

**YAYASAN HASANAH**

**Special Address: From Charity to Justice – Reimagining a Just and Sustainable Tomorrow**

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Distinguished members of the board and management of Khazanah Nasional, Yayasan Hasanah and the audience.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address you today at this much awaited Hasanah Forum. The fact that we are gathered here, inhaling the fumes of the just-concluded COP 26 and are seeing some worrying trends in our Covid-19 data, makes the subject upon which I was requested to share my thoughts, a very relevant one.

Charity remains an important part of our national make up. While there are several definitions of the word “charity” this one resonates:

*the act of giving money, food, or other kinds of help to people who are poor, sick, or needy.*

There will always be a place for charity – it is the ultimate expression of solidarity between people and causes. Charity is an act; equity and justice are rights. Conflating the two is concerning since it implies that if you can’t have access to justice through equitable society then charity is the alternative. Even *zakat*, which Muslims are obliged to pay annually, is often mistakenly identified as charity. Actually, it is a highly effective tool of social justice when applied correctly.

As the world becomes more complex and as we see the impact that poor planetary health is having on humanity, it becomes ever more important to understand that the solutions to the problems we face lie not only in the act of giving, but in the acts of listening, sharing, accepting responsibility and taking action.

I’ve been glued to my screens over the last few weeks, absorbing the information around COP26. Strangely, media in Malaysia has been deafeningly quiet on this! I’ve also spent the last two decades seeing for myself, through my humanitarian work, the devastating consequences of the damage that we have done to the

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planet, and the impact humanity's rapaciousness and greed is having on our species. Added to the learning over the last 18 months working on Covid-19, I have come to several conclusions.

First - the pandemic is being described by some as the "great equaliser". Pretty much no one was able to escape, to fly away, to detach themselves. We were all in this together, so the narrative goes.

But that's simply not true. Those most affected by the conditions wrought by the pandemic, beyond being infected with this awful virus, are the poorest amongst us; folks living in cramped conditions, in urban settings, and likely here either as legal or undocumented migrant workers or refugees, fleeing persecution.

And what has our response been as a nation? While some have offered charity, generally speaking, we have allowed our politicians to either ignore the plight of these people or, as some have done, blame them for a crisis which is not of their making.

Let us remember that as human beings these people have rights. Malaysia, by its accession to the United Nations, signed up for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*Everyone is **entitled** to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind.*

Those rights and freedoms include access to justice and access to social security. Social security includes healthcare – and in this specific instance access to vaccines. Our national vaccine programme has ensured that everyone in this country has access to the vaccine – and this despite some quite virulent protestations from some, that migrants should be denied access.

The reason I am highlighting these points is to demonstrate that it is difficult to get things done now – not just here in Malaysia, but in many countries across the planet.

Loss of trust in politics is rife. Political legitimacy is on the wane. Ethno-nationalism is on the increase. Those who shout loudest win the day. Consequently, access to rights and justice are increasingly compromised.

And our reaction is, by and large, to retreat – into our screens and online social media echo-chambers – places where everyone reinforces our notion that only we are right and anyone who disagrees is wrong. Getting to the truth is ever more difficult. And as we saw in the United States on 6 January this year, the consequences of living in these echo chambers can be devastating.

This brings me to my second point. It seems to me that truth is becoming a somewhat **relative** concept. COP26 is an example of this. States and fossil fuel producing companies are cooking the books on CO2 emissions. This was debated and discussed in Glasgow with agreement reached that standards must be followed – otherwise the only way we will know if we are off track to reach 1.5C - is when we don't meet that target.

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There's also a bit of fiddling around the costs. The Prime Minister of Barbados has noted that over the last 20 years the world's central banks have spent 25 trillion dollars on quantitative easing – that's the number 25 with twelve zeros after it!

This was to fend off recession caused by the greed of bankers and Wall Street brokers for impossible levels of profit, to shore up banks that otherwise would have gone bankrupt, and most recently to protect our economies from the ravages of the pandemic.

But now think of this. The cost of getting us to 1.5C is \$500 billion a year. Sounds like a lot, but 500 billion is 2 percent of 25 trillion. Unlocking this money will mean that civilisation is able to adapt, that large scale shocks will be minimised, and that justice will be done for those who have the most to lose, but who have caused the least harm.

