

Malaysian Case Study: Review of National CSO Engagement on the SDGs

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Introduction

Malaysia has a very good planning process namely the five year development plans. The Government has had good consultations with civil society organisations (CSO), private sector and academic community through the development planning process. The annual budget dialogues have been another good opportunity for engagement and many CSOs have had a good level of interaction. The experience is same in a number other initiatives such as gender related policy discussions where women groups have had good success in policy advocacy.

However, this was not same for human rights based CSOs involved in the Universal Periodic Review Process (UPR) when the Ministry of Home affairs banned the coalition as an illegal groups although they were the ones who prepared the CSO Shadow report and were engaged in the UPR review process with the Human Rights Council in Geneva on both the UPR reviews on Malaysia.

The SDG discussions post Rio plus 20 provided CSOs with opportunities to flag up the concerns. However the first formal discussions on SDGs by CSOs was hosted on Oct 27, 2015 in Kuala Lumpur organised by the Society for promotion of Human Rights (PROHAM). They brought together CSO leaders from a cross section of concerns namely the development, environmental and human rights groups. This served as a platform for joint cooperation. A representative of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) also participated and assured the CSOs partnership and inclusion in the SDG national process. The CSOs resolved to organise themselves as a loose Alliance and provided some input to the SDG readiness report.

Various Stages of Engagement

The CSOs began organising themselves as an Alliance in three main groups namely the service and development, second, environmental and thirdly, human rights. A series of meeting were hosted to undertake an initial mapping exercises to note which CSO were undertaking services and programs related to the SDG goals and targets. The CSOs have organised themselves as a loose alliance, have a flat governance structure and an open door policy to all CSOs who are interested to participate. So far we have had a good working relationship with the major groups of CSOs such as environment, gender, youth and human rights including the UPR set of NGOs as well as a number of think tanks.

CSOs were formally invited two national level government organised and sponsored events. The first was the National SDG Symposium in Feb 2016. CSOs were invited to participate and a number were speakers on the panels. This was a one day event. The CSOs had prepared a statement which was handed over to the EPU Minister at this gathering. The findings of the

Oct 27, 2015 discussions was also published and handed over to the EPU as CSO findings on SDGs.

A second, two day National SDG Roadmap workshop was hosted in Nov 2016. CSOs were also invited to participate and present reflections in a number of panels. Likewise there were opportunities to ask questions from the floor. One aspect which was pointed out was the weak or complete absence of reference to human rights in the discussions. Another aspect highlighted was that CSOs wanted a partnership approach of being directly involved in the various formal mechanisms of the SDG when government establishes the implementation mechanisms rather than in ad hoc ways.

At both the EPU events in 2016, the EPU has presented the SDG implementation in three phases, in line with the five year National Development Plans, where the current Eleventh Malaysia Plan is regarded as the first phase – 2016 to 2020. Here, themes such as inclusive development and an orientation towards a multi-dimensional approach to poverty eradication has been introduced with a focus on relative poverty and the Bottom 40 % issues and concerns. Therefore the second and third phases will target aspects of SDG priorities not addressed in the first and current stage.

By Dec 2016, the EPU had set up a National SDG Steering Committee with all the key government agencies, representatives from the private sector, academic community and CSOs. Initially three CSOs from the Alliance was invited for the first Steering committee meeting but later invitations were extended to two more. Therefore the Alliance associated members now in the Steering committee are five and we have opportunity to speak and share our views as we did in the first meeting. This is a very good move and CSOs are now formally part of the main SDG governance group. EPU also informed that a National SDG Council will be set up with the Prime Minister as the Chair including Cabinet ministers of relevant ministries and other prominent Malaysians. No announcement has been made on this matter as yet.

Between Jan and March 2017, the EPU has established five cluster working groups and 17 taskforces as per the SDGs. CSOs have been invited on both the cluster groups and the taskforce. There have been invitations by the EPU for CSO inputs to the kind of initiatives carried out which are related to SDG goals, targets and indicators. EPU has developed templates for reports towards both the National voluntary reporting as well as the formulation of the National SDG Roadmap. CSOs have been asked to identify current gaps and what needs to be done in due time to address them.

