

## MY SAY: Need to balance KPI

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For some time now, key performance indicators or KPIs have been Malaysia's new buzzword. Google it and you will get more than 31 million hits. No doubt, KPIs are being widely used in various ways to help organisations measure progress towards their goals. Though aimed more at achieving corporate or industrial objectives, they have now found their way into the public sector and academia as well.

So, it is not unusual to hear academics pursuing their KPIs, like their counterparts in industry, with fervour. After all, education today is an industry and the rule of thumb is "what gets measured, gets done!" To some then, KPIs as a measure of performance are sacrosanct, as if our very life depended on them.

Arguably, if there is any country where the use of KPIs as an indicator of performance has great meaning, it would be South Korea.

From a humble beginning and from the ashes of war, South Korea has now emerged as a developed country with a high standard of living. Its transformation in the latter half of the last century is nothing short of a miracle.

Last year, South Korea's GDP per capita was estimated at US\$27,646 (RM97,206), despite lacking natural resources and having the smallest territory among the G20 major economies.

The South Korean economy is reportedly the fourth biggest in Asia and the 13th largest in the world. It is one of the world's top exporters and a technology leader in several advanced fields such as electronics, automobiles, machinery and petrochemicals.

By 2025, South Korea aims to be the world's leading country in robotics. In other words, South Korea has met many, if not most, of the KPIs it has set for itself which other countries can only dream of achieving, especially in economically tangible terms.

But it is undeniable that KPIs have other associated numbers that are not normally mentioned as a nation progresses. One of them is suicide, which could also be seen as another KPI that measures the impact of progress and development on the people. Often, technological advancement is seen as faceless, cold and inhuman. The suicide rate, as a KPI, gives another dimension to what progress or development means.

In the case of South Korea, the suicide rate has soared to 24.7 per 100,000 people in 2005, according to sources in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which ranks the country close to the top of the list. Suicide is said to be the leading cause of death in the world among those in the 20s and 30s, and the fourth leading cause of death in South Korea. It has also been found to be rising among people in their 60s. What seems ironic is that the trend is linked with the economic success of a country.

South Korea's status as one of the world's most wired countries, with a highly developed Internet infrastructure, has even prompted group suicides. By no means the least important, educational KPIs has put relentless pressure on children to perform. If they fail to do so, suicide could be one way out, and may be just a click away.

So, when South Korea's former president Roh Moo-hyun was reported to have jumped to his death from a cliff near his home last month, it did not come as a great shock. Apparently, Roh left a note that seemed to confirm his intention to commit suicide.

Indeed, the circumstances surrounding his death have in a way given another insight into what South Korea's success is all about. A recent article in *The New York Times* observed that "... every former South Korean president since the 1980s has faced corruption accusations or gone to prison on such charges after his term was over". Roh looks like another name in a long list.

While there is every indication that the South Koreans are not willing to condone corrupt and scandalous behaviour as part of their new-found success, it does beg the question: why does South Korea, successful as it is, increasingly suffer from a number of serious corruption scandals that reach to the very top of the political and economic hierarchy? Where are the KPIs in all this?

In short, in our obsession to measure all things, which may be desirable, we must seek to balance it by another equally, if not more important, consideration: KIP or key intangible performance. An excellent KIP will no doubt give better measurements in a more ethical manner.

The challenge is of course to instil KIP in a hard-nosed fashion. Here, the South Korean experience offers many good lessons to ponder upon.

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