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Towards a value-laden planning doctrine

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ACCORDING to a recent newspaper report, the possibility of achieving Vision 2020 targets appears to be uncertain. This is mostly due to the current economic problems.

It would be sad if this were to happen. Many Malaysians have psyched upthemselves to deal with the nine challenges first proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad about seven years ago.

Even if the economic dimension of the vision is not achieved by 2020, there is no reason why the other challenges cannot be pursued with the same zeal.

Malaysians can still improve upon intangible assets, like values, for example. It is anticipated that values will become imperative in all areas of life in the next century. Everyone should consider doing a quick check on his or her value system.

Actually, failure to maximise our value system can have a negative impact on other more tangible indicators, like productivity, profitability and accountability. Figures to prove this are hard to come by, but a random observation should be sufficient to substantiate it.

One notable example is our value system in relation to treating the environment. We have to admit that some of us have made blunders in terms of taking too many things for granted as far as environmental care is concerned. It is unfortunate that so much time and resources have to be used to correct the ecological imbalances that man has consciously or subconsciously created.

Imagine, if only a value-laden planning and development strategy had been subscribed to by planners and developers from the very beginning, then we would not have to face an environmental crisis of this magnitude. Furthermore, our resources can be fully utilised to combat the economic problem.

The growth of the economy prior to last year, the increase in the population and the augmentation of urbanisation have signalled the need to formulate a comprehensive and dynamic planning and development policy which focuses on an enduring and balanced spiritual and material development.

A degraded environment, including the breaking down of the natural life support system is becoming a reality. Depletion of the land and soil, destruction of water catchment areas, and denuding of green belts are the outstanding environmental problems.

Despite determined efforts by the local authorities, some of the more common negative effects of urbanisation still refuse to go away. For example, pockets of overcrowded squatter communities which lack basic sanitation, clean water supply, waste-disposal facilities and adequate recreational services still persist. It has been argued that one of the root causes of these societal and ecological problems is the inadequacy of Malaysia's planning and development policy.

Thus far, Malaysia's planning and development policy has mimicked its former colonial master, the British. A concept put forth by Ebenezer Howard in 1902 led to the creation of, among the British middle-class, champions of the "Garden City". The "Garden City" movement propagated the idea of comprehensive planning whereby business ventures could be harmoniously mixed with the development of suburbs with a general plan to control growth.

Many people have taken exception to the "Garden City" concept of planning and development. Thus, began the normative approach which consists of two relevant features.

First, development is value-laden, involving human attitude and preferences, self-defined goals and criteria for determining what are tolerable costs to be borne in the course of change. These are far more important than better resource allocation, upgrading of skills, or the rationalisation of administrative procedures.

Second, it is a multifaceted concept which is best expressed as the human ascent in integral humanity, including the economic, biological, psychological, social, cultural, ideological, spiritual, mystical and transcendental dimensions.

Apart from economic growth, there must also be social justice since people prefer to live in a society where their sense of wellbeing is influenced by the way others in the same society live. Similarly, other people's wellness is somewhat dependent on our way of life.

This interdependency cannot be ignored by a society aiming for meaningful and sustainable development. The actions of both the producers and consumers have ecological implications. If not properly governed, these may result in an environmental crisis.

Today's world environmental crisis is a case in point. It has become a concern for all mankind. Failure to address this issue through the various programmes thus far implemented signifies the need to have a deeper understanding of the malaise and strikes out at the root values where religion is most potent.

There is also a need to recognise the role of religion in establishing guidelines in efforts to protect the environment, while we move gracefully forward towards economic success. The intensity of religious commitment and the growing prevalence of religion in the world, despite modernisation and globalisation, is indeed a healthy sign.

One particular dimension of planning stands out from other moments in history, that is the ability of the Islamic civilisation to produce, shape and maintain citizens of a high calibre, intellectually and morally, bound only by their complete submission to their religious precepts. This may possibly be the key to the problems of planning. While modern planning tends to address physical, economic, social and environmental problems, the Islamic approach looks at the total man (insan).

As for the physical world, Islam subscribes to the "design earth" concept, which states that the world was created by God who provides a profound spiritual relationship among all aspects of nature. There exists a strong link which binds God, man and nature. God created both man and nature, the former being given total jurisdiction over the latter.

The Islamic precept implies living in peace and harmony with oneself, with fellow beings and with everything else that God has created, including the environment. The misuse of God's creation may be interpreted as a transgression of the absolute authority of God. This is in line with the concept of the ordained role of man as God's trustees on earth.

Thus, theocentric strategies for planning and development need to be adopted. Malaysian planners find it imperative to free themselves from the foreign-based concepts that have little or no relevance to the country's specific problems.

Two years ago a group of them gathered to ask the question: "Is there a way out?" Looking at the tradition of sound city planning, evident during the period of Islamic dominance over the world, they tried to draw lessons that would be relevant to solving the current problems faced by Malaysia.

Thus, what is now known as the Total Planning and Development Doctrine, has been put forth. The most important aspect of the doctrine is the

emphasis on the integration of spiritual and moral values into planning and development. These values should be reflective of the relationships between, man and his creator, fellow human beings, the environment and technology.

The doctrine requires that all micro-urban decisions of the planners and policy-makers be guided by theocentricity (God-centred and revelation based), rather than anthropocentricity (purely based on human intellect and rationale).

The universal values and development principles embedded within the doctrine are aimed at achieving and maintaining As-Salam (security, peace and tranquillity) and Al-Falah (victory, prosperity and profit).

As for the implementation, it has the potential to be workable. This is due to the fact that the eco-system in Malaysia is still reasonably well-preserved. There is a vast area of natural and virgin forest and urbanisation is still manageable.

Last but not least, the universal values are still very much in evidence in the daily practices of Malaysians. The potential for the doctrine to be successful is there.