In the Malaysian experience, CSOs have now been incorporated into the formal mechanism of the government for SDG implementation at the National steering committee, cluster working groups and in the taskforce specific working. This is positive and have long term implications. In due time we can measure the quality of the engagement and the impact of it. But the start is a good one.

Challenges Experiences

CSOs are facing a number of challenges in this partnership and engagement. Only time will tell the quality of this engagement and the fruit of it for effective SDG implementation.

First, the CSOs are in need of getting their act together. Each CSO has its own work and therefore with limited personal and financial resources, participation in meetings and report writing is a time consuming process. Additional staff and funding is needed for this but at this point the government has not allocated any funding to stakeholder groups. As the SDG networking and partnership is not a short term task and therefore long term there needs to be clear modalities for engagements as well as CSO funding for institutional and capacity building. The Alliance is now looking to formalise and institutionalize its operations.

Second, while CSOs are part of the five cluster working groups and 17 taskforces, many names and organisations submitted have not received invitations for participation. This could be merely an operational issues however some complaints are from human rights based CSOs who have not received the invitations while their names have been submitted. Alliance secretariat has been engaging the EPU cultural group heads on this matters and currently taking stock of who is in which cluster group and taskforce. We see this for a moment as an initial teething process which will be ironed out soon as this is a fifteen year process.

Third, many CSOs are keen in long-term policy and development concerns but the current priority among the agencies is to get the report completed as the dateline for report writing and submission is within March 2017. So the initial focus of the cluster working groups and taskforces is on the National Voluntary report preparation. However we do recognise that this is the most urgent task for the moment as Malaysia will make a presentations at New York in July 2017. In this context one major concern is Malaysia's UN treaty body obligations, such as our commitment to the conventions Malaysia has ratified as well as the obligations under the UPR process. There seems to be a neglect of these in the current discussions and CSOs are keen to address them.

Fourth, there seems to be very little public discussion nationally in Malaysia on the SDGs. Very few of the Ministers make reference and there is not a lot of public attention to Malaysia's commitment to the global community in September 2015. While the agencies are active internally, this process seem an exercise for the international community as opposed to the empowerment of ordinary citizens. Neither is there a by-partisan working group in Parliament of the SDGs and Malaysia's global commitments. Likewise beyond the borders of the national capital there are no SDG discussions or very little at the State and local government levels. In fact these sections of the government are not even in the SDG discussions now.

Fifth, there are challenges in reviewing the SDGs from the cross cutting agenda. For example gender is cross cutting and not just confined to SDG 5. CSOs working on gender concerns like to see gender mainstreaming as a key policy target. As mentioned before concerns in SDG 16 is a little weak especially pertaining to human rights and there needs to be further engagements in this aspect. Sometime the focus is narrowed down to the SDG indicators and the comprehensive spirit of the interconnected nature of the SDGs are lost. Therefore this is a challenge and hopefully can be addressed in the long run.

Sixth, is collection and access to data. The Statistic Department of Malaysia has been very progressive in this matter and is willing to share information as well as build capacity of all the agencies to collect new data that is relevant to SDGs. This is an ongoing process but Malaysia has a good start in this matter. CSOs have indicated that their micro case studies will be useful to illustrate compliance or challenges especially from the B40 communities or in cross cutting themes.

Seventh, CSO strongly feel that while they participate in these discussions they want to continue an independent process of discussions and feedback which they like to document and release as independent opinions. They have become aware that working with government does also mean responsibility to confidentiality of data and information. Monitoring and policy advocacy is a key role of CSOs. In due time the Alliance hopes to establish a website and data base for easy public access on SDG matters.

Conclusion

The SDGs have ushered in a new phase of Government and CSO engagement in Malaysia. While there are challenges, nonetheless there is a major opening for partnership and engagement. This is not a short term process but long-term. The Malaysia CSO Alliance is positive towards these and will continue to strengthen stakeholder engagement with government, private sector, academic and think tank institutions including parliamentarians. In due time we hope to go to the grassroots especially at the local district and local government levels to create greater SDG awareness and ensure the buy in of ordinary citizens.

Selected Reference

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