

31 July 2012

Invest in information infrastructure

CORRECT THIS FAST: This commodity is key to high-income economy

By Steven Wong | steve@isis.org.my



IT has been a common complaint of researchers for many years. It is a distinguishing feature of economies that "have arrived" or that are racing to get there. It is commonly secreted away behind lock-and-key and on many occasions, ignored or treated as unimportant.

What am I talking about? The answer is as astoundingly important as it is mundane: information.

Whereas advanced countries have got the acquisition of this vital commodity down to an art form, and emerging economies are literally acting as vacuum cleaners, sucking it up wherever it can be found, we seem to have a much more cavalier attitude towards this vital resource.

Yet, some simple facts cannot be ignored. Before we can become a high-value added economy, we need knowledge. Before we can acquire knowledge, we require its building blocks -- information -- to synthesise and analyse.

Before we can secure these building blocks, we need to both invest heavily in institutional infrastructure and in people to use them. And we do neither very well.

This is something that we need to correct fast. Information (like oxygen) deprivation is incompatible and contradictory to our wanting to be a high-income economy. We cannot move forward if we do not have or value information infinitely more than we presently do. We need to produce it in a consistent and trustworthy manner and to disseminate it freely.

Why does information have to flow unrestrictedly and not be secreted away? The answer is simply that the act of development, let alone transformation, necessitates connecting a multitude of dots between the economy and society.

We need to see how things are, the complex relationships that exist, and where they are heading. And this is a task for every change agent, not just the government.

Without information, we only have opinions. And while Malaysians seem to have no lack of opinions on everything, social, economic or political, the vast majority is based on no more than guesses or assumptions.

These are not rational bases for making judgments. Private companies certainly do not make big investments unless they have studied them in detail.

Recently, ISIS Malaysia organised a closed-door roundtable discussion on public and affordable housing for Malaysia at which all the stakeholders were present. I do not think that there is a more strategic issue that could be examined for Malaysia at the present time.

Unless we take hold of this issue, Malaysia's rising rate of urbanisation is destined to ensure a very bad time for all urban dwellers.

And here was a startling revelation to me: we do not know the future housing needs of the nation. (If we do, then the stakeholders around the table did not know about it.)

One can only imagine the dismal prospects that follow from a growing un-housed population, of urban sprawl, of a re-emergence of squatter settlements, and of the attendant social ills, such as crime and congestion, that accompany it. Not only do we not know the future housing needs of the country, but we even have an incomplete picture of the immediate housing supply.

Even as housing developers plead for "evidence-based policy making", the government agency in charge was at a loss as to how to ensure that there was cooperation to get the requisite data. It was as sad as it was disappointing.

One government-linked company took it upon itself to commission research to get a picture of future demand. In the main, however, the stakeholders around the table seemed in the dark about what was needed and, therefore, how to prepare for it.

Like so many issues, housing cannot be discussed totally in abstract terms and without the accompanying details.

This is a telling example of an information gap.

The question then is what can be done to remedy the situation. Like all things, it cannot be resolved only by throwing money at it. It requires careful thought, rationally crafted plans and perfect implementation.

In short, many aspects and dimensions need to be taken into account. We could do no better than to organise a series of national level conferences to address the production, management, verification and usage of this most valuable of all national resources.