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G-15: A platform to pool resources

"YOU cannot compare the G-15 with the other more advanced grouping. They lack the financial backing necessary to see through projects and resolutions," said one delegate to the recent Group of 15 summit.

That sums up the state of the grouping of developing nations that first appeared on the international stage 12 years ago.

But that does not mean that the grouping which now encompasses 19 nations from Asia, Africa and Latin America has no relevance in the fast-paced international politics and economic developments.

On the contrary, the grouping has shown some stamina that has defied its critics.

Lacking financial support that is normally associated with more aggressive groupings like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) and Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), G-15 plays a vital role as a talk-shop.

"It's important to talk. That is the key to building consensus," said Dr John Mangudya from Zimbabwe, one of the delegates at the 11th summit which ended in the tense Indonesian capital.

To drive home his point, he emphasised that, otherwise, developed economic and politic cooperation groupings like the Group of 8 (G-8) would not be meeting so regularly to come to common grounds on various issues affecting the world.

"The G-15 provides a platform for developing nations to pool their resources to face the more developed nations in important international negotiations that will ultimately affect each and every country," said John who represented the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe.

When asked on the relevance of the grouping to continue to exist, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad also highlighted a similar argument.

The Prime Minister, one of the proponents of the G-15 movement, noted that the smaller grouping was initiated to act as a nucleus to the bigger, and more unwieldy, Group of 77, which today comprises more than 100 nations.

"The G-15 acts like a Cabinet," Dr Mahathir said. "It is easier to come to some sort of consensus here."

And consensus is vital for developing nations that will be moving into the next round of talks of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) int Doha, Qatar, in five months.

The talks are important as they are destined to have a big impact on global trading patterns.

Six years ago, the WTO conclusions in what is known as the Uruguay Round had placed developing nations in a quandry. They had got themselves entangled, voluntarily, into agreements that later seemed to suffocate them.

The WTO is the only global international organisation dealing with the rules of trade between nations. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations and ratified in their parliaments.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez who also attended the summit, made a clear call for unity: "We have to unite, there are no other options".

The call was echoed by his counterpart from Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, who noted that the developed world is dominated by the G-8 countries

comprising of developed nations like the US and Japan.

Describing the G-8, Mugabe who had attended practically all G-15 summits, said that the developed nations grouping sees themselves "as owners of other people's lands and countries, masters over other people and subjugators of other peoples' cultures and civilisations".

"For as long as this has lasted, the developed world has been too ready to regard all this a natural or divine order."

Cast into the role of talk-shop, it begs answer to one important question: Does it have a future?

Dr Mangudya believes that, besides being a forum to exchange views and build consensus, it has other practical purposes, as well.

Pressed for a concrete example, he shared the benefits that he had gained from attending the summit. He had attended an earlier summit some years ago in the role of a central banker.

"I've managed to seal an initial agreement with an Indonesia bank for a two-way cooperation. Such cooperations can only be sealed with face-to-face contacts," he said.

The G-15 summit, usually preceded by a meeting of the private sector, trade and economic ministers and then sessions by foreign ministers, has partly made that possible for Dr Mangudya to arrange for the agreement.

"This forum brings together the many players in developing countries. It is important for us to put a face to a name. In business, it helps in building trust and confidence," he said.

He emphasised that such small beginnings can lead to bigger and more fruitful arrangements, with the developing countries able to increase direct trade among themselves.

In that sense, the cause that had long been championed by leaders like Dr Mahathir, who had himself attended all previous G-15 summits, seems destined to bear fruit.

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