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Take lessons of the World Road Congress to heart

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NO one can deny that the recent 21st World Road Congress, which ended on Saturday, was a success. With 2,600 participants from 115 countries attending, the event is probably one of the larger events to be held in Malaysia.

Regarded as the Olympics of the road and transport engineering industry, Kuala Lumpur was in many ways a perfect venue for the last World Road Congress for this century.

Besides the opportunity for the country to prove to the many doubting foreign eyes that the economic and political situation is well, the Congress has more importantly drawn the world's attention to its achievements in its road infrastructure development.

Feedback showed the participants were convinced that Malaysia had some of the best roads in the world.

Without downplaying our achievements, the Congress was also an excellent opportunity for Malaysians to identify areas which our system still lacked, and learn from the experiences of others which were discussed during the sessions or showcased in the exhibition.

While we accept that our engineering expertise in road construction ranks as one of the highest in quality in the region, the areas that could be further looked into in Malaysia which were just as important when considering the success of a project tended to be non-technical issues - management, environment and environmental aspects.

Even within the technical realm, there is room for Malaysia to expand - like intelligent transport systems and road safety audit.

High on the social aspects list is the issue of public consultation.

While Malaysia has increasingly moved towards involving the public in road development, the public consultation mechanism is still at its early stages.

Early this year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared that no new roads will be built if the public did not want any. Later, two surveys were carried out to gauge the response of the public to two different groups of privatised expressways.

Still, some people have questioned the way in which these surveys had been carried out.

An entire session on sustainable transport devoted its energy to find out the reasons for the success and failure of exercises to get the public's opinion on road construction.

Another session on urban transport planning also extensively considered the same question and both sessions came to similar conclusions on the fate of public consultation exercises in Malaysia.

Ian Heggie of the World Bank pinned down the reasons for the failures to three main factors - lack of genuine intent on the part of the authorities; failure to identify the correct audience for the survey; and the lack of information and experience on such consultation among those surveyed.

The correct audience, he added, would include those who were affected and all stakeholders of a particular project.

Another speaker said public consultation should extend as far as the Government provides adequate and comprehensible information to the public and actively encourages them to participate.

Consultation should occur at all stages, and not at the end where it

will just attract opposition and be doomed to failure.

Even in developing countries such as Morocco, public consultation was legally built into their road development process.

Another aspect which was dicussed extensively was how to tackle urban congestion. Integrated transport planning - between different modes of public transport, between public and private transport and between transport and land-use - was seen as the solution.

The situation in Kuala Lumpur was immediately brought into focus as one of the technical visits involved bringing participants on a ride on the city's two light rail systems.

A question was raised as to why the two systems were not integrated physically and in terms of ticketing. These two aspects, it was concluded, should be looked into to ensure the success of public transport in the city.

The above are merely two illustrations of a treasure trove of best practice examples provided by the Congress. All should take full advantage of this.

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