

# Challenges Beyond the MDG Targets

The preceding chapters have identified some key constraints that need to be addressed for Malaysia to advance beyond the MDG targets and realize its vision of becoming a fully developed nation by 2020. Based on an accounting of the evidence of development gains made over the most recent past decades, the country is on track to achieving its ambitions. Development gains have been achieved in a context of political and macroeconomic stability and there has been a responsiveness to adapt quickly to changing world conditions. For Malaysia to become a fully developed nation by 2020, this enabling environment needs to be maintained, including continued human resource development, especially with emphasis on higher education and skills training. Below are pointers to some of the main challenges that need to be met.

## Poverty and inequality

Malaysia's successful poverty-reduction efforts confirm the interactive roles played by economic growth and public interventions to improve the lives of the people, especially its poor. Public policies that raise human capabilities, most notably through health and education, have both pro-poor and pro-growth effects. Accelerated growth, coupled with a favourable natural resource endowment, provides the government with a strong revenue base to raise capabilities even further. Sustaining economic growth to provide employment opportunities and further improve standards of living of the poorest will continue to be a challenge.

The vast majority of the remaining poor households are *Bumiputera* and are mainly concentrated in the agricultural sector, especially in the least developed states. These groups of remaining poor, especially the indigenous communities, are less accessible and may be less amenable to conventional poverty-reducing programmes. Targeted and participatory approaches will be needed, taking into account new layers of poverty that are emerging, including among older persons and the physically disabled, due to the country's rapid economic growth and related social and demographic changes.

Current low levels of absolute poverty suggest that a change of emphasis in public policy may now be called for. There has been relatively little progress in improving overall income inequality since 1990 and there is a risk that low-income households may feel a sense of social exclusion and limited economic opportunity. Similarly, ethnic income differentials have remained roughly unchanged since 1990, so that there is a continuing need to ensure equal economic opportunity for all Malaysia's communities.

## Education

Despite the success in achieving universal primary education, challenges remain to maintain progress in improving the quality of primary education and ensuring the relevance of curricula. A special focus on expanding educational access and quality for the hard-to-reach groups is a particular challenge, both in relation to the strategies required and the costs involved.

Given the rapid use of ICT throughout the country, education policies need to be sensitive to the possible creation of a digital divide between rural and urban children, due to a less comprehensive ICT infrastructure in rural areas. Nor should teachers be left out of the education equation. Maintaining the presence of good quality teachers, especially in rural areas, will help ensure that all school-going children have access to a well-maintained and relevant education system.

## Gender

A notable early success for Malaysia was its ability to close the gender enrolment gap between boys and girls at the primary schooling level. However, at the higher education level, there is concern at the emerging and increasing disparity in enrolment between boys and girls. At higher levels of education, secondary and tertiary, the enrolment of girls now greatly exceeds the enrolment of boys. The causes of this widening gap, which if maintained will have implications for Malaysia's future labour force, merit study.

At the same time, a number of constraints continue to constrain women's active participation in mainstream economic activities. These include the choice of courses at school, women's competing responsibilities at home and at work, and inadequate access to credit and market information. Women are still expected to be primarily responsible not only for reproduction but also the continuing care of the next generation. The competing responsibilities of family and career appear to restrict Malaysian women's return to the labour market after childbearing. Improved childcare facilities and more flexi-working arrangements may help increase female participation in the labour market.

With their increasing level of education, often exceeding that of men, it is to be expected that women will want to participate more fully at all levels of political life. In order to ensure their fuller representation, it will be necessary to create more space for women to take up positions in political decision making.

## Improving health

### **Child and maternal mortality**

In the context of Malaysia's relatively low levels of infant and child mortality, active advocacy must be continued to keep issues of child health on the national agenda. A priority consideration should be the reduction of marked inequalities in child mortality that exist among the states and major ethnic groups. Equity in access to services is dependent on availability of health infrastructure, sufficient numbers and categories of trained and skilled manpower, adequate supplies, and financial resources. Health personnel will need to devise new strategies to reach out to hard-to-reach disadvantaged target groups.

