

Malaysia can take the green road to post-coronavirus recovery: joint op-ed

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We mark the World Environment Day today, followed by World Oceans Day in three days' time. Today we should be more aware than ever of the global context in which we operate. Covid-19 has shown us that an action in one country has major consequences in another. Our economies and the very structure of our societies can be disrupted by exogenous developments outside our control.

But in our hurry to focus on economic recovery from Covid-19, we risk missing the lessons and the opportunity to deal with another existential challenge. Climate Change, the result of the carbon emissions of our current socio-economic system, is already happening.

Malaysia's rapid and decisive action to manage the Covid-19 epidemic has been impressive. A similarly resolute approach is needed to tackle the climate and wildlife emergencies.

Global carbon emissions fell sharply as people were locked down at home. Businesses and factories were shut, resulting in cleaner air in cities, and wildlife has emerged in unlikely places. We all want to retain these benefits, but of course Covid-19 lockdown is not a solution, given the mass unemployment and reduction in the quality of life.

The lesson from the 2008 economic crisis is that recovery efforts should be combined with long-term sustainability goals. We have now three major advantages with respect to 2008 to push those goals further and faster.

- First, the cost of renewable energy has dropped dramatically, in many cases below that of conventional energy, despite the temporary slump in oil prices. Today we can extend the deployment of renewables through technologically sound and commercially viable solutions that provide high quality jobs.
- Second, the world's development institutions are now much more focused on climate change. Central banks and financial institutions have taken stronger positions on climate actions, including Bank Negara and many of Malaysian banks. Malaysia has been the biggest green sukuk player in this region for the past two years.
- Third, a global carbon price is on the horizon. Factoring the future carbon price into new projects will be essential. Malaysia will benefit

immensely in emission avoidance schemes through market mechanisms.

This favourable framework should entail a fast distribution of funds to sound, ready-to-go low-carbon projects in emerging markets.

Streets and motorways should be ready for electric vehicles, industries need to invest in clean technologies, and electricity grids should be designed to enable the integration of more renewables. A critical element will be widely accessible fast broadband that will spur further the digital economy.

Malaysia is already ahead of the curve in policy thinking and technology developments for this transition. The pledge to maintain at least 50% forest cover and protection of immense marine areas under the Coral Triangle Initiative signal the ambition to be at the forefront of mitigation actions.

Just as Tan Sri Dr Zakri Abdul Hamid (a former Science Advisor to the Malaysian PM) said a few weeks ago:

It is up to our leaders to put us finally and firmly onto a sustainable path. As a wake-up call to respect nature, the Covid-19 pandemic is a giant alarm clock with the impact of a sledgehammer on our health and economy. We have no time left to procrastinate.

The next United Nations' Climate Change Conference, known as CoP26, will be the right place to show tangible progress in tackling climate change. Originally due in 2020 but postponed because of Covid19, the COP26 will now take place between 1 and 12 November 2021 in Glasgow, hosted by the UK in partnership with Italy.

Covid-19 is a severe blow, certainly. But it need not be a blow to a safer, healthier, resilient, sustainable and green future.