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Keynote Paper- Problems vs. Polarities: The Importance of Understanding Stakeholder Nuances in Your Quest for Inclusive Growth

by

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Keynote Address:

Problems vs. Polarities: The Importance of Understanding Stakeholder Nuances in Your Quest for Inclusive Growth

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Abstract

Government administrations, being typically staffed by professional administrators, in their haste to deliver results to citizens, tend to naturally focus their attention on policy and administrative interventions. However, broad encompassing actions often fail to take into account the particular polarities that exist among different segments of the stakeholder base being called upon to implement such interventions. Experience in Malaysia has shown that policy formulation has tended to be the lesser challenge; in extreme cases even unnecessary. The achievement of government and citizen objectives tend to be at higher rates when specific actions are identified prior to the gazette of the policies; and especially when such actions are properly classified as problems to be solved, as opposed to polarities to be managed.

DRAFT SPEECH

RECOGNISING PROBLEMS AND POLARITIES IN STRATEGIC DISCUSSIONS

1. ***Asanteni mabibi na mabwana kwa kunipa fursa ya kuwa pamoja nanyi leo.***(Thank you ladies and gentlemen for giving me the opportunity to be with you today.)
2. Your excellency, President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, Sir, please allow me to use this amazing African time saving device that my friends in the Tanzanian Government have just taught me, and say, respectfully, in all sincerity and humility, to all gathered here today, “All Protocols Observed.”
3. It is indeed a great honour to be invited by the conveners of this august gathering to be with you all today. It is a tremendously exciting opportunity for me personally, and I thank you for allowing this moment. I am both proud and humbled that you view Malaysia as a good development partner – I use this term in its generic sense because my country is not yet rich enough to contribute in financial terms as the DPs you are accustomed to here – good enough to seek to share in the insights that we have gathered during our own long journey of development. I shall endeavor to be my best not to disappoint you. I beg your indulgence and your forgiveness if in my later remarks; I may say some things that may seem out of place. But this is the deficiency of my not being a professional diplomat, but merely a humble practitioner in the very real work we are doing in Government and Economic Transformation in Malaysia.
4. Ladies and Gentlemen, let me begin by first declaring – neither I nor my boss nor my colleagues in PEMANDU are policy experts – Senator Idris is an industrial relations graduate, whereas I graduated with a degree in biochemistry. In Malaysia, as I’m sure is the case here in Tanzania also, policy making is left to the people who were entrusted by the people to perform that task. Therefore, in my remarks – I confess in advance, I will make scant reference to your theme “The Quest for Inclusive Development”. I believe the collective brainpower in this room has no need for a relative outsider to advise you on things you already know so well.

5. I will however focus my remarks on the other aspect of your workshop objectives – which is to discover and discuss eliminating the “barriers” that have stood in the way of your country’s development.
6. When I read the workshop objectives that Dr Mmari kindly sent me before I came here, I gravitated towards the matter of “eliminating barriers” from a “process” point of view, reflecting, of course, my standing in the spectrum of this discussion, which is as an implementer of policy. But not a policy maker *per se*.
7. Any hope of finding a holistic, and more importantly, a viable, solution path to a particular problem, must necessarily be anchored first on acknowledging and paying due respect to that overused word - “holistic”.
8. By its very definition, being “holistic” means comprehending all the various parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole. Yet how many of you feel that this is more common in the exception rather than the practice?

A POLICY DOES NOT A PROGRAM MAKE

9. So please follow me as I share the epiphany, or more plainly, the wake-up call that Malaysian policy makers have recently had – that is simply “**A policy does not a program make**”. A program has many intimately interconnected parts explicable only by reference to the whole. Allow me to elucidate.
10. Malaysia, like its many brethren in the developing world, has never had a shortage of policies or policy makers. In fact, our senior legislators and civil servants, having been trained in the best traditions of our former British colonial masters are considered among some of the best there are.
11. The highly vaunted success in driving our nation from its agro/resource oriented roots to the current manufacturing based middle income economy was based entirely on mobilizing the entire population to provide skilled workers to scores of foreign investors seeking cheap labour. Therefore inclusiveness, which happens to be one of your key workshop objectives, was pretty much a given, and didn’t enjoy the buzzy catchword status it does today.

