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Mega Projects

By: Engr. Chin Mee Poon, *F.I.E.M., P.Eng.*

Less than 30 years ago, a construction company in our country would probably throw a dinner for its senior staff members to celebrate the procurement of a RM20 million project. Projects of that size were considered very big in those days as most of the projects dished out for tendering by Jabatan Kerja Raya were below RM10 million. The figure-of-8 Jalan Tebrau Interchange right in the heart of Johor Baru, for example, only costed the government about RM5.5 million.

Construction projects have increased in value over the years due to various reasons: inflation, escalation in the cost of materials, construction plants, transport and labour, and increase in project size and complexity. The last factor itself probably results from the higher expectations of the people which in turn are a result of the higher standard of living brought about by development. The people's higher expectations include higher design standard, better finishing and more attention on aesthetics. However, the value of a project can also become very high if the authorities concerned decide to include many things under one contract instead of splitting them into several contracts.

Today, some people have become so accustomed to gigantic figures that they only talk in terms of billions. Not too long ago the managing director of an upcoming construction company was overheard telling a runner not to bother him with any project valued at less than RM100 million! That company is no longer active in the construction arena. Now, how much is a billion? A billion is 1000 million. A billion seconds ago I was working in JKR Johor, having graduated from the University of Malaya less than a year ago. One billion minutes ago was the year 104 AD, and one billion hours ago Homo sapiens had not appeared on earth!

It does not need much imagination to figure out that many more construction companies will benefit from the country's development budget if projects are packaged into smaller parcels wherever possible. Not all projects can be packaged into smaller parcels, of course, and those that can, will have to be studied carefully to determine the best way of doing so. This requires a lot of imagination.

Mega projects attract attention. They are nice to look at, but may not necessarily benefit the people. Tax payers' money should be channeled into development projects that will bring maximum benefit to the most number of people. Such development projects may not bring much glamour to the authorities concerned, but they will be appreciated by the people. On the other hand, projects that are monumental and glamorous in nature but do not benefit the general masses cause grievances among the people, especially the tax payers. Public funds should only be used in areas shunned by the private sector. It should not be used to compete with the private sector in areas where business corporations and individual entrepreneurs can do a better job.

How to turn the limited resources available in the country into stimulus for sustained economic growth for the benefit of all people from the most developed urban centres to the remotest villages, requires great wisdom and leadership on the part of the government. ■