

Seeking more than just economic growth

HAPPINESS INDEX:

Development should take a holistic approach to address non-economic aspects of wellbeing

As we approach the 51st year of the formation of Malaysia, leading to the independence of the states of Sabah and Sarawak, we have much to think about.

Malaysia certainly has prospered well overall and this has much to do with its brand of development that generally sees the uplifting of the standards of living and, to a certain extent, happiness, too.

The two, however, may not necessarily correlate with one another, as shown in many cases from more

developed countries.

The main trend is either happiness remains static as compared with previous decades when material wealth was not so abundant, or, in fact, is in the process of decline in the midst of glaring wealth, relatively speaking.

This trend can be summarily attributed to the fact that as we move up the value chain, as often stated by the business community, we slip down on values, or the virtue chain, which includes the attainment of happiness.

What it means is that while economic or material value may be necessary for happiness — especially for basic needs — it is not sufficient to promote all-round happiness.

The very fact that the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH)

was mooted by the Royal Government of Bhutan and through its Gross National Happiness Commission, a lofty vision was created of "Peace, Prosperity and Happiness" for Bhutan by 2020, indicate that the issue is much more complex.

For example, a statement from the commission recognises that "the pace of change is so great that it seems to propel us into the future. But the future cannot be what it brings to us, it must be how we want it to be. The socioeconomic changes must be what we seek, not completely what the forces beyond our control compel us to accept".

It is no wonder that GNH is now being seriously looked at by various reputable agencies, including the United Nations, in addition to the business-as-usual Gross Do-



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mestic Product (GDP).

This is testimony that targeting and developing economies alone is no longer adequate.

In fact, it could be counter-productive, according to some expert views.

For example, renowned economist Joseph Stiglitz, who was the recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2001, highlighted "why unfettered markets often not only do not lead to social justice, but do not even produce efficient outcomes".

He is of the opinion that GDP is a poor measure that may lead to the worsening of living standards.

He expounds this in *Mismeasuring Our Lives*, pointing out why GDP is a problematic measure and why it is so important that we understand the long-term implications.

Yet, until today, GDP is ceremoniously announced periodically without the slightest hint that it is "misleading as a straightforward indicator of human wellbeing".

While we may take comfort that the recent preliminary report of the 2014 Household Income Survey indicates that the people are enjoying a "better standard of living, with the average household income surpassing RM5,900 a month" — up by RM900 since 2012 — and the GDP growth in the first half of the year is 6.3 per cent, the question that needs to be raised is, are we not "mismeasuring our lives"?

Or are we, indeed, "misleading" ourselves?

We need to be more innovative socially, as advocated by the prime minister at the recent Innovating Malaysia Conference 2014, so new meanings can be assigned to our lives.

Today, as we salute those who have sacrificed their lives for this nation, we must, too, have some thoughts for the "living dead" among us.

As the song goes, "*disini lahirnya sebuah cinta*" (here, where love grows).