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Smart Partnership's impact

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SMART Partnerships, which are emerging in various regions around the world - in Africa, in the Caribbean, following the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) are beginning to have far reaching impact on the social, economic and political arena of participating countries and regions.

The "Smart Dialogues", unlike other regional and international forums, bring all stake holders into the discussions. They provide for networking, skills development, capacity building and sharing of experiences which lead to a "win-win" situation.

All segments of society fully participate in the planning and provide inputs into policies and government actions that have an impact on the population. "The dialogue is something done by the people and not done to them, unlike other fora," according to Mrs Eunice Kazembe, Malawi's Ambassador to Taiwan.

The dialogues facilitate networking, personal and inter-group connectivity that ultimately provide long-term solutions to problems, according to Dr M.J.M. Sibanda, senior secretary for Administration, Office of the President and Cabinet in Zimbabwe. He adds that "this in itself has been a very important lesson for most developing countries".

Kazembe contends that the basic value of Smart Partnership movement in the country is to reduce mistrust and suspicion among government and private sectors and labour and to get these key economic player groups to appreciate the need for working together towards accelerated national development.

"The missing partners such as the rural folk, informal sector and all those operating on the fringes of the economy are brought into the dialogue process to allow their views and opinions to be captured in debates and discussions of national interest," Sibanda says.

In fact, the issue of social contract, one of the key elements of Smart Partnership has assisted political leadership, business, labour and media in appreciating the need to work together to stabilise economies.

This has fostered closer relations and greater willingness to co-operate among African leaders.

They are now moving beyond "talking" and are beginning to co-operate in the implementation of several projects in Southern Africa.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe cited several examples where Smart Partnerships are being utilised in the Southern African region. These include the development of cross-border tourism ventures; joint development corridors; strengthening of business and economic links; and consolidation of national Smart Partnership hubs.

At the national level in Zimbabwe, the National Economic Consultative Forum (NECF), comprising government, business and labour was established, according to the principles of Smart Partnership.

"It is now widely seen as the catalytic organisation with the capacity to engage all stakeholders in the economy in any issue to the extent of engaging the donor community".

The NECF is a direct offshoot of the Smart Partnership dialogues based on the success of MIGHT in Malaysia.

Dixies S.M. Kambauwa, acting group chief executive officer in Malawi praised the unique ability of the dialogues to "deliver results better than other meetings".

Sibanda hopes the movement will concentrate more on intra-regional and

regional projects and provide direct linkages between Southeast Asia and Southern Africa, the Caribbean and West Asia.

Joint ventures should now assume more prominence with the weaker economies getting assistance from stronger ones for mutual benefits in a win-win environment.

At each dialogue, progress made in project implementation should be the yardstick for success and problems identified and solutions sought to ensure that economic growth is achieved. Sibanda contends that "economic blocs that are powerful can easily emerge in these regions".

This suggestion lends further weight to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's view that there is greater regional co-operation among leaders who are now more interested on economic development and the welfare of their people and less focused on politics.

In addition the leaders use the concept within their own countries by bringing people together to achieve an understanding on what action can be taken. "They now understand and appreciate that it is a much better way of doing things instead of being confrontational. Unions, businesses and government work together to achieve a common goal," Dr Mahathir had said in Maputo, Mozambique.

In Namibia's experience the Smart Partnership brings together "various parties and partners to share and contribute to a common destiny". Dr Ndeutala Angolo, secretary to the President of Namibia, points out that in the global economy countries are competing with one another and hence the importance for co-ordination and united action from groups and partners within the country.

The support and acceptance of the dialogues, jointly organised by Malaysian Industry Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT) and the CPTM, was not immediate. At the very first dialogue in Langkawi in 1995 questions were raised, with many participants wondering whether they were indeed "Smart" enough to leave their businesses and head for Langkawi.

Others questioned the term "Smart" and pointed out that the concept of "Smart Partnership" was not new and that it had been practised centuries ago. But as Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, advisor to the SungeiWay Group, told the meeting then that while it may be so but it was like "good liquor in a new packaging".

True, the concept has been practised before but not to the extent that it being pursued now. Malaysia has utilised it effectively with Malaysia Incorporated - a public sector and business sector partnership in development - as perhaps the best example of Smart Partnership in the country. It functions at various levels and is not limited to the Federal Government operations alone.

Various examples and illustrative experiences showed that the concept was beneficial and would not result in a "lose-lose" situation nor create a "begger-thy-neighbour" situation which most often is the case with numerous other forums and policies.

By the end of the first dialogue in Langkawi the participants from around the world, wanted it to be held on an annual basis. There are numerous compelling reasons for this among developing countries which find that the world economic scenario and the world economic structures are heavily stacked against them.

"Countries that manage through dialogue to foster mutual understanding among all its partners, create a peaceful and democratic atmosphere, a pre-requisite for successful economic growth as programmes are designed through consensus and implementation become everyone's responsibility", according to Sibanda.

At the same time the dialogues provide the participants "an insight into the wide variety of problems from different perspectives," Dr Ndeutala

Angolo from Namibia says.

In just five years the benefits of Smart Partnerships are being seen and the "movement" is gathering momentum with many countries setting up regional hubs to co-ordinate activities of the Smart Partnerships.

But even so it is pointed out that "too much theories from academics which have no relevance to practical issues on the ground" could give rise to more questions about the dialogues. Sibanda says there is a need to see the gains made since the movement began being transformed into real concrete actions and projects by all countries involved.

It is important that there is some continuity in attendance at the dialogues. According to Kazembe this is necessary for a better appreciation of the real benefits that have accrued to those who practice the concept. Presently, she notes attendance has "tended to be ad hoc and discontinuous".

Kazembe argues that more work is needed at the local level through the hubs. In addition she suggests that a team of Smart Partnership practioners from various countries be formed. This team should visit a country for a number of days and help those on the ground by talking to political, business, civil service leadership.

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