

# Living with the environment

We cannot have development without taking care of our surroundings



Transformation Unplugged by IDRIS JALA

The recent weeks of choking haze due to peat and bush fires triggered by a long drawn-out drought, and excessive rain which led to flooding in Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan and Johor, suggest that the normality of our weather has been affected.

In the Klang Valley many of us had to experience water rationing and it is no easy thing to have your routine disrupted this way. But having said that, I believe our time in the sun as far as the weather is concerned is up and we should be better prepared for these shocks.

Some things will have to change. For example, the haze is due to hot spots happening in Malaysia and many other South-East Asian countries, based on the Asean Meteorological data surveys. There should be concerted efforts across regional authorities to prevent and stop the causes of these hotspots.

Presently, there is a Regional Haze Action Plan Co-ordination and Support Unit within the Asean Secretariat, established in April 1999 by the Haze Technical Task Force (HTTF) and Asean Environment Ministers. Its function is to coordinate and develop programmes aimed at addressing this problem and what we need now is strong will to implement solutions.

Meanwhile, in dealing with drought, more aggressive planning will be required on the government's part and this is something that is already being done by the relevant ministries. I came across an interesting chart by the National Drought Mitigation Centre at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln explaining the 'Hydro-illogical Cycle'. When drought occurs, society becomes

acutely aware of the problem and starts becoming concerned about the impact on their lives. This leads to panic and cries for immediate solutions. However, when it rains and we have enough water, society sinks back into an apathetic state, resumes business as usual and forgets the need to save water.

In my work and social engagements, I am also often asked - how does the GTP and ETP address environmental concerns? My answer is quick and certain. The single biggest air quality project under the ETP is the mass rapid transit system (MRT) for Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley which I believe will be the game changer for the environment in Greater KL.

Imagine this. We now have six million people - one out of five Malaysians - living in the Greater KL area, basically the city and the Kuala Lumpur-Klang Valley. By 2020, one out of three Malaysians will live here. Clearly we cannot continue with business as usual. We have to do something drastic to make sure the city does not grind to a crunching halt, ruining productivity and increasing the already high levels of frustration commuters feel sitting in traffic.

But before we can reduce the numbers of vehicles on the road we must improve our public transport to provide an affordable, convenient and comfortable alternative.

What we want to do is to take as much as 50% of the cars and perhaps as many of motorcycles that are on the road now off it when the MRT is ready, up and running. That will result in a major reduction of emissions in the Klang Valley area,

improve urban development and go a long way to improve air quality.

The MRT project made significant progress in 2013, with work continuing on the system's elevated guideway foundation and underground station excavation following the delivery of 10 Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs) to various sites. In June 2013, the Land Public Transport Commission, or SPAD presented its final implementation plans for MRT Line 2 and Line 3 to the Economic Council. Just over a week ago, we heard news that Line 2 has been approved by the federal government.

Solid waste management is also something we really need to fix. We are not making much progress here because nobody wants an incinerator in their backyard even though this is an efficient way to manage waste with very little pollution.

Instead, we continue with the old method of landfills with all their attendant problems such as environmental pollution and groundwater contamination. Recycling is extremely slow to take-off and until today for too many households in Malaysia, rubbish is not segregated.

In countries like the Netherlands, if there is no segregation of waste, there is no collection. Australian authorities are stricter - if rubbish is not segregated, a warning is issued followed by a fine if the offender persists.

For Malaysia, it would be great if concerned groups will work with us to encourage segregation of refuse.

If that is done, we will be able to also add economic value through proper waste disposal. The Government can make a business

out of waste collection because it is possible to recycle with segregation and to isolate biomass materials that can be profitably utilised.

And then there is water. We need to plan forward. Pipes can't be dug in a few days. Treatment plants take years to be built.

Meantime, burgeoning industries need a constant and reliable supply of water. All that cannot be achieved without finding good, sustainable sources of primary water.

We simply cannot pollute our water. If we want to reach our aspiration of raising the water standards of the Klang-Gombak River and its tributaries to recreational standards (Class IIb), as targeted under the ETP's River of Life (RoL) project, we have to start from the source and go down all the way to the river mouth.

On the Government's part, the river cleaning programme has recorded many achievements since the basic foundation for the execution of the RoL project was laid in 2012. Key achievements include DBKL's installation of 69 gross pollutant traps under its jurisdiction. The Department of Irrigation and Drainage Malaysia exceeded its target by completing the construction of 359 gross pollutant traps, log booms and trash rakes. Other achievements recorded include the continued reduction of oil and grease levels from a total of 63 communal grease traps installed within the areas under the Majlis Perbandaran Selayang and Majlis Perbandaran Ampang Jaya's jurisdiction.

Public awareness campaigns are also actively being carried out

through engagement of local communities living along the river as well as events like the RoL River Carnival held in conjunction with World Rivers Day on 29 September 2013.

Do remember that the results of river cleaning also require a longer period of time to become apparent, as shown by the experience of Singapore, which took 10 years to clean its river.

The public must realise that preservation of the environment, which is a key part of sustainability, comes with a cost. We as a nation and as a people must be prepared to pay this cost. We have to change, we must become more responsible, and become much more environmentally aware.

Remember, our purpose in transformation is not only to achieve developed status by reaching a per capita income of US\$15,000 by 2020 but to do it in an inclusive and sustainable manner. That means spreading development to as many people as possible and to ensure that our resources, including our environment is maintained and sustained for future generations to enjoy.

Let's bear this burden willingly and joyfully for now, for we will surely reap the benefits not long after. Hopefully, with some tender care and attention, the environment will see a quick recovery.

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