



# ***MALAYSIA SDG WEBINAR***

## **MALAYSIA'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE DECADE FOR ACTION**

**7 AUGUST 2020**

***Malaysia SDG Webinar***  
**Malaysia's Sustainable Development:  
The Decade for Action**

**7 August 2020**

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## A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Malaysia SDG Webinar “Malaysia's Sustainable Development: The Decade for Action” was organised on 7 August 2020. The event provided a platform for stakeholders from the government, civil society organisations and academia to discuss important issues pertaining to Malaysia’s pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The event was also an opportunity for all parties to share different perspectives on the challenges faced, and the way forward for sustainable development in Malaysia.

The key takeaways derived from the event are as follows:

- i. Despite laudable efforts to improve sustainable development in Malaysia, we still lag behind in the progress of several critical SDGs.
- ii. The monitoring and evaluation process of SDG-centric policies still pose a challenge.
- iii. Partnerships between various stakeholders, such as academia, local governments and the private sector, are central to achieving SDGs.
- iv. Innovative approaches are required to instil a sustainable mindset among society.

From these key takeaways, the following recommendations are suggested to be undertaken by the various key stakeholders:

- i. Engage communities in sustainable development programmes from start to finish.
- ii. Engage the academia to assist in community outreach and closing data gaps.
- iii. Follow through with enacting the Climate Change Act.
- iv. Make addressing the issue of stunting a national priority.

## **B. PROGRAMME**

### ***Malaysia SDG Webinar*** **Malaysia's Sustainable Development: The Decade for Action**

**Friday, 7 August 2020**

- 10.00 am : Opening Remarks by Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam  
*Chairman, ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)*
- Recorded Opening Statement by Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah AO  
*Founder and Chairman of Sunway Group, Chair of SDSN Malaysia*
- Recorded Ministerial Management by Dato' Sri Mustapa bin Mohamed  
*Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Economic Affairs*
- 10.05 am : Presentation by Dr Zunika Mohamed  
*Deputy Director General (Macro), Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department Malaysia and SDSN Malaysia Leadership Council Member*
- 10.20 am : Presentation by Lavanya Rama Iyer  
*Head, Policy and Climate Change, WWF Malaysia*

- 10.35 am : Presentation by Prof. Woo Wing Thye  
*Distinguished Professor of Economics, University of California Davis; Vice President, SDSN Asia; and Director, Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development*
- 10.50 am : Presentation by Prof. Dato' Dr Mazlin bin Mokhtar  
*Director, Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI) and SDSN Malaysia Leadership Council Member*
- 11.05 am : Moderated Q&A Session
- 11.30 pm : End of Session

## C. EVENT RAPPORTEUR REPORT

### i. **Opening Remarks by Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam** *Chairman, ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)*



Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam began by congratulating both the Asian Strategy and Leadership Incorporated (ASLI) and Jeffrey Sachs Centre (JSC) for their efforts in putting the webinar together. He then highlighted Malaysia's modest improvement in global sustainability rankings. According to the latest 2020 Sustainable Development Report by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Malaysia moved up from the 66th position in 2019 to the 60th position in 2020.

However, Malaysia still faces many challenges in achieving sustainability. Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam explained the webinar's purpose is to gather prominent thought leaders on sustainability to provide their insights as well as discuss Malaysia's opportunities and challenges in the field of sustainability.

### ii. **Recorded Opening Statement by Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah AO** *Founder and Chairman of Sunway Group, Chair of SDSN Malaysia*



In his opening statement, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah emphasised how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the threats to our future into sharp focus. It is therefore pertinent that our economic recovery from the pandemic is accompanied by the necessary reforms for a more sustainable world. Fortunately, the path towards transforming existing structures and policies has already been mapped out for us. The seventeen agreed-upon Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a holistic global vision towards building a better world to live in.

Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah also took the opportunity to speak about SDSN's recognition of Sunway's strong track record in embracing the SDGs. The SDSN has

selected Sunway City Kuala Lumpur as one of three cities in the world to oversee continent-wide initiatives.

Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah stressed that Sunway's involvement in the webinar is an acknowledgement that the government is not solely responsible for the realisation of the SDGs. Achieving the SDGs instead requires a whole-of-society approach involving the commitment of the private sector, academia, civil society, and every single individual.

**iii. Recorded Ministerial Message by Dato' Sri Mustapa bin Mohamed**  
*Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Economic Affairs*



Dato' Sri Mustapa bin Mohamed's address began with the acknowledgement that SDGs are a critical component for Malaysia's development. The SDGs, along with the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV 2030), will be embedded in the upcoming 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan. This complements the government's efforts to ensure that Malaysians understand the importance of achieving SDGs and accomplishing sustainable development.