Sustaining maternal mortality at Malaysia's current low level, and reducing it even further, requires maintaining human and financial resource commitments and innovative programme strategies. Addressing ethnic group disparities in maternal mortality levels remains a priority. Every pregnancy faces risk, thus necessitating continuous alertness and responsiveness by the health system. The ability to sustain multi-agency support and to keep maternal health high in the health policy agenda remains a challenge for which continued advocacy is essential.

### **HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis**

Over recent decades, infectious diseases have assumed less significance in Malaysia relative to non-communicable diseases. The trends in absolute numbers, as well as incidence rates, have declined appreciably for malaria, but continue to rise in numbers for HIV/AIDS and TB. TB and AIDS are the leading causes of death from infectious diseases in the country. Both diseases are largely related to social problems, namely, rural and urban poverty, and intravenous drug use. Efforts and resources must be maintained to eradicate these diseases, including operational research into the causes of drug use among youth.

Strategies in disease control are most effective if evidence-based with in-built operations research to evaluate outcomes and respond efficiently to changes in disease epidemiology. This is important where resources are limited with increasingly higher programme costs and competing priorities. Implicit within this is the development of appropriate indicators by which to measure the attainment of objectives.

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among the general population is still low and the epidemic is concentrated, giving considerable potential for containment. National multisectoral leadership is essential to thwart institutional inertia and to recognize and address social issues that fuel the epidemic, including stigma, discrimination, gender inequalities, and poverty. Community leadership can help generate locally acceptable responses, such as through discussions of behaviours and values that will lead to a reduction in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Although there are well-established control strategies and treatments for TB, it still remains the most serious infectious disease in Malaysia in terms of incidence and deaths.

Key challenges in combating TB include increasing awareness of the disease among clinicians and medical personnel, as well as among the public, reducing poverty and optimizing access and follow-up to medical facilities, especially in rural areas, and curbing the accelerating occurrence of co-infection with HIV.

The private sector—particularly, the pharmaceutical industry—can contribute towards achieving the MDG targets in health through its research development on new drugs, pricing, licensing and corporate social responsibility policies. Furthermore, the input of non-traditional health-related sectors, namely, religious leaders and institutions, is encouraged to intensify the fight against HIV/AIDS in Malaysia. This includes the battle against substance dependence, particularly injecting drug use, thus far the primary source of HIV infection.

Overall, Malaysians currently enjoy public sector health care that is very heavily subsidized, especially for government servants, and is almost free for those with limited means. With the rapid growth of the private health sector, particularly in urban areas, people have been able to exercise their choice for health care. However, only those who can afford to pay or are covered by health insurance schemes, utilize the private sector. Rising expectations and the greater demand for specialist services, even for primary care, will lead to increased costs for, and a heavier burden on, the public health sector. Private sector support is required to consider cost-sharing schemes or models for a shared responsibility for health care.

## Sustainable development

With development, Malaysia's land use has been altered from forests to agricultural use and to development projects, such as housing and industrial areas. Although the National Land Council was established to ensure that there is a coordinated approach towards land development, much of the land use has been determined by the state governments. As such, the newly formulated National Physical Plan is crucial in ensuring that there is better coordination and integration in land use planning. In addition, the newly formed National Physical Council also has a critical role to play in effecting better coordination of land development.

In past decades, the government has increased the capacity and ability of its agencies in handling various developmental issues. However, the protection of natural resources and the environment involves other developmental issues. Thus future challenges lie in the proactive and consistent coordination between the agencies (for example, environmental authorities, industrial agencies, trade agencies, land agencies, and so on) in order to improve the management of natural resources and the environment, and to ensure sustainability. The concept of integrated water resource management (IWRM) that has been adopted by the government is one good example of coordinated efforts between the different agencies to better manage the country's water resources.

