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Africa's desire to succeed

WHEN former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere spoke of a bright African future by the year 2020, he probably said some silent prayers as well. Nyerere is a man with great economic perspective; after all, he authored the report that set in motion the South-South economic cooperation locomotive. Although the Group of Fifteen (G-15) dynamism and the success of business and economic cooperation among developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America today cannot be credited to any individual, Nyerere will be remembered as a major catalyst in transforming the ideas and visions of the South into practice and reality.

But prayers are needed for even the highest degree of optimism related to Africa. Years of civil strife, poverty, slow economic growth and small domestic markets, macroeconomic instability, poor infrastructure and high wages and production costs all work against continent-wide prosperity in such a short time. If catching up with the South East Asian economic Tigers by the year 2020 is what Africa wants to set out to achieve, then it must be remembered that the road it is likely to take is not only long and winding, but made of sand from the Saharan desert as well. To be able to grow into the same class as the Asian Tigers are in now, every African nation needs not only to resolve its own domestic problems but also to develop its economy by adopting outward-looking policies.

An industrialising Africa in two decades, however, is not a scenario that is totally improbable. Asean, which is one of the world's most successful economic groupings, could serve as an ideal model. Asean, in fact, was established out of fear that conflicts in the Indochina region in the 1960s would spread south to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore. Individually, many of the Asean members were facing turmoil on their own political and socio-economic fronts. In 1969, for example, Malaysia experienced racial riots that could have destroyed whatever future it had. But at both domestic and regional levels, the determination to survive by way of the prosper-thy-neighbour policy have ensured that Asean thrive and expand.

Nyerere is not alone in thinking there is a future for Africa. Among the leaders of the South, many have pursued the wish to see greater cooperation that could expedite the Third World's escape from the economic pits. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is chief among them, never tiring in calling for greater efforts towards self-help by the South and reduced dependency on the North for handouts. So far, the efforts have paid off handsomely. The G-15, for instance, meets annually and such meetings have been extended to include other forums. This year the first Southern African International Dialogue (SAID) saw the participation of Malaysia. There have been talks of organising meetings between regional groupings, where Asean could come into the picture and deal directly with the various groupings in Africa and Latin America. Bilaterally, leaders from developing countries have started to make it a point to visit their counterparts in other developing countries. When they have started to see the benefits of helping one another, there will be no way to stop them from achieving, as a collective force, what none of them individually could ever dream of achieving.

The key to success lies in the determination to succeed, to rid of poverty, to prosper. The Southern African International Dialogue and the active participation of African members in the G-15 and other regional and

international forums prove that the determination and the ambition exist. Africa can count on its friends in Asia and Latin America to help. Within the G-15 and bilaterally, the private sectors of Asia, including Malaysia, have been supportive of their Governments's call for them to invest and transfer their technologies to Africa. More needs to be done, certainly more than optimism and prayers. But certainly, as the story of South-South cooperation so far tells, the hard work has started even as the developing countries continue to talk.

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