

**INTERNATIONAL TRAINING WORKSHOP ON DISASTER RISKS
AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**
9th to 12th JULY 2008

**“ACHIEVING QUALITY ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE
FOR A HIGHER QUALITY OF LIFE”**

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“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”

**- World Commission on Environment and Development
(Brundtland Commission), 1987**

“We have enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed. We have to learn to live simply so that others might simply live and that we might be able to continue to live”

- Bapu Ji Mahatma Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

If a journalist had asked his or her news editor about reporting on the environment in Malaysia 10 to 15 years ago, he or she would probably have been told that the environment is not a hot story. Some would even have been told in the face that if there was airtime or space, their story may see daylight. **THIS WAS THEN.** Ask them again today and this time around journalists and media practitioners will hear a very, very different opinion!

The reason for this about-turn may be that the public and civil society today has very different views about what constitutes an ‘environment story’. In most newsrooms, editors still view coverage of the environment in the traditional package; the flora and fauna colour story pieces, the waste recycling stories, the jobs versus the environment standoffs, and even tagging along with Very Important Persons (VIPS) to write about show-pieces offered by certain quarters in the hope of taking the heat off a certain other event. However out there today, the times and priorities for both the people and their environment have changed dramatically.

When I first joined TV3 Malaysia as a broadcast journalist 12 years ago after resigning as a graduate secondary school teacher, I knew deep in my heart that the most neglected aspect of living faced by the man on the street in Malaysia was the rapid degradation of his immediate environment. I also knew through my own personal dealings with

governmental bureaucracy and red-tape that the journey to change and overcome the entrenched mindset of the numerous agencies and departments entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the environment and quality of life of communities, would not be an easy task. And this journey has proven itself today as not being an easy one for this environmental journalist when confronted with obstacles such as access to official information, transparency, accountability, AND THE COULDN'T CARE LESS ATTITUDE OR "TAK PA". Yes, we understand the necessity of economic growth and development cannot take a back seat as the nation speeds towards realizing 'Wawasan 2020'. Development is not just measured by statistics wholly. Development does not mean providing adequate housing to the rakyat, good air, road, and sea network systems, better and enough jobs etc. Development as I see it must be a continuous process which essentially uplifts and seeks an improvement in the overall quality of life without damaging, polluting, or degrading the immediate and natural environment of the locality concerned.

Nonetheless, this rapid push to develop Malaysia into an industrialized nation by the year 2020 has left behind many victims in its wake. Glaring examples are the rapid depletion of forests (both highland and lowland) and aquatic life, coupled with other serious environmental problems such as water and air pollution, chemical pollution, and the increasingly deteriorating ad hoc waste disposal management systems put in place as a direct result of dismal failure in **ENFORCING FULLY WITH CLOUT, THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT 1974 AND THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1976.**

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Immediate issues which the public want addressed today concern threats to their health, consumer rights, and their immediate environment, and how all these impact upon them now, and in the future. Today's environmental issues impact upon every aspect and facet of our quality of life. Issues such as family health, industrial and solid waste management, the blatant rape of forests and the rapidly vanishing water catchment areas, illegal logging, water and sanitation needs, the choking traffic jams we endure, the congested places we live and work in, the robbery of playgrounds and green lungs by greedy developers, and the list goes on. These are the critical points at which the environment touches and indexes the quality of our daily lives.

The public is generally neither stupid nor ignorant today thanks to the government's efforts in making education the number one priority in all its five year development plans. As a result, society is more aware of its right as tax payers and voters and is asking more questions of the delivery systems employed by local governments and agencies entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring their safety and quality of life. Questions on why there is so much traffic, why cases of asthma are on the rise, why the weather is so unpredictable and hot now, why water and electricity rates have risen, why flash floods still occur, why toxic waste and illegal waste dumpings are so prevalent, how and why illegal factories keep mushrooming in their neighbourhoods, why outbreaks of dengue

never keep recurring, and perhaps more importantly, why their complaints to the relevant authorities seldom receive immediate attention and remedy.

The media from which I operate from does among other things, **give voice to the voiceless and often unseen victims of devastating impact of rampant ad hoc development.** A preference for mega-projects over more environmentally friendly options damages the natural balance of ecosystems and destroys forests as well as biodiversity. A case in point is the the Kelau Dam project to transfer potable water from Pahang to Selangor through a 45 kilometer tunnel through the Main Range at a cost of RM3.8 billion. The cost environmentally to Malaysians will be the permanent disappearance of more than 1000 hectares of the Lakum primary forest (at a time when global warming issues are being addressed by the government) together with many species of flora and fauna, amongst which are several totally protected ones. Ironically, Malaysia is recognized by the United Nations as one of only 12 nations in the world possessing a mega biodiversity. Will this be another case of penny wise, pound foolish as only time will reveal. And to be honest, this was a project which the Malaysian media failed to stop due to political reasons and funding agreement signed with the Japanese government.

