

United Nations Development Programme



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Speech

***“Conference on Climate Change Preparedness:
Towards Policy Changes”***

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UNDP Conference on Climate Change Preparedness:
Towards Policy Changes

11-Sep-07

Yang Berhormat Dato Seri Azmi Khalid,
Dr. Richard Leete,
Yang Berbahagia Ms. Loo Took Gee
Yang Berbahagia Dato Syed Hamzah Syed Othman
Dr. Marcel Alers
Your Excellencies
Distinguished speakers and participants
Members of the media
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Selamat Pagi, Good Morning,

As a concerned citizen of Malaysia, I am very happy to be here at this conference this morning, and once again I'd like to thank Dr. Richard Leete and UNDP for inviting me here. It is an honour and my pleasure to volunteer my time whenever possible, for causes I feel strongly about. I think we can all agree that the climate change we are facing is something we **should** feel strongly about, as it is something we can no longer ignore or deny. Therefore, I feel it is very apt and optimistic that on a day that is synonymous with great loss and tragedy, September 11th, we are gathered together to do something positive for ourselves and the world. Preparing for climate change and creating policy changes that shall help to reverse the dwindling spiral we are facing with regards to the environment we are living in and creating, has never been more timely.

Good planets are hard to find. If we continue our current habits as citizens of Malaysia and peoples of Earth, in having negative human impact and consuming beyond our means and beyond the sustainability of the planet, we unfortunately, have no where else to go. According to Julia Hailes, co-author of the 1988 book "Green Consumer Guide", she said, "if **everyone** in the **world** lived a lifestyle like Japan, then we would need three planets."

Earlier this year in June, I volunteered as an emcee for the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia's conference on Sustainable Living in

Malaysia and the keynote guest speaker was Professor William E. Rees who is the originator of the Ecological Footprint Concept.

Our ecological footprint is a measure of how much energy and resources we consume to sustain ourselves, compared with nature's ability to **renew** these resources.

During his presentation it was proven to me that the situation we are facing on this planet is now extremely serious. Even back in 1992, the UCS World Scientists issued a Warning to Humanity,

"We, the undersigned, **senior** members of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity...A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it, is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be **irretrievably mutilated.**"

This is not a mild statement and not easy words to swallow. I do fear though, that since this warning in 1992, we are still acting too slowly from an environmental perspective, and not making changes in our own lifestyles, such as becoming "Green" consumers.

Being a 'green' consumer means learning how to live within our ecological means. It entails making thoughtful and deliberate choices as consumers to reduce our harmful impact on the environment and practice sustainable consumption. Because we are not doing this fast enough, as a result we are suffering the consequences, the world over, at an alarming rate; flooding, landslides, over-flowing rubbish landfills, drought, haze and numerous "natural" disasters. During my world travels in just the last three years, I have witnessed substantial flooding in the UK, Germany, and of all places Los Angeles which is supposedly a desert. Let alone the terrible flooding here in Johor and many parts of Malaysia which has incurred tremendous expense in damages and uprooted more than one hundred thousand people, this year alone. Even the theatre where I used to work, under Dataran Merdeka, was destroyed by flooding, only a few years ago.

And things could get worse within our own lifetime if we do not implement change in how we consume. I'm not just talking about buying but everything we consume. Beyond ourselves we have to think of the future generations to come. 50 years from now, will our children of today grow up to continue suffering these same things, or will they be able to **look back at us**, during their celebrations for the 100th Merdeka, with pride for making a change? Because since every **one** of us is creating and

adding to the problem, it does require that every single individual really make a change in lifestyle and choices to reverse it. And the changes that would make a huge difference, from the world view, can be very minor and simple to accomplish on an individual level.

Now we as human beings are a part of the ecology of this planet as well. Every action we take, from where we build our house, to how we supply ourselves with water, to how much electricity we use, to every tree we cut and rainforest we destroy, to how much we drive our cars and burn fossil fuels like petrol, whether or not we recycle etc., all has an affect on our environment and therefore when we make wise choices as consumers, we can reduce the negative impact. Our consumption of food, for example, contributes to environmental degradation a variety of ways. The production, processing, transportation, and packaging of food can all contribute to environmental damage.

