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A CSO & Academic Perspectives
MID-TERM REVIEW
The Implementation of SDGs in
Malaysia (2015 to 2022)

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Looking Back: Ascribing Malaysia's Progress towards Achieving Agenda 2030

by

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INTRODUCTION

This is a policy context paper designed to ascribe Malaysia's progress in embracing Sustainable Development Goals for the past 8 years, since Agenda 2030 was proclaimed in 2015. This paper focusses on SDG#16, which is to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. This implies the provision of accessibility to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all level. This paper is framed, methodologically, on reflective analysis. This paper is based on the authors' collective thought on the implementation of the SDGs in Malaysia, whereby secondary data, including documents pertaining to Voluntary National Review Reports 2017 and 2021, localisation of SDGs at parliamentary constituencies, and other significant and relevant literature formed the basis of findings. The researchers' intuition too helps to mount the paper's findings. The researchers have an aggregated 55 years of academic work at higher institutions of learnings, whereby teaching, research and consultancy work and publishing research findings dominate the agenda. The paper's findings will be shared with readers in the tune of Malaysia's achievement and challenges, the gaps that need to be filled, and the way forward for the critical remaining 8 years until 2030.

Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Social justice denotes the means of respecting human rights and the redistribution of human need equally (Balasingam, 2018). To this Dewi (2021) posits that social justice is amounting to a creation of an equal balance with regard to people's welfare, underpins by equality in division of labour and income as exhibit by fair wages, balanced workload, equal working hours and fair division of responsibility. Strong social justice invokes on environment of peace and tranquility. However, Kornienko and Syryamkina (2015) opined that ideal-based justice couldn't be realized optimally. Malaysia, for example, which have more than 40 government agencies and

local authorities that are either directly or indirectly involved in tourism development (National Tourism Policy 2020-2030), a sheer number of such entities which needs a herculean effort to coordinate and govern. On the other hand, however tough the journey ahead is, it would make the nation's institutions stronger, a necessity to achieve SDG#16, if appropriate measures are taken and implemented. SDG#16 calls for strong institutions, blessed with transparent, responsive and accountable attributes (United Nations, 2016).

Achievement and Challenges

Localising Sustainable Development Goals at Parliamentary Constituencies

The United Nations proclaimed Agenda 2030 in 2015, though, it was much sometime later that its sidekicks i.e., all the 17 SDGs found their way into the realm of Malaysia's life. Localising of SDGs at parliamentary constituencies, started when the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) on

SDGs was incepted in October 2019. Members of Parliament, whom represented this bipartisan group identified and selected parliament constituencies to advocate implementation of SDGs, reaching local communities at the ground level. It is one of the ways, very important in that sense, bridging to the grassroots, resulting in positive recipience of the United Nations' goal. This multi-stakeholder group, championed by respective Members of Parliament, identified local development issues and formulated ways to find solutions to these issues. In 2020, this APPGM reached out to 10 parliamentary constituencies as a pilot phase program. Projects were funded by a special grant of RM1.6 million, put aside by the Ministry of Finance. A total of 34 SDGs solution-based projects were identified and prioritized, ranging from the field of education, inequality, poverty, environment and waste management, focussing on four categories of people; rural area's folks, urban area B40 including squatters and those leaving in low-cost housing projects, youth and women, and specific disadvantage groups including Peninsular Malaysia's Orang Asli, indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak, and migrants (Jayasooria, 2021). The Members of Parliament provide the livewire to debates on SDGs in the legislative arena.

In 2021, another RM5 million were put aside. Similarly, like what had transpired in 2020, Members of Parliament who were the policymakers themselves and local leaders initiated and facilitated the so- called actions to localised SDGs at parliamentary constituencies. By the end

of 2021, 20 more parliamentary constituencies have become involved in grassroots implementation of SDGs, a double increased from the previous year. This reflects an extensive expansion of the program. According to APPGM-SDG 2021 Annual Report, prioritised issues within the 20 parliamentary constituents involved in 2021, were categorized into 11 themes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Themes of Prioritised Issues

	Themes
1	Youth, development, employment and drugs
2	Food security and agrofood supply chain
3	Welfare and right of single mothers and gender mainstreaming
4	Poverty and imbalanced development (infrastructure, including digital connectivity)
5	Environmental governance (pollution, human-wildlife conflict, oceans and river governance and wastemanagement)
6	Social protection, social safety and welfare
7	Land tenure, security and settlements
8	Disaster management (floods) and climate change
9	Rights of refugees, migrants and stateless
10	Sustainable tourism
11	Affordable housing and urban poverty

Source: APPGM-SDG 2021 Annual Report

Collectively, the prioritised issues under all the 11 themes touched all the 17 SDGs (please refer to Table 2). More so, the issues have strong ties to SDG#16, as well as SDG#17, evidenced with the overwhelming quantification. On other note, since the authors have some working research experience on sustainable tourism (theme number 10 of Table 1), an approach used in tourism industry or field, sustainable tourism will be touched in later part of this paper.

