

UN Resolutions on the Role of Parliaments and Parliamentarians in Accelerating the Achievements of the SDGs

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Abstract

Since the adoption of “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” on 25 September 2015 at the United Nations General Assembly, there have been strong calls for multi-stakeholder engagements in line with SDG 17.17 on partnerships between public, public-private sectors, and civil society. The various calls to different stakeholders include the three resolutions (A/RES/76/270, A/RES/72/278 and A/RES/77/159) adopted by the UN General Assembly on the role of parliaments and parliamentarians in the implementation of the SDGs at the international, national, and local levels. While the socio-economic development agenda is primarily seen as the responsibility of the state, different branches of the governance institutions have distinctive roles. The singling out of the parliaments and parliamentarians through UN General Assembly resolutions is very significant, marking a recognition of the distinctive roles and contributions of the legislative bodies in member states. These resolutions highlight the relationship and partnership between the UN and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in SDGs. Elected Members of Parliament (MPs) are the people’s representatives. They have a close relationship with the grassroots. They represent their voters at the highest legislative body with an oversight role in areas including the allocations of the national resources through the annual budget and monitoring the effective delivery of services. The MPs play the additional role of being the vehicle to highlight the grievances of the people. In this context, the MPs deliberate relevant policies, programmes and legislation associated with the SDGs such as poverty, health, education, employment, climate change and good governance. This article further highlights the role of four parliamentary groups actively mobilising MPs

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engaged with the SDGs at the international level. These are the *Inter-Parliamentary Union* (IPU), the *Commonwealth Parliamentary Association* (CPA), *Parliamentarians for Global Action* (PGA) and *Parliamentarians for the Global Goals* (PfGG). These four groups have been playing a key role in linking MPs with the UN on SDGs. The article ends with reflections and lessons of the role Malaysian MPs are playing through the APPGM-SDG. There is a need for greater visibility in public policy advocacy in Malaysia and on the global stage. To this end, more resources need to be made available to MPs to encourage their active involvement especially at the United Nations in New York.

Keywords: *public advocacy, multi-stakeholder partnerships, parliamentarians, parliaments, SDGs*

Introduction

Parliamentarians play a major role not only in politics but also determine the direction of the development agenda through decisions on policies, legislation and financial resources of the nation. The Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2015 -2020) was tabled in Parliament on 21 May 2015¹ and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025) on 27 September 2021.² Both these documents make specific reference to the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Members of Parliament (MPs) have the responsibility to read, study and debate the plans and determine the financial allocations in line with the nation's key priority areas.

In an earlier article on the role of parliamentarians, there is a brief description on the MPs' legislative and constituency roles.³ Their dual roles in parliament and in the constituency can enhance the localisation of SDGs. While they are involved in policy advocacy using the 17 SDGs as development policies in parliament, they also use this framework at the constituency level in efforts to address and resolve the local economic, social and environmental concerns.

1 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, 'Eleventh Malaysia Plan: Anchoring Growth on People' <https://www.ekonomi.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-05/Chapter%201.pdf> accessed 2 August 2023..

2 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, 'Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025: A Prosperous, Inclusive and Sustainable Malaysia' <https://rmke12.ekonomi.gov.my/en> accessed 2 August 2023.

3 Jayasooria, D., 'Role of Parliamentarians in Localising SDGs in Malaysia' (2021) 1 *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament* 137-58, <https://journalimp.parlimen.gov.my/jurnal/index.php/jmp/article/view/34/19> accessed 2 August 2023.

In this article, we discuss three aspects:

1. What does the 2030 Agenda say about the involvement of parliamentarians and parliaments?
2. Which organisations are involved in engaging parliamentarians and the UN SDG Agenda globally?
3. Which United Nations resolutions are on the role of parliamentarians and parliaments, and the SDGs?

What does the 2030 Agenda say about the involvement of Parliamentarians and Parliaments?

There is a call for multi-stakeholder engagements in the localisation of SDGs, specifically in SDG 17.17, which encourages effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships. There is a place within this equation for leaders, elected by citizens or appointed within the democratic system, who have a specific task in the delivery of SDGs. Here, parliamentarians are one of the many stakeholders involved in the implementation of SDGs. In that vein, there is a specific reference to leadership in governance as outlined in SDG 16.7, which reads, *'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'*.⁴ Additionally, there is a specific indicator, SDG 16.7.1 which highlights the need for *'Proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including (a) the legislatures..., compared to national distributions, by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups'*.⁵ Here, the indicator emphasises the need to identify representation in public institutions that reflect sex, age, disabilities, and population groups at national and local legislatures, with the parliament being the national legislature.

Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda points out the specific role of the parliament and parliamentarians:

We acknowledge also the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our

4 United Nations Statistics Division, 'Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%202023%20refinement_Eng.pdf accessed 2 August 2023.

5 Ibid.

commitments. Governments and public institutions will also work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, sub-regional institutions, international institutions, academia, philanthropic organisations, volunteer groups and others.⁶

The above affirms the important oversight role of parliamentarians as the peoples' elected representatives in ensuring good governance, accountability, particularly in the allocation and use of public funds, and independent monitoring to ensure that *no one is left behind*. This global mandate unifies the role that parliamentarians play globally in advancing the SDGs.

Drawing from the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, this section highlights five points on the role of parliaments in relation to the SDGs. First, representation is key in the SDGs, therefore, the leaders must represent the different segments of society, namely men and women, young and old, people with disabilities or able-bodied persons, and different population groups that reflect racial, ethnic and religious diversity. This is basically to ensure that *no one is left behind*. Second, parliamentarians are significantly responsible for the enactment of legislation. In Malaysia, no SDG legislation had been introduced between 2015 and 2023. However, the SDGs have been introduced through development policies that provide the direction for the localisation of SDGs.

Third, a key function of the parliament is the adoption of annual national budgets. MPs have the opportunity to raise questions and comments based on the budget presented. In terms of a national budget allocation for the SDGs, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) of Malaysia undertook a mapping of the budget with the SDGs. Following a pilot test, MoF has been funding the localising of SDGs since 2020 through the *All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on SDGs* (APPGM-SDG).

Fourth, the Parliament plays a key role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of the SDGs. Currently, 85 MPs have undertaken this journey with the APPGM-SDG between 2020 and 2023 through mapping exercises and situational analyses.⁷ The MPs are encouraged to take note of the gaps and challenges highlighted in their respective constituency's report and call upon public sector agencies to

6 United Nations, 'Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' Item 45, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> accessed 2 August 2023.

7 All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG), 'Constituencies with SDG' <https://appgm-sdg.com/constituencies-with-sdg/> accessed 4 August 2023.

address these issues and concerns. The Ministry of Economy has instituted several mechanisms such as the National SDG Council,⁸ chaired by the Prime Minister and the National SDG Centre⁹ which coordinates and monitors the various SDG activities. The Ministry of Finance and the UN country team also established the SDG Foundation¹⁰ to enhance financing for development.

Fifth, parliamentarians are encouraged to work with local and international partners in addressing SDGs concerns. Here, the APPGM-SDG has been the principal vehicle, both locally and internationally.

Which organisations are involved in engaging parliamentarians and the UN SDG Agenda Globally?

At the global level, there are four parliamentary groups mobilising MPs from around the world in addressing SDGs. While MPs operate at a national level, there is solidarity and partnership in addressing global and international concerns, in particular, matters pertaining to security, climate change, world trade and migration issues including human trafficking.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)¹¹

The IPU was set up in 1889 by a small group of parliamentarians, dedicated to promoting peace through parliamentary diplomacy and dialogue. It has since grown into a truly global organisation with 180 members and 15 associate members. One of the many themes they work on is the SDGs.¹² IPU mobilises parliaments towards the global development agenda. By fulfilling legislative, oversight and budget responsibilities, MPs are most suited as key players in reducing social and economic inequalities, improving the health of the people it represents and taking action to save the planet from the climate emergency.

8 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, 'Sustainable Development Goals' <www.ekonomi.gov.my/en/sustainable-development-goals> accessed 4 August 2023.

9 Povera, A., 'Govt to Establish National SDG Centre' New Straits Times (Kuala Lumpur, 6 September 2022) <www.nst.com.my/news/government-public-policy/2022/09/828867/govt-establish-national-sdg-centre> accessed 4 August 2023.

10 Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 'MySDG Foundation' <https://www.mof.gov.my/portal/en/mysdg> accessed 4 August 2023.

