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An ideas factory for a Smart African Renaissance

Hardev Kaur in Maputo (Mozambique)

MAPUTO (Mozambique): This is one of the few meetings which allow leaders from Southern African to discuss economic issues and ways of cooperating without getting into politics.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe reportedly made this statement in reference to the Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID 2000) and the Smart Partnership that it fosters.

A businessman said it is the only forum that enables entrepreneurs, businessmen, labour and media to sit round a table and discuss issues and problems as equals irrespective of the official positions they hold.

This in fact sums up what the Smart Partnership, being promoted by the dialogues, is all about. There are too many emerging economic and social issues and trends - national, regional and international - that have dramatic and severe impact and implications on developing countries. These cannot be ignored. Globalisation and liberalisation are just two of them.

The African continent, which has been left behind and is home to some of the poorest countries in the world, needs help to progress and develop. It needs to get out of the trap that keeps sending African countries and its people on a race to the bottom.

Smart Partnerships offer an avenue to get out of the downward spiral, correct "our perceptions of ourselves as Africans", move towards greater integration and cohesion and engage each other in "a relaxed atmosphere and discuss the issues that impede progress of our region and continent".

The African leaders, together with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who met under specially constructed tents on the shores of the Indian Ocean in Maputo, identified areas which lend themselves to cooperation and mutual benefit.

Even as the dialogues provide opportunities for cooperation and mutual help it is important that there is political will, commitment and sincerity. Undoubtedly, some nations are more advanced and developed than others, even in Southern Africa, but there are still opportunities for cooperation and there is much to be gained from a united stand.

Mr Jacob Zuma, Deputy President of South Africa, stressed the need to "... employ a brotherly approach in our dealings with each other" and the need to "love our continent".

In land area, Africa is large and the continent is rich in natural resources, but it is "fragmented and politically divided" into more than 50 different states. By pooling their resources and by taking advantage of the informal nature of discussions at SAID, the African leaders can and should push a united agenda "for reconstruction of the African continent and the attainment of Renaissance".

There is also a need for countries to "develop together rather than focus solely on our own development, leaving neighbouring countries behind". They must foster and promote win-win solutions and not beggar thy neighbour policies.

President Mugabe listed at least eight projects which he described as "notable successes" and another six that he said were at various stages of implementation. These are among the projects that had been identified at SAID 1999 at Victoria Falls.

Among them are projects of cross-border tourism ventures, joint development corridors, strengthening of business and economic links, and consolidation of national smart partnership hubs.

While some progress has been made in pushing forward bilateral and regional cooperation, there is need for the bureaucracy in Southern Africa to work smart and not hinder progress and impede development. Mugabe expressed disappointment that most of the initiatives "are getting stuck in bureaucracy among officials of various countries involved".

This is not very smart. Red tape and bureaucracy needs to be reduced and at times totally removed if the projects are to get off the ground and yield the desired results. Businessmen and entrepreneurs are keen to forge ahead, but it is important that their enthusiasm is not strangled and killed with bureaucratic red tape.

Dr Mahathir, who was the only non-African leader to attend the meeting, stressed the need for "a new way of thinking, for developing nations to chart a new paradigm in nation building such that old mistakes are not repeated".

In keeping with the theme of the fourth SAID, "Smart Partnership 2000 - Global Trends and Emerging Economies", developing countries must prepare themselves for the changed and changing world economic environment. This new environment is hostile and can destabilise developing countries. The recent Asian financial crisis is a case in point.

It is all the more important that developing countries, and especially those in Africa, unite and "formulate a common stand and embark on cooperative actions to counter any perceived negative forces of globalisation".

Emerging economies need to identify all the trends, forces and processes, including that of globalisation and liberalisation, "from all aspects". While individually the countries do not have the resources or expertise to do so, collectively they can. They must collaborate, share views, experiences and formulate unified and united stand for international forums and negotiations. This can be achieved through Smart Partnerships.