When you buy green products you show the corporations who make the products that the environment is important to you. As consumer behaviour gets greener, product manufacturers will respond by making more of their products better for the environment.

In fact, as consumers, we can be extremely powerful through our power of choice. In the UK for example, there has been a rapid growth of the market for firms producing environmentally sustainable and ethical products and services. A report found that UK ethical consumerism was up 11percent in 2005, compared to its previous year, and was worth •29.3 billion. Sales of ethical food such as organic and Fairtrade goods soared 18percent to •5.4billion. Spending on eco-travel, tourism and transport also went up. An executive director of business management, Craig Shannon was quoted as saying,

“Where the ethical or eco-choice has become the market leader, for example in sales of A-rated energy fridges (which account for 60% of the market), this has been underpinned by an EU labeling scheme, inefficient products being removed from sale and the support of well targeted subsidies. If many scientists are saying we have ten years to make a dent in climate change, it is this type of radical overhaul of the choices made **available** to people that is going to deliver the rapid market changes required. The efforts of far-sighted, highly motivated consumers need to be leveraged and supported with business innovation and government intervention.”

I believe this trend of environmental or Green consumerism, which could be defined as individuals attempting to protect themselves and their world through the power of their purchasing decisions, should be encouraged by creating new policy which supports this.

Such as, Fairtrade and carbon emission labeling of products, which would also encourage the consumption of local products. Easy access and availability to every home for recycling, tax incentives to go green and purchase a hybrid or bio-fuel car or environmentally friendly products, legislation for retailers that requires them to take back unwanted packaging, encouraging the use of eco-friendly packaging such as this palm oil husk product instead of using polystyrene and plastic.

Availability and awareness of consumer guidebooks such as one called "Shopping for a Better World" for awareness for choice of corporations. "Better World Investment Guide" which has increased shareholders to put their investments in more socially responsible corporations. To give you an idea of how this trend of investment is progressing, in the years between 1984 and 1989, the socially responsible investment industry grew tenfold, from \$45 billion to \$450 billion, according to Jacquelyn A. Ottman who is president of a Market Consultancy in New York.

This trend in moral responsibility in consumerism should hopefully grow in Malaysia. In my family we separate and recycle all our rubbish, we keep our water and electricity consumption low, we buy organic and environmentally friendly products, my sister even collects all the paper, plastic and aluminum waste from her office and recycles it. We have found this relatively easy and simple to do, except for the availability of recycling **disposal** in neighbourhoods, so it could be easier for every household if the government sector and private sector gets involved and implements actions for Green consumerism, which includes not just what we buy, but also how we **live**.

The next time you go shopping, as a green consumer, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is there an environmentally friendly alternative available?

2. Is the product's packaging wasteful or excessive?
Also, bringing a re-usable bag along when you shop is a great way to cut back on excess packaging.

3. Is the product made from recyclable materials?

Choose products made from recycled materials such as paper, cardboard, aluminum, steel and plastic. Check if the materials are biodegradable. Avoid hazardous materials.

4. Was the product produced locally?

Transporting products from around the world contributes to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Buying locally made products is a great way to reduce adverse environmental impacts while supporting the local economy.

5. Was the product created using environmentally sustainable methods?

Buy from manufacturers with a good environmental track record and check product labels for environmental certification such as ISO 14001.

In closing, all the great religions of the world teach us that we should protect and take care of nature and our environment, after all, our lives depend on it. In Malaysia, our rainforests really are gems of our country and arguably one of our best assets. For example, our Belum-Temenggor rainforest is 130 million years old, older than the Amazon and the Congo, and therefore much richer in biodiversity. Our rainforests have an integral part in reversing climate change and providing us with clean air and water. There so many benefits to sustaining our rainforests which took millions of years to evolve, including responsible eco-tourism, medicinal value and green sustainable products, to name but a few. I urge the private sector, state and national governments to support sustainable forestry projects to protect our tropical forests and to truly make Malaysia "Green" with an ecological footprint that is sustainable for all our future generations to come.