12. The success of our investments in our education system, and in our physical and non-physical infrastructure development, were less in part due to the creation of the policies themselves, but more towards the single minded implementation of the vision by, primarily, our longest serving Prime Minister Dr Mahathir. His strong belief in the “rightness” of his policies, and his relentless pursuit of their execution, made Malaysia what is today. Many a time, people didn’t even know which came first – policy or implementation – things were just made to happen.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

13. This brings us to Lesson #1 in our learning journey – **situational leadership**. When our nation is in its infancy, or when it is still growing, the key to success is strong, directive leadership. Quality and Quantity of policy may be debated by policy makers, but what’s more important is for the leadership to take the first steps towards their realization and set the direction for the rest of us. Policy debate is a classic example of diminishing returns. There is little value in prolonged discussion to create the perfect document. There is always time to refine and revamp said policies when you are already into the journey, but we do not waste time to take that all important first step.
14. But ladies and gentlemen, please remember, I said this strong directive leadership is required only in the nation’s infancy, or maybe into adolescence. We must give the head of the household, or the captain of the ship, the freedom to plot the course for the journey. We certainly had this in Dr Mahathir, and I believe you have people like him in your country too.
15. Your President, has led his Cabinet to create the Tanzanian Development Vision 2025. He has created in his mind, a clear vision of the promised land for the people of his great nation. To use a common analogy – he has determined what he wants his house to look like – how many floors, how many rooms, what finishing touches – and now he needs his architects, or the policy makers, to determine exactly how to construct that house. The distinction and separation between the role of leadership and policy making cannot be any clearer than this.

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED.POLARITIES TO BE MANAGED

16. This now brings me to the next concept I need to share with you all – that is, the importance of knowing the difference between problems and polarities. And in the following discussion, we will uncover the 3rd and final member of the homebuilding trinity – the implementers.
17. Ladies and Gentlemen, problems can be solved. I could do the normal schoolboy thing and get into the Oxford Dictionary definition now, but I shan't bore you. I think we can all agree on the easiest one - problems are simply things that get in the way. And things that get in the way can be removed in some way or another if we put the required energy into it. Problems are, quite frankly, no problem.
18. A polarity is a different animal altogether. These are the differences that naturally exist amongst us. Entrenched differences that will not go away no matter how many times we put the thing in the washing machine. The simplest example of a polarity is the gender difference between us. I am a boy. You are a girl. I like to watch the football. You like to ... err ... talk. Ladies and gentlemen, this is NOT a problem that can ever be solved. And God help you men if you try.
19. This is an example of a polarity. Polarities must be accepted as part of God's grand design. And you cannot hope to "fix" them. A boy may spend a fortune on cosmetic surgery and pretty clothes etc, but he will never be a real girl. Polarities cannot be solved. But polarities can most certainly be managed. Case in point, the example I just used.

THE DIFFERENCES AMONG US.THE DEVELOPMENT TRINITY

20. Coming back to the serious world now - you and I are constantly confronted with various polarities in the course of our work. Politicians vs Civil Servants; Private vs Public Sector; Development Partner vs Government; Rural vs Urban; Rich vs Poor; Mzunguvs Tanzanian; and the list goes on. You get the picture.
21. Ladies and Gentlemen, I assure you – very little REAL progress will be achieved if you view these issues as problems to be solved or worse yet, to be avoided. Because these are things that will never go away. God made us

all different. We have to accept the diversity and leverage them, not fight them.

22. The biggest favour that policy makers can do for themselves is to recognize the most relevant polarity – that is the distinct characteristics and responsibilities of the development trinity – leadership, policy maker, and implementer. They each have their role in delivering the ultimate prize – the result to the citizens.
23. At this time let me pause for a while and take us on a little side journey. We are all football fans, Malaysians and Tanzanians. So let me ask you – how many of you know who won the last World Cup in 2010? A show of hands please. You should all know this since the game was played just south of here a bit.
24. Yes. Spain was the champion.
25. How many of you remember the final score? Please raise your hands.
26. Yes. Fewer hands now. But the final score was 1-0.
27. Now, who among you remembers the name of the goal scorer? Raise your hands.
28. Andres Iniesta scored the winning goal. Not many of you remembered his name.

