

Paradigm Shift Needed in Global R&D – Sustainability: People, Profit and Planet Must Receive Balanced Benefits

Ibrahim, Ahmad^{1*}

“Today’s R& D, sadly, is too much skewed towards business and commerce.”

The first time I visited Kuching, Sarawak, was in the 1980s. I then worked for the Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia. In the 1980s, Kuching was a small town. I remember that then, the route going to the airport was lined with shops selling the famous Sarawak vases. They were a big hit among visitors. A visit to Sarawak was not complete without taking back a set of the black-and-white vases. They came in many shapes and sizes.

It is different now — most of the shops that sold vases have more or less disappeared. The few that may still be there are “drowned” by modern shops plying the automobile trade and selling faster-moving items, like smartphones and other telecommunications gadgets. The airport is brand new, while the road to the airport offers much smoother rides. Such modernisation of a once-sleepy Kuching is testimony to the impressive progress made by the state since becoming part of Malaysia. What has not changed, though, is that we, from the Peninsula, have to clear Immigration checks, despite the fact that we are one Malaysia. Hopefully, this will change soon. It would be a pity if the requirement remains, while Asean contemplates doing away with border checks among member nations.

Recently, I was in Kuching to participate in another initiative to push for change. Not just for Sarawak, but for the world. I was there to attend the academy’s debut conference, which gathered research and development (R&D) leaders from around the world, who are pushing for a shift in focus for global R&D. Appropriately themed “Injecting Soul into R&D”, the inaugural event attracted close to 200 participants, both local and international.

Interestingly, the conference assembled an impressive list of speakers, including eminent local personalities and internationally experienced overseas experts. Kudos, to the Academy for a successful first effort, which attracted the support of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI), as well as the Ministry of Higher Education (MOE).

The deliberations during the conference proved exciting and thought-provoking. The keynote address by Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, former vice-chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia, was about the philosophy of what message “injecting soul into R&D” was sending. He likened “soul” to “conscience”. Quoting Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Einstein, “Conscience is the voice of the soul and conscience is a man’s compass.” To be useful, R&D must have clear directions. It must be clear on the returns and benefits it will bring to society and humanity. Going back in history, R&D undertakings of the past — especially the glory days of Islamic science — had a clear purpose and reason. Today’s R& D, sadly, is too much skewed towards business and commerce. In the medical arena, for example, thanks to the power given to patents and other instruments of intellectual ownership, much of humanity, especially the poor, is deprived of the benefits of R&D.

¹Fellow of the Academy of Sciences, Malaysia

*Corresponding author (Ahmad Ibrahim, e-mail: ahmad.ibrahim@akademisains.gov.my)

There was a consensus among participants that this had to change. Tan Sri Dr Jemilah Mahmood, founder of Mercy Malaysia, lamented how the world had descended into never-ending conflicts. She cited worrying statistics about people who were displaced by conflicts and natural disasters, now exceeding 60 million. Every war, the cost front natural disasters globally runs into US\$300 billion (RM1.2 trillion). A major impediment to change is the lack of political will. Take climate change, for example. Despite the prediction that one billion people may be displaced by 2030, the politics of climate change remains unresolved. The first United Nations World Humanities Summit is planned in the near future. The issue of sustainability for the world will no doubt take centre stage.

It is clear that global R&D must be guided by the sustainability agenda. Global investment in R&D must conform to Sustainability Development Goals, which should be finalised soon at the UN. This means that global R&D must deliver balanced benefits to people, profit and planet, the 3Ps of sustainability. Otherwise, we cannot discount major upsets that could disrupt the sustainability agenda. And, all investments in R&D would go to waste.