

Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) Strategies and Challenges in Malaysia

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the accompanying 169 targets and 230 indicators cover a wide range of complex political, social and economic challenges. Addressing these goals will require transformations in how societies and economies operate and how we interact with our planet. Human rights are not explicitly mentioned in the SDGs, but its mantra of “leave no one behind” mirrors key human rights principles. The SDGs are significant in two ways. First, they acknowledge rights in a way that the predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had neglected. Second, the SDGs mark a turning point in approach, from a focus on a right to development to a human rights-based approach (HRBA). Recognising the instrumental role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the implementation of the SDGs, this article analyses strategies and challenges of Malaysian CSOs in making the SDGs work through a localization approach. Following an overview of the current SDG and human rights discourses in Malaysia, this article describes the SDG-related activities of CSOs. The attributes of CSOs that increase their potential effectiveness are also discussed.

Keywords: Human rights, CSOs, Localization, Rights-based approach, SDGs, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, 170 world leaders gathered at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This new Agenda, grounded in international human rights law, covers a broad set of 17 SDGs and 169 targets and it serves as the overall framework to guide global and national development action until 2030. It took a long process of negotiations among the world leaders to agree upon the goals: end poverty, end hunger, well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work for all, technology for the benefit for all, reduce inequality, safe cities and communities, responsible consumption for all, stop climate change, protect the ocean, take care of the earth, live in peace, and mechanisms and partnerships to reach the goals.

These goals are elaborated in detail in the final outcome document, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The Preamble itself contains a statement about five interlinked and integrated areas for action that are of critical importance to humanity and the planet. These areas are known as the “5Ps”. The first P refers to the people, where people are recognized as the heart of development. The second P refers to planet, on promoting sustainable use of earth’s resources. The third P is prosperity. It specifically fo-

cuses on inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The fourth P refers to peace and it highlights on access to justice and human rights for all and the final P is recognized as the most crucial component where it recognizes the importance of multi-stakeholder partnership that calls for global solidarity and people-centered approach to development.

These 17 goals cover the three main components of “sustainable development”: economic, social and environmental. Goal 17 on the global partnership for development is particularly important as it refers to the partnership between developed countries and the developing countries to fulfil these goals. This is a key difference between the SDGs and the approach of the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which put the “blame” onto the developing and underdeveloped countries.

One of the most significant features of the SDGs compared to the MDGs is their absolute inclusiveness. This is why despite there being a UN document with details on goals and targets, as well as the methods for implementation, each UN member state is also given the flexibility to establish its own targets and methods for implementation adapted to its needs and situations, in addition to the global targets as set by the UN.

The notion of human rights is never explicitly mentioned in the SDGs. Nevertheless, the emphasis on equality and the commitment to “leave no one behind” mirrors key human rights principles. And compared to the MDGs, the SDGs arguably integrate human rights and development in a more balanced, inclusive and ecologically sustainable way. The Agenda 2030 is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the other nine core international human rights treaties. Likewise, Agenda 2030 specifies that the follow-up and review processes at national, regional and global levels should be guided by the principles of accountability, participation and non-discrimination, in which these principles are at the core of the human rights-based approach to development. Arguing that universality should yield to cultural relativism, governments sometimes resist adhering to international norms they perceive as contradicting local values.

Malaysia, one of the countries that adopted the SDGs in 2015, has been prominent in such universal vs. local value debates. Recognising the instrumental role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the implementation of the SDGs, this article analyses strategies and challenges of Malaysian CSOs in making the SDGs work through a localization approach. Putting this within the human rights-based approach, the top-down nature of human rights norm setting is increasingly being challenged over time, both by practitioners and by scholars who propose a range of methodologies and approaches to draw attention to the daily realities of human rights users and the ways in which human rights norms are received by these rights-holders. We pose a series of questions on the implications of different interpretations of human rights in implementing the SDGs, looking at their strengths and shortcomings that may impact on the effectiveness of the domestic actors in influencing governments. We raise two concerns in this paper and attempt to fill in the gaps. First, as cultural and religious values are often presented as an attribute of the local, and universality as an attribute of the international human rights structure, a structure charged as overly reflective of so-called Western values, the importance of respecting the equal rights of everyone when it comes to local struggles could be ignored. Second, as the SDGs were introduced only in 2016, literature on examining the role and effectiveness of domestic actors particularly in the localization of SDGs remains limited.

