

## Well-being for all: How is Prayut meeting his pledge?

A recent report in this newspaper gave me the chills. Sansiri is launching a downtown condominium project next year with a price tag of Bt500,000 per square metre or higher. That is outrageous if you consider that a blue-collar worker would need to work 1,666 days to buy one square metre – just enough to stand up in.

In fact, very few of us could afford a pad here. According to the World Bank, Thai citizens earned on average Bt185,000 in 2013.

Of course, we can't blame the property developer, which is merely supplying what the market demands. But we certainly can blame past Thai policy-makers for failing to address the income gap that feeds such gross inequality.

Policy-makers understood that education was the answer to raising incomes among society's poorest. They achieved the plan to deliver equal access to education, but failed to deliver equal quality of education. A major reason for that failure was a breakdown in urbanisation beyond Bangkok.

Urbanisation calls for infrastructure to support business and normal daily

life in provincial cities. In its absence, the best university graduates opted to stay in the capital. Bangkok schools pulled talented students from the provinces. These students went on to the leading universities, most of which are in Bangkok.

This has been the story for year after year, and the problem has now been exacerbated by Thailand's declining birth rate. Village schools once packed with students are now seeing fewer pupils each year. About 20,000 schools now cater to fewer than 120 students. These schools stand to lose out, because the Education Ministry allocates school budgets according to the number of students. As the World Bank noted last week, insufficient budgets mean small schools have very few teachers and resources. How can children here compete with those in larger schools with more teachers plus facilities like language laboratories?

Making things worse for students is the fallacy that a university education is a passport to a good job at a government agency or big company. Thailand now has over 100 universities and each tends to offer as many courses as pos-



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sible, regardless of whether they satisfy the needs of the job market. It came no surprise this year that, of the total 361,297 unemployed in the first quarter, 164,159 were new graduates, according to National Economic and Social Development Board Office data. The number rose 13.1 per cent from last year.

The problems will only worsen if the situation in Thailand remains as it is today.

Yet how many Thai educators have stepped forward to shed light on ways to improve the education system?

There has been no response at all to the World Bank's suggestion last week

that all small schools be merged for higher efficiency, which should improve education and ensure higher competitiveness in the Thai economy. Even with a junta holding unchecked power, there has been no clear plan on how to produce more graduates with vocational degrees. Does Thailand have a plan to scrap some university courses in favour of education that better meets market demands? What progress is there in turning universities into research centres? The Science Ministry has set its sights on increasing research and development spending, but where are the targets for the commercialisation rate of university research?

Looking around the Asean region, Singapore has set a good example. Having only gained independence in 1963, it now rates among the best in the world for standard of living, education, healthcare and economic competitiveness. In 2013, its per-capita income was \$55,182 – five times more than Malaysia and nearly 10 times more than Thailand (\$5,779).

Its Asean neighbours are keen to emulate Singapore's achievement. Last month, Prime Minister Najib Razak

unveiled the 11th Malaysia Plan, a vision to reach developed-nation status by 2020. Malaysia aims for an average annual economic growth rate of 5.6 per cent in 2016-2020, compared to 5.3 per cent under the 10th plan. With the focus on productivity, the country is targeting average per capita income of 54,100 ringgit (about US\$14,300 or Bt485,000) by 2020. Fiscal targets remain on track as the government has reiterated its aim of balancing the budget by 2020, after a projected deficit of 3.2 per cent this year. This is expected to bring the government debt/GDP ratio below 45 per cent, from more than 55 per cent in 2014.

A core strategy in the plan is to develop key cities to boost investment, trade opportunities and improve connectivity in the country.

Thailand has a similar plan. The 11th edition (2012-2017) of our economic and social development plan also sets rosy targets for narrowing income gaps, boosting years spent in education and cutting corruption in government. On top of that is the junta's five-year plan, which promises to improve the "well-being" of all

Thais, a message broadcast every day on the radio following the national anthem at 6pm.

However, doubts remain on how these aims can be achieved while Thailand is still struggling to escape cyclical political and economic problems. On the economic front, we have heard assurances from the prime minister that economic growth will climb above 3 per cent this year. That promise is being repeated nearly every day, prompting the big question of how Thailand can overcome long-term issues while we are busy dealing with short-term problems. Further clouding this priority is the debate raging over who will lead the country after the National Centre for Peace and Order stands down.

What matters more than who leads the country is whether that leader knows how to address the fundamental problems that are plaguing our economy and our collective well-being. Far less than 10 per cent of us will be able to afford a nice downtown condo next year. How do we make sure that this figure rises over the next 10 or 20 years?