

MY SAY: Challenging the status quo

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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On Oct 23, Malaysians were presented with Budget 2010 aptly themed "1Malaysia, Together We Prosper". The budget is based on a three-pronged strategy: driving the nation towards a high-income economy; ensuring holistic and sustainable development, and focusing on the people's well-being.

Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said in his budget speech: "This means the needs of the people must always take precedence. Therefore, every step requires sacrifice and strong cooperation from every segment of society." He emphasised that the government would take a new approach based on innovation, creativity and high-valued activities.

Through these measures the per capita income of Malaysians is expected to more than double by the next decade. It underscored the 1Malaysia concept as being centred on the positive values of social justice and acceptance of a multiracial society.

No doubt, the objectives and strategies of the budget are commendable, but there must be adequate safeguards to ensure their implementation leads to the desired results. After all, a high-income economy has often been linked to wastages and harm ranging from environmental degradation to socio-ecological crisis, which will eventually result in a low quality of life all around.

The second strategy is seen as a key factor that could balance the future of development in a more sustainable and holistic way. In other words, the overarching target is to arrive at a state of "sustainability" — not only in the context of sustainable development but, equally important, sustainable economy and that of social well-being, too.

Therefore, it is imperative for the nation to further enhance highly skilled human capital while expanding access to quality and affordable education. Again, it is not just any form of education but one that leverages education for sustainable development.

Invariably, this journey towards sustainability must embrace innovative educational processes. It must start from the issue of governance and go all the way to autonomy if there is to be any impact on "human capital". Otherwise, it becomes a mere cliché based on the usual approach to education: using the tried and tested methods of yesterday, which is about accumulating "facts" and "information" in search of answers instead of thinking about the "right" questions to create a new future.

Consequently, we are preoccupied with doing more of the same, and not daring to blaze new trails using innovative ideas. We prefer to copy "innovation" from elsewhere in the name of benchmarking, but this will only serve to ensure that Malaysia plays catchup, instead of taking the lead even though we are able to move up the value chain. But with the third thrust, there is now a new imperative: the people's well-being. Where is "humanity" in this so-called value chain?

In short, the argument that the value chain is ostensibly designed to benefit the organisation and its stakeholders is no longer tenable if the people's well-being (sometimes even within the organisation) is not truly factored in. The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), while relevant, is still too broad-based and in no way guarantees the well-being of the people. Moreover, CSR is also fast becoming a cliché.

We need to go beyond the confines of CSR: we must move into social enterprises where the interests of the people is given top priority. There are enough global agendas that could be adopted as frameworks to leverage sustainability and make it not only a national goal, but also an international one.

It cannot be overemphasised that as a nation progresses, the disparities among its population will also widen and lead to a deterioration of social well-being. Mere numbers or percentages to indicate so-called progress or development do not seem to have any substantive meaning when it comes to sustainability.

Thus, it is quite obvious that Malaysia must move to a high-income economy. The country must be willing to rethink its future and not be tied down to current ideas and measures. Relying on single-digit figures or the aggregate of a few to define success may not be sufficient anymore to reflect the complexities of the future.

Sustainability may be the prime objective, but "innovativeness" is key to moving forward. However, it must be buttressed by a changed mindset that sees an alternative worldview possible, if not desirable. And this must begin by challenging the status quo.

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

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