

21/11/2000

Dialogue of equals for mutual gain

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THE International Langkawi Dialogue (LID) 2000 and the smart partnerships that it promotes, which brings together various stakeholders, irrespective of the position they hold or their hierarchy, is in its fifth year.

The smart partnership concept encompasses "respect, trust, transparency and tolerance".

Thus heads of State and Government, first ladies, politicians, businessmen, entrepreneurs, special interest groups, unions, religious leaders, professionals and media representatives sit at the same table to discuss issues as equals.

The dialogues are the only regional grouping which have, according to Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, enabled leaders to discuss economic issues and not be bogged down by politics and helped foster closer economic relations among southern African leaders.

Based on a win-win and prosper-thy-neighbour concept, the LID and the smart partnership concept has been emulated with similar dialogues evolving in other regions. The overall objectives of the practice is to synchronise perceptions; unify positions and work towards co-operative actions for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Since the first LID in 1995, the smart partnership practice has evolved at various levels - international, regional, national and local. These include the Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID) and Caribbean International Dialogue (CID).

In addition to the regional-level dialogues, a number of national smart partnership hubs have emerged in participating countries. These include those in Botswana, Malawi, Malaysia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Aimed at internalising the practice of smart partnership at national level in Governments, industries, companies and communities, they serve as focal points for extra national activities besides acting as links with other national hubs and the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM) hub in London.

These hubs encourage the application of smart partnership principles in addressing and resolving national and regional issues. They also serve as additional forums for countries to share their experiences and learn from each other, at all levels. At the national level the smart partnership hubs work towards national cohesion, stability and prosperity.

The participants, who include the private sector, special interest groups, unions and professionals, work for the greater good of the society.

Issues that are considered at the national level through smart partnerships include national development, economic empowerment, social enhancement and other social and political issues.

In Malaysia, for example, four national-level smart partnership dialogues have been held for the youth and professionals. These have been successful in enabling those in different groups to discuss issues that are important to them and learn from others.

But that is not all. Smart partnerships involve the business community - local and foreign partners, too.

These public-private sector partnerships work towards wealth creation and bring together like-minded people to enhance co-operation, work towards skills development and education, corporate governance, technology transfer and management.

Through discussion and sharing of experience and expertise, bottlenecks can be overcome and efficiency and productivity improved and increased thus enhancing competitiveness of the various segments of society and the economy.

Malaysia has been practising smart partnership even before the concept was institutionalised. The benefits of smart partnership have been well demonstrated through various practical applications.

Malaysia Incorporated concept, the pre-Budget dialogues, the National Consultative Committees and the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) are all smart partnerships.

At the regional level the smart partnerships such as SAID and CID enable the participants to work on developing a common stand on, and participation in decision making on global issues; and fair and equitable participation in the global market.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said with a better understanding of the smart partnership, leaders were moving beyond "talking" and beginning to co-operate in the implementation of several projects.

Some of the joint projects have achieved "notable successes" while others are at various stages of implementation. These include cross-border tourism ventures, joint development corridors, strengthening of business and economic links and consolidation of national smart partnership hubs.

The business community is working towards compilation of a business directory while the media is working towards setting up direct links between Malaysia and Africa.

The issues at the top of the agenda of most conferences and meetings these days are globalisation and trade liberalisation.

Many countries are ill-prepared to deal with them much less understand the implications. Their resources are stretched just dealing with the national issues.

Through smart partnership they can, as Dr Mahathir said during SAID in Maputo, help unify concerns and actions and formulate a common stand and embark on co-operative actions in order to counter any perceived negative forces of globalisation affecting emerging economies.

"Smart partnerships can serve as focal points to deliberate and share views and experiences and to nurture continued interactions among members and partners," he had said.

As long as people talk and discuss issues, it helps to reduce suspicion and avoid conflict. Smart partnerships, in addition to acting as "ideas factories", promote a "shared vision".

Thus the dialogues, and the smart partnerships that they foster in the different countries and regions, can help reduce conflict, promote peace and channel limited resources towards development and improvement of livelihood in the true win-win fashion.

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