Don't forget the old

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"Enhancing competitiveness and sharing economic prosperity" - this was the theme for the recent 2008 Budget dialogue chaired by the prime minister.

The theme is consistent with the main thrust of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010).

There is a growing awareness worldwide that the primary goal of the government is no longer confined to the realm of creating wealth. Equally important, is the "creation of happiness".

Consequently, the focus has shifted from tangible indicators such as gross domestic product to other measures such as general well-being (GWB).

Although GWB is not as easily defined, some progress has been made towards this end as exemplified by the work of Adrian White from the University of Leicester.

Labelling it as the social well-being (SWB) index, White pioneered the innovative concept to create an indicator for "happiness" and this is now gaining wide acceptance.

According to the table created by White, only five of the countries listed among the world's top 10 World Competitiveness Ranking last year made it to his list of 10 "happiest" nations.

Denmark is at the top, followed by Switzerland (2), Iceland (4), Finland (6) and Canada (10).

The usual stereotypes dominating the World Competitiveness Ranking fared poorly in White's list, notably even among many of those so-called G8 countries.

On the other hand, countries such as Austria (3), Bahamas (5), Sweden (7) and Bhutan (8) are recognised as more "developed" on the SWB index. In 2006, Malaysia is listed as number 17, as compared to 23rd on the GDP-based index.

SWB measures have been positively correlated with factors like access to health facilities and basic education, in contrast to poverty and associated variables which are negatively correlated.

It is timely to dwell on the relevant issues of social well-being, in particular those related to the elderly (the group that is no longer active in the labour market) as well as others in disadvantaged sectors.

All of them appear to have been left behind, regardless of the tremendous growth of the economy as well as education.

They pose new social issues that would eventually threaten the well-being of society.

As such, it is advisable to introduce a more pro-elderly policy in stages, taking into consideration that an aging society is inevitable.

This is made worse by the fact that there is now a breaking down of the traditions and values of extended family network.

With both husband and wife working and spending less time at home, this has significant effects on the young who are deprived of parental attention.

This also affects the elderly in the household, especially if they do not have a pension or other income to depend on.

While pensions are seen as a well-deserved life-long reward for past services, the rapidly rising cost of living and longer life expectancy erode the value of the fixed pension.

Since pensioners are regarded more as economically inactive, they can no longer partake in the prosperity arising from a growing economy.

Many more are being marginalised.

Worse off are those retirees who have to rely on their Employees Provident Fund savings.

The free medical benefits enjoyed by pensioners are not available to those on the EPF scheme. Medical care costs more as one ages and will gradually eat into the limited EPF savings.

It is quite clear that policies must be put in place if the well-being of such groups are to be tackled meaningfully over a period of time.

The groups include workers in the plantation sector, the urban poor (many due to rural transmigration) and the Orang Asli.

The need to enhance economic competitiveness alone without paying equal attention to social well-being is no longer an option.

Those who are economically and/or educationally disadvantaged, through no fault of their own and because of poor previous policy implementation, need to be uplifted by broadening their participation in the community.