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OUR JOURNEY MUST CONTINUE

The govt should redouble efforts to meet the goals of the UN agenda



File picture showing people at a waterfall in Templer Park, Rawang. The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda espouses the belief that no one should be left behind in enjoying health and well-being, quality education and clean water.

MANKIND has come a long way – from a hunter-gatherer society through agrarian and industrial to a sustainable society. Concern over sustainability emerged in 17th century Europe. Forest conservation then, as now, was a burning issue. John Evelyn, an English writer, reasoned in his 1662 essay, *Sylva*, that “sowing and planting of trees had to be regarded as a national duty of every landowner, in order to stop the destructive over-exploitation of natural resources”.

Since then, sustainable development has broadened its scope to encompass socio-economic development that enriches the current generation without impoverishing neither posterity nor the environment. Since the last century, the United Nations has championed sustainable development – from the setting up of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1980, through the Rio Summit and its Agenda 21, to the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). With the latter’s expiry in 2015, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is the most recent and largest ever UN initiative to keep up the pressure for sustainable development.

Going beyond the largely socio-economic development agenda of the MDGs, the 2030 agenda shifts the thinking of what development should be. Its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) espouse the right of all mankind to enjoy the fruits of socio-economic development in a fair and equitable way.

And, no one should be left behind in enjoying health and well-being, quality education and clean water, and in living in sustainable cities and communities. It shines the spotlight on urbanisation, infrastructure, gender equality and environmental protection – an issue made urgent by climate change.

These are legitimate concerns worthy of pursuit. But, have we stretched sustainable development too far to blur the focus on any one of them?

The UN views these goals as highly interconnected. This integrated approach makes sense. For example, poverty has many root causes, such as ill health, poor education, injustice and inequality. The systemic approach also implies that investments in one goal, like the game of bowling, can have a positive impact on most or all others.

Governments the world over are doing the heavy lifting to integrate SDGs into their development planning. Their actions range from transforming institutional structures to tweaking them.

Malaysia, as a signatory to the agenda, is ahead of other countries in the region in devising a governance structure, with the prime minister at the helm. The Economic Planning Unit has created an Implementation roadmap to ensure that the SDGs are incorporated in development planning. This commendable action is a culmination of past efforts at specifically dovetailing sustainability in our development agenda. The 2010 New Economic Model, which informs development planning and which espouses high income, sustainability and inclusiveness, is among the more recent ones.

There is much to be done to ensure effective execution of the SDGs. It will surely profit the government to be mindful of the following six key execution issues.

FIRST, given the budget constraints, greater work on prioritising these 17 goals and their 169 sub-goals would be the next logical step. Are we going to go for

the low-hanging “fruits” or complete the unfinished agenda of the previous MDGs? Are all the goals relevant? Will the goal of “freedom from hunger” be in our scheme of priorities when we have almost eradicated poverty?

SECOND, prioritisation itself brings tensions of its own, as the goals need to be seen as a package, that is, the goals, at least in principle, are indivisible. Even as summing prioritisation is possible, the issue of trade-offs across goals will have to be contended with. For example, while oil palm plantations are important for economic growth, they come at the expense of depleting forest cover.

Transparent coordinating mechanisms need to be erected to ensure that trade-offs among goals and programmes are made professionally and in an evidence-based manner. Trade-offs will require cost-benefit analyses across alternatives. They will also involve intense negotiations and consultations among stakeholders to minimise the adverse impact of the choices that will inevitably have to be made.

THIRD, the government has a big task ahead of ensuring alignment of the SDGs with the current strategic thrusts and focus areas of the 11th Malaysia Plan. This is not a big issue at the level of the broad goals. However, to make the match more meaningful, sub-goals or targets have to be also aligned with the current development strategies.

FOURTH, public policy can carry us only so far. We need the pri-

vate sector and non-governmental organisations to carry the burden of implementation as well. How can the government then cause businesses and civil society to minimise their carbon footprint?

FIFTH, synergies in executing the MDGs are important. They conduce to an efficient use of resources. For example, better education can uplift communities from poverty or low income and ensure well-being. We need to have a mechanism that explicitly exploits such synergies. Alluding again to the game of bowling, we need to knock down as many ten-pins in one shot.

SIXTH, should Parliament, as the custodian of public interest, have a role in all this? Parliament has many select committees – some are more active than others. Should Parliament not have a select committee on sustainable development to orchestrate the prioritisation, trade-offs and synergies in the implementation of the SDGs?

Malaysia has put her hand to the plough. As the SDGs are deserving of support, the government should resolve to redouble its implementation effort. As Francis Drake, the great English seafarer, once said: “There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory”.

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Public policy can carry us

only so far. We need the private sector and non-governmental organisations to carry the burden of implementation as well.