

Dr Mahathir's vision for science and technology

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TECHNOLOGY has long been recognised as the additional component to land, labour and capital in enhancing economic supremacy. Japan used it. Korea exploited it. A host of other developed economies harnessed science and technology (S&T) to fuel their economic surge.

Economic successes in countries such as the US, Japan and Germany are clear demonstrations of the beneficial consequences of a strong governmental commitment to S&T. Can we speak of the same degree of commitment in Malaysia?

Scientists in Malaysia have for many years been crusading to persuade policy makers to allocate more resources and institute better recognition for S&T. The response has been rather dismal in the past. All we got were repeated lip service, empty promises and lacklustre support.

The commitment, was to say the least, only lukewarm. But Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad changed all that. Since the beginning of Dr Mahathir's era, earlier promises began to steadily materialise into concrete commitments. Soon after taking over the stewardship of

R&D. Such massive injection of funds has never featured in prior developmental plans. To use the allocated R&D funds sensibly and realistically, priority areas were formulated under the programme to intensify research in priority areas (IRPA).

As a result of IRPA, S&T is definitely enjoying a new lease of life. And there is no doubt that these R&D ventures would contribute to the economic development of the country.

For the Sixth Malaysia Plan an allocation of about \$600 million has been budgeted for R&D.

In 1988, the Government launched a comprehensive study to evaluate other S&T weaknesses in the country, especially institutional-wise. This move led to the recent unveiling of the Technology Development Plan (TDP), making sweeping recommendations on S&T co-ordination, manpower and cognitive incentives for education and career in S&T. And we have been made to understand that the Government has given unequivocal support for most recommendations of TDP. This is definitely an other plus for Malaysian scientists.

the Government, a number of policy changes were initiated, signalling a new dynamic and vibrant phase for S&T in this country. All those years of persistent lobbying were finally crystallising into undertakings never before dreamt of by the scientific community.

Things are definitely looking up for S&T in the country. For a start, the Prime Minister saw to the appointment of a Science Adviser to provide relevant inputs to the Government on S&T matters. It was a significant step towards increasing recognition of S&T.

A number of policy changes soon followed. In 1985, the Government launched the Industrial Master Plan which drew attention to the crucial role of S&T in spearheading the industrialisation of the country. The IMP advocated realistic allocations for research and development (R&D) which is recognised as the strategic backbone of S&T progress.

Research and development pursuits should be stepped up, more so in downstream manufacturing. In terms of percentage of Gross Domestic Product, Malaysia's contribution to R&D has not been at par with other developing economies including that of Korea and Taiwan.

More funds for R&D would be needed. Again as a result of the new commitment to S&T by Dr Mahathir's Government, there was no hesitancy in responding to the cry for increased funds for R&D. The Fifth Malaysia Plan saw to it that about \$400 million was allocated for

On top of that Dr Mahathir has even agreed to the establishment of a special Cabinet committee for S&T affairs. With such overwhelming support and encouraging appreciation of S&T, the country should witness an early realisation of her industrialisation objectives.

It is quite obvious that recent drastic realignments of our S&T policies and strategies would not have materialised without the sincere commitment of the Prime Minister himself.

In fact there have been cases that demonstrate his justified obsession with S&T matters. He has sometimes shown personal interest in R&D projects. This speaks very well for the level of appreciation that Dr Mahathir has for S&T matters.

Now the question is, will IRPA be a standard feature of all future development plans? Governmental recognition of S&T roles in our economic development is just picking up momentum. Do we want to introduce unnecessary inertia? Or do we want to precipitate increasing acceleration in S&T progress? The choice is ours.

There is no doubt over how Dr Mahathir views the S&T future for the country. And we would like to suggest that if there is to be effective sustenance of current S&T initiatives there has to be continuity in governmental commitment.

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