For almost 50 years Malaysia has chosen to travel on the path to progress without reflecting soberly on the unsightly and oftentimes degrading side of poorly planned development, until disaster strikes. This is often the scenario now where natural disasters are beginning to plague communities nationwide (both urban and rural) as a direct result of human greed, apathy, and disregard of the natural environment as it was meant to be. To name just a few incidences which happened recently would be the Johor floods (due to human indifference), Shah Alam floods (due to over development and greed), Sungai Langat pollution (in Selangor Negeri Maju), Lojing Highlands fiasco (in Kelantan), Kampong Pasir landslide (in Selangor Negeri Maju) etc and the list goes on.

The Media (classified here as television, radio, newspapers and the internet) in carrying out its functional role as a disseminator of information and news to the general public, would now also reaffirm its secondary role as agents of social, political and economic change in shaping governmental policies and laws as well as public opinion, perspectives, and world views. This definitely involves coverage of these natural disasters or any other related environmental story which fits the bill in terms of relevance, proximity and currentness.

Besides facilitating thought and action for strengthening environmental policymaking at the national, regional and global scale, the Media must also seek to advance the dialogue on the functions, structure, financing, and activities of the national environment protection and conservation programme. Our work as media practitioners and journalists is based on the premise that there exist serious problems of failed collective action, institutional fragmentation, corruption and abuse of power, and deficient authority within the current Malaysian environmental governance architecture. Our goal is to contribute to more efficient environmental governance by developing a sound analytical foundation, expanding the policy dialogue, and creating a channel for the public and private sector,

NGOs and civil society to exchange ideas on the options and opportunities for revitalizing national, regional and global environmental governance.

This is often done through media coverage encompassing investigative and special reports seeking to avoid environmental damage which often leads to impacting the lives of communities and irreversible loss of biodiversity. Through thoughtful analysis, these reports not only inform the general public and the powers-that-be of possible dangers and harm to the environment and quality of life, but also are agile enough to address evolving needs and relevant enough to be viewed as legitimate issues as we progress towards embracing 'industrialised nation' status in the projected year 2020.

Principles of effective environmental governance such as **TRANSPARENCY, INCLUSIVENESS, and ACCOUNTABILITY** are increasingly recognized as key factors supporting sustainable development. Moreover, evidence from media scrutiny in Malaysia now suggests that public participation in decision-making can improve the quality as well as the acceptance of resulting decisions from governmental agencies and policy makers. My stories on environment governance have been about people and their families, about communities suffering in silence irrespective of race, religion or political affinity. And ironically, these stories have often involved the finger-pointing syndrome of local authorities and government departments when things go wrong and events become a media circus.

Public demand for these stories is high as is the thirst for public accountability pertaining to events impacting upon local communities and their environment. The shroud of secrecy and almost total lack of transparency and accountability is often a tough if not a daunting hurdle in getting at the truth. **The truth must be told** if the media is to help elevate environmental governance in the country by all stakeholders to a higher and more sustainable level. Therefore the environmental journalist must soldier on and never falter when translating conflicting science and statistical information, and interpreting environmental and local government laws and regulations before finally putting it all together in layman language for the public to consume. This is public service as the media is often referred to as a facilitator and change agent in propagating behavioural changes in society. Passing the environmental message effectively to the masses and telling them the future of this country directly depends upon their choice of active participation or inaction, requires endurance, patience, and a passion for the job, which unfortunately not many possess.

The role of the media is also to challenge the way the environment is protected and monitored by the relevant authorities. This helps keep the checks and balances spreadsheet of the various authorities such as the Department of Environment, Local Governments, Drainage and Irrigation Department, Indah Water Konsortium, Alam Flora etc on their toes. Using the principle I deem most effective, **'name and shame them in public'** on national television, the results have been most surprising. Where these **'little Napoleons'** use to rule without accountability and transparency, today they are more subservient to the rakyat as they know the media is watching their every move.

This has seen a slow but healthy improvement in the governmental delivery system over the years as well as a rise in the awareness levels of the rakyat, especially the younger generation. This in my mind is due to the **ADVOCACY ROLE** which environmental journalism carries with it. In many other forms of journalism, the journalist does not take part in the debate and does not get involved with the unfolding events. In my reports, I let my viewers and those who wield the stick, decide on what is right or otherwise. The advocacy part is to want the rakyat to think in a certain manner. I desire too the politicians and policy makers to think on a more micro and macro level in order to see the whole picture clearly and understand the situation. I make no apologies in this attempt to influence all strata of society as **‘providing the right information to the rakyat’** is paramount if Malaysia is to shrug off her blinkers and develop not only physically but also spiritually and mentally.