And the same applies to pandemic preparedness. The estimated losses from 12 months of COVID19 globally is \$11.5 trillion and yet the investment needed for the next ten years in being better prepared and preventing pandemics is \$260 billion. [Pause]

So now here's the problem, as I see it. Banks and politicians snap their fingers when their direct financial interests are at risk and the money is conjured up, mostly from taxes paid by normal earners, living normal lives. But when the fate of the planet is at stake the money is suddenly not there. And yet there is no huge outcry – and this I cannot understand. It's mind boggling why highly intelligent leaders cannot buy in to this when the maths is so straightforward!

Those hardest hit are provided with handouts, not with solutions that uphold their rights and dignity, but with charity. But justice isn't built on charity. Equity, which enables justice, requires a more level playing field than the one we have now, which brings me to my third point.

And it's about tax. When I say that word what is your reaction? I used to immediately think "how can I minimise what I pay in taxes" but over the last couple of years, and with thanks in part to Rutger Bregman's appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos, I have changed how I think about tax. He said, and I quote: "It feels like I'm at a firefighters conference and no one's allowed to speak about water, right? Just stop talking about philanthropy and start talking about taxes. We can invite Bono once more, but we've got to be talking about taxes. That's it. Taxes, taxes, taxes. All the rest is bullshit in my opinion." Unquote.

When we talk of a vision for a just and sustainable Malaysia, it's the same. It's about taxes. And it's not just the super-rich; it's all of us figuring out how we minimise the amount of taxes we pay the state. Sadly, the political record on use of taxpayers' money here is somewhat chequered - so why should we pay any more than we can get away with? Simply put it is taxes that can play a key role in fixing our approach; to supporting

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decarbonisation, for incentivising the private sector to engage in measures that will help to clean up our lived environment, for planting trees and saving our forests.

All these actions require money. All these actions will help to ensure the health of this country and, by extension, our health. So we need greater transparency on how taxpayers contributions are used. My Malaysian friend in Copenhagen tells me about how 60% of her income is taxed, but she is unfazed by this. She knows that their family health, education and other support services are there at no cost and of high quality. And she still manages to save for holidays and little indulgences, and this is why Denmark is one of the happiest countries in the world.

My fourth point is more a question for ourselves. As we emerge from the pandemic, what kind of country do we want to be – how equitable, how just? And here we are a bit stuck.

- While Malaysia made some strong commitments at COP26, our economy is highly reliant on fossil fuels – both for revenue and production of goods and services.
- Our adaptation away from fossil fuels is slow compared with others who have invested heavily, largely through the private sector, in building the infrastructure needed for electric vehicles, solar power etc. We're getting going on this but need to accelerate our efforts. The tax breaks on new electric vehicles included in the 2022 budget speech are a step in the right direction and very warmly welcomed.

Esteemed viewers:

- We live beyond the boundaries of what the planet and this land that we call home can sustainably provide for us.
- Our politics is, and let me be diplomatic here, challenging and confusing.
- Our rivers and coastlines are littered with single use plastics.
- The air in our cities is often not good for our health and our cities are wasteful and inefficient.
- Our exposure, as a nation, to the increasingly robust international debate on planetary health, in all its manifestations, is limited and our media shows little interest in doing anything about that.

Now – those who are impacted hardest by this set of issues are the poorest in our communities. But that brings me back to my point on taxes. If we want to fix these issues, as well as address the very clear division between the haves and have nots in our society then maybe we need to stop calling tax “tax”? Maybe we need to talk about a mandatory societal contribution.

Interestingly the UK has recently added a separate 1.25% levy on earnings for health and social care; both to pay for its national health service in its need to catch up with non-Covid-19 work and thereafter to fund social care, which is becoming ever more important as the UK population ages. While unpopular, the fact that it

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was not described as a tax but as a health and social care levy, separated it out from the black hole that is tax.

