

TN50: Which way to the future?

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THE Transformasi Nasional 50 (TN50) road show started well when it chose University Malaya to launch the discussion about the future of the nation in the next 30 years.

Unlike Wawasan 2020 that was announced in a meeting with business leaders, TN50 aims to engage the younger generation as potential leaders taking into account their own aspirations. This is in tandem with the United Nations document, The World We Want, where a global conversation helps to guide in shaping the future.

The second TN50 roadshow, which I am privy to, also took place in another university, namely, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, with the discussion taking a faith slant and broadening the horizon of discourse.

While Wawasan 2020 is said to address mostly general aspirations crafted in the nine challenges, TN50 is claimed to be “specific”. If so, the latter needs to be conducted with greater rigour, more evidence-based and with a high anticipatory focus. These are, after all, characteristics of any credible university with global outreach reflective of the processes to arrive at the specifics of TN50.

It is not the regular stage-managed event where the discourse lacks depth and intellectual prowess, let alone the strong evidence needed to support the articulations. In other words, it must be beyond empty rhetoric, for example, in the context of Wawasan 2020, it must be about bridging the gaps in transforming the future.

A case in point is the lacuna about sustainability in the latter for which we are paying a high price. Hence, the questions that need to be raised must be searching enough to be relevant to the desired future; not run-of-mill that can be readily answered without a wink.

It would be naïve to expect any meaningful transformation to happen without involving any form of deep thinking. This means there are at least four crucial issues that must be sorted out before it is clear if the future can bring any hope at all.

Foremost is the state of planet Earth by 2050. By all counts, it would be a gloomy one after factoring various scenarios based on assumptions about economic, social, technological, and environmental conditions then.

For sure, there is a need to move away from the stereotype number (or Key Performance Indicator) games — like being among the top 20 countries in the world (by 2050) in terms of human development index, gross domestic product per capita, innovation and even in terms of our football ranking. The reason is plain to see.

The recent announcement about the state of “happiness” among the different countries worldwide is demonstrative enough.

Published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, such a “measure” was unheard of when Wawasan 2020 was formulated.

It was only in July 2011 that the UN General Assembly passed a resolution inviting member countries to “measure the happiness” of their people and to use it to help guide their public policies. This had never crossed anyone’s mind before. Not even the foremost economists.

The credit must go to Bhutan for being visionary enough to “reinvent” the future by pioneering an aspiration and officially adopting gross national happiness, instead of gross domestic product, as their main development indicator. Today, it has gained global acceptance.

By 2050, “happiness” may well replace the crude indices that we use today becoming obsolete to indicate the so-called progress or even success.

Indeed, on April 2, 2012, during the first UN High-Level Meeting chaired by the prime minister of Bhutan, the theme: “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” was deliberated.

Related to this is how global warming is ravaging the world population over the last several decades. On this basis, the temperatures are expected to increase further following key climate changes as a result of a myriad anthropogenic activities.

Bearing in mind that by 2050, too, the world population would have gained another three billion inhabitants, which will add more pressure to the planet if humankind continues to live the way they do currently. Unless such burning issues are well understood and anticipated, TN50 will only remain at the periphery with no specific significance to speak of.

As it stands today, we need more than one planet to feed the existing seven billion inhabitants, while in reality, there is just one ailing planet with vast divides of all sorts that could have been better prevented.

Earlier this year, Oxfam, the renowned charity, revealed that eight super-rich white males possess half of the world’s assets held by 3.5 billion people. This alone is sufficient to derail any prediction that ignores such prevailing disparities that are expected to widen even further in the future.

One disparity that cannot be overlooked is how technological advances far outstripped social and cultural changes.

Those who are trapped in the clichés of the so-called “fourth industrial revolution” may want to pause and think what such disparities entail for the future.

Some may want to ask about the point of singularity hypothesising that the invention of artificial superintelligence will abruptly trigger runaway technological growth, resulting in unfathomable changes to human civilisation, if not humanity itself.

The demise of the human race is also threatened, rendering the human development index useless. What then are the “specifics” that must be addressed by TN50?

More challenging still is to seriously consider the overlapping factors of happiness, climate change, global population and disparities, and technological singularity, among others, before we can decide which future to go for.

As warned by Einstein, this demands another level of thinking if TN50 is to have any specific impact post-2020 for the generations to come.

Democracy is a process and democracy in a university is a process that we have to work at everyday.

— Nelson Mandela (1918-2013)

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