

## Malaysia's foresight shows

By IVY SOON

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Most of the developmental goals laid out at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to eradicate diseases and poverty were already familiar to Malaysians.

In many ways, Malaysia had a headstart in attaining the goals. Many of the targets outlined – to be achieved by 2015 – had been defined in Malaysia's national development plans, namely the Outline Perspective Plans and five-year national plans.

“The philosophy underlying Malaysia's development is that growth is not to be pursued as an end in itself. Growth should always be accompanied by equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, so that all segments of society benefit from the development process,” said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when launching *Malaysia: Achieving The Millennium Development Goals – Successes and Challenges*.

The report traces Malaysia's performance and achievements in development since 1970.

Malaysia's development strategies are unique in its multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural context.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), formulated in 1970 with its key goals of eradicating poverty and restructuring society to correct economic imbalances, guided developmental agenda for 20 years.

After 1990, Malaysia adopted the National Development Plan, which maintained the basic strategies of the NEP but introduced several shifts in specific policies to eradicate extreme poverty, increase bumiputra participation in the modern sectors of the economy, place greater reliance on the private sector to generate economic growth and income, and emphasise human resource development.

Earlier this month, the United Nations unveiled the Millennium Project, an action plan that calls on rich nations to help poor countries meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

The project, headed by renowned developmental economist Prof Jeffrey Sachs, amounts to a Marshall Plan to halve extreme poverty and radically improve the lives of at least one billion poor people in the next 15 years.

The Malaysian model, in which poverty rates fell from 50% of all households in 1970 to 5% in 2002 in an ethnically diverse setting, has demonstrated that the Millennium Development Goals are achievable.

Between 1970 and 2000, life expectancy at birth rose sharply for females and males, while infant mortality rate fell from 40.9 to 7.9 per 1,000 live births.

In the same period, adult literacy rate went up from 60% to 94%.

“Malaysia's experience demonstrates that the Millennium Development Goals are not utopian. They can be achieved with a clear vision, the right people-centred policies and political commitment to implement them,” said UN Resident Co-ordinator Dr Richard Leete.

However, Malaysia's developmental strides could potentially be undermined by the only millennium goal it has not achieved – reversing and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

“It is especially disturbing given that reported cases continue to increase,” said Abdullah in listing out emerging challenges that continue to threaten human development.

The first case of HIV infection in Malaysia was reported in 1986. By 2003, the cumulative number of HIV cases had gone up to 58,000. About 19 Malaysians are infected with HIV each day now.



The low prevalence rate, however, is a poor indicator of HIV's spread because of its long incubation period, and the silence that surrounds the epidemic. Data collection on HIV cases are also skewed towards marginalised groups engaging in high-risk behaviour such as injecting drug users who are tested when sent to rehabilitation centres.

“One of the reasons why we have yet to achieve the millennium goal on HIV/AIDS is because of the dearth of research on the epidemic. We need to understand the vulnerabilities to HIV infections in different groups and what is fuelling the spread in order to come up with targeted intervention programmes,” said Malaysian AIDS Council executive director Nik Fahmee Nik Hussin.

“There is not enough evidence-based research to help us identify issues. We can do general prevention campaigns, but a cookie-cutter solution is not so effective in preventing the spread of HIV.”

The World Health Organisation has classified Malaysia's HIV epidemic as a concentrated epidemic among injecting drug users, who made up 75% of reported cases.

Failure to control the spread of HIV among drug users would inevitably lead to a generalised epidemic as they could also transmit the virus through unprotected sex.

An indication that a generalised spread had already occurred in Malaysia is the fact that the male-to-female ratio of HIV infection is now 9:1, compared to 70:1 in the early 1990s.

“We have to re-examine our approaches. We have to be bold in taking evidence-based approaches that are proven, particularly harm-reduction methods (such as needle exchange and drug substitution treatment) in preventing HIV infection among injecting drug users,” said Nik Fahmee.

In countries like Australia and Britain, where harm reduction is adopted at an early stage of the HIV epidemic, the rate of infection among drug users is less than 5%.

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