

19 June 2012

Meet Joe, Jose and Jusuf

People linkages: building inter-state relationships one person at a time

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SOMEWHERE between the headline report of Facebook's initial public offering and the report of Donna Summer's passing, the story of Project Paladar jumped out at me. Named for Cuba's entrepreneur restaurants, Project Paladar is a 10-day collaboration that pairs chefs from Cuba and New York in a purpose-built restaurant in Havana to cook for a diverse group of diners who, without breaking bread together, would never otherwise interact with each other.



American Fulbright scholars at a farewell lunch in Kuala Terengganu after a one-year stint as teaching assistants. A well of shared experiences and memories will have been created on both sides.

The diners range from foreign guests who pay US\$250 (RM780) each for the experience to blue-collar Cubans who eat for free. The idea is to encourage people, mainly Americans, to "be able to meet Cubans and eat with them, rather than just see them on the other side of a service counter".

Project Paladar applies to the complicated dynamics of the United States-Cuba relationship. But the larger point is that a single project like that, along with other comparable exchanges elsewhere, can create as much of an impact on international relations as any security treaty or free trade agreement. Here are three reasons why:

FIRST, people-to-people (P2P) initiatives bring international relations to the ground. Between conceptual frameworks of state behaviour and calculated calibrations of realpolitik, international relations is usually the preserve of the elite far removed from the daily concerns of the ordinary Joe, Jose, or Jusuf.

What Project Paladar and similar initiatives long before it show is that the conduct of international relations no longer remains the sole domain of government. It is complemented by the citizenry

wherever there is exchange -- by chefs, pianists, athletes and teaching assistants through food, music, sports and education;

SECOND, unlike state diplomacy, P2P initiatives are often unfettered by the dregs of politics or bureaucracy. In the vagaries of election cycles, trade wars, or political brinkmanship, they anchor relations to an assured degree of continuity and stability. When supported by private sector funding and powered by new media technologies, they have the potential to create the greatest impact where governments are unable or unwilling to, and when bureaucracies are simply too inert to.

There are numerous programmes that promote dialogue, cross-cultural cooperation, and compassion in the Middle East. One of the more curious grassroots initiatives, however, took off in March when peace activists in Israel launched an "Israel loves Iran" online campaign; Israelis of different backgrounds sent messages of peace and love to the people of Iran through a YouTube video collage. The campaign's objective was to temper the rising political tension and possibility of a potential Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear programme. Importantly, it was directed at both the Israeli government and the people of Iran. A complementary Facebook campaign began receiving similar messages of peace and friendship from Iranians in response to their Israeli counterparts' efforts.

P2P initiatives, therefore, offer a direct opportunity for exchange between the populations of countries that may not even have diplomatic relations with each other. Significantly, they humanise where governments may choose to demonise; and,

THIRD, P2P initiatives, even if temporary, create life experiences that connect in a meaningful and enduring way. Project Paladar does this through food.

Closer to home, it is hard to tell whether 20 years from now, it will be the students in Terengganu and Johor who will have benefited the most from their American Fulbright teaching assistants or the other way around. Either way, if the Peace Corps alumni of the 1960s to 1980s are any indication, a well of shared experiences and memories will have been created on both sides to last far into the future.

P2P exchanges create future investments by critically shaping views and perceptions in the present. It is tempting to pooh-pooh P2P initiatives as trivial. It is crucial to remember that the resilience of a nation-state, particularly in the face of an evolving geo-strategic landscape, lies not solely in a mix of politics, economics, defence and security.

It lies, first and foremost, in the state of its nation comprised of its people. By extension, an effective foreign policy that contributes to the dynamic stability of interstate relations is one that harnesses the potential of people's linkages to others. It is one that recognises what a participating diner in Project Paladar astutely observed, that "it's the small actions that sometimes have a huge impact. That's what builds ties between countries".