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The case for new governance

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NEW governance is one of the fundamental issues actively advocated by the Malaysian Youth Council.

This issue warrants serious attention especially in the light of the changing thinking of the youth as well as the general public. It becomes an important issue when addressing the problems and challenges of the third millennium.

In a modern society, three major sectors contribute to development and nation building: the state, business, and civil society - the members of which, by position or role, do not belong to either the state or business. Youth is one of them.

There many important issues that link the youth/civil society movement to development. Youth/civil society needs development because development benefits it. At the same time, the development process also needs youth/civil society as it is one of the main resources for progress and success.

Youth/civil society can actually be an effective "partner in development". But unfortunately, youth/civil society, is more often than not perceived as "a beneficiary of development".

Youth/civil society is seldom given the opportunity nor empowered to be an active, genuine partner in development, especially in decision-making.

The phrase "partner in development" and "empowerment" may appear in official government policy documents, but how far they are understood and practised remains to be seen.

The three sectors which are partners in development, i.e. the state, the business community and youth/civil society, need to understand that each has its own unique culture and working style. At the same time, there are no permanent boundaries among the three.

Besides that, the three sectors must have an unconditional willingness to work together within established ground rules.

If implemented in a harmonious environment, the resultant synergy will lead to development and happiness for all.

An understanding of the different work cultures is essential before a genuine or smart partnership can materialise.

The basis of the system that covers the roles and functions of the three sectors is again, partnership - smart and genuine. The framework is not unproblematic, being both debatable and difficult.

It has to start out with the understanding that democracy is not just about having a general election every five years but entails a much wider, deeper and encompassing participation by the democratic family at large of every age, cohort and grouping of society.

Politics should not be confined to the outcome of the adversarial activities between the Government and the Opposition. Efforts should be launched to go beyond party and partisan politics and reconstruct the "government is the answer" versus the "government is the enemy" mentality.

This is what the new concept of governance is all about - youth/civil society, participation, partnership and empowerment synergising to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The information age calls for a new, integrated and holistic model of governance that includes all sectors as equal partners in development. The objective is solely to achieve a better quality of life and happiness for all.

In this context, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as Chairman of the National Information Technology Council (1998), defines governance as "the fine art of balancing the different interests of sub-groups through processes of exercising authority and influence to safeguard the ultimate interest of the whole group while guaranteeing social responsibility and basic human/individual freedoms".

In addition to the information, multimedia and communication technologies there are also other contemporary factors, for example, the expansion of the borderless world, globalisation and liberalisation that also demand the state to re-evaluate its position, role and function.

Even politics, the most important institution for the state, has begun to change. This can be observed clearly by the fact that Internet application has become the new political stage and is fast changing the rules, styles and games of politics.

The United Nations Development Programme (1997) defines governance as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens articulate their interest, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences."

The next question is: What is "new governance"? New governance "is the transformation from the current framework where there exists an imbalance in the three-way relationship between the three sectors to a new framework where there exists a more equitable and genuine partnership among the three sectors".

In the current framework, the state and business are closer to each other than to youth/civil society. The relationship between the state and youth/civil society is usually top-bottom, and patronising on the part of the state. The relationship between the youth/civil society is generally that between an organiser and a sponsor/donor.

Granted, the current framework and situation are a vast improvement, to some, over previous years or other situations. But, this is certainly insufficient.

What is needed is that all three sectors interface with each other as equal and genuine partners in development. And for the youth/civil society, opportunity to participate should also be provided to non-organised individuals or non-formal networks.

In this context, one should always remember that in this increasingly complex and sophisticated world, happiness is no longer restricted to the receiving of the fruits and benefits of development.

Happiness also means being able to be actively involved in the process of planning, implementing and evaluating development.

Actually, now is the time when the role of the youth/civil society movement is becoming more important. The world is currently faced with the huge impact of global problems such as the degradation of the environment, poverty, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, etc.

