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Co-operating for progress

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MALAYSIA'S experience in Smart Partnership involving the Government, private sector and labour attracted much attention at the First Southern Africa International Dialogue on Smart Partnership (SAID) held in Botswana recently.

Malaysia's experience in privatisation which guarantees job security and has become a means of enhancing Bumiputera participation in business was widely discussed as a model for other developing countries to follow.

SAID `97 was inspired by the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID), at which in 1996 three Presidents and one Vice-President from Southern African countries participated.

The Presidents were Ketumile Masire of Botswana, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and Sam Nujoma of Namibia and the Vice-President was Malewuezi of Malawi.

These four countries resolved to jointly sponsor SAID 97 and a SAID Secretariat was established in Gaborone, capital of Botswana, in September 1996.

The Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM) which is a joint organiser of LID, assisted in the conceptualisation and organisation of SAID.

Botswana became the first host country and the dialogue was held in Kasane from May 3-7.

SAID `97 was also attended by the Presidents of Mozambique, Tanzania, South Africa, Ghana and Uganda, the Vice-President of Zambia, and Deputy Prime Ministers of Lesotho and Swaziland.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was present with a delegation of some 20 business and government leaders. They included Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin of Utusan, Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli of Malaysia Airlines, Tan Sri Kishu Tirathrai of Globe Silk Store, Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam of Sungei Way, Datuk Francis Yeoh and Roger Bambarough of YTL Corp, Datuk Mohan Swami of Chase-Perdana, Dr Mohd Salleh Ismail of Technology Park Malaysia, Dr Ariffin Aton of Sirim and Salleh Kassim of Charterfield.

SAID `97 had the same format as LID, allowing for much interaction between individuals in small groups. Even heads of states and governments joined the dialogue roundtables during the interactive sessions.

For Southern Africa, the meeting of so many heads of state to discuss serious common issues was unprecedented. That it was held in an atmosphere of informality, openness and frankness enhanced the value of the interactions.

Said President Museveni of Uganda: "We have never come together to talk on serious issues in this way before. Let us make use of this time to find common ground for concrete action."

The general dialogue session discussed three major topics, namely the philosophy and practice of Smart Partnership, the roles of Government, private sector and labour in smart partnership in Southern Africa and development of Southern Africa as a growth area through smart partnership.

Cyril Ramaphosa, former Vice-President of South Africa, currently executive deputy chairman of New Africa Investment Ltd and joint-chairman of SAID `97 enumerated his 10 characteristics of smart partnership, which included a common vision and objectives for the partners, adherence to an accepted code of ethics, harnessing cultural diversity for its

complementary strengths, trust, and transparency in all dealings and strong sense of fairplay.

Ramaphosa also said that Smart Partnership can have both short-term and long-term objectives, and that most importantly, Smart Partnership should turn contacts into contracts.

Privatisation is a very topical issue in much of Southern and West Africa. The mode of privatisation in some countries has caused resentment among their nationals.

For this reason strong statements were made. President Mkapa talked about divestment of Government assets that should benefit the people. Another leader talked about national ownership scheme in public asset divestiture.

Dr Mahathir's description of the privatisation process in Malaysia received much attention. Of particular interest were the rules forbidding worker lay-offs, an increase in wages to near private sector level, a percentage of equity-ownership by workers, and payment of bonus based on productivity and profitability.

The Prime Minister cautioned about rushing into privatisation. To fully benefit from it, particularly as a means of improving the share of the economic cake for the people, a careful strategy was needed. In Malaysia this included creation of jobs, encouragement of saving, creation of trust funds (Amanah Saham Nasional and Amanah Saham Bumiputra), training for management skills and creation of a core of Bumiputera entrepreneurs.

With regard to the role of the private sector in implementing development objectives, a full understanding of key issues and Government strategies was deemed necessary. Therein lies the rationale for the Government-private sector smart partnership and the need for the process of public-private sector consultations and dialogues. Here again the Malaysia Inc strategy and the role of the Malaysian Business Council became good starting points for discussions.

During the three days of SAID '97, there were only two formal speeches. The first was by President Masire, the host, at the opening banquet when he welcomed participants and explained the purpose of SAID. He expressed the hope that SAID would become a regular event in the region and a catalyst to meaningful programmes. SAID can become the implementator of the SADC ideals, he said.

The second speech was the keynote address by Dr Mahathir on the second night, the topic being Smart Partnership: Meeting the Challenges of Globalisation.

According to Dr Mahathir, Asean and SADC shared many common features. Many member states of both groups gained their independence from former colonial masters not long ago. "But can we developing countries be truly independent?" he asked. Undoubtedly, direct occupation and political control have ended but these have been replaced by much more insidious forms of colonisation, he said. "Our politics, economy, social and behavioural systems are all still under the control, directly or indirectly, of the old colonial masters and the great powers."

* Tan Sri Omar Abdul Rahman, who is Science Adviser to the Prime Minister and Chairman of the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM), was a CPTM resource person at SAID '97.

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