The role of the media in propagating environmental protection and conservation comes with a heavy responsibility. It must function responsibly in what it does as it wields the capability to alter, shape and mainstream the thinking patterns of the rakyat which can lead directly to behavioural changes. The parameters of what can and cannot be reported in the Malaysian media are always being tested by journalists for its flexibility. The notion of total press freedom does not exist in Malaysia and does not exist anywhere else in the world either. Even the First Amendment in the constitution of the United States of America with regards to freedom of speech does not offer immunity from prosecution to journalists anymore. And this was the land people once called The Land of The Free.

DEVELOPMENT VERSUS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The challenge for Malaysia as I see it is to achieve economic and social advancement, as well as gain scientific and technological expertise without depleting her natural capital. This utilization of natural resources for economic development and scientific research must be done in a sustainable manner so that the valuable biodiversity and rich ecosystems of this blessed nation can continue to flourish in trust for the next generation. As stakeholders, we are all part of these complex interdependent biological systems. We have been given the intelligence and wisdom to discern and distinguish the safe economic use of these valuable resources and to conserve them for the benefit of the present as well as for future generations.

Capacity building in conservation and environmental protection must be brought to a dedicated, firmer, and higher level of commitment as an important element in Malaysia’s environmental governance framework. Integrity and ethical management must drive every level of the delivery system and supported by the private sector and civil society. Additionally, care for the environment as espoused in the **NINTH PRINCIPLE OF ISLAM HADHARI** and sustainability must be integrated into all national development plans and strategies.

Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi’s vision of incorporating the principles of Islam Hadhari into his administration and the delivery system of his government is wonderful news to environmentalists and nature lovers. The

intrusion of human greed which has led to a total disregard of the environment through coercing with black sheep in decision making government bodies, may soon be a thing of the past. And if this adverse intrusion into the environment is against the will of local communities, it is also against Islam and the other religions. For these environment criminals, the Malay bidalan “menanam tebu di hujung bibir” is most apt when they fail to walk the talk by saying something else and doing something else! And all disasters which come from the natural world, come from the hands of Man. Forest fires, blinding haze and choking smog, water and air pollution, widespread floods, massive landslides and the thinning of the ozone layer which has led to global warming, are all a result of Man’s greed and disregard of God’s Fitrah to them. Islam Hadhari provides the guiding principles of values and spiritual sustenance in the protection of the environment. The backlash will be immense and terrible if we are to ignore the way out as has been pointed out by Pak Lah many times over. It is also forewarned in the Holy Al-Quran in Surah al-Rum verse 41.

The government’s concern for the need of an environmentally sound development or ESD has often times fallen flat and come short of expectations in the eyes of the public, especially so when disasters strike and there is loss of lives and public property. This is ironic as ESD, through the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, recognises that the environment is the fundamental resource on which the well being of our society is built upon. And it is precisely this recognition upon which the media brings to book the parties which have failed to adhere to existing laws and regulations by naming them and shaming them in public.

In all fairness to the governmental departments and agencies involved in monitoring and enforcing laws related to environmental governance, things are beginning to look brighter especially where many individuals have decided to walk their talk by going to the ground where it really matters. The new environment minister Dato’ Seri Haji Azmi bin Khalid is such a person. Moves are currently being made by him in Parliament to enable a mandatory jail term to be included for environmental pollution offenders under the Environment Quality Act 1974 (amended 1996). This is seen by the media as making a huge difference in bringing to the dog house environmental criminals who have often been let off with petty fines and a rap on their knuckles by the courts. Even at the point of writing this paper, not a single environmental criminal case brought to any court in the country for judgment and sentencing to date, has ever been served with an imprisonment term. This, despite the provisions being there in the EQA! Hopefully this time around things will be different as the media will be watching from the sidelines. If it fails again, then what chance will the rakyat and the nation’s environment have if environmental criminals again walk away in glee after paying only a fine.

The media in general and this journalist in particular however does not believe that in the long term, punitive measures will provide the best solution in combating environmental crimes. More will have to be done to encourage self-regulation as an effective form of environment protection insurance. This is because we are the custodians of the environment and bear a special responsibility for ensuring the integrity of this nation and her bountiful ecosystems. The capabilities of ecosystems to adjust to changes are limited.

