Meet the scientist preparing Malaysia for 2050
The Malaysian Insider
March 26, 2015
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Dr Mazlan Othman, the founding director-general of the Malaysian National Space Agency, has an uphill task ahead of her as she attempts to steer Malaysia towards becoming a leading nation for science and technology by 2050.

It is a good 35 years away, she told The Malaysian Insider in an interview recently, but the process of getting there would be a long and complicated one.

The 64-year-old Mazlan is the project director of the Mega Science 3.0 project aimed at preparing Malaysia for the future in science, technology and innovation.

Launched in January, Mega Science 3.0 is focused on five industries that raked in more than RM100 billion in 2013, namely furniture, automotive, creative (media and arts), tourism as well as plastics and composites.

The first step towards becoming a leading nation in these areas by 2050, Mazlan said, was to forecast the state of the nation by 2050.

"In order to be the best in science and technology by 2050, we have to foresee and do some predictions of the future... of what technologies and innovations we can expect then," she said.

"That's how we can be ahead of the pack. And then we are able to lead."

The project is now at the "foresight" stage, where a team is tasked with anticipating and foreseeing Malaysia's future in 2050.

"We already started this last year and we have already prepared the outlook that is to be Malaysia and how we envision it in 35 years' time.

"We expect this to be ready by September and from there, we can proceed to the next stage, where we plan and spell out the road map towards that future," the astrophysicist said, adding that there were established techniques to create the foresight.

Taking the automotive industry as an example, she said the team would research where the sector was heading globally before performing a benchmarking with the foresight report.

"Then they adjust the foresighting and place an aim of where we want to be then in the automotive industry and then work out how we would work towards that.

"Let's talk about having driverless vehicles. If that is where we see ourselves in 2050, we have to think about it in terms of the law and out infrastructures. We can already

prepare the authorities.

"So whether we like it or not, our road transport planners must already be thinking about this," she added.

However, Mazlan, who was once the deputy director-general of the United Nations Office at Vienna, said the road was tough and paved with challenges.

"First of all, nothing is certain. We don't really know what will happen tomorrow, much less in 35 years' time.

"So although you will do the foresight using probabilities and possibilities, people might buy your idea or people won't.

"Changing this mindset is what will be hard. We have to convince people to buy into this future we are envisioning."

Besides that, there would be a high demand for scientists, Mazlan said, but there probably would not be enough of them to carry out the future technologies.

"One of the problems is that many people or students are veering off science in schools. They prefer to take business and other subjects as they feel it would be more lucrative for them later on in life.

"This is a problem as we see that we will be lacking in scientific expertise, especially since we predict that there would be new fields and avenue to be explored in the future."

Mazlan herself had faced such challenges herself in the early days as an astrophysicist, with a PhD from New Zealand but in a field which was unheard of in the country.

Although the lack of interest in her field was discouraging, the undeterred Mazlan went on to set up academic courses and laboratories for undergraduates and postgraduate training in Astrophysics and Astronomy in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, where she was a lecturer.

She was also instrumental in the inclusion of space science in the national school curriculum in 1990 and in the establishment of the National Planetarium in 1986.

Despite the bumpy road ahead, Mazlan and her team at Mega Science 3.0 project are optimistic about the future.

They are convinced that Malaysia will not fall behind compared with the rest of the world, and are hoping that the project will help prepare the country for what is about to come.

"In 1950, there was a vast difference in how Malaysia was compared with other

countries like the United States in terms of its cities, transportation, houses and agriculture. But in 2000, we are on a par with these developed countries.

"So the question of whether we will be at the same level as them will not arise. It's a matter of preparing ourselves for what lies ahead of us. We are not going to be left behind." – March 26, 2015.

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