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Asean initiative against poverty

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THE capitalist-minded in cities around Southeast Asia are sweeping up the splinters of shattered dreams of sustained material wealth. For the poor, particularly in rural areas, life goes on.

In contrast to the novelty of a feel-poor existence among the nouveau riche, the persistently poor and marginalised remain firmly pinned down as the have-nots of society.

In Southeast Asia - part of a larger neighbourhood that houses 960 million of the world's poorest 1.3 billion citizens - poverty and its debilitating consequences will have to be faced with more than empathy.

As World Day for Poverty Eradication provides an opportunity to pause for reflection today, member-countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are preparing for serious stock-taking of their own.

Senior officials and ministers responsible for rural development and poverty alleviation in all nine member-countries will meet in Bandar Sunway, Subang Jaya, to discuss a new regional initiative from Oct 19 to 23.

By unhappy coincidence, each has taken a body-blow from speculative currency trading which has thrown development plans into temporary disarray.

The poorest, who had yet to gain from trickle-down growth, will be left further behind unless realistic adjustments allow them to catch up with those better off.

Socio-economic development is a two-legged act. Until each country redresses urban-rural imbalances and tackles poverty head on, it can only hobble along at best.

This applies in the regional context as well, where the misfortunes of any country could transcend boundaries or spill over into the well-being of neighbours through migration of the dislocated or the poor.

Asean is the second regional grouping after South Asia to take up the issue of rural development and poverty alleviation, in a world where trade and finance increasingly dominate discussions.

Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa mooted the inaugural meeting, in keeping with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's "prosper thy neighbour" principle in regional linkages.

Like all poor communities worldwide, those of Southeast Asia require "access to assets" as the United Nations Development Programme describes it in leading a decade-long fight to eradicate global poverty by 2007.

It has identified the need to provide an enabling environment for equitable economic growth through access to land, credit, technology, training, job opportunities, market access and empowerment of the poor.

Rural Development Ministry secretary-general Datuk Abdul Aziz Muhamad, who leads Malaysia's delegation to the three-day Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) from Sunday, has no illusions about the magnitude of the task ahead.

However, he is quietly confident that the twin demands of rural development and poverty alleviation can be handled by tapping into the Asean framework of co-operation and information-sharing.

"A substantial proportion of Southeast Asia is depressed or considered backward.

"By tackling a difficult issue that is of relevance to all member-countries, we can strengthen regional cohesion and stability," he

explains.

"Country experiences will be useful as these will address problems peculiar to this region.

"Malaysia, for instance, could learn from Indonesia and Vietnam about cost-effective solutions against poverty."

In Vietnam, 80 per cent of the population live in rural areas.

Low income, rising unemployment, poor living standards and insufficient infrastructure are major concerns, according to recent news reports.

Today, rural advancement and poverty alleviation programmes must also be viewed against globalisation. This has unleashed the full strength of market-forces on nations that are still in vulnerable stages of development.

Globalisation may have inherent advantages for economic growth, but it also threatens to widen disparities in quality of life between the richest and the poorest, as well as between urban and rural areas.

Since 60 per cent of Southeast Asia is rural-based and often poor as well, Asean's intervention is not just timely, but crucial.

"If standards of living are not raised, the whole region will not be competitive and income disparities would be accentuated," says Abdul Aziz.

Apart from the city-state of Singapore, Asean member-countries share an interest in arresting rural-urban migration, which has negatively affected both countryside and cities over the past decade of economic growth.

"It is meaningless for rural people to go to urban centres only to experience deterioration in quality of life. This has become a major problem in most Asean member-countries," says Abdul Aziz.

Intensified rural development is recognised as one avenue to redistribute opportunities for jobs, creation of wealth and a better quality of life, as well as relieve the growing pressures on urban centres.

This will be among topics to be discussed at the SOM, when four papers will be presented. These will cover economic, social, gender and family viewpoints in identifying common features and problems in regional poverty.

The SOM will recommend a regional poverty alleviation strategy, which will be discussed at the ministerial meeting that follows. Once endorsed by member-countries on Oct 23, it will be integrated into national policies.

Of significance is that a mechanism will be included to implement the plan of action, under the auspices of the Functional Co-operation arm of the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta.

It now deals with regional issues of the environment, social development, science and technology, culture and information, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, human resource development, women's empowerment and child protection.

Programmes to alleviate poverty and advance rural areas tend to have beneficial spin-offs for the nation as a whole, if they adopt a multi-dimensional approach and are implemented responsively.

The UNDP's Human Poverty Index, released in July in the annual Human Development Report, measures deprivation against the indicators of illiteracy, malnutrition, early death, poor health care and access to safe water.

Even as these basic needs are fulfilled, there will have to be progression to value-added components like legal literacy, gender-neutral development and consumer education, all of which contribute towards human empowerment.

Changes in mindset are underway in Malaysia following a recent rethink of the rural development policy. Since last year, this has been moving

away from simple infrastructure provision to the philosophy of human development.

However, several tiers of needs continue to exist among the rural and poorer sections of the population and these must be served accordingly.

Abdul Aziz says some still lack access to amenities like electricity and piped water, while others require knowledge-based assistance or are caught up in the unending "revolution of rising expectations".

"I believe that, ultimately, the poor and marginalised themselves have to decide what activities are most beneficial and pursue these based on the knowledge, skills and resources available to them," he says.

"We can only educate them to manage the projects and empower them up to a certain level. They generally have tremendous potential - all that they lack is access to opportunities."

Since that potential is likely to be a common factor throughout Southeast Asia, it opens up a range of options for the Asean strategy as it matures.

Although Abdul Aziz says the inaugural meeting will not go into specifics, he does not discount the possibility of the action plan becoming a vehicle for related socio-economic developments in future.

Environmental education, for one, will have to emerge in the wake of the Indonesian forest fires which have refocused attention on shifting cultivation in the region, including Sabah and Sarawak.

This could, in turn, extend research into indigenous technologies and use of local resources that are sustainable, affordable and compatible with local needs and lifestyles.

However, even the best-laid strategies could go awry without strong political stability region-wide and increased self-reliance against external disruptions such as the currency crisis, says Abdul Aziz.

As Southeast Asia joins the rest of the world in tackling poverty through equitable allocation of resources and expansion of knowledge for empowerment, Asean must fix its focus on this sobering thought.

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