However, Dato' Sri Mustapa stressed that the government cannot achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by itself. Partnerships, shared resources and innovation are all needed to shape a better and more equal future for everyone. Dato' Sri Mustapa called upon all Malaysians from the private sector, non-governmental organisations as well as individuals to be aware of these shared responsibilities. He then ended his address by welcoming any instructive and pragmatic recommendations from the webinar's eminent panel.

**iv. Presentation by Dr Zunika Mohamed**

*Deputy Director General (Macro), Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department Malaysia and SDSN Malaysia Leadership Council Member*



In Dr Zunika's presentation, titled '*National Directions in Achieving the SDGs*', she focused on three dimensions of the government's efforts in achieving the SDGs.

In the first part of the presentation, Dr Zunika spoke on the implementation of the SDGs in Malaysia. She remarked that it should be relatively easier for Malaysia to embrace SDGs as Malaysia's development has always taken economic, social and environmental perspectives into account. In fact, the concept of sustainable development has long been embedded in our national long-term policies. At present, the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department is already looking into the SPV 2030.

Additionally, the ministry has also just launched the Green Technology Financing Scheme (GTFS) 2.0, which will provide tax incentives for green technology. The scheme complements investment acts which focus on promoting renewable energy as well as energy efficiency. Dr Zunika noted that other possible avenues for SDG financing lie in private sectors' CSR programmes, international sources, crowdfunding and social entrepreneurship.

The second part of Dr Zunika's presentation elaborated on the monitoring and evaluation of SDGs. Malaysia has established a governance structure to oversee the implementation of SDGs. This governance structure consists of a council and will eventually report the overall implementation of the SDGs to the United Nations. In terms of monitoring, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) has developed a system to assess and keep track of Malaysia's progress in achieving SDGs.

The final part of the presentation focused on the issues and challenges that Malaysia currently faces in implementing the SDGs. Among the challenges include weak

coordination and low funding. Gaps in data also hinder the preparation of national reports, and the government has difficulty localising the implementation of SDGs.

**v. Presentation by Lavanya Rama Iyer**  
*Head, Policy and Climate Change, WWF Malaysia*



Lavanya started off her presentation, titled '*Malaysia's Sustainable Development: The Decade for Action, The Environmental Pillar*', by pointing out that nature is cross-cutting and underpins the achievement of all the SDGs. Many of the SDGs are fundamentally reliant on biodiversity and ecosystems being protected. However, Malaysia's performance in implementing SDGs relevant to the environmental pillar is poor. The progress of relevant SDGs, such as climate action, life below water and life on land, has been stagnating for some time.

She emphasised that the slow pace of SDG implementation has negative implications for us. The prevalence of zoonotic diseases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has been on the rise due to the mismanagement of nature.

Lavanya went on to highlight a few policy and enforcement challenges, citing the lack of a comprehensive framework in relation to the governance of our forests and marine areas. Malaysia is still part of an illegal wildlife trade hub, and the continued illegal poaching of tigers poses a security threat. Elsewhere, the loss of fisheries threatens our economy and food security.

A few interventions were put forward, including amending the constitution to include the right to a clean environment. Lavanya also called to look into the issue of carbon pricing as part of meeting Malaysia's long-term goal of being a low-carbon nation, as well as reframing monetary use for SDGs as an investment rather than as a cost.

Wrapping up, Lavanya lauded the government's plans to break down silos between government sectors. However, she added there was still work to be done to encourage

holistic planning, citing the example of how various overlapping agencies were presently responsible for waste management.

**vi. Presentation by Prof. Woo Wing Thye**

*Distinguished Professor of Economics, University of California Davis; Vice President, SDSN Asia; and Director, Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development*



Prof. Woo's presentation titled '*On Accelerating Sustainable Development, Malaysia Boleh?*' focused on the progress of children's welfare at the forefront of achieving SDGs. In the introduction, he cited an SDSN report which showed that for the past six years, the top ten countries in sustainable development rankings have been located in Western Europe. On the other hand, the bottom ten countries in sustainable development rankings have been some of the poorest countries.

Prof. Woo explained that high-income countries generally do better in sustainable development rankings as they have the resources to undertake social protection, invest in quality education and support a comprehensive health network. However, this may not be the case for all high-income countries.

In the case of Malaysia, we perform poorly in the dimension of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) despite boasting zero absolute poverty. The prevalence of stunting and wasting among children are indicators of Malaysia's poor performance in achieving SDG 2. Stunting is associated with a higher death rate, higher sickness rate and lower IQ. Stunted girls are also more likely give birth to stunted children in the future.