We organize this paper into four sections. The first section attempts to establish the connection between SDGs and human rights. As we look into the role and influence of the Malaysian domestic actors, the second section explores human rights development in Malaysia. The third section discusses the role of domestic Malaysian actors in the localization of SDGs. It looks specifically at the Malaysia CSO-SDG Alliance as a case of how domestic actors can influence the implementation of SDGs at the local level.

SDGs AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Recognizing that the MDGs may have failed certain people and countries, the SDGs 2016-2030 sets out to “reach the furthest behind first” and concludes with a pledge to “leave no one behind”. The theme of “leave no

one behind” is most critical in ensuring that inclusive development is within the reach of all human beings. The concept of sustainable development originated from a needs-based approach, aiming to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. But, in recent years, the needs-based approach has gradually evolved into a rights-based approach recognizing the crucial relationship between duty-bearers and rights-holders, incorporating the ideas of rights claiming and obligation.

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are more directly relevant to human rights. The SDGs are linked to human rights through the goals concerning economic, social and cultural rights; goals concerning civil and political rights; and goals that emphasize the principle of equality, non-discrimination and access for all. For instance, Goal 16 includes a goal on accountable and inclusive institutions and access to justice for all. This goal touches on important human rights standards and principles. For example, it includes targets on access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, participation in decision-making, non-discriminatory laws and policies, and access to justice. The inclusion of such commitments provides a much-needed recognition of the crucial role that civil and political rights play in making sustainable and equitable development possible. The MDGs were criticized for putting responsibilities on the shoulders of the developing countries alone, with the developed countries merely playing a supporting role through international development cooperation. In contrast, the SDGs require the commitment of all member countries to address the developmental related issues in their respective countries.

Despite the term not being explicitly mentioned in the 17 SDGs, the entire Agenda 2030 is undoubtedly tied to human rights. This can be identified through the following three observations. Firstly, Agenda 2030 emphasizes, “leave no one behind” and recognizes that “the dignity of the human person is fundamental”. These pledges are strongly aligned with the concept of human rights where the notions of dignity are stated in the universally recognized document, the UDHR. Both the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights 1966 (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR) have further reaffirmed that “these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person”. As human dignity does provide “a foundation for human rights” (Donnelly, 2013, p. 130), the reference to human dignity in the Agenda 2030 is indivisibly associated with human rights based on the value of inclusiveness.

Secondly, some sections in Agenda 2030 itself touched on human rights, albeit ambiguously. For instance, paragraph 3 in the Preamble of Agenda 2030 clearly outlines that it seeks “to realize human rights of all” while Article 3 mentions protecting human rights. When the document mentions human rights, one of the key focuses is gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Goal 5 of the SDGs is especially dedicated to the notion of gender equality. Forming a vital part of human rights, gender equality has always been one of a core value promoted by the UN since its establishment. This effort could be seen from the 1945 Charter of the United Nations that highlights the “equal rights of men and women”.

Thirdly, Agenda 2030 is in fact “grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome” and “is informed by other instruments such as Declaration on the Right to Development”. As clearly exhibited, integrating human rights is important in achieving the goals and targets of Agenda 2030. Table 1 shows how the SDGs relate to human rights, using information adapted from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

THE HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia’s and Singapore’s economic and social success in the early 1990s contributed to the notion that “the ‘Asian miracle’ rested on distinctive Asian values” (Bell, 2006, p. 52). The idea of Asian values as the foundation of Asia’s exceptional performance over the past decades was championed by both Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, who were the prime ministers of Singapore and Malaysia respectively at that time (Hoon, 2004). According to Bell (2006, p. 52), the notion of Asian values was employed to “cast doubt on the normative superior-

