

COMMENT

Rethinking Malaysian youth

POTENTIAL: They are a great asset for nation if harnessed in the right direction

YOUTH development is defined by scholars as a process that prepares a young person to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood, and achieve his or her full potential. It is promoted through activities and experiences that help youth develop social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies.

However, it is interesting to note that there is a linkage between youth and national development, national integration and social stability. This intercourse is interdependent, one which depends on the other for its sustenance. Therefore, the role of youth in national development, national integration and social stability is absolutely crucial.

So what does being “young” mean? Many would debate that being young need not necessarily be associated with age. The United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 25 years. The National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia defines youth as people aged between 15 and 40.

Malaysian youth constitute 46.5 per cent of the total population. This quantum of population is a great asset for Malaysia if they are harnessed and utilised in the right direction.

Interestingly, the transition of society from one generation to another is critical to the formative and developmental aspiration of such society. That is why a society that prepares its youth for the sake of future aspirations will not only secure her future development, but will also prepare her next set of leaders with the challenges of national reconciliation and development.

Malaysia is facing a less well-known, but perhaps even more difficult predicament: demographics. The existence of a relatively large youth cohort with the population serves to exacerbate nearly all dimensions of its political, social and economic problems.

The challenges for youths that are central to Malaysia’s economic development are numerous and varied — they include unemployment, under-employment, social, health and many other issues. These issues differ among groups within the states in the country (by gender, educational level, ethnicity, religion, rural-urban).

Although the present cohort of youth has numerous advantages, it also faces a complex and rapidly evolving situation where new oppor-

tunities coexist with major challenges. Fierce competition is affecting the marketplace, and its rules and practices in the country. Youths often remain in a vulnerable situation and lack the requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to the changing economic and social environment.

Many who are otherwise productive and energetic remain unemployed and continue to lack sufficient support. Some of them have special needs that require attention. These include those living on the streets, those living with HIV/AIDS, those with disabilities and those who are facing social issues.

Unfortunately, the many youth policies and programmes to address these challenges do not seem to have resulted in a great deal of success. Weakness is due to a number of factors, including the inadequacy of information about youths that is necessary in the design of policy, weak coordination among a host of government agencies and donors, and the failure to draw policies on a number of contemporary youth themes, such as youth and economy, youth development, youth subcultures, youth transition and youth marginalisation.

Any policy should start with the understanding of the changing nature of youth and exploring the issues from the perspective of new life patterns that see the current gen-

eration making adult choices in a highly individualised context. There is a need to create a new perspective which emphasises diversity and difference, democracy and equality in dealing with youth experience.

At the same time it should provide the structure and foundations to address the priority issues of concern that have been raised by youth.

Malaysian youth have significant potential to be engaged in active roles to develop themselves, their communities and their nation.

This approach can work for young people in three ways. One is for the benefit of youth (as target beneficiaries); second is with youth as partners, and third is for programmes and policy to be shaped by youth as leaders. This is a dynamic approach which depends on the local context and development intervention.

On that account, a national youth policy should demonstrate the country’s commitment to, and strategic directions for, promoting and progressing the well-being and participation of young people and create opportunities for the young to become “skilled, healthy and productive to develop the country and specific strategies to translate the policy into action.”

The writer is a senior analyst (social policy) at the Institute of Strategic & International Studies Malaysia

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DR ABDUL WAHED JALAL NORE