We also need to think about how we can better respect the rights of people who currently are the recipients of charity. How do we give them voice and agency? While Covid-19 has been a terrible time for us all, it has transformed how we communicate. Take this meeting, for example. Previously numbers were limited to how many people could fit in the room. That physical constraint is gone. Events like this should be open to all, widely advertised; accessible online and managed in such a way that at least 50 percent of the questions are asked by people who are not able to be in the room. We need to make efforts to ensure that dialogue is flattened, less elevated so that not only those perceived as high value are encouraged to speak, and that any decisions are made through that broader dialogue. After all, if we are not listening then how can we understand? So I hope next year, Hasanah Forum will have the voices of the unseen and unheard join us, engage with us and be a part of the solutions we seek. That would be a really fantastic step forward.

But, and this is my fifth and final point – when it comes down to it, society – something that we often speak about as “other” – is us.

Malaysia is us.

The Government is elected by us.

Carbon is emitted by us.

Rivers are polluted by us.

SUVs, which very few of us need, are increasing levels of pollution faster than regulated reductions can take hold.

Online shopping makes billions in profits a year because we buy stuff from online outlets. It’s so easy: “Oh I want this” – get onto the website or Instagram or Facebook, click “buy” and await its arrival.

But do we actually ever think about the consequences of our actions?

- The carbon footprint of the items we buy which are often manufactured in and imported from China?
- The plastic that these items come wrapped in to make sure that they are safely delivered. Have we ever protested to Shopee and Lazada about this?
- Where will all that plastic end up? More than likely on our dinner plate inside a fish.
- Whether this item is something that we need or yet more landfill fodder.

I used to blame others – it’s MUCH easier than taking responsibility, right? Principally the Government, who should pass laws to stop me doing things and regulate my behaviour so that, as if by magic, the behaviour of

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people I transact business with will also change. Of course, that's true; governments need to play their role. But so do we. We need to take responsibility for the role our individual actions have played and to recognise that our actions are determinants in what happens next. And it's not enough to say, "I don't know what to do". The Times of London put out a simple but useful guide just prior to COP, which included some key suggestions (see slide):

- Track your carbon footprint.
- Repair stuff rather than throwing it away
- Adjust your AC thermostat so that your home isn't freezing but rather comfortable
- Consume less plastic – it's easy but we are lazy
- Get a water bottle and wear a washable mask.
- Cut your consumption of meat.
- Carpool – our cars spend 95% of their time doing nothing.
- Eat ugly vegetables – food waste is a huge carbon contributor. Better still grow your own.
- Cut down on online shopping.
- Think about water consumption.
- Think about where you are investing. Don't invest in companies that bankroll fossil fuel extraction.
- Learn. Sign up for a short course at the Carbon Literacy Project.

So, what does all of this have to do with justice and sustainability? Well, it seems to me that the decisions we make about our daily lives are currently disconnected with the kind of society we want to live in. Connecting our consciousness to that of the broader environment in which we live takes effort, frequent pause for thought and often a fair degree of compromise.

Part of this decision-making has an impact on justice and sustainability. They are precious – but because we see them as rights, we tend to take them for granted. And we are lucky. In general Malaysia has come a long way in a short space of time. The danger now is that our collective wellbeing and the sustainability of our lived environment is increasingly threatened by our desire for more.

Planetary health is an integrated way of improving our relationship with planet Earth. It focuses on achieving the highest attainable standards of health, wellbeing, and equity worldwide, all within safe environmental limits. It requires a much stronger focus on how our political, economic, and social systems must change in order to truly protect us and the Earth's natural systems so that both can thrive.

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Simply put, adopting a planetary health approach to how our country moves forward will set us on a course where we find the right balance. Much work is already underway on making our cities more sustainable, addressing inefficiencies in food systems, dealing with factors that caused Covid-19 so that we can better manage pandemics and, where possible, eliminate them. Planetary health is also looking at how we make economies fairer – so that we can respect the boundaries of what the planet can provide while also living comfortable and sustainable lives. And of course, tackling the climate emergency is a top priority.

We have the tools to make all these things happen. But making progress is hard. And if decisions are left only to those in power, without due reference to most of us who simply want to live decent sustainable, equitable and just lives, then things will not change.

Leaders **MUST** lead, but let us remind ourselves that justice, equity and sustainability are important for us, the people. So reimagining that just and sustainable tomorrow must begin with us, the people, who must be the first to defend and fight for them.

We need to and we can because we owe it to future generations to be good ancestors.

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