Table 1: The linkage between SDGs and human rights

SDGs	Related human rights as summarised by the OHCHR
Goal 1: No Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to an adequate standard of living ● Right to social security ● Equal rights of women in economic life
Goal 2: Zero Hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to adequate food ● International cooperation
Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to life ● Right to health ● Special protection for mothers and children ● Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application ● International cooperation
Goal 4: Quality Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to education ● Equal rights of women and girls in the field of education ● Right to work, including technical and vocational training ● International Cooperation
Goal 5: Gender Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women ● Right to decide the number and spacing of children ● Special protection for mothers and children ● Elimination of violence against women and girls ● Right to just and favourable conditions of work
Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to safe drinking water and sanitation ● Right to health ● Equal access to water and sanitation for rural women
Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to an adequate standard of living ● Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application
Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to work and to just and favourable condition of work ● Prohibition of slavery, forced labour, and trafficking of persons ● Equal rights of women in relation to employment ● Prohibition of child labour ● Equal labour rights of migrant workers
Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application ● Right to access to information ● Right to adequate housing ● Equal rights of women to financial credit and rural infrastructure
Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to equality and non-discrimination ● Right to participate in public affairs ● Right to social security ● Promotion of conditions for international migration ● Right of migrants to transfer their earnings and savings
Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Right to adequate housing ● Right to participate in cultural life ● Accessibility of transportation, facilities and services ● Protection from natural disasters

Table 1: Continued

SDGs	Related human rights as summarised by the OHCHR
Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to health • Right to adequate food and the right to save drinking water • Right of all people to freely dispose their natural resources
Goal 13: Climate Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to health • Right to adequate food & right to safe drinking water • Right of all people to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources
Goal 14: Life Below Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to health • Right to adequate food & right to safe drinking water • Right of all people to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources
Goal 15: Life on Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to health • Right to adequate food & right to safe drinking water • Right of all people to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources
Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to life, liberty and security of the person • Protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse or exploitation • Right to access to justice and due process • Right to legal personality • Right to participate in public affairs • Right to access to information
Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right of all peoples to self-determination • Right of all peoples to development, & international cooperation • Right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application • Right to privacy

Source: OHCHR¹.

ity of Western-style human rights and to question the desirability of exporting that model to East Asian societies". As elaborated by Mauzy (1997), critics from the East viewed the notion of human rights and democracy as Western imports not necessarily suitable for Asian states. Some also think that the concept of universal values is a form of neo-colonialism, and a conspiracy to handicap Asian economic growth after the financial crisis. Accordingly, Asian values have been viewed as the most apparent challenge to the universality of human rights (Bell, 2006).

Bruun and Jacobsen (2000) outlined four interrelated themes of this so-called Asian view of human rights. Firstly, the cultural argument opines that human rights that are culturally specific to the West are less relevant in other cultural settings, such as in Asia. Secondly, the collective argument highlights that Asian societies are communitarian in spirit, differing from Western individualism. Thirdly, the disciplinary argument stresses the importance to Asians of having discipline in all aspects of social life, with social and economic rights outweighing civil and political rights. Fourthly, the organic argument emphasizes that state and society form a single body, with the state having a mandate to rule for the common good of everyone, free from international interference.

As one of the leading voices championing Asian values, human rights usually served as a core component of Malaysia's competition with the Western agenda (Milner, 2011). Mahathir Mohamad, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia who was also the Prime Minister from 1981 until 2003, has been the key advocate of this policy.

¹United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (n.d.). [Sustainable Development Goals and related human rights]. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/SDG_HR_Table.pdf

Mahathir highlighted that Malay-Islamic culture is embedded in the Malaysian perspective of Asian values, and was in danger of absorption by Western values (Sani et al., 2009). His “Look East policy” has been viewed as a strong assertion of Asian values as he promoted the idea that a developing country should seek inspiration from successful Asian models rather than always referring to the West (Sheridan, 1999, p. 92).

During the subsequent administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003 to 2009), the concept of Islam Hadhari was introduced. This expanded the interpretation of Asian values, with a specific emphasis on Islam and Malay culture (Sani et al., 2009). In respect to this, Milner (2011) argued that particular attention must be paid to the role of religious and ethnic imperatives in the context of Malaysia, as certain dominant local perspectives and claims can be a hindrance to human rights aspirations. The human rights discourse in Malaysia took a turn in 2018 when it experienced the first change of ruling parties in more than six decades. The regime change from *Barisan Nasional* (BN) to the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) offers an opportunity for the state to take measures to foster a safe, respectful and enabling environment for CSOs. In its election manifesto under Promise 54: Empowering societal institutions, civil society and social entrepreneurship, PH specifically recognised social organizations, civil society and social entrepreneurship as important elements of a modern country.

SDGs AND THE MALAYSIA CSO-SDG ALLIANCE

Learning from the experience during the MDG period and restrictions imposed on the role of civil society in the past, civil society in Malaysia has taken a lead in advocating for the SDGs to the government. In particular, the CSO-SDG Alliance has arguably “created” the opportunity through engaging with the government even before it had launched its SDG roadmap. Based on the first author’s experience as part of the Alliance, factors such as leadership and the shift of strategy from confrontation to engagement appear to have been particularly crucial. This strategy aligns well with the view that localizing the SDGs and human rights norms is necessary due to the challenges presented by human rights interpretation in Malaysia.

