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Giving voice to poor, disadvantaged countries

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THE Smart Partnership Dialogue is "not a soliloquy" nor is it a talk shop. "It is a process in educating ourselves. We all have responsibilities and we all want to discharge our responsibilities well. This dialogue can help us do what is expected of us," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said at the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) in 1997.

Sharing and a sense of responsibility were ably demonstrated by a nine-year-old boy, Phephisa Nxumalo, who donated five chickens towards making the Global 2003 Smart Partnership Dialogue a success.

That is all he could afford. "I wanted to do my bit for the dialogue," he said.

Others donated cattle and whatever they could. It was a clear demonstration of smart partnership at work from people of all walks of life in the kingdom with limited resources.

"It was a resounding success and you have done remarkably well," Sir Martin Lange, joint chairman of Global 2003, said.

It was the biggest event in Swaziland and certainly in Ezulwini with more than 650 political, business, labour and media leaders gathered in the Valley of Haven to discuss issues, exchange ideas and learn from each other's experience.

They sought a win-win approach for a "smarter globe". Towards this end the leaders, mainly from poor countries, issued the Ezulwini statement for "a just regime in global trade".

They pointed out that the "large number of small and vulnerable developing countries need to have a secure voice and role in the dialogue process."

Specifically, the leaders noted that there was a worrying tendency to retreat from the Doha declaration for a development round of global trade negotiations in which the development needs of poor countries would be of paramount concern.

Dr Mahathir and Joaquim Alberto Chissano, the President of Mozambique as chairman of the African Union, have been given the task of forwarding the views and decisions of the dialogue for the attention of the ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico, next month.

For a "smarter globe" that will benefit people from all walks of life, it is important that decisions taken by the rich, powerful and developed nations do not adversely affect those in poorer countries.

In an increasingly interdependent world, what happens in developing countries also affect developed countries and their institutions.

The actions and decisions of rich countries and their institutions have had an impact on the development and progress of others. The worst affected are the vulnerable in developing countries.

Poverty and neglect in developing countries manifest themselves in numerous ways - the growing threat of terrorism is just one of them.

These can no longer be ignored and must be addressed and dealt with if the world is to be safer and a more prosperous place.

In this context, the decision by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) must reflect democratically the view of the havenots as much as the haves. The decision making process must be fair, transparent and democratic.

"The world needs a rule-based international economic order not one dominated by the precept that 'might is right'."

The developing world is under siege. The WTO process lacks transparency,

undemocratic and not inclusive; the UN is being sidelined and the world's most powerful nation and only superpower is acting unilaterally on many fronts.

"This kind of action brings the rich and powerful short-term benefits only; long-term stability and growth depend on multilateral rules and institutions which all respect," the leaders said.

Meeting in the cool and clean mountain air in Ezulwini and just weeks ahead of the fifth WTO ministerial meeting the leaders from a representative group of mainly poor countries felt compelled to issue a statement calling for a "smart partnership" approach to the negotiations and to the resolution of global issues and concerns.

The leaders from Southern, Eastern and Western Africa together with those of Southeast Asia and the Caribbean meeting under the smart partnership umbrella pointed out that no single country can solve the issues of global security alone.

With the unipolar geopolitical system mirrored in the distorted architecture of the international economic system, which does not serve the interests of developing countries, the win-win principles must be used to address the imbalance.

Developing countries must act collectively and form smart partnerships to face challenges - a point that was repeatedly made by Dr Mahathir.

This time, the leaders meeting in Swaziland stressed the point in "The Way Forward" issued at the end of the three-day Global 2003.

During the dialogue, leaders spoke of the need to be confident of their own values and to be realistic of their own strengths. Individually, they are powerless, but collectively they are a force to be reckoned with.

Dialogues offer the participants an opportunity to share experiences and exchange ideas and views. Dr Mahathir had pointed, during the 1998 national smart partnership dialogue, that smart partnerships are not intended to achieve absolute equality of benefits but a much fairer distribution of results.

This is something that the international community needs to recognise. They need to engage, not ignore those from the developing countries in dialogues and discussions.