

APEX journey towards a sustainable future

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Comment

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UNIVERSITI Sains Malaysia (USM) "celebrated" its first anniversary of being conferred the APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) status last year.

This highly innovative initiative, which was launched as a component of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan in 2007, saw USM adopting a new vision statement -- Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow.

This, in part, is the result of a Scenario Planning exercise undertaken by the university in 2005 which lasted for about 18 months.

Five scenarios of universities of the future were created and one -- The University in a Garden -- was deemed the most preferred one.

Arising from the new transformational vision, USM also articulated its new mission statement -- USM is a pioneering research-intensive university that empowers future talents and enables the bottom billions to transform their socio-economic well-being.

The use of the phrase "bottom billions" refers to the 60 per cent of the world's 6.6 billion population (approximately four billion of them) who are living on less than US\$3 (RM10) a day.

This number will definitely rise as the world population increases.

In his book, *The End of Poverty* (2005), Jeffrey Sachs of the Earth Institute at Colombia University in the United States commented that every day our newspapers could report "more than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty".

This figure is over 70 times more than the number of people killed in the Lockerbie bombing in 1988.

We can still remember what the outburst was like then when the tragedy happened, and it still resonates with people today.

Why is the case so different when 20,000 people perish every day of poverty?

Is it because it is less tragic?

Are we not interested in finding out who is accountable for the metaphorical plane of starving people?

Why the double standards and for how long?

Could it be because most victims are from developing or less developed countries?



An Indonesian boy, who lives at an unlicensed shack with his parents near a railroad in central Jakarta, plays by himself. Some 71 per cent listed extreme poverty as the biggest global issue in a poll.

On that note, it is interesting to learn that according to the latest GlobeScan survey findings for the BBC World Service, extreme poverty is the most serious problem facing the world.

The issue is well ahead of climate change, terrorism and war or armed conflict, according to the poll in which more than 25,000 people in 23 countries (Malaysia is not involved) were interviewed face-to-face, online or over the telephone between June and October last year.

Despite the downward spiral of the economy then, only 58 per cent regarded the state of the world economy as the biggest global issue, compared to 71 per cent who listed extreme poverty.

Environment or pollution is cited by 64 per cent, and 63 per cent, the rising cost of food and energy.

Terrorism, human rights abuses and the spread of disease were singled out by 59 per cent each, climate change by 58 per cent and war or armed conflict by 57 per cent.

The poll, timed for the failed Copenhagen Climate Change summit, also suggests that Japan is the only nation to regard climate change as the most serious global issue, whereas China and Costa Rica identified environmental issues more generally or pollution.

While it is said that this represents a daunting agenda for institutions such as the United Nations to address, it is similarly so for many institutions of higher learning, which are agents of societal change.

Unfortunately, most are not even aware of global agendas such as the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) programme, endorsed by world leaders, and the eight challenges it encompasses.

For example, among MDG's top priorities is to halve the proportion of people, from 1990 to 2015, whose income is less than US\$1 a day.

Another is to halve the number of people who suffer from hunger by 2015.

The reality is, in 2005 alone, about 1.5 billion people are still estimated to live on US\$1.25 or less a day.

Every year some 10 million die of hunger and hunger-related diseases, a majority of whom are children, although fewer kids below five are undernourished -- from 33 per cent in 1990 to 26 per cent in 2006.

In stark contrast, in 2006, an estimated 1.5 billion people were said to be overweight globally according to the 10th International Congress on Obesity.

In other words, education, which is often touted as the "leveller of society", has failed to live up to expectation as far as the institutions of higher education are concerned.

Sadder still is that the MDG targets may not make a significant dent on poverty and hunger by 2015.

Yet many remain oblivious to achieving such an important goal, never mind the fact that even US President Barack Obama acknowledged global poverty as being a major issue when he addressed the UN General Assembly on Sept 23 last year.

Indeed the US itself has not lead the way!

The reason perhaps is because "poverty" is seldom seen as a form of violence or terror propagated by a system that is grossly unfair the world over!

Those who are responsible for such massive global poverty are not regarded as "terrorists" largely because they are among the people who set the rules as to who is whom!

Thus the priority remains limited to parochial goals couched in global terms such as the "war on terrorism".

The mind boggles as to why trillions of dollars are not poured into the "war on poverty" instead.

Especially when so many have vehemently argued that "poverty" is one of the major root causes of "terrorism", just as rising food prices and environmental pollution contribute to the vicious cycle of poverty and hunger.

Unless this cycle is broken the problem would remain, if not worsen given the deteriorating global situation.

Like it or not, to break a vicious cycle such as this is an arduous task, more so if education failed to be sensitised as one of the key long-term solutions in tackling such pressing issues!

It is with this acute awareness that USM continues the APEX journey by fulfilling its vision and mission with a renewed sense of global commitment and purpose, by acting locally.

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