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On the right track in bringing MSC benefits to all Malaysians

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EVERY Malaysian school may soon be hooked up to the Internet and enjoy International Net Day, while scientists from international IT companies may be teaching at Malaysian universities.

These were among the pledges and possibilities which came out of the discussions held between the international advisers for the Multimedia Super Corridor, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and several Cabinet Ministers.

Whether this vision comes true, however, depends to a great extent on the strength of Malaysian commitment to the MSC's success and to the nation's willingness to be at the forefront of the Information Age.

Judging by feedback from those at the MSC's International Advisory Panel meeting recently, the Government is on the right track so far, with "far-sighted" incentives for foreign companies to trust, invest and experiment in the MSC - and share what they know with Malaysians.

"Malaysians are clearly aware that being a knowledge-based society means your value lies in your people and their skills, not so much in your buildings or machinery," said Siemens Nixdorf vice-president Axel Hass, who attended the two-day meeting as an observer.

Not only does the MSC uproot the traditional concept of assets, it also changes the idea of what constitutes investments.

Instead of a purely monetary perspective, investments should be seen from a technological point of view as well.

As Alex Sozonoff of Hewlett-Packard put it, "You can put in RM100 million worth of technology, but if it's not compatible with your vision, then your vision won't realise its true potential."

Sun Microsystems chief scientist Dr John Gage pointed out that Malaysians themselves played the main role in deciding whether the fruits of the MSC would be enjoyed by all levels of Malaysian society.

Citing a Sun Microsystems volunteer project which got engineers all over the United States to wire schools to the Internet, Gage said he had spoken to Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak about possibly helping to organise such a project through Malaysia.

"We, the foreigners, are willing to help and so it is up to you to decide, how to help and when you will help yourselves," he said.

Far-sighted thinking is necessary by the Government, MSC-status companies and "ordinary" Malaysians for the potential benefits of the MSC to be realised to the full.

However, as has been pointed out, this long-term planning should be marked by flexibility, boldness and the creativity to adapt to the changing circumstances, technological or otherwise.

The growing culture of entrepreneurship among Malaysians will help cultivate these qualities but the MSC's very nature of being a test-bed means companies should also be allowed, as one IAP member put it, "the luxury of failure" to a certain degree.

Dr Mahathir himself said that a "safety net" of bankruptcy protection laws would be considered for those MSC companies which were not doing well.

Far from being hindered by economic problems, however, progress on the MSC is already a year ahead of schedule since the project was launched in August 1996.

In fact, some IAP members have described the MSC as the catalyst which

will pull Malaysia out of its own, and the region's, economic problems.

Since April last year, the MSC's governing body, the Multimedia Development Corporation, has received 178 applications for MSC status.

Thirty-nine per cent of the applications are from Malaysian companies and 26 per cent from joint ventures between Malaysian and foreign companies.

The combined revenue projected by the fifth year of these companies' operations is around RM13 billion, while the profit is projected at close to RM5 billion. Investment is estimated at around RM4 billion.

Of the 178 applications, 110 companies have been given MSC status, with 78 already operating.

Attended by 25 international members and observers, this was the IAP's second meeting but the first which brought panelists to the site of MSC.

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