We therefore must recognize that this limit imposes constraints on our choices in utilizing natural and environmental resources, and even in the products we create for our needs and comfort. The guiding principle then is for us to avoid transgressing these limits. This is an issue and a quandary which faces many developing countries such as Malaysia where economic growth is a compelling necessity for the progress of the country and where environmental considerations can sometimes be seen as unjustified barriers to economic development and progress.

AGENDA 21

Many of the environment stories covered by the media have been about contaminated and smelly water, leaking landfills, damaged and polluted waterways, dead rivers, degraded hills and forests, flashfloods and so on. These reports always remind me of the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21. While the former merely set 27 principles for protecting the environment, the latter spelt out the blueprint for local governments to draw up local initiatives on the environment and sustainable development.

Agenda 21 was and is still seen as the desired path towards sustainable development or “**smart growth**”. My general expectation of the Malaysian version of Agenda 21 has always been to see the initiative as the “driving force” behind local governments doing their utmost to carry out the Rio Declaration of 1992. Simply put, to galvanise local initiatives for concerted action to improve the environmental quality and quality of life in their respective areas of jurisdiction. However, this has not been achieved to the expected degree and neither has their delivery system sufficiently improved. In fact, in several aspects, the situation has worsened as many of my stories have revealed how they have failed to walk the talk. Most lacking I found was their empathy towards public complaints and their failure to realize that as local governments, they play the role of regulators as well as gatekeepers. And this dual role they must never lose sight of while doing away completely with the “**close one eye syndrome**”.

Then again, the Malaysian horizon is not all gloomy and blurred. The government is presently placing a greater emphasis on preventive rather than curative measures being put in place to combat possible environmental pollution and degradation from happening. Stricter and impartial enforcement, and evaluation processes have been put in place to curb highlands and islands development as well as making it standard procedure for all developments to undergo an environmental impact assessment submission regardless of the size and locality. It is my fervent wish to see the manufacturing and industrial sectors implement cleaner production programmes in their business by attaining the ISO 14000 Environment Management System (EMS). This is the organisational structure, responsibilities, practices, procedures, processes, and resources for implementing and maintaining environmental management within a company. Together, the nation can progress at being more inclined to stop pollution at source rather than forking out the massive costs involved in undertaking remedial and curative measures.

THE WAY AHEAD FOR MALAYSIA

For any society grappling today with the spin-off effects of development progress, population growth, and industrialization, education about the environment is of vital importance. Solutions to these problems will only be found in the future by educating our children, regardless of race, religion, sex and financial standing. The ability to build the foundation for sound environmental management and governance will depend to a large extent on the strategies employed to develop a population that is aware of and is concerned about the environment and its associated problems and threats. This generation must be given the knowledge, skills, attitude, motivation, commitment, and the confidence to speak up to solve current and emerging environmental problems and the prevention of new ones.

Ideally, environmental education should be taught continuously at all levels in our formal education system as a mandatory examination subject so as to ensure every child who grows up is at least aware of basic environmental cause and effect issues. This subject should not be assimilated into various curricula designed to be inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary such as being taught presently in schools.

CONCLUSION

My work and travels in reporting on the environment over the last 12 years have shown me there are positive stirrings among the rakyat, even in far flung remote corners such as the Bario Highlands in Sarawak and Kampong Batu Putih in the Kinabatangan District of Sabah. They are now more environmentally literate by virtue of watching TV3 and media exposure on environmental issues journalism. In my heart, I believe the real target must be the younger generation; the youth and the children. My generation and the generation before me have developed in a very different environment. Many of us have been left with environmental attitudes that have become obsolete and in some circumstances even in conflict with what are currently regarded as correct environmental practices.

The youth and children of today are media savy especially with the new media, the internet, which offers them the world without barriers. The bottomless warehouse of knowledge on environmental issues on the net as well as access to all media reports stands them in good stead in understanding the past, present and the future as they inherit the environment from us. This I hope will be their saving grace as it moulds and shapes their ethical behaviour towards the environment in a more spontaneous and voluntary manner.

Lastly, the media's role in advocating sustainable development has been the belief that a healthy environment means healthy humans. The challenge is to ensure that development takes place for the people and the environment rather than at the expense of both, as has happened far too often in our history. The hope remains that with patient work at the community level, the active participation of Malaysians in shaping their environmental

future will increase. By ensuring a healthy environment in which to live and work, we will be safeguarding our own lives and the lives of our loved ones. God bless us all and give us the mental and spiritual strength to persevere in our mission as guardians of the environment for the next generation of Malaysians in line with the spirit of Islam Hadhari. For only through **Achieving Quality Environmental Governance can we enjoy a Higher Quality of Life.**

===== *ENDS* =====

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