

Discussant's Comments at the Launch of Dr Hezri Adnan's Book *The Sustainability Shift: Refashioning Malaysia's Future* on 29 November 2016 in Putrajaya

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Introduction

It is my great honour and privilege to make some comments on this book by Dr Hezri, whom I regard as an environmental academic cum activist. I take this opportunity to congratulate him for this fine piece of scholarly work and thank him and ISIS Malaysia for inviting me to make these interventions.

I bring my analysis as a sociologist who has been working on ethnicity, urban poverty and inequality, human rights and minority concerns to this discussion on environmental sustainability. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the linkage to shift from silo thinking to an inter-disciplinary outlook. I hope I can do justice with my reflections and comments.

This is a major academic work on the theme of sustainability in Malaysia as well as the first major work on the sustainability theme, especially after the United Nations had adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The book draws a balance between environmental protection and economic growth, a much needed public policy agenda today.

In reading this book, I asked myself what is new in this book. I must say, this publication is an academic, scientific work on sustainability related concerns, which also has a strong policy advocacy component. Academic works are often weak on policy and policy works tend to be lacking on academic analysis. However, Dr Hezri has very skilfully blended both aspects in his work.

Key theme

A key theme of the book centres on a term used by Dr Hezri, namely, the "logic of sustainability", which calls for a rethink of concepts like the ecosystem, development and social progress. He makes reference to three trajectories: (i) environment to sustainability, (ii) organisation approach to institutional change, and (iii) aspirations to policy and programme implementation.

Dr Hezri calls for "a new way of looking at development issues – one that views the social and environmental externalities in an integrative manner" (p. 175). He goes on further to describe his major thesis and analysis by stating that "while Malaysia's impressive economic achievement has advanced human development and reduced poverty, the pursuit of socio-economic progress has been accompanied by an unprecedented rate of change in the natural environment and the country's ecological footprint. Malaysia is no exception in its inability to implement development via a holistic framework – which is the essence of

sustainability. Reversing further environmental degradation requires nothing short of an institutional change, which forms the core message ...” (p. 175).

Six major shifts

Dr Hezri then draws out six major shifts that are required. He justifies these from a review of the current situation with academic integrity and calls for a shift in gear. These are also listed out as key chapters of the book, namely, chapters three to eight, out of the nine chapters in the book.

First, on nature protection calling for a shift towards the ecosystem;

Second, on pollution control making a shift from treatment of pollutant downstream to cleaner production;

Third, on resource nexus towards a governance structure;

Fourth, on climate crisis and the shift towards global warming;

Fifth, on a sustainable society with a shift towards equity and participation. Here, Dr Hezri introduces the term “environmental citizenship”.

Sixth, on green economy and the shift towards “green capitalism”. In this context, Dr Hezri notes “the social aspects of the green economy need to be factored prominently in its definition in order to move beyond a sole focus on quantitative growth” (p. 174).

Policy recommendations

The book provides a very strong policy advocacy discourse in the final chapter entitled “Powering the Shift”. Here, Dr Hezri makes ten policy recommendations, which are divided into three parts – hardware, software and heart ware. His punchline is that “effective implementation and policy integration are hence crucial for the sustainability shift to occur”. (p. 179)

These policy recommendations are well-thought-out and highly relevant. Two major recommendations are: (i) the appointment of a commissioner for environment and sustainable development, and (ii) the establishment of a council for sustainability development. Concerning the commissioner, what is significant here is that such an officer should be based at the Ministry of Finance and not the Environmental Ministry. Furthermore, it is recommended that the commissioner be appointed as a senator in order to have greater recognition. On the council, the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) recently announced at the SDG Roadmap Conference on 15-16 November 2016 that the cabinet had agreed to the establishment of a national level council to be chaired by the prime minister.

Civil society organisation (CSO) partnership

In both his analysis and recommendations, Dr Hezri devotes some attention to the place of CSOs. This is very relevant especially since the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda place a very strong priority on stakeholder engagement between the public sector and two other sectors, namely, the private sector and civil society. Dr Hezri does give some focus to the theme of the CSOs interfacing with the government.

