

Time to reinvent smart partnership idea
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THE Ninth Langkawi International Dialogue (LID2011), held for the first time outside its traditional venue, in Putrajaya from June 19 to 21, was a manifestation of the smart partnership concept, which was developed more than 10 years ago.

The notion of smart partnership arose out of informal discussions promoted by business and government members of the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT) and the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM), during the MIGHT consultation in Kuala Lumpur in 1993.

The formalisation of the concept and philosophy of smart partnership was officially launched at the inaugural Langkawi International Dialogue in 1995 by then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, providing the framework on which Malaysia-Africa political and economic relations have been built.

The event, held alternately in Langkawi and a venue in southern Africa, was helmed by then science adviser to the prime minister, Tan Sri Professor Omar Abdul Rahman.

Based on the idea of "win-win" and "prosper thy neighbour", smart partnership as embodied by the holding of the LID each year had enabled the elevation of diplomatic relations and improved business ties between Malaysia and Africa during its initial years. However, the situation is perceived to be somewhat static and unenlightening lately. Surely our presence on that continent pales when compared with the likes of China and, recently, India.

The concept of smart partnership needs to be reinvigorated by putting ideas and principles into action that can lead to rapid growth in the emerging developing countries.

It should also allow the partners to deal in a flexible and responsive way the unexpected and unforeseen changes brought about by technological development and increasing globalisation. It should enable people to be more proactive in technology so that the unexpected and unforeseen become opportunities rather than setbacks. One of the biggest challenges is to remain relevant in an ever-changing world.

The above forms the basis for a change of format in LID2011. Anchored by Wisma Putra this time, the theme "Enhancing smart partnership for social-economic transformation" symbolises the continuing dynamic engagement between Malaysia and the developing countries in Africa and the Caribbean.

However, LID2011 is predicated on more real-time action with a view to producing tangible outcomes that can be measured in a timely manner.

Several innovative features were introduced in LID2011. First was the inauguration of the Malaysia-Africa business forum, with the apt theme of "Exploring new dimensions". This forum provided an exciting new platform for exploring business and investment

opportunities between Malaysia and its partners in Africa. It could also serve as a useful barometer of the business climate and collaboration between the corporate sectors in Malaysia and the African countries. There was unanimous approval among the participants that the forum should be an integral part of future smart partnership dialogues.

The second novelty of LID2011 was the introduction of "Dialogues in the field" handled by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. The purpose of this segment was to showcase Malaysia's various people-centric models that could serve as case studies for participating countries in their efforts to transform their administrations and societies.

Through the dialogues, delegates learnt about the best practices and advances made by Malaysian entities in areas, such as agribusiness, manufacturing, ICT, biotechnology and sustainable development.

The heads of state and government as well as ministers also attended a briefing by Pemandu on "Transforming and realising the national vision" at the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya. They learned about the concept of 1Malaysia: People First, Performance Now, Government Transformation Programme; Economic Transformation Programme and New Economic Model.

Third, for the first time a retreat session on "Future direction of smart partnership" was introduced for the heads of state and government. Their discussions revolved on the major issues of food and energy security, social media for transformation and the Global Movement of the Moderates.

LID2011 certainly gave new perspectives for smart partnership to thrive in the future. It also provides a way for Malaysia to reflect on the new modality that it may wish to formulate for any initiatives on Africa. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak made two important observations at the conclusion of the meeting. First, the implementation of plans was more important than deliberating on them during forums and panel discussions. Second, for any national plan to be implemented successfully, a system of good governance needs to be in place.

It is now up to the key stakeholders, who consist of the government, private sector and academia, to translate the prime minister's vision into tangible results and outcomes.

What can Malaysia contribute to Africa in terms of technology transfer and R&D in areas of food and energy security, agriculture, manufacturing, ICT and biotechnology? How can bilateral trade and investments between Malaysia and the African countries be increased?

How could Malaysian universities, public and private, contribute towards building the skilled manpower much needed by African countries? Are there possibilities of enhancing the short-term training of mid-career African officials in Malaysia?

At the end of the day, the big question remains the amplification of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the African countries. These are some of the questions that need to be answered before the next dialogue in Tanzania in 2013.

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