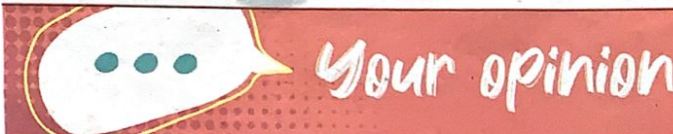


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## Redesign the role of EPU

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# Redesign the role of EPU

**MAKE** no mistake, floods are not a singular act of God. According to climate scientists, severe floods, like other extreme weather events, are now increasingly the result of human-caused global warming.

And, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned us years ago, we can only expect natural disasters to be more frequent and deadlier with accelerating climate change. For Malaysia, this means dealing with recurring floods, landslides, droughts and the like on a grander scale.

We need a "whole of government" approach if we are serious about upholding environmental conservation. At present, there is no central agency that actively coordinates the environmental conservation efforts of all ministries and bodies in the federal and state governments. The burden of ensuring sustainable development currently falls on the Department of Environment (DOE), a small department with limited powers under the Environment and Water Ministry.

Our pursuit of economic growth has led to significant environmental degradation, which is now biting us back in the form of natural disasters.

The time has come to main-

stream sustainable development through national coordination with a higher authority like the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) leading the war room.

The responsibility of coordinating national sustainable development should be handed to the EPU as an economic central agency and DOE can function as an operating agency.

The EPU can work in concert with ministries and departments at the federal level and the respective economic planning units at state level to oversee all economic activities, particularly those that are environmentally sensitive. These include logging, mining, development of forest and river reserves, agricultural and industrial activities that degrade the environment, and overfishing.

Critical government agencies from other ministries can join the war room. These include the Malaysian Green Technology and Climate Change Corporation, and the Public Works Department, among many others.

With active federal involvement and consultation, we can expect stronger natural environment protection especially for our water catchment areas, highlands, river reserves and natural forests.

When it comes to land use for economic activities, land is a state matter. But for Peninsular Malaysia, the Federal Government coordinates land development through the Department of Director General of Lands and Mines (JKPTG) under the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry (KeTSA).

It is important to note that JKPTG has more powers and enforcement officers than DOE. Until recently, these two agencies were under the same ministry, but they are now separated. As such, there is a greater need for coordination in environmental preservation.

As this effort cuts across various ministries, a "whole of government" approach can begin to solve economic-environmental issues concurrently (not consecutively).

With EPU coordinating both environmental and economic development, especially those involving huge land areas, we can expect Environmental Impact Assessments to be taken more seriously. Approvals for land development would involve multi-disciplinary input and prioritise eco-friendly, low-carbon footprint and non-flood exacerbating projects.

Expect rigorous ESG (environ-

mental, social, and governance) tracking from each ministry regulating their area of responsibility, such as International Trade and Industry Ministry (industries), Agriculture and Food Industries (agriculture) and KeTSA (mining). Before any approval is given, the true economic benefits and environmental costs must be rigorously weighed and measured.

One can argue that longer lead times in investment approvals will make us less competitive. But can the promise of more jobs and higher incomes justify the lives and properties lost from disasters resulting from our neglect of the environment?

Our prime minister has said that the government is looking for a comprehensive long-term solution to floods. Besides the obvious need for better disaster response, sustainable development will be crucial in preventing or reducing future billion-ringggit disasters.

Redesigning the EPU as the Environmental and Economic Planning Unit may fulfil this function. The "E" in EPU should rightly be empowered to represent both the environment and the economy.

**MUHAMMAD AMMIR HARON**  
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