



## Roads a prime factor in sustainable development

**N**OT SO LONG AGO KEY WORDS IN DISCUSSING NATIONAL or global development were *sustainable* development, which encompassed such important concepts as *environment* and *pollution*. Somehow they seem to have been downgraded in the rush to express knowledge about *climate*

*change*, a very complex subject for which most people have only really been presented with an outline coverage.

In this article, however, I want to highlight again *sustainable development*, and the new proposals and other thoughts for the road sector, which is at the root of most sustainable development.

## Sustainable development

IN A COUPLE OF UNIVERSITY GUEST LECTURES LAST YEAR, I SET out a definition for sustainable development, as follows:

*The utilization and development of natural resources for socio-economic growth, with the exploitation of those resources held compatible with sensible conservation of the environment, such that future generations are not impoverished*

Sustainable development means different things to different people. When applied to the developing world, which is most often the case, but not exclusively, it is usually addressed to the problems faced by the lower levels of society, those trying to deal with poverty and lack of opportunity. As an aside, the term is now reappearing in the political commentaries for the recovery of damaged developed economies following last year's market crash!

But sustainable development is apposite to all levels of society and strata of government, from global concerns and big corporations right down to community development, in which today's serious companies are increasingly involved through CSR programmes.

Each level of society has to address social, environmental, economic and political issues, albeit the emphasis of each of these components varies according to the level of jurisdiction or responsibility.

While all the four issues above are important and interactive, many examples in the history of civilization have shown that prolonged lack of environmental concern, with neglect of forestry providing a good example, will ultimately lead to collapse of society, however well the other factors are addressed.

A prime factor for successful sustainable development is access – to education, health and for connecting to the world outside. Fundamental to this are roads, and the huge growth of the Thai economy over the two decades from the mid-1960s can be attributed to an aggressive road building programme. Indonesia also made impressive inroads into its requirements until the 1997/8 economic crisis.

## Roads

HOWEVER, INDONESIA STILL HAS A VERY LARGE, MULTI-BILLION dollar, road building programme to pursue in the years ahead. In general, the road network across the country has declined since the 1997/8 crisis period, and there has been insufficient funding and human resource capacity to tackle the maintenance of the existing network using international standard techniques and equipment introduced in the years leading up to the crisis, never mind add the thousands of kilometres of additional network required.

All the issues are well understood by government, as I was privileged to be advised in a couple of recent high level meetings. The current considerable increases in national budget towards the sector are a step in the right direction, but only that. They are also a reflection of as much as the sector can humanly absorb within

currently available capacity. Central government is responsible for the national road network, and details of the immediate planned programme have been recently released in the press. The expenditure allocation of \$10.7bn for infrastructure projects from this year's funding is approximately equally distributed between central and regional budgets.

A high proportion is for roads. It is also expected to provide millions of jobs, although economists query, with some justification, the proposed number of 4.4 million. However, an important other benefit of infrastructure projects is the very considerable indirect employment that it establishes.

A big problem relates to the ability to have the budgets dispersed and used properly, especially at provincial and regional level, where there is a glaring lack of skills capacity at all administrative and technical levels, as well as imbalances in software and

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hardware. Some \$5bn is left over from last year's budget, much of it in the regions. It is vital that upgrading the administrative and technical skills of regional government are prioritized directly from government budgets and as part of any multinational or bilateral project loans. The alternative is a very low return on the capital allocated, poor regional social development, less-than-optimum economic growth, and unnecessarily slow sustainable development.

The problem is exacerbated by corruption, as just highlighted in the *Jakarta Post* (February 9) for Lampung province, as an example, which reduces significantly the funds that should be used; the corrupted are left with no moral grounds to ensure that a good job is done according to specification and the funds used properly.

The private sector and appropriate academia should be encouraged to assist in this large but vital requirement, through design and implementation of consultancy programmes from a small percentage of allocated budget funds; if properly done the return on investment will grow considerably and sustainably.

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