Table 2: The Number of Times SDGs Been Touched Based on 11 Themes

SD G #1	SD G #2	SD G #3	SD G #4	SD G #5	SD G #6	SD G #7	SD G #8	SD G #9	SD G #10	SD G #11	SD G #12	SD G #13	SD G #14	SD G #15	SD G #16	SD G #17
6	5	6	3	3	1	2	3	5	9	7	2	3	1	1	11	11

Source: Authors' analysis

Another positive note is that the program of localising SDGs at Parliamentary constituencies delved into a different form of engagement, which was capacity building on the understanding and awareness of SDGs. However, this capacity building process was very challenging when only two parliamentary constituencies; Batu Kawan and Permatang Pauh, were involved (APPGM-SDG 2021 Annual Report). Most of the 27 participants of each capacity building program (the same number applies to each constituency), agreed that the program raised their level of awareness on SDGs.

Civil Society Groups and Non-Governmental Organisations' Contributions

According to APPGM-SDG 2021 Annual Report, there were Civil Society Groups and Non-Governmental Organisations that contributed through a working groups format, a process initiated by the APPGM-SDG Alliance, with regard to localisation of SDGs. There were 5 working groups all together, though they were not named (see Table 3 below). The table illustrates the working groups (identified by numbers) relationships to specific SDGs they were tasked to deal with.

Table 3: Working Groups and SDGs Involved

	Working Group	Themes	SDGs
1	WG#1	Poverty and nutrition	1, 2
2	WG#2	COVID-19 and health recovery	3
3	WG#3	Inclusive economic growth	8, 10
4	WG#4	Sustainability and climate change	12, 13
5	WG#5	Governance, social cohesion and partnership	16, 17
	Total		9

CSOs and NGOs are known to inspire, and are champions of development progress in many arenas. The headings under the themes in Table 3 are such examples. There were 9 SDGs, including SDG#16, that were touched by the 5 working groups. The challenge here is to increase the number of working groups, with the involvement of more CSOs and NGOs, expanding into remaining SDGs.

Challenge can also be in a different form. While much can be said about the transformation of ideas on sustainability from the parliamentary domain to the grassroots, there is a lack of such transformation process from the Federal Government to the State Governments, and subsequently to the Local Governments.

Sustainable Tourism

In preceding segment, sustainable tourism was treated as one of the themes of prioritised issues in 20 Parliamentary Constituencies in 2021. The United Nations General Assembly of 2017 declared the year 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This declaration amplifies tourism as a tool to advance Agenda 2030, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Development Program emphasized the account of tourism's journey to achieve laid out SDGs (Hall, 2021). Contemporary dominant discourses in tourism industry reflects this approach. Beforehand, research on tourism is dominated by neoliberal market orientation, not focusing on sustainability. On the flipside Hall (2021) also remarks that it doesn't make tourism more sustainable but tourism has become less sustainable by most empirical measures.

Beach resorts as tourist destinations if properly managed would not only provide the host or local community the economic benefits but also enhance social cohesion and multistakeholder partnership, implying SDG#16. Several case studies involving small resorts on Perhentian, Redang and Kapas Island embarked by the authors, exemplified the participation of locals as labour work force on the island destinations (see Khairil & Mazlina, 2020, Mazlina et al, 2020). This reflects inclusivity of society in the tourism industry, which is known to hire fulltime and parttime workers during periodic peak and low seasons. Resorts willingly received university student-interns too. Some of these resorts that were family-owned businesses channeled their clients to other service providers on the islands when the former was unable to cater to some cliental requests due to limited resources (SDG#17).