THE WINNING COALITION

29. But let me ask you this. How many people were awarded a gold medal because of that win? Raise your hands if you say “everyone in the team”.
30. Ladies and Gentlemen, the purpose of that short diversion is not to show off our knowledge of football trivia. It is to underscore the importance of the Winning Coalition. It should not matter who precisely scores the goal, because during the prize giving ceremony, the entire team gets a medal.

31. Recognizing each other's strengths and value; and working as a winning coalition to win the World Cup is supremely important. Whether you are a striker or in the backline, or even the team physiotherapist – it doesn't matter. Each of you has a specific role to play in the fulfillment of the national objective.
32. So what does this have to do with the price of tea in China? Or the price of Africafe in Tanzania, to bring it closer to home? Let me try to round it up now.
33. I am in front of you today, because of your President's visionary approach – to enlist the resources and experience of our Malaysian team to assist in transforming the Tanzanian delivery system to be what the people of Tanzania wish it to be. President Kikwete was not so arrogant as to say "we must do it ourselves". He was pragmatic enough to realize that others were perhaps better at it, and he could leverage on them instead of starting from scratch. He reached out to Malaysia and formed a winning coalition with us.
34. So we now have a team of 30 people on the ground here in Dar es Salaam running what we call "labs" in 6 key priority areas. Water, Energy, Transport, Education, Agriculture, and Resource Mobilization.

WORKING TOGETHER IN THE LABS

35. A lab is a methodology, adapted from various private sector practices, which we use in Malaysia to solve complex problems. (Perhaps it is more accurate not to describe them as private sector practices, but simply as practices which the private sector have put in practice more often, and in some cases, perfected.)
36. In a lab, we assemble 30-40 people - proactively identified as being key decision makers and/or influencers in the targeted focus area. We then task them to work together to develop the solution to that problem statement. In our case, the "problem" is "how to do we hit a certain target".
37. The thing is – we lock these people in room – for 6-8 weeks. 9-6pm every day. Until they come up with the solution. They will scream and shout at each other, but after a week or so, they will be resolved that their only way they can get out, is to work together to produce the required work. There is no

transformation without pain, ladies and gentlemen. And I'm afraid we can make no apologies for that.

38. And here's the best part though – "quality" of the work is defined by the granularity of the action plans to solve that particular problem, or to hit that particular target. In our labs, we expect actions to be defined to the "3-feet" level of detail; not the 100,000 foot detail that are invariably found in academic studies, sectoral blueprints, departmental long term perspective plans etc.

THREE FEET PLANS.ADDRESSING POLARITIES

39. A 3 feet action plan should contain precise details of the actions to be taken, the person accountable for taking that action, the timeline expected for completion of that action, the success measures, and the budget required (if applicable).
40. It is in these details of the 3-feet action plan that the various polarities between the diverse members of the winning coalition can be recognized and accommodated accordingly. When you operate at this level of detail, the precise action to accommodate the needs of each and every segment of the diverse implementation community can be identified and documented.
41. Ladies and Gentlemen, conflict only arises when one person representing one segment of the spectrum, representing a particular polarity, attempts to paint the entire program in his or her own image, forgetting the other colours in the spectrum. This is inevitable if one operates at 30,000 feet where it is impossible to see and appreciate all the wonderful detail.
42. Lest we oversimplify the whole situation. Let us also be clear - before the outcome of any lab can be accepted as the *de facto* implementation document, each and every party named in the plan as an owner of a particular action must agree to own it. And since the action is tailored for the specific segment of the spectrum each lab member represents, therefore we should expect no resistance. Otherwise it would be like arguing with oneself.
43. The final tangible outcome of a lab is a roadmap which reflects the views, interests and concerns of the collective body responsible for implementing the total solution to a particular problem. Our process ensures that the final

document is a product of consensus decision making, hence there should be no feeling of anything being shoved down other people's throats.

