

MAXIMIZING HUMAN POTENTIAL

Today, we mark a historic break with the past. This is a timely and gratifying period of change and a forward thrust for nations that are showcases of robust growth and development.

SCOURGE OF POVERTY

Unfortunately, not all countries are similarly blessed. Some even have natural gas and other primary resources, but are still afflicted with deeply rooted poverty and inequality. UNDO surveys, for instance, identify that the world's richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million. Beyond these extremes, 40 per cent of the world's population -- 2.5 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day --and account for only five per cent of global income. The richest 10 per cent, who live in high income countries, rake in 54 per cent. The report show that many people live on less than US\$2 a day, are illiterate, especially women, and experience high unemployment. The report authors note not only acute economic deprivation exists but find the lack of individual and social capacities as well as poverty of opportunities. The youth are the principal victims of these dysfunctions.

The twin scourges of poverty and inequality are directly traced to inadequate education and rigidities -- many of which are due to cultural factors -- in the labour market. Absence of political freedom was also cited. "In our interconnected world," a UNDP reports warned, "a future built on the foundations of mass poverty in the midst of plenty is economically inefficient, politically unsustainable and morally indefensible." No form of repression can be worse than poverty.

UNLEASHING HUMAN POTENTIAL

The conquest of poverty requires bold, decisive, immediate and sustained action on the part of governments, the private sector and civil societies. "In Asia, we have to run just to stay where we are," Jawaharlal Nehru once said. The Indian statesman was defining the scope of the challenge facing the impoverished nations. Nothing short of unleashing their full potential can reverse their fate and free them from the bondage of poverty. Ultimately, the best weapon against poverty is quality education. It is the only instrument of wealth creation that is not subject to diminishing returns. It is most gratifying that our profession focuses on the central challenge of our time -- maximizing human potential to accelerate growth and lift the quality of human life.

STRATEGIC ARCHITECTURE

Some countries have paid attention to this human potential expansion thinking. It seems India has. When asked what Singapore's strategic aspiration was, an official of Singapore Economic Development Board replied laconically: "US = 2010." He meant the city state will match the United States per capita income levels by the year 2010. Singapore can now roar for it has reached its goal way ahead of the target date. Singapore's grand blueprint -- its strategic architecture -- has laid out the national competencies needed to propel it to the peak of its potential. The largest Islamic country, Indonesia, with a population of more than 240 million and comprising 13,000 islands, is not only a nation of awesome potentials; its strategic importance to the world defies imagination. It is a slumbering giant awakening to rising prosperity that membership in the global economy has made possible.

Indonesia was one of the fastest growing economies in East Asia until July 1997 when the so-called "Asian Crisis" descended upon the region. Hardest hit was Indonesia. But this resilient country is on the road to recovery. Its fundamental strength lies in its versatile human capital and latent assets which, properly developed and unlocked, can catapult the nation to unimagined heights of progress. Egypt is another example. It is the cradle of ancient civilization, the land of the pharaohs, the Pyramids and the Sphinx and spans the Nile the longest river in the world. It extols the role of knowledge in transforming society.

THE VALUE OF TEAMWORK

At the heart of any great achievement is teamwork. Working together means working together to ensure the success of our HR conferences and endeavors. Success means that we benchmark "best practices."

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Economies are indeed being run by brainpower. "Knowledge is not only a resource," Peter Drucker said. "It is the only resource." It is in pursuit of knowledge as a catalyst for growth and development that HR professionals must establish -- and maintain -- alliances with kindred organisations advancing the cause of education and training. Companies can only preempt the future if they possess the core competencies to serve not only the existing market but the future unarticulated needs of their customers. As one religious leader exhorted, "We have to organize, organize, organize, and build and build, and train and train, so that there is a permanent vibrant structure of which people can be part." This is a wake-up call worth heeding to make our HR profession truly global in scope, strength and influence.

GREATEST REWARD

Sir Winston Churchill once observed that "Kites rise highest against the wind -- not with it." Our HR profession has surmounted the swirling winds of trials and vicissitudes. Adversity has only fortified and made it stronger. We are now poised to scale the height of its vast potential because your unfailing support has made it possible. We derive a deep sense of satisfaction from the knowledge that we are making a real contribution in the epic task of uplifting the human condition. We feel that the greatest reward for our collective effort is the opportunity to do much more in the years ahead.

BERNARDO F. OPLE, Secretary General, Asian Region Training and Development Organisations