11 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'About Us' <https://www.ipu.org/about-us> accessed 7 August 2023.

12 IPU, 'Sustainable Development' <https://www.ipu.org/impact/sustainable-development> accessed 7 August 2023.

IPU has produced a useful self-assessment SDG toolkit which helps parliamentarians identify good practices, opportunities and lessons learnt on how to institutionalise and mainstream the SDGs into the legislative process.¹³ IPU organises seminars, workshops, and meetings on the SDGs as an attempt to help MPs exchange knowledge and experience with peers on best practices and set common action to advance the Sustainable Development agenda.

Two key IPU events have reaffirmed the role of parliamentarians in the SDGs. The first was the 132nd IPU Assembly, where the 'Hanoi Declaration - The Sustainable Development Goals: Turning words into action'¹⁴ was adopted on 1 April 2015; clearly outlining the roles and commitment of parliamentarians in the implementation of SDGs. Another event held more recently was the first global parliamentary meeting on achieving SDGs held on 28 - 30 September 2021.¹⁵

The APPGM-SDG chair was invited as a panel speaker and members of the APPGM SDG secretariat were also invited to participate at the IPU event on SDGs.¹⁶ This was held at the UN in New York on 13 July 2022, in conjunction with the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). In the following year, the APPGM-SDG chair was invited to be a panel speaker but was not able to attend. On 21 September 2023, a representative from the Head of Secretariat, Pn Nur Rahmah Othman, participated at the event held in conjunction with the SDG Summit when IPU hosted an SDG meeting with parliamentarians.¹⁷ The IPU meetings and discussions on SDGs provide a good platform for Malaysian MPs to showcase the Malaysian experience and best practices.

13 IPU, 'Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Self-Assessment Toolkit' <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2017-01/parliaments-and-sustainable-development-goals-self-assessment-toolkit> accessed 7 August 2023.

14 IPU, 'Hanoi Declaration: The Sustainable Development Goals: Turning Words into Action' <http://archive.ipu.org/conf-e/132/rpt-gendebate.htm> accessed 7 August 2023.

15 IPU, 'First Global Parliamentary Meeting on Achieving the SDGs' <https://www.ipu.org/event/first-global-parliamentary-meeting-achieving-sdgs-0#event-sub-page-documents/> accessed 7 August 2023.

16 IPU, 'Parliamentary Forum at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development' <https://www.ipu.org/event/parliamentary-forum-un-high-level-political-forum-sustainable-development#event-sub-page-26252/> accessed 7 August 2023.

17 IPU, 'Parliamentary Event at the SDG Summit and other High Level Meetings' <https://www.ipu.org/event/parliamentary-event-sdg-summit-and-other-high-level-meetings> accessed 7 August 2023.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)¹⁸

CPA, established in 1911, is one of the oldest parliamentary groups, comprising over 180 legislatures, categorised into nine geographic regions of the Commonwealth. It offers a vast opportunity for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to collaborate on issues of mutual interest and to share good practices.

One major innovation of CPA is the CPA Parliamentary Academy.¹⁹ Among the courses offered is the CPA Sustainable Development Goals Certificate (Course 601) with a focus on the parliamentary role. This course is designed for elected or appointed parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. During this course, participants will explore how to advance the SDG Agenda through, amongst others, the role as a parliamentarian. It focuses on key SDG engagements including SDGs Financing. By the end of the course, participants will understand what the SDGs are and what can be done to achieve them before the deadline in 2030.

Malaysia is active in the CPA activities and the course on SDGs will provide some good insights for Malaysian MPs. The MySDG Academy is seeking to collaborate with the CPA Parliamentary Academy to conduct some of these courses in 2024. In this context, it is important to note that both the IPU and UNDP have produced valuable resource materials for the capacity building and training of MPs.^{20,21}

Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA)²²

PGA, founded in 1978 during the Cold War, is a Washington-based organisation for mobilising parliamentarians in support of nuclear disarmament and in addressing global problems. PGA, as a non-governmental, multi-party, international network of legislators acting in their individual capacity, informs and mobilises parliamentarians in

18 Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), 'About Us' <https://www.cpahq.org/about-us/> accessed 9 August 2023.

