

By Invitation

# We are all responsible for our planet

Singapore can improve on its approach to use of plastic bags, recycling waste and sustainability.



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For The Straits Times

Two rather alarming reports were published earlier this month about the state of our planet.

The United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that the average temperature on earth is rising faster than expected, and that the consequences are unpredictable, given the non-linear nature of the effects of warming. Separately, a group of United States agencies released a report saying that global warming is real and the consequence of human activities.

The concerned citizen and scientist in me wondered what we can do about it. The first reaction is, of course, to look at the government and wait for its actions. But the point I want to make today is that we all can take action. I was reminded of a conversation I had a few months ago with a group of European exchange students at the Singapore Management University (SMU). I asked them about their experiences at the university and here in Singapore.

As usual, I received quite a few positive comments about the country. I thus challenged them to name one thing that Singapore could do better in. I was surprised when one of them blurted: "This country still lives in the 20th century when it comes to selective waste collection and sustainability". To prove his point, he added: "You know, they still use styrofoam here; and you get plastic bags in the supermarkets!"

It is true that in most European countries, styrofoam packaging is being phased out and plastic bags are hardly available in supermarkets. If you want to get such bags, you have to pay a rather hefty sum. Most of his friends voiced support for his observation.

I was heartened to some extent when they said that at least at SMU, there was a possibility for selective waste collection and composting of food waste for use in SMU's garden. I countered their assertion by

pointing out that the National Environment Agency organises quite a number of campaigns, such as Keep Singapore Clean, Clean and Green Singapore, and Energy Efficient Singapore.

However, the exchange students felt that although the government agencies are taking action, citizens here are not very engaged when it comes to sustainability.

I do agree with them that we cannot leave the responsibility for sustainability to governments alone.

The issue is so overwhelming that all of us need to work together.

Citizens and businesses need to take on more responsibility and be more proactive. We cannot have a short-term egocentric view, but have to take it upon ourselves to ensure the long-term viability of our planet for the coming generations.

We all need to decide together how we want to live together tomorrow, and that will require action today. We cannot keep kicking the can forward when it comes to actionists to preserve our environment!

It sounds like an impossible task, but well-known development economist Jeffrey Sachs, who recently delivered a lecture at SMU, pointed out that it is still possible to reverse the global warming trend.

He argued that we have to make a few very challenging transitions: a demographic transition to limit the growth of the world population, an energy transition away from carbon-based fuels, an ecological transition so that we grow our food

without exhausting our natural environment, and a governance transition so that long-term objectives take priority over short-term purely financial objectives. He also pointed out the key word is collaboration: between governments, but also between the government, business and civic society.

In September, we had also welcomed the former prime minister of the Netherlands, Mr Jan Balkenende, as a speaker at SMU. He was here in his role as chairman of the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition. This is a group comprising well-known Dutch companies such as AkzoNobel, DSM, Heineken, KLM, Philips, Shell and Unilever.

These multinationals share the conviction that long-term financial and economic value and success are inextricably linked to minimised environmental impact, social progress and inclusiveness. They go beyond this conviction and carry out studies, report on their actions and initiatives, and take the lead to provide governments with advice on how to push the sustainability agenda.

## COMPANIES CAN TAKE THE LEAD

They realise that they cannot act alone, because doing so would put them in a very unfavourable competitive position, but by acting together, they can engage in pre-competitive collaboration and undertake effective dialogue with stakeholders.

Why should companies take such a proactive role? Perhaps because sustainability is a good business driver: It helps them to build their reputation and it may create new profitable business models. But there is more.

Governments have a limited geographical reach. We may work hard on preserving our environment here in Singapore, but that will have little effect if similar actions are not taken by our neighbouring countries. Multilateral

governmental initiatives are of course the solution, but agreeing on these initiatives takes much time and effort, and the implementation is always a big challenge. Companies, on the other hand, are in a very different position. Their supply chains stretch over many countries, and they often have a deep understanding of all the externalities that our consumption here in Singapore creates.

The products in our supermarkets may look sustainable, but how much water had to be used to raise the shrimp or fish in Vietnam or Indonesia? How much carbon dioxide was produced to transport the fruits and vegetables from South Africa or New Zealand to Singapore?

Companies have much better insights into how much the real cost of producing such goods has been shifted to others or to future generations. They are certainly well-placed to take action to reduce the unwanted externalities. But will they do so? The evidence suggests that it is not impossible. Under public pressure and scrutiny, they have for example, limited child labour in the textile industry and reduced slash-and-burn practices to create oil palm plantations.

Companies such as Heineken that produce a lot of beer in Africa have invested in ensuring that more than 60 per cent of the agricultural materials that go into their beer are locally sourced. Companies could also create a circular economy where materials are re-used as much as possible. This stands in contrast to the linear production and consumption model that is about "take resources, make products and dispose the used product".

We in Singapore can be rightly satisfied that we recycle more than 50 per cent of our waste, but we mainly burn it for energy production and dump the non-incinerable waste and incineration ash into the Semakau Landfill. It is a good step in the right direction, but we could do so much more, by re-using products and components.

This can be achieved only through long-lasting design for reuse, maintenance, repair, remanufacturing, refurbishing and recycling. These are tasks which companies need to assume

leadership in, and they excel in that role.

## INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS MATTER

Can we leave it all to the Government and companies? I am convinced individuals can also make a real contribution as citizens and consumers. There are at least three areas where each of us can make a difference: education for awareness, consumption choices and waste handling.

Let me return to my interaction with SMU's exchange students mentioned earlier. When they expressed their surprise about the continued use of styrofoam packaging and plastic bags in the supermarkets, one should not assume that they have a natural inclination for sustainability. It is just that they are used to it. They were raised in an environment where selective waste collection is widely practised.

In northern European cities, families often have up to 11 containers for different types of waste. These students know they have to bring bags to the supermarket or have to pay for them. And they have been made aware of the impact of plastic on the environment.

Many of them know the mantra: It takes one second to produce a plastic bag, about 20 minutes to use it, and perhaps decades if not centuries to get it out of the environment. It is all about education. Not the type of education in universities or schools, but the one at home, in the family where they can see and emulate role models of sustainability in action.

As consumers, we also have a very important role to play. Through our choices, we provide a signal to the suppliers of what we want. Do we really need that fruit or vegetable that has travelled thousands of kilometres, when similar food is available from our neighbours? Do we make careful use of all that we buy? Sometimes we don't have all the information but there are certain kinds of certification by independent organisations that can help. Let's be open to such information.

Finally, what do we do with products when they have been used? Do we simply throw them away, or do we ask ourselves whether they can be recycled or be used by others?

The selective collection of waste in Europe has resulted in a reduction of the total amount of waste per family per year. Many families have used food waste to produce compost, either individually per house, but often collectively with neighbours in the building. Clothes or small electronic products are now far more often sold through second-hand shops.

Let's not rely on governments alone to take action. We should all take charge of our planet, and to paraphrase President Emmanuel Macron of France, let's all work together to make this planet great again. All of us can contribute to that goal!

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