Now is the time when idealism, altruism and volunteerism in performing fastabiqul khairat (competing to do good) through the youth/civil society movement should be most welcomed. Now is the time when issues that have long been neglected and ignored because of the man-in-the street's inability to grasp the fast pace of change should be championed by the youth/civil society movement.

The concept of youth/civil society movement as partners in development in a new framework of governance will not be realised as long as the worldview of all involved, especially the elders and the state, and members of the youth/civil society itself, does not change.

This change will only take effect if the path towards the fulfilment of

the concept of partnership in development is prepared. The path to it is through the understanding and practice of empowerment.

In the context of new governance, empowerment should be considered a concept or philosophy, and as an approach or strategy.

Empowerment of youth/civil society does not mean giving power to youth/civil society. Instead, it is the process of transforming the idealism, vision, knowledge, experience, activism, motivation and energy they already have.

All individuals, agencies and organisations should be prepared for a paradigm shift in their way of thinking and doing. The prevailing hierarchy needs to be de-layered. This will involve modifications in at least three aspects. Firstly, the rules of decision-making have to be changed.

Decisions are pulled downwards to the level of action. Secondly, job descriptions have to be broadened and each actor is multi-skilled so that they can make decisions when dealing with team members or clients.

And thirdly, long formal lines of communication need to be replaced with a flexible communication network backed by information, multi-media and communications technologies.

The role of the elders and the state has to change. An empowered organisation places the human resource in work teams instead of rigid functions.

These teams are motivated by goals, not orders; and leaders no longer supervise but identify those who are able to work and allow them to use their own judgment while doing it. The leader evolves into a facilitator.

This does not mean that the role of the elders and the state as intermediaries, strategists, giving guidance and perspectives will disappear as soon as youth/civil society empowerment is implemented.

But traditional ways of extracting obedience, maintaining conformity and reprimanding failure that are "top-bottom" are definitely out.

The elders and the state should guide, support and become examples. The civil society must no longer be treated as fools. Youth must no longer be treated as kids.

Traditional governance uses the elders and the state as the focal point. It presumes they identify strongly with the objectives of development and nation building.

In contrast, it is assumed that the majority of youth/civil society are unable to think for themselves or for the country. Hence, they should only be asked to 'participate' (read: follow orders) in programmes. Neither assumption is relevant or consistent with contemporary experience.

Empowerment does not use the elders and the state as the focal point. It presumes that youth/civil society are equally fit to think for themselves and for the country.

In planning, implementing and evaluating policies and programmes, it must be realised that with the increasing complexity and sophistication of technology, the youth/civil society of today may be experiencing a world which is very different from anything ever imagined by the elders and the state.

Rapidly advancing technology allows instantaneous global communication, and youth/civil society everywhere are able to share experiences quickly and hence, there is the emergence of a new kind of global community.

At the same time, many complain that youth/civil society seems disinterested in participating and attending programmes sponsored by the elders and the state.

Many have said that the situation is no longer "like old times". There are many factors that contribute to the phenomenon. But primarily, it may be that youth/civil society sees the programmes as "not relevant", "not

suitable" or "failing to appeal to the imagination".

There is a group of members of the youth/civil society who feel that they are being "alienated" by the elders and the state.

There is also another group that has views and vision that go "beyond" the thinking of the elders and the state. One should understand and appreciate that the youth/civil society of today want their voice heard, their issues addressed and their roles recognised.

This is why the development process needs a new approach. A shift is needed. This shift refers to the change in approach from development for youth/civil society to development with it.

Youth/civil society empowerment is about democracy. If democracy can be defined as the "government of the people, by the people, for the people," then development should allow full and effective participation of the youth/civil society in all areas and at all levels, so that development will really become "development of the people, by the people, for the people," or at the very least, to ensure that it will not become "development off the people, buy the people, force the people".

Youth/civil society empowerment as genuine partners in development in a new governance framework can only materialise if youth/civil representation is recognised, i.e., that the representatives are made full members in decision-making platforms.

But the representation must also be genuine in that the representatives must be selected and determined by each youth/civil society organisation or networks, and not appointed or determined by others.