19 CPA, 'CPA Parliamentary Academy' <https://www.cpahq.org/parliamentary-academy/> accessed 9 August 2023.

20 IPU (n 13).

21 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Parliament's Role in Implementing the SDGs Handbook* (New York, 2017), <https://www.undp.org/publications/parliaments-role-implementing-sustainable-development-goals> accessed 7 August 2023.

22 Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), 'About Us' <https://www.pgaction.org/about/> accessed 8 August 2023.

all regions of the world to advocate for human rights and the rule of law, democracy, human security, inclusion, gender equality and justice, including climate justice.

PGA has a special initiative on human rights and environment.²³ In 2021, PGA launched a 'Campaign for a Human Rights-based Approach to ClimateAction' with a regional focus on the Caribbean.²⁴ The approach was to create awareness among parliamentarians on climate change issues and seek support for action at both at the national and global level. Currently, M. Kulasegaran, the MP for Ipoh Barat parliamentary constituency, and Deputy Minister of Law and Institutional Reform in the Prime Minister's Department in Malaysia are members of the International Council.²⁵

Parliamentarians for the Global Goals (PfGG)²⁶

PfGG, also known as 2030beyond, is a Danish non-profit organisation founded by Kirsten Brosbøl in July 2020. She is a former Member of Parliament (2005-2019) and was the Minister of Environment (2014-2015) of Denmark. She also founded and chaired the Danish All-Party Parliamentary Group on the SDGs (2017-2019). Unlike the other parliamentary groups, the focus of PfGG is solely on the SDGs. PfGG is an initiative for parliamentarians to promote the SDGs through a network of parliamentary action around the world. It supports legislators in building networks, learning best practices and approaches for action.

Since 2021, the Malaysian APPGM-SDG has been actively participating in online discussions among these parliamentarians. This network of MPs includes MPs from Europe presenting opportunities to learn best practices on SDGs from Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden.

It is therefore significant that APPGM-SDG's MPs and the secretariat have established contact and engaged with these organisations. Over the next few years, APPGM-SDG is committed to network more with these global bodies and contribute towards Malaysia's visibility in global advocacy.

23 PGA, 'Human Rights and Environment Program' <https://www.pgaction.org/hre/> accessed 8 August 2023.

24 PGA, 'Campaign for a Human Rights-based Approach to Climate Action' <https://www.pgaction.org/hre/climate-action/> accessed 8 August 2023.

25 PGA, 'Who We Are' <https://www.pgaction.org/about/who-we-are.html> accessed 8 August 2023.

26 2030beyond, 'About Us' <https://www.2030beyond.org/who> accessed 9 August 2023.

Which United Nations Resolutions are on the role of parliamentarians and parliaments?

There are three resolutions adopted at the UN General Assembly on the role of parliaments and parliamentarians in the context of the SDGs. It is important to clarify the relevance of resolutions with the UN system and how member states adopt them. According to Article 10 of the UN Charter which defines the functions and powers of the General Assembly:

The General Assembly may discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs provided for in the present Charter, and... may make recommendations to the Members of the United Nations or the Security Council or to both on any such questions or matters.²⁷

The key point here is that the General Assembly does make resolutions but these are only recommendations and are not legally binding on the Member States except when adopted by the Security Council. This clarifies the position on resolutions but it is still significant to note that there are three such resolutions regarding the UN and parliamentarians, with specific reference to the SDGs.

The First Resolution is A/RES/72/278 - Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (22 May 2018)²⁸

This is a general engagement between the UN and the IPU for a systematic engagement. There is a recognition to work together in several areas including sustainable development.

Paragraph 4 states, *'Encourages the continued active involvement of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in promoting the enhanced contribution of parliaments at the national, regional and global levels in support of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;'*

27 United Nations, 'Model United Nations' <https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/how-decisions-are-made-un#:~:text=may%20make%20recommendations%20to%20the,binding%20on%20the%20Member%20States> accessed 12 August 2023.

28 United Nations, 'Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 22 May 2018 A/RES/72/278' <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1627506?ln=en&v=pdf> accessed 12 August 2023.

