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Learning through dialogue

By Saiful Azhar Abdullah

SAIFUL AZHAR ABDULLAH examines how the Langkawi International Dialogue, first held nine years ago to forge developing-country partnerships, has evolved into a platform on the world stage.

NOT many would now dare to dismiss the Smart Partnership Dialogue as a mere talk-shop.

Ignore the cynics, the detractors and the sceptics. As expected, they will continue to make unkind remarks to undermine it. They simply refuse to swallow their words.

Nine years after its inception, the smart partnership dialogue has emerged as a vehicle for a meeting of minds. Most significantly, it has emerged as a platform for developing nations to make themselves heard.

Take last year's Smart Partnership Dialogue, held in Ezulwini, Swaziland, as an example. At a time when the poor countries were often ignored by the rich and powerful members of the World Trade Organisation, the forum managed to unite developing countries.

The smart partners joined forces to speak with one voice. And at the end of the dialogue in Swaziland, days before the WTO Ministerial Meeting began in Cancun, Mexico, the leaders who attended the Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID) issued a strong statement calling for the WTO to be reformed to take into account the concerns of the developing countries.

Named the Ezulwini Statement on a Just Regime in Global Trade, the leaders wanted the large number of small and vulnerable states to be given a voice and role in the negotiating process at the WTO. The solidarity at Ezulwini reflected the success of the Smart Partnership dialogue.

Coincidentally, the Dialogue this year is being held at the same time the WTO is meeting in Geneva to move the world trade talks forward. This is the first meeting since the ministers last met in Cancun, when Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz presented the Ezulwini statement to the WTO.

Today, the Smart Partners will meet again, this time in Langkawi at the Langkawi International Dialogue and the host is the new Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who has said that he is committed to continuing with the dialogue despite calls from certain quarters to do away with it.

His predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was instrumental in spearheading previous dialogues, will attend in his capacity as the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM) Emeritus Fellow.

When the CPTM, led by chairman Tan Sri Omar Abdul Rahman, met the Prime Minister recently to discuss the focus of this year's dialogue, Abdullah stressed the need for the dialogue to focus on Malaysian policies in the context of the global environment and the policies devised to meet these challenges.

Hence the theme of this year's LID - "Reconciling development challenges with global security through dialogue".

"The Prime Minister wants it to focus on good governance, national unity, national integrity and poverty. These are integral parts of development. When we talk about development, most of us talk about the economic aspect of development.

"But here the Prime Minister is more concerned with the softer and gentler aspects of development," explains Omar.

King Mswati III of Swaziland, as the outgoing chairman of the dialogue, echoed the same sentiment.

Both leaders shared similar views on numerous issues, including good governance, national unity, national integrity and poverty. They concurred that these were the real challenges faced by countries in their development process.

"If your country is not developed, that will be the greatest threat to security," says Omar.

"Some countries, when they talk about security, talk about terrorism and some suggest that the way to overcome terrorism is to blow it up with the use of military force.

"That is not the solution. The best option is to develop the country, eradicate poverty, provide employment opportunities and give the people a stake in the national economy. It means stepping up development efforts."

Those who come for the dialogue think alike. They are the ones who want to learn from Malaysia's experience.

"I have often said that the dialogue has become a very useful platform for sharing experiences on governance for development. Governance is not only for the public sector but also for the corporate sector," says Omar.

The participants, the leaders included, come with an open mind. They meet as friends, share experiences and learn from one another. This is not a formal class but an informal process that does not end with the close of the event. They continue to keep in touch long after. Many have become close friends and continue to consult one another informally.

"They do not come here to sign agreements but to share experiences and what they have learned. On returning to their home countries they adapt and apply the successful experiences and lessons to their domestic situations," says Omar.

Malaysia's experience is one that many want to hear and learn about.

Omar dismisses the criticism by some quarters in the business fraternity who are pessimistic about the outcome and its perceived lack of tangible results.

"If we view it through a purely business prism, and have very high expectations for quick returns, then there would be disappointment. Not all benefits of the dialogue can be measured in ringgit and sen as many of them entail building relationships - equally important in the business world."

Then again, many participants are not aggressive in pursuing opportunities or maybe there are other reasons for the lack of progress in their business ventures. The different environments and cultures must be understood, respected and adhered to in doing business. No two countries share the same business environment and it is essential that businessmen and entrepreneurs respect local cultures and practices.

Undoubtedly, it takes time to adapt and adjust to a new environment.

"If the business person has a larger perspective and a long-term view, the dialogue may be useful. If you are looking for short-term gains, then it may not be useful," says Omar.

The more experienced can help guide the younger ones in their ventures in new and uncharted territories and environments. The learning by experience would help youth benefit from their elders.

But Omar feels the young business leaders should not be deprived of the knowledge and experience of established entrepreneurs.

"The younger ones are trying to learn and seek opportunities but they can only learn from the experience of others by mingling with the established business leaders at this dialogue.

"This is why I appeal to our business leaders to participate in the Langkawi Dialogue so that they can lend a helping hand to youth from the

participating countries. Many of them look forward to learning from the experience of others."

The success of the dialogue is reflected in the large participation. A total of 60 countries will be represented at the dialogue with seven heads of governments and 800 participants representing the government, private sector, businesses, entrepreneurs, social groups, the first ladies and the media.

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