

## Sustainable development goals



**IMPRESSIVE INITIATIVES:** *Translating rhetoric into solutions requires collective action*

If a dollar is gained every time sustainable development is mentioned, it will probably be enough to fund all the solutions to combat the world's most pressing challenges.

At the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, influential figures such as Bill Gates, Unilever CEO Paul Polman and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg were only some of the leaders that spoke in support of sustainable development. Even John Sauven, director of Greenpeace, was reported to be pleasantly surprised, noting that many global corporations that Greenpeace had previously campaigned against are now passionate in issues such as removing deforestation from the supply chain.

The surge in rhetoric seems to suggest that sustainable development is a top global priority. Evidence, however, continues to tell an unflattering story.

In an annual global CEO Survey produced by PwC regarding key global risks, only 10 per cent registered concern on climate change last year. This year, it did not even make the top 19 risks. Changes in biodiversity due to human activities were more rapid in the last 60 years than at any time in human history and continue to accelerate. Inequality is rising in most parts of the world. Most countries, Malaysia included, face the crisis of rising frequency and intensity of natural disasters. The list goes on.

Many have dubbed 2015 as the year of sustainable development. The ubiquity of sustainable development, in large, can be attributed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the end of the year as the global development agenda. The SDGs strive to implement what is often considered an ambiguous concept. Whilst more and more agree that moving towards sustainable development is the right way to go, translating the rhetoric into actions is proving rather more difficult.

Governments will play a crucial role in creating and enforcing policies that can steer desired actions. With government expenditure roughly 12 to 15 per cent of GDP in Malaysia, it can also be a leader in creating a more sustainable supply chain. In many cases however, there is only so much that governments can do. Whilst it can catalyse actions through instruments such as taxes, subsidies, research targeting and dissemination of information, much of the technological innovation as well as lifestyle choices required are beyond the control of the government.

Businesses will be at the centre of innovating technologies and solutions and are beginning to address the triple bottom line - people, planet and profit. However, a recent white paper by Aviva, United Kingdom's largest insurance company, entitled a "Road map for Sustainable Capital Markets" acknowledged that there is a philanthropic insufficiency - where it is irrational to assume that investors will incorporate social and environmental costs as they do not affect financial figures that appear on the balance sheet.

Academia as well as civil society organisations will continue to play a major role in generating public awareness and understanding of the nature of the challenges. Generating actions, however, will require linking knowledge with markets and policymaking - where not many researchers and NGOs excel at.



The reality is that the interconnected nature of the challenges calls for collective action. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), under the auspices of United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon and led by Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University seeks to do just that - to instigate a new era of intensive problem solving through a network of scientific, business, civil society and policy experts from all around the world.

The SDSN Malaysia Chapter, led by Professor Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid, the Science Adviser to the Prime Minister, has begun to compile solutions that contribute towards sustainable development. In the search for solutions, many impressive initiatives were found.

Amongst them were high-tech "smart villages" which are currently under construction. It provides affordable homes, high-tech educational, training and recreational facilities, with an integrated, sustainable farm system providing villagers with food and employment - lifting incomes for scores of rural families while promoting environmental sustainability. The low-carbon cities framework by the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water and partners offers a guide to planning low-carbon cities and their management, including an assessment system enabling the calculation of a carbon footprint baseline and the measurement of changes in emissions from a particular development.

Another initiative, MYBiomass, is a special-purpose vehicle dedicated to turning waste into wealth through pioneering technology for converting oil palm industry's waste biomass and refining it into high value green chemicals. Many other encouraging solutions continue to be found through the network.

While these solutions are very promising, achieving sustainability will require them to be rolled out on a larger scale and mainstreamed across all sectors.

This goes beyond technological fixes and requires a rather more human solution. Ban Ki-moon's report on the SDGs entitled "The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet" framed it as a question of ethics. True sustainable development can only be achieved if it is a common vision shared throughout society, ensuring that all walks of life actively and voluntarily pursue solutions and lifestyles that contribute to a more secure future.

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