

*The two men
who were key
to institution*

Hamani Diori of Niger and the Montreal journalist Jean-Marc Léger.

Amid political storms and diplomatic tensions, these two men succeeded in laying the foundations of a multilateral institution which they hoped to place at the service, not of a particular culture or language but of the peoples who use this language or share this culture. For President Diori and Jean-Marc Léger, the Agency was to be an instrument for cultural and technical co-operation — hence its name — which would be of benefit to all members, but particularly to the French-speaking countries of the Third World.

The First Conference of the French-speaking Community took place in Niamey in February 1969, exactly one year after the famous Libreville conference in which Quebec had taken part alone, without the federal presence, and which was to result in the suspension of diplomatic relations between Canada and Gabon. Ottawa and Quebec had both been invited to Niger. Quebec sought acceptance for the conception of "two delegations" (federal and Quebec) within "a representation from Canada"; Ottawa never acknowledged any such idea. The meetings were marked by various incidents of protocol, one of the most resounding being Pauline Julien's cry of "Vive le Québec libre".

The Niamey discussions have been described elsewhere. It need only be said that they ended in an agreement which provided, among other things, that President Diori would be responsible for setting up a provisional executive secretariat whose mandate for the following six months would be to prepare the constitution and define the purpose of the future organization. The provisional secretariat would be entrusted to Jean-Marc Léger, who, as Secretary-General of AUPELF, had already played a very important part in the French-speaking world. Lastly, the resolution stated that these proposals were to be designed in such a way that "co-operation shall be carried out with respect for the sovereignty of states, national languages . . .". One can well imagine the discussions that such a resolution would give rise to.

Points of view

Between the months of April and November 1969, the provisional Secretary-General of the Agency travelled throughout "the French-speaking world" to learn the points of view of all these states as to the purpose and structures of the future organization. In November he submitted to President Diori the outline of the proposal

he intended to submit at the Second General Conference of the French-speaking Community. The President of Niger then sent out invitations to the countries which had participated in the first conference, except that this time Quebec was not directly invited but simply informed. The President explained his action by emphasizing that, since he himself was struggling for the strengthening of unity in his country and against the secessionist tendencies in Nigeria, he could not play the game of those who would divide Canada.

Difficult discussions then ensued between Ottawa and Quebec. Several days before the conference began, when a decision was still being awaited on the composition of the Canadian delegation, the Quebec premier, Jean-Jacques Bertrand, announced that an election would be held in Quebec. This was to bring about the defeat of his National Union Party by the Liberal Party under the leadership of Robert Bourassa. Because of the election campaign, not a single Quebec minister was able to leave the country, and Quebec was represented in Niamey by Julien Chouinard, Secretary-General of the cabinet. As a public servant, he had to work discreetly within the terms of the agreement reached at the last minute between Mr. Bertrand and Mr. Trudeau. The agreement was of such major importance that the "terms and conditions" agreed upon by Quebec and Ottawa on October 1, 1971, reflect it quite accurately.

The delegates from the 25 countries represented at this Second General Conference of the French-speaking Community met on March 15, 1970, again in Niamey. They received more than 400 pages of texts prepared by the provisional secretariat. These documents dealt with the questions requiring study on the occasion of the founding of the Agency. At that time Mr. Léger stated that:

the organization whose creation was accepted at the previous conference would offer four characteristics: (1) a flexible and efficient instrument for co-operation; (2) multilateral operation; (3) co-operation achieved by means of the French language; (4) co-operation in the widest sense, that is, not reduced simply to a concept of technical assistance but seen as equally as a permanent flow of exchanges between the civilizations represented

The project proposed by Jean-Marc Léger was an ambitious one, but realistic. He insisted on the importance of the Agency's getting off to a "real start" with rather large financial resources; the figure of \$10 million for 1971-1972 was mentioned. However, Mr. Léger was already aware of France's reticence. This was undoubtedly his reason for adding: