



THE National Biotechnology Policy, launched in April 2005, saw the creation of a dedicated government agency to develop the biotechnology industry in Malaysia. Malaysian Biotech Corporation Sdn Bhd (MBC) is headed by its chief executive officer, Iskandar Mizal Mahmood.

Prior to this, Iskandar was the CEO of Malaysian Technology Development Corporation (MRDC) Sdn Bhd. His background includes training in investment banking and as a venture capitalist in the biotech industry.

He now operates from a newly refurbished office at Menara Naluri in Kuala Lumpur, heading a 20-member team that's set to develop the nation's biotechnology industry from 2005 to 2020 in three phases. Following are excerpts from our interview with him:

What are the major challenges of developing the biotechnology sector in Malaysia?

I am convinced there are immense prospects for Malaysia. Biotechnology is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Biotechnology is merely a science and a technology that can be used

Serving the Country's Needs

An interview with Malaysian Biotech Corporation's CEO, Iskandar Mizal Mahmood.

for wealth creation and to create social well-being.

We need to use this biotechnology and harness it to create products or services for our own needs. The main challenge is to undertake this development in a manner that will suit our niche areas, our development plans and our special economic needs.

From a scientific standpoint, almost everything in science is feasible. But when we take this science into the market, not everything is viable. Perhaps it is a challenge when certain products are left in the science labs instead of hitting the market.

How can the present National Biotech Policy overcome the obstacles faced by the earlier BioValley project?

I shall not speculate on what happened. I have just taken over MBC. And as a newly set-up agency, I can only talk of what is going to happen and what we are putting in place currently.

Perhaps, what happened was there were aspirations for Malaysia to become a biotechnology hub but there was no concerted approach towards its development. Maybe from the industry standpoint, there wasn't a demand for a local biotechnology sector.

To be commercially viable, a biotechnology product or service has to target a global market, and even from the modelling of the business, you need to think from a global perspective. Maybe, that did not happen in the past.

What are the criteria for Malaysia to move ahead in the biotechnology sector?

There are a lot of risks in the biotechnology sector. In moving forward we need to look at industry demand, and how we can cater our products towards a global market. We have to move our discoveries from the science lab to the global market.

How much has Malaysian Biotech Corporation achieved since it was set up in April 2005?

MBC is the commercialisation arm of the biotechnology industry and our task is to accelerate sector growth. But before we

can proceed, we need a conducive environment. I could go to any international pharmaceutical company and be a good salesman, and take a few photographs, but is that fair? Are we merely creating hype?

We do have our strength, but do we have a conducive environment for

to the commercialisation of discoveries.

Perhaps Malaysia started talking about the biotechnology sector since the 1990s, but even when I was a venture capitalist in the biotech sector, I found it difficult to move forward as there was no conducive enough environment

You need to look very deeply into the



biotechnology companies in Malaysia? In the last five months, we have been building this environment – the human capital, the legislative protection and a benefit-sharing environment.

The biotechnology industry is a marathon and not a sprint. Even if we could bring in international players, can we get them to stay? Perhaps not, as Malaysia may not have the proper environment, at least not yet.

But biotechnology is not new in Malaysia. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was also a keen proponent of the sector, is that right?

This is a different approach. The National Biotechnology Policy is different; it is a new way of looking at the biotechnology industry. Previously we had BioValley, now we have BioNexus. It is a holistic approach from the supply side of research

past. Perhaps it was something that was mooted but not followed through. Dr Mahathir had a vision and aspiration for BioValley. He had the hope that Malaysians would embrace the project, but the follow through was not done.

What changes can MBC introduce to the biotechnology sector?

I have been a business-oriented person and I will always be so. Business needs a conducive environment. For example, for a biotechnology project, it is best for business to be close to research facilities so that when something goes wrong, you can make an immediate correction. You need to adapt to changes in the industry.

We also need to capitalise on present research facilities. We need to be a little smarter; we do not need to splash money on big buildings since we already have excellent research facilities at our universities. **mb**