



by Charles Raj

IT is indeed a crying shame if a nation can't care for its sick and needy citizens or provide higher education to all those who seek it.

Yet, this is what we seem to be lacking in if recent Press reports are anything to go by. Something must surely be wrong if the poor have to resort to public generosity to finance a life saving operation, or if there are insufficient places in local universities to meet demand.

In many countries, especially the developed ones, the provision of an adequate level of healthcare and education have become a basic right – something the state must provide its citizens.

Of course, we can always argue that we are a developing nation, and that it will be some time before these things can be in place. While that may be true to a certain extent, we are also, in other ways, at par with developed nations.

We have built the world's tallest twin towers, have our very own car industry, possess a world-class airport, have a spanking new administrative capital called Putrajaya, were the second Asian country to have a Formula One racing circuit and the first in the world to introduce machine-readable passports. To cap it all, our foreign reserves are at a record high.

But at the same time, we have long queues at understaffed government hospitals, two sessions in schools due to shortage of schools and teachers, most of our piped water is dirty, electricity supply is erratic and the crime rate just seems to be increasing.

Malaysians therefore, had great expectations when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi gave an assurance that his Government would get down to basics. The Prime Minister had also said that on-going and proposed mega projects would be reviewed.

There is nothing really wrong with embarking on mega projects if we really need them. After all, part of our success in attracting large numbers of foreign investors is our excellent infrastructure.

Going Back To Basics

It's impressive for us to have the tallest buildings and world-class infrastructure. But, when our sick cannot afford treatment and educating our young becomes a problem, it's time to see where we went wrong.

In fact, some of these projects have even made Malaysia famous.

But, in our quest to leap frog into the arena of progress, we must not forget the basics. The key to long-term success is, after all, being able to achieve sustainable development.

There must be the right impetus to drive this. Education therefore plays a vital role in laying the groundwork for the future successes of a nation.

We wonder what the progress is on the Government's plan to eventually have single session schools throughout the country. Surely something is wrong if young children have to troop off to school in the morning even before adults reach their offices!

We also need to address the woes at local universities. Currently, less than half of the applicants get to study the course of their choice. There also seems to be a mismatch between the supply of graduates and demand for jobs.

Despite a shortage of doctors, engineers and other professionals, local universities cannot provide sufficient places. Unable to afford private colleges, many thus, end up pursuing courses they don't like or worse, degrees that will not easily secure them jobs later.

Thanks to the Prime Minister's swift intervention recently, all qualified applicants who wanted to pursue medicine locally got their wish. But, what about those interested in pursuing other professions?

It might also be a good idea for the Higher Education Ministry to analyse the growing numbers of unemployed graduates and find out the reasons for the mismatch.

Health related issues must also be resolved quickly. From pensioners unable to get medication, to escalating private healthcare costs, the complaints seem endless.

A long overdue national health-financing scheme needs to be implemented quickly. Let's hope Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek will be able to push through what his predecessor failed to implement.

Malaysia is a blessed nation rich in natural resources. We are a net exporter of crude oil. With world oil prices at more than US\$ 40 per barrel, the Government's coffers will undoubtedly enjoy a huge windfall.

Hopefully, much of this windfall will be channelled towards providing the basics of health and education.

After all, what is wealth without health and how are we to achieve progress without an education? **mb**