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Engineers and Poverty Alleviation: Are We Contributing Enough?

By: Engr. Ayob Katimon, *M.I.E.M., P.Eng.*

Believe it or not, many of us are oblivious when defining the meaning of the word `Engineer', especially in terms of alleviating poverty in our country, as we have always perceived that we have done much for our profession.

While the success of the engineering profession has always been associated with modern and high-level activities, I strongly believe that the true success of our profession should be demonstrated through the overall contribution of our profession in building the nation. In other words, engineers are obligated and answerable in contributing to all groups in society in such a way that the socio-economic gaps are minimised. This is currently a benefit that people living in developed countries have enjoyed thus far.

Do we remember that, during our first few semesters in the university, we were urged to think along the design of a small house, a small bridge, a small food processing machine, a rural electrification system, a small agricultural machine, a small warehouse, a small water treatment plant, a small irrigation system, a small sanitation system? In fact, everything we visualised was small! We were also asked to carry out the cost-benefit analysis of such small projects and its socio-economic implications towards society. All those exercises were actually the first stage of training for engineers towards the goal of alleviating the poverty of the people.

Engineers can help in alleviating poverty through a concept called 'Social Innovator'. For example, the following questions should provide a clear basis of intent for engineers. Can a low-cost water pump help to alleviate poverty? Can a small irrigation system help in improving farmers' incomes? Can a solar cell help in improving the standard of living of rural people? Can an efficient transportation system help rural folks to commute? Can a small machine help to improve small to medium scale industries? Can any small processing machine help to increase farmers' incomes? I do believe that the majority of us would answer 'yes, they can!'

If those were the answers, how much effort have we produced, as engineers, in search of solutions to alleviate poverty? How much focus has engineering researchers given and dedicated towards the problem of poverty? The establishment of a research excellence centre dubbed `Pusat Kajian Kemiskinan dan Pembangunan' by Universiti Malaya and officiated by our Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Abdullah Hj. Ahmad Badawi, in my opinion, is the right platform for us engineers to participate in solving the poverty problem in the country. Engineering societies, such as IEM, should provide valuable input to the centre by bringing together experts from various engineering sub-disciplines and from diverse domains with the common goal of alleviating poverty in our beloved country, Malaysia. ■