

Food for Thought

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WORLD WATER DAY 2016 - WHERE ARE WE AFTER A DECADE?

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LETTER TO EDITOR - 21st March 2016 (MONDAY)

WORLD WATER DAY 2016 - WHERE ARE WE AFTER A DECADE?

World Water Day is celebrated every 22nd March. It is to mark the importance of water to human civilisation and the nature. It is part of Decade for Water (2005 - 2015) activity by United Nations. The annual celebration will be continued, but how far has Malaysia gone after a decade for water?

Water Catchments

Failure to protect water catchments has begun to show its impact in many states. Rampant logging and change in land-use is taking its toll on the raw water security. Change in land-use and raw water are state governments' jurisdiction. With increasing population and economic activities to support a growing nation, we will need to secure more water resources and reclaim some of the polluted resources. Why are we going on the reverse?

In a national level survey conducted by AWER (using Department of Statistic's sampling methodology), 72.86% of Malaysians supported AWER's suggestion to remove state governments' power to water resources and place it directly under Parliament if state governments fail to protect water catchment areas. This shows that Malaysians will definitely support the move to prevent water crisis and higher tariff which are directly associated with failure in protecting water catchment areas. Based on current problems associated to water resources and water catchment areas, if a national referendum is called, the state governments will lose its power on water resources. Do we really need to go for a

referendum to protect the needs of our future generation?

Lately, water catchments seems need to give way for highways. Preposterous! Building more highways does not reduce traffic congestion but worsen them. In a developed state begging for more raw water from other states, degazetting protected water catchment areas are suicidal. All states need to protect more areas as water catchment and not reduce them!

Population Density and Pollution Load

Take two glass of water. In the first glass add 1 spoon of salt daily and the second glass add 1 spoon of salt every hour. The first glass represents our rivers decades ago. The second glass represents current status of our rivers. Densely populated areas will pose higher pollution loading to our rivers. Strategically, more pre-treatment facilities should be developed to ensure the river water quality can be improved over time. Department of Environment (DOE) must study wastewater discharge standard based on pollution loading factor. If a river is loaded with higher pollution loading due to high human activities (including industry and commercial), a stricter wastewater discharge standard should be imposed. This is due to inability of the river to dilute the pollution loading. Environmental protection needs paradigm shift. We need to stop fire fighting attitude and move towards preventive attitude. If DOE has been proactive, Pahang's Bauxite episode will not arise. Has DOE published the environmental impact due to bauxite activity in Pahang, including contamination of groundwater, surface water, seawater as well as flora and fauna in affected areas? The TPPA signed by Malaysia requires a DOE that is many fold proactive compared to what it is now!

National Water Services Industry Restructuring (NWSIR) Delayed

Issues related to industry structure, cost efficiency, transparency, old infrastructure, high Non-Revenue Water (NRW), failure in privatisation and tariff structure were the main reasons Federal Government pursued with implementation of Water Services Industry Act 2006 (WSIA) model for Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan via NWSIR. Congratulation to Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water (KeTTHA) for continuing its legacy of delaying NWSIR which is supposed to be completed by 9th Malaysia Plan period. Many of the important steps outlined in NWSIR are now postponed to 11th Malaysia Plan. Do we need to prepare for postponement to 12th Malaysia Plan?

Delay in NWSIR has huge financial and operational implications to our water services industry. Water services industry includes water treatment, water supply and sewerage services. Mind you, all the additional cost due to delays will be passed on to the water tariff. Yes, the consumers will have to pay for the cost of delay!

Planning for Flood and Dry Seasons

Ad hoc responses to flood and dry seasons are becoming more frequent. Flood's solution is simple; if you remove the nature function you must mimic it with man-made technological solutions. If housing projects needs flood water retention ponds, why do we need to "close one eye" for the plantation sector? Till date, there is no full analysis on flood mitigation projects and its effectiveness. This includes how many such projects failed due to land use change by state governments?

Ancient civilisation built dams and irrigation system as well as protect their water resource. Are we even clueless with all these technology at our disposal to do the right thing? Do we need a total revamp of human capital that is employed? There are many solutions available starting from protection of water catchment areas as well as usage of treated effluent (sewerage services) to manage water demand. Will these issues continue to haunt Malaysia after few more decades? Some of the solutions have been put forward, but the responses to the problems are still ad-hoc.

Water and Jobs

Now, this World Water Day's theme is Water and Jobs. All economic activities are dependent of water in one way or another. If we fail to secure our water needs, the consequences are severe. That includes losing jobs! Water rationing in Klang Valley back in 2014 should have given a glimpse of how water affects our daily life. Kelantan was badly hit by flood at the end of 2014 and lack of treated water also shown all of us the importance of water during crisis.

Every step we take now is a building block for a better future for the next generation. As the Malay saying goes, "Berakit-rakit ke hulu, berenang-renang ke tepian, bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian". In a natural catastrophe, the environment prevails as it has withstood many such catastrophes. Unfortunately, the inhabitants are lost.

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