Before moving on to discuss the effectiveness of the Alliance in contributing to the localization of the SDGs, it is necessary to provide some brief background on the Alliance, referring to the publications of the Alliance’s co-chair, Jayasooria (2016a, 2016b). The Alliance is an informal grouping of CSOs committed to the effective implementation of the SDGs in Malaysia. The groups came together for networking, joint cooperation, action, and liaison with government. The Society for the Promotion of Human Rights (PROHAM) and the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM) hosted the first CSO-SDG discussion on October 27, 2015, about a month after the UN adopted the 2030 SDG Agenda on 25 September 2015 (Jayasooria, 2016a). Since its establishment, the Alliance has met regularly and its major priority has been to undertake a mapping exercise (Jayasooria, 2016b).

This exercise, known as SDG Roadmap Malaysia, is divided into three phases as follows: Phase I (2016-2020): prioritising SDGs according to the 11th Malaysian Plan (11MP); Phase II (2020-2025): focus on post 2020 goals and targets; Phase III (2025-2030): remaining goals and targets in line with Malaysia’s capacity and global role. The Department of Statistics (DOSM 2018) has recently launched an initial assessment of the SDGs indicators for Malaysia in 2018. A total of 244 indicators were used for the assessment, using three dimensions of sustainable development: social (137 indicators, 56%), environmental (58 indicators, 24%) and economic (49 indicators, 20%). SDGs are both an opportunity and a challenge for Malaysia; the question is how do we align the existing or future policies with those of the SDGs? The SDGs framework requires broad coalitions to be formed: of national and local governments, multilateral and regional organizations, civil society, NGOs, academic and research organizations, and the private sector.

Engagements and Strategies

Alliance membership is categorized into four types of CSOs. The first is development and service-based CSOs that are working with the poor, women, and youth, undertaking a range of services addressing the economic, social and cultural concerns of these segments of society. Two examples of this type are the National Council of

Women Organisations (NCWO), which has 120 affiliate CSOs throughout the country; and the Malaysian Youth Council (MBM) with 39 national bodies. Both of these run a wide range of services and are located in all of the states. NCWO for instance, has been effective in pushing for policy advocacy with the government (Jayasooria, 2016b). The second type is the human rights-based CSOs that address civil and political rights including transparency, accountability and good governance. For example, there is the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the Universal Periodic Review (COMANGO) with 54 organizations. The COMANGO has been very active in monitoring human rights through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process and has mobilized community interest in the UPR accountability process (Jayasooria, 2016b). Malaysia went through its first UPR in 2009, followed by a second UPR in 2013 and the latest in 2018. This process has been particularly important in linking the UN mechanisms such as the UPR to the SDGs. The third type is environmental CSOs focused on preservation, conservation and the balanced management of the earth's resources. An example is the Malaysian Environmental NGOs (MENGO) with 26 organizations. Many MENGO members have adopted a rights-based framework towards enhancing the environment through conservation approaches as well as ensuring local communities are not alienated from their forests. The fourth are the think tanks, which are independent or associated with local universities addressing SDG concerns. These include the Institute of Social & Strategic Studies (ISIS Malaysia), the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA-UKM), Institut Darul Ridzuan and the Third World Network (Jayasooria, 2016b).

The CSOs have organised themselves as a loose alliance, and have an open door policy toward all CSOs who are interested in joining. Although the CSOs have different objectives, priorities and methods of implementation, putting these different CSOs together under one umbrella has helped to advance the localization of human rights and SDGs. While mostly based in the major cities, the Alliance recognizes the tremendous potential of linking with the grassroots. Each CSO identified the goals and targets closest to the type of activities they are carrying out. Different CSOs have different priorities, target groups and services. Each has its area of expertise and specialization. Following that, the Alliance undertakes a mapping process, which is deemed as crucial in insuring inclusivity. In doing so, the Alliance has identified eight different areas of involvement at the grassroots levels, which all have direct or indirect relevance to SDG implementation in Malaysia. In this penetration of domestic actors into the local level in terms of human rights with SDGs, the acceptance to certain values and norms spreads more easily when the effort is tailored to fit local conditions and traditions (Acharya 2009; 2012).

