

Speech for KL Book Launch, 29 November 2015

Distinguished participants, colleagues and friends

Greetings of peace, greetings of solidarity,

Thank you for being here today. In an age when the most widely-read book is the Facebook, it is humbling to see so many people in the room to attend a book launch. It is more humbling as this is a book that deals with a topic that is only beginning to receive mainstream attention. And here I am referring to the notion of sustainability transition or the sustainability shift. In essence, the Sustainability Shift means that development processes must operate using the logic of sustainability principles.

The idea to write this book – or at least the confidence to write it came to me some eleven years ago. It was Hari Raya Aidil Fitri and I was stuck in my office in Canberra to complete a revised version of a journal manuscript for a United Nations sustainable development journal called the Natural Resources Forum, published by Wiley. The manuscript was titled ‘the evolution of environmental policy in Malaysia’, which I co-authored with Professor Nordin Hasan, whom some of us regarded as the intellectual father of sustainability thinking in this country. Instead of submitting a 6000-word piece as commonly practiced, we ended up writing a 12,000-word manuscript. The editor-in-chief – I suspect he was a diplomat because he was too nice, too supportive – he suggested that we had enough materials to write a book on sustainable development in Malaysia. And he asked us to cut down to 8,000 words.

With this confidence – in retrospect it was a misguided confidence – I approached the Prime Minister’s Exchange Fellowships Programme a few years after that, with a proposal to write a book on sustainable development policy in Malaysia. To my surprise the Board members agreed with the idea and granted me an ISIS Fellowship to complete the manuscript. I was given 8 months to complete the work. Let me thank the Perdana Board from the outset, for its generosity and for the vision that it had by considering sustainability as a subject worth funding. This was way back when sustainability was not yet a ‘fashionable’ topic compared to other pressing policy issues.

But few months into the project it started to dawn upon me that I did not have enough materials for the book, contrary to what the diplomatic editor suggested earlier. First of all, sustainability means different things to different people. Sustainability has been called many things – an oxymoron, nebulous, fuzzy, a pipe-dream – you name it. Secondly, it is also huge in scope. Is it possible at all for one person to know enough to say useful things about the economy, the society and culture, international relations, about forests, about water pollution, climate change, technology and innovation, about agriculture, about social movement?

So, intellectually, there are disciplinary boundaries that one has to cross if one is to analyse sustainable development from a holistic angle. And as a student of public policy, I had no choice but to look at sustainability comprehensively.

In practice, natural resources such as forests, water, minerals, energy – are all managed by many agencies, which often requires a high degree of specialisation. This often leads to policy fragmentation and silos. And mind you this challenge is not unique to Malaysia.

I then realised why nobody had even bothered to write a book like what I had promised to Perdana (or the Programme). It was just plain hard...

Out of this desperation, I started to work on different projects, studies, consulting – some intentionally, some by chance, others by force. In the words of a policy scholar Charles Lindblom – I had to muddle my way through a very very complex scholarly and operational waters. So that was how 8 months turned into many years.

This book in a way is a chronicle of this intellectual journey that led to the conceptualisation of the different chapters in the book. Three chapters deal with what I would call classical environmental issues – nature protection, pollution control, and natural resource management. In addition there are also quintessential sustainability issues – climate change, green economy, sustainable society and institutions.

But one thing was still missing – what is the red thread, what is the glue that would bring all the chapters together, what is the ‘story’ than binds the book together?

By chance, around 2008, I started collaborating with one of the oldest environmental NGOs in Malaysia. The Environmental Protection Society Malaysia or EPSM. After decades of project-based advocacy, EPSM decided to address the systemic roots of unsustainability - the institutions. They wanted to instigate a discourse on institutional change in Malaysia. It was too costly to hire Professor Dovers, a global authority on institutions for sustainability, to work with them. So they got a student of Dovers instead, that is yours sincerely, whose service was pro bono. That was how I started to assist EPSM with their high-level policy advocacy campaign called ‘SLIM’ or Sustainable Living in Malaysia. I was tasked to articulate on the institutional challenge for sustainable development. It was during this period and this engagement that Mano Maniam, the man with many hats who’s also a wordsmith, suggested the title ‘The Sustainable Shift’ for a keynote paper in a meeting held in Bursa Malaysia in 2010.