Paragraph 5 states, *‘Welcomes the practice of including parliamentarians as members of national delegations to major United Nations meetings and events, as appropriate, and invites Member States to continue this practice in a more regular and systematic manner;’*

Paragraph 11 states, *‘Welcomes the contribution of the Inter-Parliamentary Union to the work of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, through the participation of parliamentarians, in convening a regular parliamentary side event on the work of parliaments to institutionalize the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as through its efforts to encourage parliaments to engage in the voluntary national reviews of participating countries;’*

Paragraph 23 states, *‘... to support the role of parliaments in translating international commitments into national policies.’*

The Second Resolution is A/RES/76/270 - Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (21 June 2022)²⁹

There were similarities noted with the earlier resolution. The new points are highlighted below:

Paragraph 2 states, *‘Encourages the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union to continue to work closely in various fields, including the three dimensions of sustainable development – the economic, social and environmental...’*

Paragraph 15 states, *‘...the participation of parliamentarians, in convening a parliamentary event on the work of parliaments to institutionalize the Sustainable Development Goals...’*

Paragraph 18 states, *‘...strengthening parliamentary capacities, ... in regard to the allocation of budgetary resources for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda... and helping to align national legislation with international commitments, and to facilitate, within existing resources, greater South-South and triangular cooperation between parliaments and parliamentarians;’*

²⁹ United Nations, ‘Interactions between United Nations, national parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 21 June 2022 A/RES/76/270’ <https://www.ipu.org/file/14716/download> accessed 12 August 2023.

Paragraph 20 states, *'Recognizes that the contributions of young people are important for the full and successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and ... in consultation with youth, youth-led and youth-focused and young women's organizations, to explore and promote concrete new avenues for the full, effective, structured, increased and sustainable participation of young people, youth-led and young women's organizations in relevant decision-making processes and monitoring, in all spheres of political, economic, social and cultural life, including in designing and implementing policies, programmes and initiatives, in particular when implementing the 2030 Agenda;'*

Paragraph 28 states, *'...to increase the representation and participation of women in parliaments.'*

The Third Resolution is A/RES/77/159 - Enhancing the role of parliaments in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (14 Dec 2022)³⁰

Paragraph 5 states, *'... a strong and constructive relationship between parliaments and independent oversight bodies is important for improving the effectiveness of efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and encourages parliaments to ensure that their oversight mechanisms are well structured and have appropriate resources and equipment, as well as access to expertise and resources, to ensure qualified monitoring and evaluation of national development plans and strategies aimed at fully implementing the 2030 Agenda;'*

Paragraph 6 states, *'Encourages public awareness of parliamentary processes and opportunities for public engagement in monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda;'*

Paragraph 7 states, *'... the importance of analytical support to parliamentarians on the respective government budget proposal to enable effective financing for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals;'*

Paragraph 8 references the empowerment of women, while Paragraph 9 references persons with disabilities and Paragraph 10, on youth;

30 United Nations, 'Enhancing the role of parliaments in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 14 December 2022 A/RES/77/159' <https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=A/RES/77/159&Lang=E> accessed 12 August 2023.

Paragraph 12 states, *'Calls upon Member States to promote the leadership role of parliaments in accelerating the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals ... [and in] strengthening the institutional capacity of parliaments in this regard;'*

From these three resolutions, we can note that there are some specific expectations on the role of parliament and parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. These clearly emerged in the third resolution (A/RES/77/159). The direct reference to a leadership role as indicated by the UN is very significant.

At the first IPU global parliamentary meeting on achieving SDGs held in September 2021, parliamentarians affirmed the importance of holding governments accountable with periodical monitoring of government action and through oversight mechanisms with the participation of citizens. In this context, the IPU document states:

Each parliament should find effective ways to hold governments accountable for the goals to which they have subscribed. In doing so, parliaments should define frameworks for periodical monitoring of government action. We, parliamentarians, should monitor the process by which SDG programmes are delivered at the local level, to ensure the context's specificities are considered and citizens are engaged. Oversight mechanisms, such as parliamentary questions, committee hearings, inquiries and reports, are important tools for assessing the concrete impact of government policies and for bringing the SDGs to the attention of the public and the media, thereby encouraging accountability at all levels.³¹

Here, the importance of the oversight role is evident. Amy Tam draws a distinction among the three types of oversight institutions, namely parliaments with a dedicated oversight mechanism, parliaments which use existing structures in undertaking monitoring tasks and parliaments which established an APPG mechanism such as Malaysia.³²