For instance, in 2016, the Alliance hosted a dialogue with the key community leaders in Kuala Lumpur. The dialogue at the grassroots focused on SDG 10 (Jayasooria, 2017). The membership-based Alliance with different categories of the NGOs has enabled the localization of the SDGs. The grassroots organizations outside of the city centers and issues such as indigenous peoples are particularly useful in strengthening the localization approach and improving the credibility and prestige of local agents. The Alliance recognizes the importance in engaging local communities, as emphasized by Acharya (2004), with local actors likely to be more credible to the extent that their target audience sees them as upholders of local values and identity. This is arguably a factor that can create more space for advocacy, not only with locals but also with the government at the national level.

The first way this can be done is awareness raising work. This could range from raising citizen awareness of rights, environmental issues, gender equality, among others. The intent is to mobilize public opinion in order to bring some changes to society at the local level. Second is through service provision and projects. This is the most visible in centrally based projects to assist and support a whole range of people. The third is community development. A number of CSOs are directly involved in community empowerment activities. Some of these are income generating, including social enterprises. Community organizing and mobilizing joint action and ownership is most essential (Jayasooria, 2016b). The fourth is capacity building and training. The fifth is financial and income generating loans or grants. The sixth is data collection, research and monitoring, and the seventh is policy advocacy. This is a major effort, as some CSOs focus on these matters and provide alternative narratives as a result of the localization approach as spread through the vast network of the Alliance. As outlined by Kaufman (2017), the data collected by communities and organizations can be valuable to state and local govern-

ments when it comes to the stage of implementing SDGs locally. The eighth refers to the societal watchdog and accountability role (Jayasooria, 2016b).

The Alliance is actively participating in various levels of advocacy, from the local through to the national. CSOs are invited to events organized and sponsored by the national level government. For instance, the National SDG Symposium in February 2016, for which the Alliance had prepared a statement to hand over to the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) Minister². In addition, some members in the Alliance made use of the opportunity through distributing publications. For instance, the findings of the 2015 discussion was published and handed over to the EPU as CSO findings on SDGs. As showcased, the diffusion of international human rights norms is carried out not just through grassroots advocacy but also high-level dialogue. The latter is particularly crucial as a strategy to influence the policy-makers of the country. Another aspect that the Alliance wanted to foster is a partnership approach of being directly involved in the various formal mechanisms of the SDG from their establishment rather than in ad hoc ways later on.

In December 2016, the EPU had set up a National SDG Steering Committee. It included the entire key government agencies, as well as representatives from the private sector, academia and CSOs including the Alliance. Between January and March 2017, the EPU established five cluster working groups and 17 taskforces as per the SDGs. CSOs have been invited for both the cluster groups and the taskforce. In the Malaysian experience, CSOs have now been incorporated into the formal mechanism of the government for SDG implementation at the National Steering Committee, cluster-working groups and in the taskforce specific working. This is positive and has long-term implications (Jayasooria, 2017).

As raised above, one of the strategies is to use the human rights mechanism to strengthen advocacy for SDG implementation. Many of the goals and targets correspond to essential dimensions of states' human rights commitments, as outlined in international human rights treaties, as well as other regional instruments and documents relating to human rights. The most effective way to get action on the goals and targets in 2030 Agenda is to link them to existing commitments of governments that address the same issues such as UPR mechanism, as highlighted above. The COMANGO, also a member organisation of the Alliance, actively advocates this. The challenge in Malaysia is that its international human rights treaties accession status remains stalled, giving it one of the lowest treaties ratification or accession rates in the world. Many of these human rights treaties entered into force internationally decades ago, and Malaysia's continued non-accession reflects its lack of determination to live up to its international obligations. Malaysia has ratified only three thus far—CRC, CEDAW and CRPD.

Discussions of human rights mainstreaming have now been replaced by references to a human rights-based approach (HRBA). This shift in the debate points to the need for different programs for the implementation of human rights as both the ends and the means of development. This approach, as actively promoted by the Alliance, supports the accountability of all stakeholders. It is critical to understand who is responsible and what actions might be taken when a right is violated. Participation is another procedural principle, which lies at the heart of the HRBA. It is both a means and a goal. Enhancing the empowerment of both rights-holders to claim their rights and duty-bearers to meet their obligations, is an important implication of the HRBA. This approach empowers the beneficiaries of development to be actively engaged in the process of development.