The average percentage of the stunting phenomena for children among other upper middle-income countries is around 6.9%. Surprisingly, Malaysia's percentage stands at a whopping 20.7%. In fact, the percentage of stunting prevalence in Malaysia as of 2017 was the same as in 1997.

Prof. Woo remarked that this reflects a failure in the Malaysian education system – when we teach students about food, we fail to inform them about food which is nutritionally good for them. He concluded by stating that Malaysia’s issue of hunger could be easily tackled because we have the economic capacity to do so.

**vii. Presentation by Prof. Dato' Dr Mazlin bin Mokhtar**

*Director, Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI) and SDSN Malaysia Leadership Council Member*



At the start of his presentation, Prof. Mazlin highlighted the status of several SDGs at a national level. He lamented the lack of data on SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and requested for academia to step forward to assist with relevant research. In addition, Malaysia is performing poorly for SDG 17 (Partnerships to Achieve the Goals). Prof. Mazlin called for scrutiny on whether the issues stem from partnerships among ourselves or partnerships with other countries.

On a more positive note, an official study has already been launched in an effort to turn the water sector into an important industry. This is in line with the visions of the Water Sector Transformation 2040. Prof. Mazlin remarked that this study could accelerate the attainment of SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Prof. Mazlin then talked about his recommended ways forward for Malaysia. The recommendations included increasing the research work put into achieving the SDGs and tapping into our youths’ potential. He also called for more collaborations between the government, the business sector as well as the community at large.

Prof. Mazlin then elaborated on the United Nations’ Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) approach, arguing that we should frame our environmental disaster response plans with the DRR in mind. As we were quick and efficient in responding to the pandemic, it should not be a problem for us to replicate the same kind of efficiency when it comes

to countering environmental disasters. We also have to acknowledge that our issues require solutions that are a combination of public health efficiency, economic intervention and planetary intervention. In wrapping up his presentation, Prof. Mazlin emphasised on the need for a circular economy for purposes of sustainability.

### **viii. Moderated Q&A Session**

The session was moderated by Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam. He began the session by stating that good governance was dependent on the willingness to constantly learn. In his view, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic requires abandoning the ‘business as usual’ approach. Therefore, the postponement of the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan should be viewed positively as it gives time for the government to develop a balanced plan which is inclusive to everyone.

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam then selected a few questions posed by the webinar participants to be answered. The key takeaways of the session are as follows:

#### **1) Getting the private sector involved**

The Ministry of Environment and Water is primarily responsible for overseeing Malaysia’s commitment to reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 45% by 2030. However, Dr Zunika Mohamed pointed out that private industries share the responsibility as well. One of the strategies being employed by the government to incentivise green practices by the private sector is through the Government Green Procurement (GGP) initiative. The GGP initiative requires 20% of selected products and services procured by the government to be green-labelled. In addition, Dr Zunika mentioned that the government has plans to review the Environmental Quality Act.

#### **2) Harnessing the power of nature-based solutions**

Lavanya pointed out that being a nature-rich country, Malaysia should be doing more to protect its natural resources and harness the power of nature-based solutions (NBS). An example of an NBS in action is how mangrove covers

mitigated the damage of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. A framework is needed to harness the power of NBS for various purposes, including climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as food and water security. Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam added that the quality of policy implementation in Malaysia has been on the decline, and that we require more stringent monitoring of policy implementation.

### 3) **Decentralising efforts to achieve SDGs**

Prof. Woo pointed out that while the federal government was spearheading several notable SDG efforts, more needs to be done at the state and local level. He argued that while policy-making was initially centralised due to Malaysia's shortage of skilled human capital, we now have a sufficiently educated workforce to pursue the decentralisation of policy-making.

Prof. Woo noted that state governments also need to have their financial power increased. As land constitutes the major resource revenue for state governments, they are incentivised to over-exploit the land through activities such as logging. A suggested way to increase the financial power of state governments is to attract green investments into their respective states. Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam agreed on this point on decentralisation, stating that restoring local council elections would complement these efforts.

### 4) **Engaging multiple stakeholders and fostering partnerships**

Continuing along the recommendation to decentralise efforts to achieve SDGs, Prof. Mazlin pushed for the pursuit of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by engaging multiple stakeholders. Among his suggestions were for the academia to collaborate more, and for religious leaders to incorporate messages about SDGs into their sermons.

He also highlighted the untapped potential of development committee members spread across 16,000 villages throughout Malaysia. He drew comparisons to the *Saemaul Undong* initiative in South Korea in the 1970s, where over 34,000 villages were empowered by the federal government to take concrete efforts to improve their respective quality of living. This helped the South Korean economy to develop rapidly and eventually surpass Malaysia.

