reviving the case study approach to research & policy making in Malaysia

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A book titled Social Science and Malaysian National Development, edited by Abdul Rahman Embong, was published by the Malaysian Social Science Association (or PSSM) in 2007. The book sought to emphasize the research and policy nexus, and the centrality of 'evidence-based policy making.' Citing Genevieve Domenach-Chich, the editor highlighted 'the importance of fully employing social science for policy formulation, especially to manage social transformation.' (see **note 1**)

After 18 years, how far have we progressed in this issue? Have we been able to 'conduct research that would contribute meaningfully to development and social transformation'? How has policy making in this country contributed to the growth of the nation's development?

The status or nature of research work that has shaped the national development agenda is ambiguous. How research, and social science research in particular, has benefited the approach to the policy formulation and implementation is similarly uncertain. The recent report by the Malaysia auditor general on the status and monitoring of research projects in selected universities in Malaysia, however, is not reassuring.

The report highlighted that for the year 2023, 1000 research projects were identified as unsatisfactory, which amounted to RM 148.04 million. Further, of the amount of 2077 projects that received grants, only 236 projects were categorized as showing 'good progress' while another 571 had 'satisfactory status.' Five universities were involved in the receiving of government research grants, consisting of Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). (see **note 2**)

These findings are not a promising indicator of the status and condition of the research field in Malaysia. It illustrates gaps in the approach and purposes of research work. Such gaps would in turn affect the nature of policy making, and the impacts of policy implementation in government programs that would affect Malaysian society.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s- even the 1990s- research works that involved anthropological, sociological and ethnographic approaches were prominent. These studies contributed to the knowledge corpus, and discussions on the national development agenda and policy making process.

Amongst these works include James Puthucheary's Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy (1960), Syed Hussein Alatas's The Second Malaysian Plan, 1971-1975: A Critique (1972), Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's Rancangan Malaysia Kedua, Tujuan dan Pelaksanaannya: Suatu Penilaian Teoritis (1979) and From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsular Malaysia (1986), Diana Wong's Peasant's in the Making: Malaysia's Green Revolution (1987), Ishak Shaari's Keadaan Ekonomi dan Struktur Masyarakat Melayu Kelantan pada abad ke-19 (1991), and Abdul Rahman Embong's State-led Modernization and the Malay Middle Class in Malaysia (1999).This also extends to works in the field of politics and culture, and political science and history. Consider, for instance, James Scott's Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (1985) and Moral Economy of the Peasant (1976), and Anthony Milner's Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule (1982).

These works, although academic in nature and originating from the field of social research and the social sciences, both guided development planning in Malaysia and the review of existing and new State policies. The framework and political-economic basis of the New Economic Policy (NEP), established in 1970 and which constitutes a major social transformation program in the history of development of Malaysia, was shaped by perspectives of social justice by key intellectuals, activists, and political leaders of that era. Abdul Rahman Embong, writing in 2007, observed that the social sciences in Malaysia 'has an institutional history of about five decades' and that the development of the field 'has been most dramatic since the 1970s.' (see **note 3**)

Today, works such as those of Diana Wong and those that are locality specific, qualitative and longitudinal, no longer attain a prominent position in national development conversations and policy making discussions. Instead, the trend and focus has been on the accumulation of data that is quantitative in nature, and extensive in form with area-wide data sampling. The importance is therefore on statistical findings. The latter is subsequently utilized to inform policy thinking and formulation, and further to that, in the assessing of deliverables and outputs whether economic, social, environmental or political.

Several consequences arise out of these trends. Firstly, is the implication that while we may possess the information regarding a particular issue, for instance in the measuring of the rate of unemployment in Malaysia in percentage form, we lack in-depth knowledge of the nature and characteristics of the social condition of unemployment. Similarly, we may be informed of the rate of poverty, but we lack insights and knowledge in the conditions and dimensions of poverty; poverty becoming faceless.

Secondly, we are unable to provide in-depth explanations of phenomena that occur in a particular and distinct locality, which is time-bound and context-bound. Additionally, without focus and in-depth analysis, we also lack the capacity to track changes and transformations in the social conditions of communities in that locality over long and expansive periods of time. Third and lastly, by relying on quantitative and statistical approaches, we lack the capacity to explain the causes and ramifications of a particular, or constellation, of phenomena.

Overall, the formation of agendas, the formulation of policies and programs, and their implementation become impaired. Policy makers and political leaders are not provided with sufficient critical and comprehensive empirical data, which is locality-focused and bottom-up, that can guide sound policy formulation and decision making.

Moving forward, there is a need to revive and renew the case study approach to understanding social issues and social phenomena, Using the knowledge resulting from this approach to guide the formulation, planning, and implementation of national, state and local development. The case study approach encompasses anthropological, sociological and ethnographic methods, being locality-defined, community-based and devoutly partisan to those who are on the margins, qualitative in substance, and longitudinal in scope. Such corpus of knowledge, with its framing and analysis of problems, will assist public officials at all levels of government to deliberate solutions and aid in the efficient and effective execution of those solutions. In this way, the government and society can together affect social transformation that is positive, progressive, inclusive, and above all, humane, so that no one will be left behind.

notes

(note 1) Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), Social Science & Malaysian National Development (2007), p. 30–31
(note 2) Over 1,000 research projects costing RM148m by Malaysia's top universities found 'unsatisfactory', The Edge Malaysia, 24 February 2025, at https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/745614
(note 3) Abdul Rahman Embong, Social Science & Malaysian National Development, p. 64

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