Currently, there is neither a dedicated mechanism nor independent mechanism set up in Malaysia. While groups have been working with the government and focus group discussions held in preparation for

31 IPU (n 15).

32 A.L.C. Tam, 'Parliamentary Oversight to Uphold Accountability in the Review Process of Sustainable Development Goals' (2022) 2 Journal of the Malaysian Parliament 177-199, <https://journalmp.parlimen.gov.my/jurnal/index.php/jmp/article/view/57/31> accessed 13 August 2023.

the VNR in 2017 and 2021, as well as in the preparation of the SDG Roadmap, there have been no formal oversight mechanisms identified. With the APPGM-SDG directly working with MPs on localising the SDGs, this oversight could emerge from the mapping and situational analyses reports. There is a proposal for the APPGM-SDG to prepare a *Voluntary Parliamentary Review* when Malaysia presents its third VNR at the HLPF in July 2025.

It is also necessary to state that there is no formal budgetary review process using an SDG lens. This exercise might be a useful practice. In addition, an engagement process with the public might also serve as a good feedback mechanism. Currently, in all the 85 parliamentary constituencies, APPGM-SDG has conducted focus group discussions which differ from town hall meetings.

Reflections on the roles Malaysian MPs Play through the APPGM-SDG

The role of parliament and parliamentarians in the SDGs have been clearly highlighted by the many UN SDG-related documents and resolutions. Since 2020, the APPGM-SDG has become the major vehicle for the articulation of policy issues and micro-solution projects at the grassroots level, highlighting economic, social and environmental concerns to Malaysian MPs.

MPs at the Local Stage: Addressing Local Grievances from a National Perspective

Parliamentarians in Malaysia need to advocate for an effective grievance mechanism which can receive complaints from the public; a body that can investigate and ensure that the problems identified are resolved.

APPGM-SDG though its mapping exercise has identified about 20 to 30 critical SDG issues in each parliamentary constituency. A simple listing would mean over 2,000 unresolved issues at the ground level. These issues encompass economic, social, environment and governance concerns, with many of them remaining unresolved.

In several cases, local issues such as land conversions from estate or agricultural land that have been subdivided to individual lots, remain unresolved since the British owners sold the land to the locals. In another case, an on-going issue for the past 30 years involved squatter dwellers who were moved to temporary housing (longhouses) but are still waiting to be relocated to permanent low-cost housing. The coastal fishing community, on the other hand, have experienced numerous

problems with sand mining activities and mangrove swamp clearances. Contemporary issues also include the struggles faced by B40 women and welfare recipients against the backdrop of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty.

In this regard, the recommendation made by the government in the 2021 *Voluntary National Review* report is timely and requires the MPs to ensure it is executed in practice at the grassroots. This refers to the establishment of an inter-agency delivery taskforce at the district level:

In localising SDGs, in addition to working with local authorities, efforts are being made to engage with the district offices. This is to ensure an inter-agency SDG delivery taskforce is organised at the district level to enhance the role of all agencies including a multi-stakeholder group (civil society, private sector and academic networks) in addressing economic, social and environmental concerns at the grassroots level.³³

A good example of unresolved issues pertaining to over 800 complaints received by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), is on the National Inquiry into the Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Malaysia, namely the natives of Sabah, Sarawak and Orang Asli community of Peninsular Malaysia.³⁴ It has been 10 years since the release of the report yet relevant government agencies have failed to resolve the matters raised.³⁵ SUHAKAM has called for 'parliamentary and/or State level discussion to deliberate the NI recommendations.' SUHAKAM has further called on the 'government to re-examine the establishment of a National Commission or Customary Land Tribunal to address issues related to Orang Asal/Asli.'

One positive move of the government since the launch of the *Twelfth Malaysia Plan* is the announcement of an independent mechanism called the Ombudsman. This mechanism was first instituted by the Swedish

33 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, 'Malaysia Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021' 120 https://www.ekonomi.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-07/Malaysia_Voluntary_National_Review_%28VNR%29_2021.pdf accessed 14 August 2023..

34 National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), 'Report of the National Inquiry into the Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples' April 2013, <https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2013/07/suhakam-enquiry-full-text2013.pdf> accessed 14 August 2023..

