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Malaysia can make a difference through SDGs

COMMENT by Dr Lee J. Peter

IN 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set the stage for a new approach towards cooperation, when all 193 United Nations member states, including Malaysia, agreed on 17 economic, social and environmental objectives to transform our world by 2030.

We are now at the halfway mark, but current global issues such as the recurring Covid-19 pandemic, the prolonged war between Russia and Ukraine, inflation and climate change issues raise the question as to whether these SDGs are still achievable by 2030.

An evaluation by Social Progress Index in 2020 speculated that these goals would only be reached by 2092.

Heriot-Watt University Malaysia (HWUM) has played a significant role in addressing and educating their community to realise these SDGs.

The students of the university under the EmPOWER programme tackled some of these challenges that our world is currently facing in support of the United Nations' aspirations via diverse social projects.

These challenges included poverty, education, mental health and well-being, and environmental and climate actions.

Poverty has been the primary issue both in Malaysia and around the world.

A crowdfunding project with creative activities, initiated by HWUM students raised RM42,061 from January to May this year for charities and NGOs aiming to eradicate poverty among the B40 community in Malaysia.

The students also volunteered in several orphanages around the country.

As well as teaching and mentoring orphans, they became involved in wiring, plumbing and painting activities at these establishments.

Finally, a collaboration with Kechara Soup and Grace Community Service (a foodbank and street feeding programme) was carried out successfully.

This effort touched thousands of

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lives, especially the homeless and hardcore poor families around Klang valley.

This is in harmony with the government's effort to eradicate poverty in the country.

Education is another important aspect of the global agenda.

A teaching project was started by HWUM students for two Orang Asli villages in Banting and Dengkil, both in Selangor.

This was to ensure that these communities, which saw only marginal progress, could receive proper access to modern education.

Also, the students organised online tuition for the B40 community's children who were sitting for the SPM examination during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Two mini libraries were also set up, one for the B40 community and one for the Orang Asli kampung, aimed at cultivating the habit of reading.

More than 350 books were donated to the libraries in these two regions.

All these efforts brought life-changing experiences and impacted the lives of children in the B40 and disadvantaged communities, allowing them a brighter future and the possibility to contribute back to the country in the future.

Mental health issues are also on the rise in the country. Those seeking

help for stress-related challenges have increased by almost five-fold in 2021 compared with 2020.

Recognising the seriousness of it, HWUM students organised mental health and well-being workshops for young adults who are vulnerable to depression, stress and suicidal thoughts.

The reason for organising these workshops was to create awareness and knowledge about the significance of mental health and related matters, to provide opportunities for people to build genuine connections and support them by sharing experiences, as an outlet to release stress.

Furthermore, these students also initiated a crowdfunding project and raised RM7,657 for the Malaysian Mental Health Association.

These funds have been used to promote mental well-being within the community, to support people with mental health challenges and to endorse their caregivers through the provision of support service, education, training and advocacy.

Environment and climate change matters such as flash floods, landslides and haze should be addressed seriously.

They have become more common and the impact is alarming.

In response to this, HWUM students organised a recycling campaign and students and staff of

HWUM collected around 36kg of recyclable materials.

These were sent to the Putrajaya Community Recycling Centre at Presint 9, to be sold and proceeds were channelled towards the flood victims.

This campaign helped to promote awareness among the participants of the need to be environmentally sensible, keep our surroundings clean and protect the eco-system.

A tree planting programme to create public awareness about the importance of forest protection was also organised by these students.

This is in collaboration with the Global Environment Centre and resulted in the planting of more than 125 trees around the Raja Muda Forest Reserve in Rawang, North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest and certain vacant land in the nearby countryside.

The students' efforts were a small part of the global endeavour to save the planet and prevent global warming, ensuring healthy preservation of local natural water supplies and helping to protect the land and avoid flash floods, landslides and haze in the country.

HWUM Provost and chief executive officer Prof Mushtak Al-Atabi, who initiated the EmPOWER programme in HWUM, commented: "We are pleased that our students have acquired socially responsive

and entrepreneurship qualities by completing their impact statements, mobilising that purpose into a positive impact on the world, and making us proud through their excellent achievements."

As a person who had been personally involved in these events and projects, I sincerely thank all those coordinators and staff participating in this noble cause.

My gratitude is expressed, especially to the Head of Heriot-Watt Global College Malaysia (HWGCM) Jasmine Low, Remuga T. Rethinam and Rohaya Daud, who are staff from HWGCM, and Marques Jeevan Menon, the EmPOWER programme director.

I thank them all for their dedication to planning and for supporting our students' activities on this excellent cause.

Working for a good cause, students have opportunities to learn beyond the classroom, think critically, handle complexity, and communicate effectively.

Neil Armstrong, the first person to walk on the Moon once said, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind". Little steps go a long way.

Each contribution may be small, but together we can make a difference.

When many people take small steps towards change, the world will transform and become a better place for our children and future generations.

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