

NST Leader: Alleviating plight of the hardcore poor

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The government hopes to eradicate poverty by increasing the income of participants to RM2,000 monthly through the People's Income Initiative. - NSTP file pic

Poverty stems from various factors, such as urbanisation, inflation, disruptive innovation, unemployment and an ageing society.

The government has undertaken various schemes to help the destitute and underprivileged, with the latest measures contained in the revised 2023 Budget.

It aims to bolster the social safety net for the hardcore poor with initiatives to ease the suffering of the 130,000 identified to be in this category. Most notably, the government hopes to eradicate poverty by increasing the income of participants to RM2,000 monthly through the People's Income Initiative.

The Rahmah initiative, too, will be expanded to cover four new areas of focus, targeting also the hardcore poor aside from the B40 group and university students.

These are among the many measures that have been introduced recently, with even more in the past.

Poor families have benefited from various agricultural projects implemented across large swathes of rural Malaysia, while special housing projects have provided them shelter.

However, none have been able to definitively resolve the longstanding problem. The number of poor households has increased, with absolute poverty going up to 8.4 per cent from 5.6 per cent in 2019, with Sabah recording the highest percentage.

The media continues to highlight how many continue to fall through the cracks, surviving in deplorable living conditions and living from hand to mouth not just in rural areas, but urban centres too, amid gleaming skyscrapers.

We can blame welfare officers and wakil rakyat for their oversight in such cases. But more so, the problem lies with the unconscionable leakages in the delivery system. It has been highlighted many times how those entrusted to execute projects and programmes for the underprivileged take advantage of their position to line their own pockets.

Details can be gleaned from the auditor general's reports almost annually, but not enough has been done to throw the book at those responsible and put an end to unacceptable practices. Aside from plugging leakages, directly investing in opportunities for the poor is essential. Assistance should not just be in the form of cash handouts, it must also boost the ability to generate income.

Getting a community to uplift themselves is vital for sustainable change. Through microloans, for example, those with no credit history, collateral or steady income can get access to basic financial services. These small, low-interest loans provide seed money to start, sustain or expand income-generating businesses that can help better lives.

Education is also often referred to as the great equaliser, opening doors to jobs, resources and skills a family needs to not only survive, but thrive. Access to high-quality primary and secondary education and supporting child wellbeing is a globally recognised solution to break the cycle of poverty.

Access to healthcare, water, energy and transport is equally important. Social assistance is critical to prevent people from falling into poverty traps, especially when adverse shocks hit. The government should not only budget support for the social safety net, but also look towards building a more resilient and inclusive society.