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Helping Africa the Asian way

AN age-old axiom says: give a man a fish, you feed him for today; but if you teach him how to fish, you will feed him for a lifetime. That saying is attributed to the Chinese sage, Confucius. It is a time-hallowed Eastern value. Which is the prescription the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dispensed to the leaders and officials at the Second Tokyo International Conference on African Development on Monday. He said that the Asian approach and the Asian way towards development is still a good strategy. They should concentrate less on aid and more on acquiring skills and development.

Africa is a vast continent. It is home to a vast number of sovereign nations, the highest of any of the six continents on planet Earth. Most of these countries have vast resources. Which is what attracted European sea-faring nations to their shores in the last century. For years they plundered and took home bountiful riches. And when they finally pulled up their stakes and returned home in the 1950s and 1960s, they left behind impoverished though independent nations, many of whom were rent asunder by internecine wars that still rage on today. Though still rich in resources, most African countries still rank among the poorest of the poor nations of the world.

The way forward for them as Dr Mahathir suggested is the Asian, especially the East Asian way. In the past many, if not most, African nations opted for the European way to develop. That was through aid. And aid was not granted freely. It was dispensed with conditions. One, these loans carried interest. Two, they were granted to specific projects. Many of which projects have proved to be of no benefit and costly in terms of the continuing interests that have to be paid. Which are the reasons why many African countries still remain poor.

Dr Mahathir cited the road Malaysia took to development. It was not through aid but through foreign direct investment and through acquiring skills and technologies. For one, Japan invested heavily. Its and other countries' investments spawned numerous factories. These plants provided employment which in turn raised the standard of living of Malaysians, making them buyers of Japanese and other countries' products. Malaysia prospered; so also did the investing countries. This is surely a win-win strategy.

True, many East Asian countries seemed to have failed recently. But, as Dr Mahathir said, the contributing factors were not the Asian values. Currency trading and raids on the stock market are not the fault of Asians or their value systems. Any and all countries are vulnerable to such destructive attacks. And over the past several weeks even the rich Western countries have discovered that they too are vulnerable to the wanton ways of hedge fund managers.

Clearly then adopting the Asian approach to development is a logical strategy. The Japanese are interested in helping African countries. So also the Europeans. Even Malaysia is keen. Indeed, France, Japan and Malaysia have initiated trilateral co-operation to assist Africa. The trilateral initiative is premised on African countries taking ownership of their development. The overriding objective is building a partnership rather than a donor-recipient relationship. This is a modest way to promote social and economic development of African countries. As Dr Mahathir said, there is everything to gain and nothing to lose by

prospering Africa.

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