Perhentian Island received clean treated water supplied through submarine pipeline, enforcing the Terengganu State Government's desire to provide basic services in rural isolated area. This imbues SDG#6, the provision of clean water. However, sanitation is problematic, whereby some small resorts discharged their used water to natural ponds more often than not found located behind resort buildings away from the beach front. Environment qualities do have impact on social welfare of the island's community. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive and integrated sewage system for the island destination, underlying the carrying capacity issue of holiday destinations. This is a challenge to both State and Federal Governments, whereby the capital needed for such venture is high and the image of top island destination is at stake. An environment catastrophe or incidence of disease outbreak, for

example, could severely tarnish Malaysia's image as one of the top tourist destinations in the Asia Pacific region.

On another note, resort owners' persistence during the early days of the resorts' growth, ensure decent and economic growth of the rural region, even though they faced monumental tasks when banks spurned their request for loans (SDG#8, SDG#16). Perhaps, this a venue for the state to implore.

Community-based Tourism

One of the many forms of sustainable tourism is the Community-based Tourism, acronym as CBT. CBT is inherently a tool for rural development and empowerment (SDG#8, 10, 11, 16 and 17). The authors, hereby are highlighting one program conducted by the office of the State Secretariat of Kelantan, with the help of the former in designing and facilitating a Community-based Tourism program in 2019, sometime before the advocacy of SDGs by the APPGM-SDG Alliance. The CBT program was a two- day one-night affair held in the enclosure of Min Camp, on the outskirts of Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Participants whom ranged from District Officers, staff of district offices to *Ahli Jawatankuasa Kampung*, were given exposure on some elements of sustainability, including waste management and understanding and preserving nature-based tourism products found within the vicinity of the camp. Participants were tested on their understanding of respective concepts through SWOT analysis at the end of the program. Though, until now there is no equivalent program known to be held within the state. Within the world's academic fraternity, sustainability started to take a firm footing in academic discourses at a much earlier date (Hall, 2021).

Another CBT worth mentioning here is the Batu Puteh Community Tourism Co-operative, KOPEL Berhad. CBT by KOPEL started with the opening of Miso Walai Homestay program in 2000, Sabah's first homestay program 15 years before the United Nations' proclamation of SDGs in 2015. KOPEL made in road on programs that dealt with employment provision, protection of ecosystem and biodiversity of Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary linking to current SDG#8, 12 and 15. With the help of NGOs and state authorities, KOPEL grew to become what they are now amidst the challenges of Batu Puteh Village located in interior part of Sabah, with poor accessibility, a poverty laden community and hard to convince villagers to become

co-operative member initially. KOPEL is a success story of a strong cooperative institution (SDG#16), apart from helping disadvantage group (SDG#8).

While KOPEL may be one of some best practice of co-operative run business programs, the fact is closing the gap between economically developed and well to do urban areas with poverty laden rural region is seemingly hard to achieve.

Addressing the Gaps, Way forward and Conclusion

One has to raise the stakeholders' awareness on Agenda 2030, with its 17 SDGs. The increased in number of Parliamentary Constituencies involved in localisation of SDGs programs in brief succession period reflects a positive attitude amongst Members of Parliament. This indicates the buy-in has worked rather significantly.

However, more intense buy-in should be conducted to encourage more participation from CSOs, NGOs or semi-autonomous think tank groups. The low number of working groups represented by such organisational set-ups in relevant programs mentioned in earlier segment of this paper exemplifies this notion.

The build-up in hosting human capacity building programs has to match the desires of the SDGs. There is a huge gap to fill in when there were only 2 Parliamentary Constituencies that were involved in program that disseminate understanding and awareness values pertaining to SDGs.

Localising SDGs in Malaysia requires greater innovation. Co-operation from Federal, State and Local Governments should be strongly enticed so that officials from these three levels of governance could actively participate in sustainability-related programs. A similar set-up like the APPMG-SDG Alliance should be strongly encouraged to be incepted at the state or provincial level, perhaps at a less grand scale. Local action is pillar to progress and success. The Honourable Speaker of the House of Representatives too, could influence his counterparts, in the State Legislative Assemblies in this matter.

Lastly, the policy making process in Malaysia is an inward-looking one, with the existence of a highly Centralised Government. It is best, perhaps, at this juncture to use a constructive engagement approach with different levels of administrative governments, CSOs, NGOs, semi-autonomous think tanks or even individual champions.

The all-important attributes of SDG#16 which are good governance, transparency and accountability may still far from being reachable in Malaysia. Though, tremendous progress has been seen for the past few years. The country still needs to continue “localising the SDGs”, putting energetic efforts to realise all the 17 SDGs for the next 8 years. Suffice to say that entrenching the thinking on Agenda 2030 in the minds of the stakeholders is still a big challenge for Malaysia.

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