

MY SAY: Re-prioritising innovation

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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In a May 30 interview on a weekly public affairs show hosted by journalist and author Fareed Zakaria on CNN, Microsoft Corp chairman Bill Gates mentioned the need "to reorder the priorities of the innovation system" in making changes in the healthcare sector. The fact that "the priorities of the innovation system" can be reordered implies that there can be more than one innovation system, and that not all innovation systems work wonders.

Gates was talking about the invention of "a chemotherapy drug that costs US\$200,000 a year and only gains months of life for the people involved". In contrast, that amount can be "as profitable as something that keeps people healthy".

Similarly, innovations of various types can be re-prioritised for maximum impact, assuming that the system has the same priorities. What we are accustomed here is the so-called "technology-based" innovation. Indeed, this relates to the theme of the Akademi Sains Malaysia International Conference 2010 — "Wealth Creation through Science, Technology and Innovation: Creating the Environment for Technology-Based Innovation".

Tun Mahathir Mohamad, a Honorary Fellow of the academy, was the keynote speaker at the conference, which was held from June 2 to 3 in Kuala Lumpur. Speaking on the topic "Building an Innovative Nation", he stressed that a mindset change is a pre-requisite to enable innovation.

Mahathir illustrated this point by referring to a drug called MB693, which was produced after 692 failures, and which still does not assure return on investment. Not appreciating this fact would make innovation look like a mere "waste" of time and money, which then becomes an obstacle to the process itself. Thomas Edison knew what he was talking about when he said invention (so too innovation) is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.

Mahathir highlighted the barriers to commercialisation despite the many innovations created in Malaysia. The "socially based" innovation is often overlooked as a vital component of the innovation system. In fact, it is not just the tangible "hard" innovations that are important, but also the intangible "soft" ones. Thus, if it is medical products, then the healthcare system is equally important; if it is computers, it is the educational system; and if it is cars, it is the road system. One without the other can render innovations ineffective, if not useless.

This is where the mindset must be in tune with other aspects such as collaboration, empowerment, cultural sensitivity and indigenous wisdom, which are part of the social system. Yet these are normally neglected when it comes to considering innovation because they are considered less important than the technology and market-led dimensions. Just because social dimensions cannot be patented, it does not mean a technology-based innovation can be used optimally without giving due consideration to socially based innovations. This is especially so in promoting quality of life, which is the ultimate goal of innovations.

The eradication of illiteracy and poverty, more often than not, needs socially based innovations. Think about the "open" university or the "open" source system that have benefited millions worldwide. So has the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which lends support to social entrepreneurship. These have resulted in an innovation revolution in their right, uplifting the lives of millions. Such is the power of social innovations that must be leveraged to make technical innovations more meaningful and efficiently used. Compartmentalising the two is in itself a barrier to enculturating innovation.

In fact, Mahathir reminded the audience of two social innovations that have benefited Malaysia immensely. One is the introduction of the Look East Policy in the 1980s, which allowed the country to make better comparisons for much-needed innovative change. The other is the policy introduced to handle the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis (which the audience applauded). Though considered heretical, this was exactly the kind of social innovation required to save the country then. Now, it has been accepted as a "good" practice by the then critics of the policy.

In short, wealth creation through science, technology and innovation is better framed in the context of a larger understanding of the innovation ecosystem, where technology-based and socially based innovations co-exist in harmony. And this has to start with the right mindset that must be nurtured holistically. Like it or not, it is the present institutionally siloed system nationwide that continues to remain inadequate in handling new innovative ideas, let alone promote a culture of innovative thinking, be it in the public or private sector.

As suggested by Gates, we need to re-order our priorities to effect and impart a better innovation system as we move forward.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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