The role of civil society in moving towards sustainable development becomes increasingly important in ensuring transparency and credibility. Several agencies within the government have been leading in increasing the participation of civil society in critical areas, such as the Economic Planning Unit, the Forestry Department, and the Department of Irrigation and Drainage. The forestry industry has a National Steering Committee, which consists of multi-stakeholders in a consultative platform, for the purposes of developing standards for forest certification. Similarly, the Department of Irrigation and Drainage has been working through the MY Water Partnership, which also includes participation of NGOs and the private sector. Other agencies are also beginning to include civil society participation. However, there is a need for more avenues for such participation and for the sharing of knowledge and best practices.

## Foreign migrants

The effects of the influx of documented and undocumented foreign workers and their families to Malaysia on health, education, and other social and economic indicators need to be carefully monitored. For example, migrants, often coming from neighbouring countries with less well-developed health and education systems, may bring with them diseases that can be easily spread, such as tuberculosis and malaria. Screening and routine monitoring of infected migrant workers are required to contain and reduce infection.

Whether basic social services and targeted programmes should be made available to undocumented migrants needs serious policy debate, especially in the relatively less developed states. For example, the high child and MMR levels of migrant women is a continuing challenge. Migrants, especially those lacking proper documentation, often have limited access to health-care services. Unwanted pregnancies, among migrants, have resulted in attempts to abort pregnancies through medication or traditional means, self-conducted deliveries with no prenatal care, and newborns being abandoned. There is a need to target those requiring the full range of health information and reproductive services.

## Improving information systems

Malaysia's social and health indicators are already relatively comprehensive. However, there remains scope for improvement in coverage, quality, timeliness, and dissemination to ensure continued relevance to the country's changing needs. Moreover, disaggregated data for age categories, subpopulations, and areas need to be made more readily available.

In the area of poverty, for example, analytical profiles of the poor would be useful to assist in targeting and identifying their characteristics and spatial distribution. More comprehensive education data could help with an understanding of household expenditure on schooling, and allow for indepth examination of relevant issues relating to gender inequality in education than is currently possible. Similarly, the availability of a regular and detailed database on contraceptive prevalence rates would provide the basis for a more comprehensive profile of maternal health.

## Partnerships

Malaysia has made the transition from being a recipient of ODA to becoming an international development partner, itself supporting development programmes in poorer countries. The policies, strategies, and programmes that have led to Malaysia's remarkable development can be used to build capacities in other countries.

As the country progresses towards achieving Vision 2020, it can advantageously reaffirm its status as a development partner and create opportunities to deepen partnerships, especially with sections of civil societies that have not been able to gain benefits from past and existing development programmes.

Existing multilateral partnerships—for example, with UN funds and programmes—can be maintained and evolved alongside new partnerships. Strategic partnerships that capitalize on the intrinsic strengths of each partner can be structured to promote healthy interactions in all aspects of the economy, including the social sectors. Strong public–private partnerships, for example with the pharmaceutical industry on health, and with various multinationals on bridging the digital divide and on the environment, provide examples of areas in which to move forward at the national level beyond the existing MDG targets. Long-term commitments to the achievements of the MDGs in Malaysia, regionally and globally, can be maintained if there continue to be concerted efforts and progressively strengthened alliances between all partners.

## Summing up

Already in the twenty-first century, rapid changes have begun transforming the world we knew in the twentieth century and had developed strategies to deal with. Some policies that served Malaysia well are no longer providing the momentum they did, as outcomes plateau before all the goals are finally achieved. Fresh perspectives and new approaches are needed to sustain momentum in achieving established goals, ensuring that residual clusters of needy do not become marginalized or entrenched, and their disadvantage or dependency institutionalized.

Fresh perspectives and new approaches are also needed to formulate strategies for addressing emerging challenges: the widening divide between urban and rural that can extend beyond education and technology—to income, health, and other services; the disjunction between the educational achievements of women and their opportunities in the labour force through constraints of multiple responsibilities and barriers to their advancement; the increasing need to expand the role of the private sector in sharing responsibility for some of the services that have become increasingly burdensome to the public sector. Once again, there is a challenge for Malaysia to continue in the vanguard of development, identifying critical issues, formulating appropriate policies and strategies, and moving ahead in an exemplary way.