Challenges

There are gaps between advocacy and implementation and there are disconnects with human rights obligations. While the Alliance has made great progress in advancing the SDGs across the country through its member organizations, it continues to struggle in terms of securing the staffing and resources necessary to ensure the sustainability of the coordination work. Also, there is a need for capability building of CSO workers and volunteers in data collection, writing alternative narratives and undertaking micro case studies. Building the grassroots capacity of local communities is also an important required step, as this will complement the comprehensive

²The portfolio of the EPU has since the end of 2018 been put under the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

data generated by the government. There is also a need to link academic institutions with CSOs and grassroots projects in order to facilitate longitudinal studies capturing the transformations taking place (Jayasooria, 2016b).

Moreover, SDGs were not a treaty or convention that nation states had to ratify, and several countries have expressed only partial alignment to certain goals and targets. The SDGs were thus a voluntary and flexible initiative, and each country could set its own targets according to their own circumstances, levels of development, cultural background and so on. The mantra, “leave no one behind” is an opportunity for all. But at the same time, it is also a challenge. It raises the question, how do we ensure inclusiveness?

The focus of each CSO is obviously its own work, not SDG-related coordination, so there are limited personnel and financial resources available to participate in time consuming meetings and report writing. As facilitating SDG networking and partnerships is a long-term task, there needs to be clear modalities for engagements as well as CSO funding for institutional and capacity building. Moreover, the engagement with the government has not been consistent and at times, selective. The Alliance, in this respect, is a norm entrepreneur that has to a certain extent managed to open up the discourse on SDGs. Still, there remains limited public discussion nationally in Malaysia on the SDGs. While cabinet-level acknowledgement of the importance of the SDGs has been increasing, only a few ministers have made reference to Malaysia’s September 2015 commitment to the global community. While the agencies are active internally, this process seems an exercise oriented toward the international community as opposed to the empowerment of ordinary citizens.

Likewise, beyond the limits of the national capital, SDG discussions at the state and local government levels are almost non-existent. As emphasized by Kaufman (2017, p. 112), “The SDGs are meant to be implemented at every level of government, including at the subnational level”. Kaufman (2017) further elaborated that it is vital to have local implementation to achieve the realization of the SDGs. Thus, it is essential that the SDGs are commonly discussed and widely implemented at the State and local level, in addition to the Federal level. There are also challenges in reviewing the SDGs in terms of cross cutting agendas. For example, gender is cross cutting and not just confined to SDG 5. CSOs working on gender concerns would like to see gender mainstreaming as a key policy target.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Recently, Prime Minister Mahathir officiated the National SDG Summit 2019, held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. The summit carried the theme, “Accelerating Progress on the SDGs: Whole of Nation Approach”. This indicates a positive sign that the government will contribute ideas and strategies to move the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development forward, and energise partnerships through a whole-of-nation approach in attaining the SDGs. However, given that global politics are intertwined with power relations, the SDGs face challenges as a non-legally binding document. Some common challenges are the lack of cooperation and engagement among different stakeholders including the private sector and also a dearth of funding.

In another recent development, Malaysia’s Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV2030) was formulated in line with the sustainable development spirit of the SDGs. The 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) is also expected to include a focus on sustainability. The first Malaysian All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on SDG has also been formed. The APPG consists of 10 Members of Parliament, two senators and CSOs from the Alliance. This initiative aims to highlight the partnerships with CSOs that will lead to clearer actions and recommendations on policies and laws. The establishment of the APPG on SDG is an indication of the first progressive step in bringing the discourse of SDGs not only at the national level that confines only with the policy-makers, but also a reflection on the localization approach by including the members from the Alliance.

The formation of the APPG is a move towards the implementation of the SDGs at the local level, where the responsibilities are no longer country-centric but each state must also find the most appropriate means consistent with their needs and resources. Such a step will hopefully contribute to living up to the spirit of “leave no one behind”. In the human rights context, all clusters are relevant since human rights are crosscutting issues. The

improvement of one right facilitates advancement of the others. Likewise, the deprivation of one right adversely affects others that could defeat the purpose of the SDG spirit. With its multitude of connections with various organizations and think tanks across the country, the Alliance has its advantages in engaging the grassroots for local development and empowerment. Their efforts in policy advocacy are crucial to bring influence and meaningful impact to policy making in Malaysia.

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