

Title	Let's not miss the boat
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DATUK Seri Mustapa Mohamed sounded the right alarm in his thoughtful comment (in the NST dated June 18) entitled “An Opportunity to prepare Malaysians for jobs of the future”.

This vital issue is indeed a major concern among all right-thinking Malaysians. Their own jobs, especially that of their children and the future employment outlook, and their well-being and welfare are all at stake.

It is therefore pertinent that the minister responsible for socio-economic planning in the Prime Minister's Department has shared his views and rich experience as a senior civil servant and former outstanding minister of trade with us the public.

Having been his colleague in the Treasury many years ago, I can say with conviction that the minister is serious in his analyses and plans for the future.

What he has proposed is necessary but may not be sufficient to solve our unemployment and other socio-economic problems, for now and the future.

However, I believe the minister has an open mind and will welcome and consider all relevant views for inclusion in his economic planning.

Need structural changes

The estimated unemployment rate at 5% is worrisome. But it is possible this high rate will worsen, unless we reform the economic structure more significantly, as follows:

1. The minister has rightly proposed that we should ramp up our digital agenda. But we must also raise our standards of proficiency in the English language to get better access to the knowledge in the English language worldwide. Of course we could stick to the present practices, but we will lose out to other competing countries for trade and investment, and academic excellence.

We are already losing out in the IMD (Institute for Management Development) World Competiveness Ranking. We dropped five points from 22 to 27 in the ranking.

I would hope the government needs to set up a committee to examine our shortfalls. They may show the structural weaknesses seeping into the system. We could send an expert team of our officials to see what there is in Singapore that we can learn and improve as they were ranked number one.

2. The minister's proposal to reduce foreign workers is laudable. But the estimate of just two million foreign workers may be too low if you include about another two million unregistered foreign workers. Furthermore the government has to review our wage structure to reward our skilled workers, those frontline workers doing the 3D (dangerous, dirty and difficult) jobs. If they can flock to Singapore to do the “dirty jobs”, surely they would be happier to work at home if given better pay.

Here again, the basic needs of our society must be met as a matter of high priority as Covid-19 has revealed that poverty, hunger, lack of housing, health and environmental protection are serious weaknesses in our economy. These fundamental economic rights and others have been denied to millions of Malaysians. Here we cannot miss the boat again, please.

Education quality has declined at many levels from schools to universities. Our international scores have not been internationally competitive enough.

This is because of the neglect of meritocracy where we went out more for quantity than quality education. This has a severe bearing on unemployment.

Indeed as the minister points out what the management guru Peter Drucker has stated that “the ultimate resource in economic development, is people”.

But we have over the years driven away some of our best brains due to deprivation of opportunities to study and work at home. It is our brain power that also attracts investment and jobs.

So we must ask ourselves, how we can create opportunities to create and find jobs at home?

The minister has done very well to stress the opportunities to revitalise, recognise, strengthen and future proof our economy.

It's a big task and some of his sound proposals would need much more structural changes for us to sail more confidently into the open rough seas of severe competition. More has to be done to ensure that as the minister says: “Let's not miss the boat”.

I would respectfully hope that Mustapa's bold foresight is shared by other broad-minded leaders or we will be left behind on the sea shores, without much hope for more employment and greater progress.

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