

Lessons on Sustainability in Challenging Times

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In 2019, leaders from around the world renewed their commitment to meeting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Launched in 2015, the SDGs are a universal collection of goals, targets and indicators designed to safeguard the well-being of the planet and improve the lives of people everywhere.

However, the SDG Decade of Action got off to one of the roughest starts imaginable. As the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the globe, governments scrambled to redirect resources to the immediate health and socioeconomic crises before them.

For many countries, the current national priority is to rebuild their battered economies while fending off potential new waves of infection. Yet amid the aftermath of the pandemic's first wave is the growing concern that progress on meeting the SDGs has stalled – or in some cases – slid back. Many environment-based SDGs have faded out of public attention, while income inequality has spiked due to mass unemployment.

Despite these setbacks, SDGs should remain at the heart of economic recovery strategies because they play an important role in building resilience to future crises. After all, countries which showcased good progress in the SDGs were able to avoid the worst of the pandemic. We need not look further than Malaysia, where our basic safety net for the vulnerable (SDG 1: No Poverty) and robust healthcare system (SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing) were instrumental in helping to flatten the curve.

This call for the refocus on SDGs was made by Tan Sri Dr Jeffrey Cheah, Chairman of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), during a webinar jointly hosted by the Jeffrey Sachs Center (JSC) and Asian Strategy and Leadership Incorporated (ASLI) in August.

The webinar's panellists echoed this sentiment. While they commended Malaysia's improved ranking by six places on the 2020 SDG Index, the panellists also stressed that our progress in several SDGs has been stagnating for some time. Webinar moderator Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam summed it up succinctly – the pandemic provides a powerful impetus to abandon the business-as-usual mentality and explore new approaches to meet our SDG targets.

In our search for innovative approaches to achieve our sustainability goals, we should draw two important lessons from our successful response to the Covid-19 crisis.

First, decentralised collaborations play an important role in advancing our national agendas. While the government took the lead in managing the Covid-19 outbreak, we saw a surge in community spirit to help alleviate the pandemic's impact. For example, a movement began among various social enterprises, logistics providers and materials suppliers to produce and deliver personal protective equipment to medical frontliners. Elsewhere, universities collaborated with civil society organisations (CSOs) to conduct Covid-19 tests for disadvantaged groups.

Decentralised collaborations are crucial in the context of achieving the SDGs. There are limits to the current top-down approach as it often takes years for a proposed policy to trickle down into concrete implementation.

Even then, local governments and relevant authorities face difficulties in transferring relevant knowledge to their subordinates.

Local strategic networks, such as the CSO-SDG Alliance and the SDG Academic Network, are examples of meaningful decentralised collaborations. These strategic networks function to keep members informed about each other's progress and coordinate members' efforts for specific projects.

The creation of local strategic networks should be encouraged by providing networking opportunities for stakeholders with common interests and building the capacity of these stakeholders. There have been successful collaborations in similar networks elsewhere which serve for inspiration. For example, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions developed a tool that allows the public to compare the data sets between member municipalities.

Second, community outreach is critical in galvanising support for a common agenda. We've witnessed how concepts of penjarakan sosial and norma baharu quickly entered everyday lexicon during the pandemic. Vital public announcements were translated into several languages, and delivered frequently via common platforms.

In contrast, the concept of sustainability is rarely heard beyond urban areas, and the perception persists that the SDGs are a lofty set of objectives for the authorities to deal with. To make sustainable development efforts appear relevant to the public, outreach programmes should be conducted in languages which are accessible to local communities. Not only will this increase the chances of the message being picked up, but it also sends positive signals to the public that their participation in sustainability efforts is valued.

Outreach efforts also involve understanding the views and concerns of local communities. These communities should be engaged in the process of developing localised sustainability-related programmes, as well as the monitoring and subsequent evaluation of programme effectiveness.

Following the earlier lesson of decentralised collaborations, each stakeholder has a different role to play in community outreach efforts. Academia and think tanks are best positioned to engage potential stakeholders and provide technical training for community leaders. CSOs and religious institutions should capitalise on their strong relationship with local communities. Financial assistance for relevant programmes can be in turn sourced from local governments and the private sector.

There are crucial lessons in long-term sustainability to be learned even as we rebuild from this unprecedented crisis. A holistic whole-of-society approach is the best strategy for making tangible progress towards important national agendas. More than ever, we need to draw on the same collaborative and innovative spirit displayed during the crisis to reach our national goals of sustainable development.

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