

09/08/2002

Where leaders can talk in a relaxed environment

Hardev Kaur

DIALOGUES offer participants an opportunity to network and discuss issues in an informal environment. These are not negotiations or conferences where firm conclusions and outcomes are outlined in communiques and declarations.

There are too many structured meetings, conferences and negotiations that do not provide leaders and Heads of Government an opportunity for a relaxed environment in which to enjoy themselves.

The Langkawi International Dialogue (LID), initiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is different. It brings together Kings, Presidents, Prime Ministers, First Ladies, civil servants, businessmen, entrepreneurs, representatives of labour, media and the youth in an informal and relaxed environment.

It offers leaders an opportunity to meet informally and to enjoy themselves. "LID is organic and it has grown," one leader said, adding that other regions and countries were interested in participating. Similar dialogues have been held in the Caribbean (Barbados International Dialogue), East Africa International Dialogue and the Southern African International Dialogue (SAID). In addition, new areas and groups were included for the dialogue in Langkawi last week - the youth.

While there have been individuals who have participated in the dialogues over the years, this was the first time that the "Club 29", a group of young entrepreneurs from Malaysia and the African continent, was present in large numbers.

It was also the first time that this group had the opportunity to ask leaders questions and seek clarifications on issues that concerned them and their age group. Similarly, the Heads of Government were keen to find out from the leaders of tomorrow their views, aspirations and hopes.

The informality of the session was topped by the spontaneity of the King of Swaziland, King Mswati III, who offered to be the patron of Club 29. Being young and in their age group, the King said he shared their aspirations and would like to be part of it. Needless to say, the youth accepted.

A young Malaysian entrepreneur, who participated in the dialogue for the first time and has become a member of Club 29, summed it up by saying that it has been very useful. "This is the only dialogue where I have had direct access to leaders without making appointments or going through a host of secretaries and having to navigate around the bureaucracy.

"In addition, it offered me opportunity to network with Malaysians whom I am unable to meet otherwise," he said.

The African participants shared the sentiments. Many of them said they did not get to meet or see their African counterparts on their own continent due to, among others, the time factor, distances, conflicts and even politics which kept them apart.

Malaysia and, in particular, the LID offers them a venue to meet, discuss and sort out many of their problems and issues. It offers a venue where political and business leaders hold dialogues openly with one another about creating wealth through public/private smart partnerships. The relaxed mood and environment provide for a "feeling of togetherness".

Dr Mahathir, the host of the 10th international dialogue, said that it offered "unique dynamics of candour, personal interactions, trust and sharing (that) will propel us to global coprosperity".

According to him, "the fundamentals of the dialogues that have evolved have helped us to address the continuing major developments in the changing patterns of trade and competition, technological innovation and globalisation of information".

Thus, the annual dialogue held alternatively in Africa and in Malaysia, is gaining greater importance. An increasing number of participants are interested in joining. For the first time, the leaders from Rwanda, Sudan, Seychelles, Nigeria and Kyrgystan participated in the dialogue. Many are keen to come back.

LID 2002 attracted some 450 participants from 36 countries. Among them were government leaders, politicians, businessmen, entrepreneurs, the youth and media. The LID and its Southern African counterpart (SAID) are unique in that there is no formality. But they offer a "meaningful learning and sharing experience for all".

Instead of being questioned by journalists during Press conferences and doorstops, the Heads of Government turn the tables on the media practitioners and ask questions and "grill" journalists and editors and "enjoy themselves".

There is no other forum or dialogue that offers the same informal environment for participants. Where else do you have a King acting as a secretary to a discussion and with no help from his staff? Where else do you have Heads of Government taking down their own notes without the help of their aides?

There may not be a memorandum of understanding, or a communique or a declaration to list out the results and agreements of the dialogue, but this does not mean that nothing concrete is achieved. In fact, the benefits and the outcomes have lasting impact.

At the end of the dialogue, Lieutenant-General Elly Tumwine from Uganda presented Dr Mahathir with a scarf and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah with a cushion cover. Elly said the scarf "symbolises the honour and the cushion cover represents our gratefulness for the tiring job you have done to care for us while here and to wish you all the best of comfort".

Elly said LID 2002 "has achieved a great deal and empowered all with great ideas and inspiration to move forward", and thus wanted to present the scarf and cushion cover as a symbol of his gratefulness and appreciation.

Symbols, he adds, represent "greater things, they speak louder than words and live longer than lives". But it is not just symbols that participants take home after the dialogue. They will also carry with them much more meaningful contacts that they will treasure for a very long time.