That explains the title of the book, how it came about. In this book, The Sustainability Shift is premised upon three key reforms:

- From environment to sustainability
- From organisation to institutions
- From policy statement to policy implementation

And the book also advocates the reform of Malaysia's institutional hardware, software, and 'heartware' to nurture an inclusive and sustainable society.

But this idea is still one that makes sense from a 15,000 feet elevation. What does sustainability mean for Malaysia? How can it be internalised by the Department of Environment, or the Ministry of Home Affairs, or by the local authorities in Kedah for instance? As a policy wonk I did not understand much about what's happening on the ground. Not by chance but by force this time, I was tasked to lead a community-engagement project in Tasik Chini. This was part of a five-country comparative study sponsored by The Nippon Foundation Fellowships for Asian Public Intellectuals which I am still a part of. This 4-year study turned a professional relationship into genuine friendships with the local community of Tasik Chini. I owe it to Batin Awang Alok, Kak Nor, and the incorruptible Encik Ismail that policy is not just about some motherhood statements in a policy document. Policy is also what is delivered or not delivered on the ground, with real life impact on the wellbeing of day-to-day people. Social justice is writ large in our quest for sustainability.

I also learned along the way that academic or specialist knowledge is just one way of looking at the world. Knowledge co-exists – be they individual knowledge, community knowledge, specialist knowledge, strategic knowledge – and here I owe a debt of gratitude to ISIS Malaysia for hosting me for close to five years.

But in the world of formal knowledge production, the disciplinary boundaries are sharply delineated. This boundary became pronounced when I was looking for a publisher to print the Sustainability Shift. When I approached a popular and generalist publishing house, the editor said "I enjoyed reading your manuscript, but can we remove your charts and illustrations?". When I approached an academic publishing house, they asked me to insert more theoretical discussions and include more charts!" Areca Books came to the rescue by agreeing to jointly publish this work. I would like to thank Khoo Salma Nasution and Abdur-Razaq Lubis for their open-mindedness in publishing what they call as a 'semi-academic' book.

Distinguished guests,

As we speak today, sustainable development has grown to be an important global agenda. On 25th September 2016, the world celebrated the inauguration of the Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 cross-cutting goals, 179 targets and hundreds of indicators that will guide development until the year 2030. Sustainability is no longer a mere environmental concept championed by environmentalists alone.

Today, its expression is more balanced with human development occupying centre stage. The term is currently used in areas as diverse as energy policy, pension reform, public finance and labour market. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the renowned economist last year declared we have entered the age of sustainable

development. The sustainability idea is fastly becoming the central public policy framework of our time and the future.

Increasingly we see the application of green economy not just in developed countries but also by emerging powers such as China, India and South Korea. There's big money to be made by embracing the sustainability agenda to the tune of trillions US dollars. The book argues that Malaysia has the potential to be one of the frontrunner countries in this domain if she can put her act together.

I would like to end this introduction by recalling the wise words from two giants from the past. Victor Hugo and Pramodya Ananta Toer.

I found myself walking in the streets of Paris last week. The gloomy late autumn reminded me of the French novelist and poet Victor Hugo. It was Hugo who once said "You can resist an invading army; you cannot resist an idea whose time has come". I think this is true for sustainability. It is an idea whose time has come, and we have to embrace it *in toto* with an open heart. In Malaysia, we have to find ways to move beyond rhetoric, sloganeering and lip-service treatment on the topic.

On my part, I have tried my level best to position sustainability as a conceivable policy focus in the Malaysian context. For the great Indonesian writer Pramodya Ananta Toer, his writings are his own spiritual children:

"Mereka (tulisan) itu adalah anak-anak rohani yang keluar dari jasad saya. Anak-anak rohani itu ada yang mati muda dan ada yang masih hidup sesuai dengan umur zamannya"

Just like parents, an author conceives and nurtures a book, and once it is out, the book will have a life of its own. The parents will have little control over its fate. I have written this book, and I hope it will have a good long life, I hope it will empower people to confront the insecurity that comes from unsustainable development pathways. If these are too ambitious, I hope Sustainability Shift will at least open up debates about our relationship with the ecosystem, about the character of development, about what constitutes national progress and about a political system that balances the dominant economic rationality with ecological rationality.

Happy Shifting everyone!

Thank you.