Let the youth design our future

BUDGET 2017 which was unveiled on Oct 21 introduced a new element to chart the nation's future. Branded as TN50, the idea was well received and considered timely.

Many agree that we need a new vision for the country as the magic year 2020 fast approaches. TN50, which stands for Tranformation National 2050, is to continue the nation's planning for the future after Vision 2020. It is a platform which has been created to drive national discourses about the future of the country.

And who better to engage and anchor such an initiative than the nation's youths? This is the reason why the initiative is parked under the Youth and Sports Ministry. What better way to manage the future than to design the future that we desire?

Kudos to the Government for this important and strategic initiative. It is all about sustainable development. How can we prepare and sustain the nation's wellbeing and progress as we approach 2050?

By then, we should aim to remain a competitive and developed nation, even exceeding the targets articulated under Vision 2020. Admittedly, the world is under all kinds of threats and challenges.

Take climate change as an example. Though there are still sceptics around, including the new US president-elect, the data staring at us cannot lie.

Many are convinced that global warming and its related consequences are mankind's biggest threat. We as a nation are equally vulnerable to the changing climate.

Agriculture may be seriously impacted and the threats posed by extreme weather conditions to the population cannot be denied. How we deal with climate change should, I believe, become a key agenda of TN50.

At the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, we have started a similar futuristic platform for science. The idea was the brainchild of one of the Academy's presidents, Tan Sri Dr Yusof Basiron.

We branded the programme "MegaScience 2050". Essentially, what we did was to start with a projection of what would happen to the nation's many key industries by 2050.

Can they be sustained? What would it take to sustain them?

What would happen to the palm oil industry and the electronics sector, and many other industries which now support the nation's economy?

The industries that have already been evaluated using the MegaScience framework included construction, car, plastics, tourism and transport, just to name a few.

The projection has been guided by the scenarios that many foresight studies have forecasted. Evidently, there are many groups in the world which regularly conduct foresight studies. We only need to pick the relevant ones for the sectors we are looking at.

Unlike TN50, which would eventually recommend actions needed to sustain the nation's development as a whole, studies under MegaScience 2050 are meant to propose action plans on the nation's development in science to support the growth of the many key industries in Malaysia.

Phase one of MegaScience looked at five sectors namely water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity (WEHAB). It is now widely acknowledged that science and technology are two key success factors of the future.

Admittedly, TN50 would be incomplete if discourses among the youths do not address science education and R&D. At the moment, the nation is still struggling to resolve many science-related issues.

Of course, TN50 is larger than just science. The discussions would have to include how the nation would deal with urbanisation, rural-urban migration, environmental degradation, urban poverty, wealth distribution, social integration and a host of other issues related to the wellbeing of the nation as a whole.

Take the case of rubber and oil palm smallholders. How would they cope with a future dominated by e-commerce, for example? In the fishing sector, how would fishermen survive with the growing depletion of fish resources arising from climate change, overfishing and encroachment by foreign fishing vessels?

It may be worthwhile to look at what the Academy has done on the MegaScience 2050 project. There may be some lessons that TN50 can learn and improvise. To be truly effective, TN50 should be made a permanent think-tank for the nation's youths.

PROF DATUK DR AHMAD IBRAHIM
Fellow, Academy of Sciences Malaysia
UCSI University