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## Lessons to help overcome social ills

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Concern for moral degradation and social ills that have been expressed by none other than our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other leaders is very real indeed. We have courageously brought into the open the question of money politics particularly during the last Umno general assembly. More recently we have noted a growing concern for the overwhelming immorality among the Malay youths.

I was just casually asking a driver in Penang what he thought of the problem. He seemed to know quite a bit about some factory girls who abandoned their newborn babies, returning home in the early hours of the morning from discos, sleeping on the staircases of the flats when their flatmates don't open the doors for them at such hours.

Surely the problem is not as simple and straightforward. All of us are exposed to the same influences and the problem is dominant among the Malays. It appears that we have reduced, if not eliminated the identification of race with economic functions through our well implemented New Economic Policy. However, we are now facing the identification of the same race with social ills.

Where have we gone wrong? Some have convincingly argued that it is a sociological phenomenon arising out of a rapid economic development that is more slanted towards materialism. The urbanised rural families seem very vulnerable to the socio-economic changes around them.

Others are determined to cure those ills by revamping the religious education in schools to meet present needs.

There are those who call for parents to show good examples to their children. This necessitates the parents themselves to behave so that their children can emulate them.

I believe the list of suggestions could go on. All of them have their merits because no two individuals are alike and that each requires a suitable approach.

In solving our economic woes, we learned that poverty eradication could not be achieved by undertaking general development. We spent huge sums on rural development in the 1960s but we found that the incidence of poverty did not decrease. We then focused on various poverty groups and tackled each group differently. Even this method did not prove to be effective. We realised that each poor individual had different capabilities and needs. We finally had to zero in on the hardcore poor households as our target unit to obtain the desired results.

We also strongly believe that education is a more sustainable method of developing our people. We implemented sound education policies right from the start. In fact we regularly reviewed these policies to improve the system, the curriculum, the teachers' capabilities, the infrastructure, so that we churn out a better educated generation.

We have consistently and regularly undertaken economic development planning every five years, clearly defining our objectives, formulating pragmatic and appropriate policies and implementing them with full commitment.

Our approach to economic problems has never been done in isolation. We are always conscious of the need for political stability, efficient and dynamic administrative machinery that supports the private sector as preconditions for our economic success.

We probably could draw pertinent lessons from our experience in the

economic sphere to steer our society away from moral decadence. Firstly our objective has to be clear. We must not just identify a certain group such as the Malay youth as our target group and ignore other groups indulging in such activities.

This reminds me of a hadith by Nasa'i where the Holy Prophet swore that if Fatimah (his daughter) were to be caught stealing, he would have her hand cut off.

Secondly, our approach should be directed to the appropriate individuals in the groups just like our approach to the poverty problem. The Islamic approach to poverty problem through the zakat institution is directed to the individual recipient and not to groups of recipients. Only when we zoom in on the individuals concerned that we could employ the most appropriate solution.

Thirdly, the approach to be adopted cannot be the quick-fix type but should be developmental in nature. We cannot just close discos because many youths frequent them. They will find other outlets. We achieved sustainable economic success not by giving aid or subsidies, but by providing our people education. Moral and religious education is indeed necessary, not only as a means to enhance knowledge but more as a tool for actual practice.

What is even more important in moral education are the examples to emulate. Such examples should not only be provided by those teaching religious or moral education, but rather by all teachers, parents, elders, community and national leaders so that there will be no conflict.

Fourthly, there is a clear need for a holistic, integrative approach towards curing social ills. Comprehensive planning with definite quantitative and qualitative targets, pragmatic and consistent policies and effective implementation of strategies should be continuously undertaken as we have rigorously done for economic development. We know the implications of a society that is plagued with moral problems on any degree of economic success. Such a society is capable of eroding all the accumulated wealth within a short period.

Finally, the social problems that we are trying to overcome should not be treated as any other issue that we may have faced in the past.

We are often excited at the early stages but our interest wilts over time. It should be considered as everyone's problem and all must contribute towards its success.

The Islamic view is that moral and ethical problems have always been the most important in human development because of its association with the core of man, i.e. the soul. The Holy Prophet himself has said that he has been sent to provide the best example in ethics and morality.