APPLYING THESE CONCEPTS TO YOUR POLICY OBJECTIVES

44. One final reality check we program implementers must do is on the perennial hot topic – the budget. Despite our best intentions, there is one immutable law of physics that no body, no matter how strong, can change – “No money. No talk.”
45. In our engagements with the Tanzanian government, we have put it a little more politely; but nonetheless, we have strongly reminded the cabinet that “a plan without a budget is only a draft.” There is no plan if there is no budget.
46. As seasoned administrators and policy makers, you know how this story usually plays out. The Ministry of Finance has a finite amount of budget for development or operational expenditure. The sum of the requests from the ministries will, more like than not, exceed that budget envelope. And all the ministers and permanent secretaries will, invariably, claim their projects are of the highest national priority.
47. This is another law of administrative jungle. But once again, this is, strictly speaking, not a problem to be solved. Differing ministerial views of their own relative importance are merely polarities to be managed. As strong results oriented people, we are all pre-destined to display this behavioural trait - because this is what allowed our species to prevail in the evolutionary race anyway.

MANAGING FROM THE FUTURE

48. As any good Transition and Change Management (TCM) practitioner will tell you – the key to convincing people to willingly let go of long held views is to involve them intimately in the crafting of the new future.
49. The views we hold in the present day, ladies and gentlemen, are mainly influenced by our experiences of the past. Therefore it is imperative to collectively transport ourselves to the future space – and “**manage from the future**”,

50. It is only when we have a clear shared vision of the future that we, then, as individuals will understand and appreciate the actions that must be taken, and the compromises and sacrifices that must be made, to get there.
51. When we have the vision, and the detailed action plans laid out from today to the achievement of the objective, then OBJECTIVE priority calls can be made. Robbing Peter to pay Paul today, is then OK, because Peter understands that by paying Paul, the entire village will be enriched, and he will be repaid and can continue on his original plans at that time.
52. In Malaysia, our cabinet did exactly that. They reached strong consensus that the 6 National Key Results Areas (NKRAs) of the Government Transformation Plan (GTP) were absolutely critical to be adequately funded. The 6 being, Crime, Corruption, Education, Low Income Households, Rural Basic Infrastructure, and Urban Public Transportation.
53. As you would have expected, there was insufficient in the current budget to begin implementation of the new initiatives, so RM1bil (around US\$300mil) was shaved off the Health Ministry's budget, and redistributed to the NKRAs, for example.
54. The Health Minister was a party to the framing of the national vision and understood the national priorities. So he willingly sacrificed his budget, in anticipation of the resulting improvement in the general economy then being able to produce sufficient revenues to enable him to get back on track ... later.
55. Fighting to maintain his budget would have resulted in sub-optimal funding for everything else, including the 6 NKRAs... and that was obviously not in the national interest.

RECAP'ING THE CONCEPTS

56. Ladies and gentlemen, please let me be the first to say – none of everything I've said is new to all of you here today. Concepts are always easy to – well -- "conceptualise".

57. I spoke to you about the relative importance of defining “Programs” vs formulating policy or creating plans. Policies define paradigms, plans describe strategic intent. Programs allow execution and actual traction.
58. We also discussed the importance of recognizing and allowing the practice of situational leadership – especially in our adolescence. Democracy is good in general. Dictatorship is negative in general. Unfettered democracy in uncertain times leads either to anarchy or inertia. A benevolent dictatorship when your ship is just leaving the harbor at least allows you to channel your energy and momentum towards a defined goal.
59. My CEO is fond of asking the hypothetical – What if Moses had asked the Jews to form a committee to determine the direction to the promised land? They would still be arguing in Egypt today. Instead, Moses was directive, he pointed his staff, and said “that is the way to the promised land”. Of course he promptly got lost for 40 years in the wilderness. But that is not the point. At least he got the exodus going. And that allowed Joshua to finally lead his people to the goal.
60. We talked then about the concept of managing from the future, and how that is important to enable objective decision making and priority setting.
61. Finally I want to end this recap by again repeating the importance of focusing on details of action required – not so much policy statements – because forcing the discussion to that level of detail not only increases your chances of success, but also allows you to identify the polarities that need to be managed along the way so you can tailor your actions accordingly.
62. The truth of the matter, ladies and gentlemen, is that the whole concept REALLY is this simple. To ensure that policy – any policy – has a fighting chance of survival, let alone being implemented, time and energy must be invested to separate problems to be solved, from the polarities that surround it.
63. Problems are no problems. Problems can be solved. Polarities need to be managed.