niger delta crises in Nigeria, which they claimed that Nigerian never felt the impact of the Commonwealth concerning the issue especially at its peak period.
- Publicity and roles which are not yet know by known by a considerable amount of Commonwealth countries not to talk of the world at large.
- Weak efforts in combating global hunger which has been a rising threat to the globe.
- Weak efforts also in enlightening a large part of the world about the problems and solutions of the 21st century. An example being climate change.
- Poor implementation of its declarations and meeting verdicts, which in turn makes their actions not clear and tailored towards the achievement of the reason for its establishment.
- The future geologist in the group expressed his concern about laying to much responsibility for the Commonwealth stating that the association is restricted to carrying out some certain actions in comparison to the UN.
- While we struggled to end the previous topic and introduce the next topic, a participant asserted that he hated the fact that the Queen of England controlled the affairs of the Commonwealth and that she would remain as head throughout her reign. I had to explain to the group that the Queen stands mainly as a ceremonial head of the Commonwealth and that the main affairs of the Commonwealth are run by the secretariat and all the member countries. I also told him that the position as head would not necessary be pass of throne through the British monarchs. I read through some information I got from the internet to the group so as to further the groups understanding of the history and system of administration of the Commonwealth.

Refreshments

Although we have slated this portion for refreshment, the group preferred to get through the chat first before the refreshment because they were so interested in the smooth flow of the chat. They also wanted to get through the chat faster because we spent more time covering lots of topics.

Benefits of the Commonwealth

I went on straight to read out the objectives of this next task to the group.

Majority of the group said they would be disappointed if Nigeria was suspended only because it would lower the country's international reputation. Some participants believe because the intentions of the declarations of the Commonwealth are perfectly just, it would be sad for the country to be suspended from a just cause.

A few participants said they would not really mind if Nigeria is suspended after all the country didn't feel the impact of its first suspension. A participant said he would be happy because the Nigerian government would transfer the funds budgeted for Commonwealth for other sectors more beneficial to the Nigerian economy.

Some participants felt the country would not feel any pain inflicted from Commonwealth's suspension or expulsion. Some said that the country may be affected in the preparations for the Commonwealth games and also will miss out on the association's scholarship. Some others think the country would not get all the necessary assistance that it should get from member countries. Non-attendance of meeting if Nigeria was suspended was not seen as something not to be happy about because the participants feel believe that the meetings has been of little impact to the country.

The major benefit of the Commonwealth to Nigeria according to the group is the Games although others believe its we gain security, trade, democratic help, scholarships etc.

Future of the Commonwealth

I read out the objective of this topic to the group and asked them to imagine if they were secretary generals of the commonwealth.

A participant said, as he's short term goal he will combat the issues of the 21st century like climate change, science and technology and poor internet connectivity in developing countries through enlightenment, sensitization and provision of adequate resources to attain he's purpose.

Another said he would empower youths through scholarships and provide resources to power member nations as his short term goal. One participant said he would strive to improve equity been the nations of the globe. This is his long term goal.

The future psychologist said he would prefer to engage in human emancipation and re-orientation of people's image of the Commonwealth. He will make this his long term goal.

A member of the group thinks in the next twenty years, he would ensure that up to 70% of what we discussed as solutions would have been implemented if he was the secretary general of the Commonwealth at that period.

Another participant said as a long term goal in the office of the secretary general, he would try to solve the problem of global financial meltdown by bringing forth a lasting solution to the problems of the middle-east and advocate for global peace, since no international organization has solved that problem.

Some said they would publicise the commonwealth and its values as their short term goal.

A participant explained that investing in youths would be appropriate since over half of them make up the Commonwealth. He said it would be his long term goal to make the leaders of tomorrow greater.

Another group member asserted that as a secretary general, he would desist from suspending countries whose followers are innocent of the blunder caused by their government. He said he would just declare an outright detest of the ways of the erring government, rather than making the country at large suffer from the support and benefits the Commonwealth and its member countries can offer to help, which in turn can go a long way to solve the nation's problems.

What do you think about the Commonwealth (Again)? Evaluation and Closing.

All the participants truly admitted that they found the Commonwealth chat very insightful and interesting.

On the evaluation sheet, I made sure all the participants gave their honest opinion about the chat and how I organized it. They all accepted that the discussion had changed their opinion of the Commonwealth positively.

They recommended that the discussion should involve a good number of people and for it to be publicized better. They said they would have preferred to have good orientation about the Commonwealth before they participate in the chat in order to contribute maximally to the aims of the discussion.

As the chat ended the group clearly asserted that although the Commonwealth had good motives for positive change around the globe, it had not in anyway been close to achieving its aims. They hoped a better verdict would be reached in Port of Spain this year to that would foster practicable change to the activities of the Commonwealth.

Conclusions

I urged the members to continue to find out more about the Commonwealth and I offered to give them materials that I possess about the Commonwealth. Most of the members took great interest and they wished there were more programmes set out to sensitize more people about the Commonwealth. In other words, they felt very impacted about the Commonwealth. I made mention of avenues where they can be actively involved in the Commonwealth like the My Commonwealth competition and forums on the internet.

The group then went on to have their refreshments. We ended the chat for the day by rewarding the group that won the quiz with extra refreshments as I promised.