

Sustainable development: Malaysia must put words into practice

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THE world's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are needed now more than ever before. This point was underlined by Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, the world-renowned director of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network in remarks last week as he helped launch the Sustainable Development Report 2020.

The report was released days before the United Nations begins a major stock-taking of international progress against the SDGs, five years after their adoption by UN member states.

The "bedrock principles" of the SDGs, said Sachs, who was recently appointed as Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah honorary distinguished professor of sustainable development at Sunway Univer-

sity, include "social inclusion, universal access to public services, and global cooperation".

"They are the guideposts for fighting Covid-19 as well as for the investment-led recovery the world should adopt to overcome the economic crisis caused by the pandemic," he added.

Indeed, this new report focuses on the short-term fight to stop Covid-19 and long-term transformations to guide the recovery phase.

"As the report shows, there was clear SDG progress before this year's pandemic. With sound policies and strong global cooperation, we can restore that progress in the coming decade."

The annual report, as it has done since 2016, tracks progress by countries towards the SDGs as an unofficial but authoritative complement to official monitoring efforts.

Some countries, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, had been successful (so far) in containing Covid-19 and minimising economic damage, the report showed.

It included a novel index for grading the effectiveness of early response to Covid-19 in 33 Organisation for Economic Co-op-

eration and Development member countries, integrating both health and economic outcomes.

South Korea topped this new index, followed by Baltic countries and countries from the Asia-Pacific region. Less successful were Western European countries and the United States.

The report said strict, prolonged lockdowns, though costly, contributed to saving thousands of lives.

Malaysia modestly improved its ranking from 66th last year to 60th this year, but major challenges remain.

We are on track to achieve SDG 1 (No poverty); SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy); SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

We are moderately improving in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being); SDG 5 (Gender Equality); SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation); SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

We are stagnating in SDG 2 (Zero Hunger); SDG 4 (Quality Education); SDG 13 (Climate Action); SDG 14 (Life below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

As in previous years, the SDG index is topped by three Nordic countries — Sweden, Denmark, and Finland — but no country is on track to reach all 17 SDGs by 2030.

The report says Covid-19 is likely to have severe short-term negative impacts on SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3 and SDG 8.

The pandemic gravely amplifies inequalities in many forms.

A bright spot is reduced environmental impact caused by a decline in economic activity. A key objective moving forward is to restore economic activity without reactivating old patterns of environmental degradation.

The report suggested that Malaysians have lost the appetite for reaching SDG 17 (International Collaboration).

Yet it is the only way to speed a resolution to the epidemic, identifying five key measures for such cooperation: disseminate best practices rapidly; strengthen financing mechanisms for developing countries; address hunger hotspots; ensure social protection; and, promote new drugs and vaccines.

The report concluded that despite political rhetoric, few countries have meaningfully integrat-

ed SDGs into public management practices and procedures, including national budgets.

Malaysia started its journey towards sustainable development in the 1970s when the New Economic Policy was introduced to eradicate poverty and restructure societal imbalance.

All subsequent five-year plans, including the 11th Malaysia Development Plan (2016-2020), have underscored the elements of sustainable development, such as sustainable economic growth and striving for equitable distribution throughout society, access to basic infrastructure and utilities, access to education and healthcare services, and mainstreamed environmental conservation.

As a nation, we excel at building the language of sustainable development into our policies and made significant progress.

However, there is clearly room to improve when it comes to putting our words into practice.

The writer is a member of the Global Leadership Council of the SDSN and chairman of the newly-established Business Council for Sustainable Development Malaysia