

## **A model of human capital development**

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Malaysia continues to be regarded by many as a quintessential state in which “prosperity thrives in diversity.”

Evidently, being one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse society in the world has not stopped it from being a key regional economic player and one of the most peaceful countries on earth.

Managing this success and expanding its future would require none other than investing in the human capital of Malaysians themselves.

In a famous quote, former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi proclaimed that “we do not want a situation in Malaysia where we have a first-class facility or infrastructure, but a third-class mentality”.

Undoubtedly, the economic and infrastructure feats that Malaysia has enjoyed since the early 1990s would amount to nothing without an equally capable human capital to steer them.

Previous definitions of “human capital” primarily look at it in terms of economic worth and the potential yields to be gained from investing in such a “capital”.

The latest developments in human capital research, however, adopt a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the concept that looks beyond humans as an economic aggregate, but considers a broad spectrum of variables, such as subjective wellbeing, happiness, intellect, spirituality and dignity.

The challenge remains as to what model is best suited for Malaysians. In varying degrees, Malaysia has experimented with several nationwide campaigns related to human-capital building.

Among them is the Wawasan 2020 (1991-2020) campaign launched by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad that envisions Malaysia to be a self-sufficient industrialised nation by 2020, empowered by a balanced, modern and competent society, but deeply rooted in local values.

The Islam Hadhari (2004) campaign spearheaded by Abdullah emphasised the role of Islamic thought in deriving theories of good governance and integrity across all levels of society.

Under the current premiership of Datuk Seri Najib Razak, there are two ongoing programmes.

First, is the 1Malaysia (2010-ongoing) programme that promotes working together beyond identity markers towards a shared vision of harmony, unity, and government efficiency.

The second is the TN50 (Transformasi Nasional 2050) initiative, which picks up from the Wawasan 2020 dateline, and looks 30 years beyond with an aim to sharpen Malaysia’s global competitive edge in economic development, citizen wellbeing and innovation.

Collectively, these campaigns have captured key elements that define the Malaysian reality. These include, as many researchers have shown, a strong sense of socio-cultural identity, the indispensable role of religion, and the natural proclivity towards economic prosperity.

Any models of human capital development that fail to appeal to these local dimensions would risk being incompatible, or worse, destructive to Malaysians.

This was pointed out by sociologist Professor Rahman Embong in his inaugural speech on July 20 as the principal fellow of the Malaysian Institute of Integrity.

Rahman emphasised the pressing need for any national model of integrity to be locally tailored, organic and homegrown based on Malaysian ideals and realities.

Simply transplanting foreign models that may have different values and moral references may unlikely be as effective as they were in their original socio-cultural terrains.

He reviewed several models. The Greek Temple model by Jeremy Pope, for instance, visualises the western ideals of integrity by having pillars representing societal institutions, which in turn, support the roof represented by “the rule of law”, sustainable development and quality of life.

This model, however, does not offer much flexibility and turns a blind eye to the role of religion and its values are grounded in western renaissance experience and history of organised religious institutions.

Another example is the Bird’s Nest model, which is built upon “materials” or “twigs” gathered from its surroundings. The model provides an illustrative metaphor on the importance of local resources, as well as the need to organise institutions in an integrative manner.

This updated model proposed by Charles Sampford provides flexibility and adaptability for societies to build their human capital.

Rahman eventually came out with his own model for Malaysia, named Sea Turtle Model.

The sea turtle is an excellent metaphor because of several reasons: sea turtles are native to the nusantara of which Malaysia is a part of; they have a strong sense of direction throughout their inter-continental journeys; they are often associated with virtues such as perseverance, modesty and longevity; and their struggle against the increasing threat of human avarice and destructive practices perfectly sums up the goals of integrity.

In this model, the shell represents the core values that need protection: the civil society, the family institution, and the community.

The executive powers are the head, politics and economy are the front-driving flaps, and religion and socio-culture are the guiding hind flaps.

In short, while models of human capital are bound to evolve and improve, what should remain as a constant principle is the recognition of local values and realities.

This will ensure not only the feasibility of the model, but also its effectiveness.

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