Dr Hezri goes on to acknowledge the “unprecedented environmental protest” and the rise of public resentment due to environmental degradation. This has facilitated the rise of CSO coalitions. He notes two second generation CSOs, the coalition of 24 non-governmental organisations releasing the Eco-Manifesto and the emergence of the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance. Additionally, he coins the term “sustainability citizenship”, which provides the space for a shift from the nation-state citizenship to a more global one of shared common aspirations for a better global ecosystem based on sustainability.

Moreover, Dr Hezri advocates for CSOs’ active participation in public governance. He writes “civil society must be given a voice in environmental governance, to allow the government to see issues through ‘different eyes’.” (p. 189). He proceeds further to justify saying that “by engaging civil society leadership in government decision-making, the populace can also understand the challenges and constraints faced by the government in deciding on issues of environment and development” (p. 189). He does emphasise the need for engaging with faith leaders in developing a “conservation ethics within the religious and ethnic based worldviews and belief systems” (p. 190).

Illustrative examples – sustainability in practice

The book contains an interesting feature where certain best practices or issues and policies are illustrated in boxes and often in colourful form. There are nine boxed items altogether. Let me highlight two of the case studies.

One is a write-up of the social impact of the Tasik Chini ecosystem degradation. This underlines that although Tasik Chini has been listed as an UNESCO biosphere reserve (2009), there has been a negative impact due to economic activities, such as mining and logging. Even more shocking is the inaction of the state government and federal agencies to protect not just the environment but the interest of the six Orang Asli villages living surrounding the lake.

Another is about the best practice of a local government, namely, Petaling Jaya City Council in its efforts to transform Petaling Jaya to a low carbon and sustainable city. The effective implementation of Agenda 21 and citizens’ engagement are dimensions that other local authorities could emulate from.

Here, I would say that Dr Hezri could have added a few more significant developments in the sustainability area in Malaysian society. Perhaps he could include them in the second edition of his book.

One could be on the “Suhakam National Inquiry to the Land Rights of Indigenous People”. The Human Rights Commission undertook this national inquiry between December 2010 and June 2012, the first of its kind in Malaysia. A total of 892 statements of infringements of the land rights in Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia were recorded. Based on human rights indicators, these were violations of the human rights of these people largely by big corporations and political interest. While the federal government received the record and set up a task force to restudy the recommendations and eventually establish a Cabinet Committee to monitor the implementations, none of the major recommendations have been accepted nor any of the cases resolved. This matter serves as an excellent case study as environment issues, business developments and economic growth aspects together with people’s concerns are clashing and in direct conflict. It has great relevance to the theme of sustainability including the role of government, private sector, civil society and grassroots forest-based communities. Finding an effective solution and resolution is most crucial and urgent.

Another potential case study is the positive note in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, in its chapter on green economy. The government has recognised the need for the community’s direct involvement and role in managing the forest, especially that of indigenous and local communities. Here, reference can be made to the Kelawat Forest Reserve in Sabah where 24 families have been roped in for this new initiative.

In addition, I am aware of another example from Sabah, namely, Gomantong Hill, a forest reserve of about 1,300 acres at Matunggong in Kudat. The 13 villages, which are located at the foot of the hill, have been enlisted into a conservation project. They have jointly formed a local heritage committee called *Jawatankuasa Perlindungan Warisan*. There is no access to the hill except via one of the 13 villages. Each of the villages are developing community-based enterprises, such as birds’ nest, honey making and bee harvesting, and eco-tourism, such as hiking and home stay programmes. This conservation project is well-documented by environmental anthropologist, Dr Paul Porondong of Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

Conclusion

This is indeed a timely book and must-read by all policy makers. It is a commendable work and major contribution to the sustainability literature. Especially during the time of the SDGs, there is a need for more similar studies of drawing a healthy and holistic balance between economic, social and environmental dimensions. The SDGs with its 17 goals, 165 targets and 230 indicators provide the policy framework for our effective implementation.

Dr Hezri’s book definitely sets the research and policy agenda for not just effective implementation but for the next generation to do more similar works in due time. All the best and happy reading.