35 SUHAKAM, 'Press Statement No. 44-2023 - A Decade After National Inquiry – Striding towards Respect and Recognition for the Orang Asal & Orang Asli' https://suhakam.org.my/2023/11/press-statement-no-44-2023_a-decade-after-national-inquiry-striding-towards-respect-and-recognition-for-the-orang-asal-orang-asli/ accessed 14 August 2023.

Parliament in 1809.³⁶ The term ombudsman means, 'representative of the people' and as one who serves as 'an ear to the people.' Chapter 13 of the *Twelfth Malaysia Plan* on page 13-18, reads:

... a new legislation on Ombudsman of Malaysia will be introduced to enhance integrity and governance of public institutions.³⁷

This policy promised by the government was reaffirmed by the Anwar administration through the Mid-Term Review of the 12th Malaysia Plan which was tabled in Parliament on 11 September 2023. On pages 2-13, there is a direct reference on improvising public complaints management. It reads:

In the remaining Twelfth Plan period, an ombudsman act will be enacted and an ombudsman body introduced. The ombudsman act will improve enforcement, increase transparency and efficiency in addressing public complaints. Meanwhile, the ombudsman body will be empowered to ensure that public complaints are duly addressed and resolved.³⁸

This is a major step forward in resolving local issues through citizens participation and enhancing grassroots democracy by giving a voice to ordinary people.

Earlier in 2023, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Azalina Othman affirmed that 'the proposed Ombudsman to deal with public complaints will be an independent statutory body answerable to Parliament.'³⁹ She indicated that it will not be like the Public Complaints Bureau (PCB) which comes under the Prime Minister's Department. It is also important to note that the proposed Office of the Ombudsman will be for a term of six years. It will be headed by a person not from the civil service.

36 United Nations, 'Ombudsman and Mediation Services,' <https://www.un.org/ombudsman/about-us/an-ombudsman> accessed 14 August 2023.

37 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, 'Chapter 13: Strengthening Public Sector Service Delivery' in *Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025* <https://rmke12.ekonomi.gov.my/en/13-18>, accessed 14 August 2023.

38 Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, *ibid.* 'Chapter 2: Enhancing Efficiency of Public Service Delivery, in Mid-Term Review of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025' https://rmke12.ekonomi.gov.my/ksp/storage/fileUpload/2023/09/2023091108_3_chapter_2.pdf accessed 14 August 2023.

39 M. Carvalho, 'Azalina: Proposed Ombudsman system to be independent, answerable to Parliament' *The Star* (Putrajaya, 8 May 2023) <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/05/08/azalina-proposed-ombudsman-system-to-be-independent-answerable-to-parliament> accessed 16 August 2023

More recently, the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Zuki Ali affirmed that:

‘the move to set up the Malaysian Ombudsman, a platform for the public to voice their grievances against the public service delivery system, is an important step to improve governance in the public service delivery system.’⁴⁰

The parliamentary oversight role is extremely important to ensure key plans, programmes and proposals are fulfilled in practice. The Ombudsman proposal in development plans was made in 2021 and reaffirmed in 2023. As there are only two more years before the 12th Malaysia Plan period ends, parliamentarians must strengthen their policy oversight role and strengthen the mechanism of solving local issues.

MPs at the global stage: Giving visibility for inclusive development

In addition to addressing national and local concerns, MPs must increase their visibility at the global stage especially at the HLPF in July each year. This is an opportunity for them to share Malaysia’s experiences and provide input for global delivery in partnership with global parliamentary movements. For this, the Parliament and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) must make funds available for MPs to be active on SDGs matters at the United Nations.

There is also the need to strengthen South-South cooperation through which Malaysia can support low-income countries in SDGs implementation. This will serve as an avenue to showcase and share best practices and the role of APPGM-SDG in providing bipartisan support for the development for all.

In conclusion, it is clear that the parliament and parliamentarians have a critical role to play in advancing and achieving the SDGs. These have not only been highlighted in UN resolutions but also supported by global organisations committed to engage with MPs worldwide in the implementation of SDGs. There remains opportunities for partnerships and platforms for the Parliamentarians of Malaysia to increase their visibility and engagement locally and globally towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

40 ‘Zuki: Ombudsman an essential step to improve governance’ The Star (Putrajaya, 11 October 2023) <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/11/zuki-ombudsman-an-essential-step-to-improve-governance> accessed 16 August 2023.

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