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Realising OPP3 goals

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OVER the past 30 years Malaysia has been successful in reducing poverty through effective intervention programmes, especially among rural Malaysians. In so doing we had reduced the incidence of poverty to 7.5 per cent in 1999 compared to 16.5 per cent in 1990.

Furthermore, the incidence of hardcore poverty among Malaysians decreased from 3.9 per cent or 137,100 households in 1990 to 1.4 per cent or 64,100 households in 1999.

The Third Outline Perspective Plan which was tabled in Parliament by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recognises pockets of poverty groups such as the Orang Asli of peninsular Malaysia and Bumiputera minorities in Sabah and Sarawak.

What is significant in the OPP3 is the recognition of urban poverty. The impact of urbanisation was highlighted by the Prime Minister when tabling the OPP3. He said, "the increase in urban population has resulted in a new phenomenon, that is, the expansion of squatter settlements and the emergence of relative poverty in urban areas among the Bumiputera and the Indian community".

Besides, OPP3 has given us broad policies on urban poverty which will affect the way poverty is defined, measured and programmes implemented to facilitate upward socio-economic mobility. Let me draw reference to some policy aspects.

I have used the term "new poor" with reference to this group to indicate the need for a shift in our thinking and action. There is indication that poverty eradication programmes may be extended to the lowest 30 per cent of the population. This is significant as Malaysia is now entering developed status, and the poorer sections - the low wage and low skilled workers - should be targeted with increased public resources.

The eligibility income category has been extended to RM1,200.

Previously, only those earning less than RM510 were eligible.

This will have significant bearing on low income earners, especially among the Bumiputera community in the civil service residing in urban poor areas. Single mothers will be another target group together with displaced plantation workers living in squatters areas.

Consistent with poverty eradication policies implemented by the Government which are based on self-reliance and empowerment, OPP3 strategies likewise focus on increasing incomes among low income families.

In this context, there is a recognition of micro-credit and micro-enterprises as a "way out and not handout". Micro-credit programmes such as Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) will be expanded.

In addition, OPP3 recognises the importance of adequate and affordable housing. This was recognised in earlier policies, too. However, it is imperative that during the Eighth Malaysia Plan period greater commitment and funding be devoted to low-cost housing and appropriate and adequate public facilities in urban centres.

The OPP3 clearly acknowledges that education is the main vehicle for socio-economic mobility. Policies on life-long learning through community colleges, apprenticeship schemes through work-based training, especially for drop-out youths, and special retraining programmes for displaced low-skilled workers are significant new trends in addressing the issues faced by low wage earners.

The OPP3, being a broad policy statement, does not give us specific

details on implementing agencies. However, there are many references to the increased role of local authorities. It is time that the third level of Government, which is closest to the rakyat, be given a dynamic push and its parameters of intervention enlarged.

The plan recognises that the growing urban population will make demands on public services and social amenities. New strategies are required to enhance the capacity and capability of local authorities to face new challenges.

The OPP3 recognises the need for a mechanism to facilitate increased citizens' participation in urban governance, especially in the development planning process.

The challenge for us is to ensure that no section or group within Malaysian society feels alienated, excluded or marginalised. In a market-driven global economy the poor are often sidelined by global, national and local power-brokers.

This is where the ideals of the National Vision Policy must be kept in focus to ensure that no Malaysian feels alienated. We are also faced by the digital divide which must be narrowed to ensure that the poor and low income families are not further marginalised.

The broad poverty policy framework of NVP and OPP3 is comprehensive and inclusive, but our challenge is a practical one which is the realisation of these on the ground.

There is much hope for the future and these policy changes will make a definitive impact upon the lives of ordinary people who look to the Government as the "people-friendly Government".

The challenge is, therefore, for policy-makers to ensure the realisation of these policies.