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam concluded the webinar by thanking all participants for the fruitful discussion. He added that as fostering partnerships was a central theme to the event, he hoped that the Jeffrey Sachs Center and ASLI will collaborate more often in the future to organise similar events.

## D. CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

There are four main takeaways from the webinar. First, despite laudable efforts to improve our sustainable development, we still lag behind in the progress of several SDGs. Second, monitoring and evaluating the success of SDG-centric policies remains a challenge. Third, collaborations and partnerships between various stakeholders are necessary to achieve SDGs. Lastly, innovative approaches are required to instil a sustainable mindset among society.

Based on these four takeaways, ASLI CPPS would like to make the following recommendations:

**i. Engage communities in sustainable development programmes from start to finish**

Currently, many sustainable development policies are imposed by the federal government in a top-down fashion. A better approach would be to engage communities in sustainable development programmes from the very beginning. This would transfer valuable policy-making knowledge to these communities, and empower them with self-determination to decide on what is best to advance their respective communities.

One such model worth examining further is the successful *Saemaul Undong* initiative of South Korea, which was a community-driven development programme implemented in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>. The initiative has contributed significantly to improved community well-being in rural communities. This was achieved by way of poverty reduction through an increase in household income, financing of rural productive activities, increase in the level of access to mechanized farming as well as electrification of households, to name a few.

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Development Bank. (2012) The *Saemaul Undong* Movement in the Republic of Korea: Sharing Knowledge on Community-Driven Development. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29881/saemaul-undong-movement-korea.pdf>.

Although this was a movement formulated in the 1970s meant for the upskilling of Korean villagers, it would still be helpful to draw inspiration where necessary to push for sustainable development programmes in the thousands of villages across Malaysia.

**ii. Engage the academia to assist in community outreach and closing data gaps**

Several data gaps hinder the effective crafting and implementation of sustainability-centric policies, for example policies to reduce inequalities and encourage responsible consumption. The academia should step in to assist the government in collecting and analysing data relevant to these areas of sustainability.

In addition, academia should also play the role of community leaders in spreading awareness about SDGs among local communities. Such outreach programmes could educate communities about the importance of a balanced diet, or build capacities among communities to initiate their own sustainability efforts.

**iii. Follow through with enacting the Climate Change Act**

As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, Malaysia has pledged its allegiance towards the global collective movement committed towards the reduction of climate-altering pollution. However, there are no legally binding frameworks to hold Malaysia accountable for its production of carbon emissions.

It is recommended for the Malaysian government to take into account the United Kingdom's Climate Change Act 2008. The UK Climate Change Act 2008 has a provision that makes it compulsory for the UK to comply with its commitment to emission reduction. As such, the current Malaysian government should follow through with the former government's plans to

enact the Climate Change Act<sup>2</sup> which was to be modelled after UK's legislation.

This would be a big step in the right direction of reducing climate-altering pollution because it would pave the way to introduce several sustainable mechanisms. These mechanisms include carbon pricing, which puts a price on carbon emissions, and a carbon market, which allows carbon credits to be bought and sold. Such legislation would also incentivise industry players to take concrete steps towards reducing their emissions.

#### iv. **Make addressing the issue of stunting a national priority**

Childhood stunting remains an overlooked problem in Malaysia, despite its prevalence here surpassing that of less developed countries. The National Children's Wellbeing Roadmap, first announced by the government in 2018, was a step in the right direction in addressing the problem. Although not much news has appeared on the roadmap's development since then, the government should make it a priority to follow up with the roadmap's formulation to tackle the problem of stunting in a holistic manner.

Many comprehensive policy recommendations can be found in the 2019 JCI-JSC report on childhood stunting in Malaysia. Among these include providing unconditional cash transfers to households which have children below the age of two years old<sup>3</sup>. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, these transfers should also be extended to recipients of current school feeding programmes such as Rancangan Makanan Tambahan and Program Sarapan Percuma<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Malay Mail. (16 May 2019) Yeo: At least 24 months for climate change act to be tabled if necessary. Retrieved from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/16/yeo-at-least-24-months-for-climate-change-act-to-be-tabled-if-necessary/1753644>.

<sup>3</sup> Kok, D. (2019) Stunting in Malaysia: Costs, Causes and Courses for Action. JCI-JSC Working Paper. Retrieved from <https://jci.edu.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/JCI-JSC-WP-2019-01-Stunting-in-Malaysia.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Kok, D. (2020) Children and Coronavirus: A Social Protection View. JCI-JSC Policy Brief. Retrieved from <https://jci.edu.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/JCI-JSC-PB-2020-01-Children-and-Coronavirus-RELEASE.pdf>.

## **E. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*[End of Report]*