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Strong leadership needed to secure circular economy

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MALAYSIA'S ambition to transition to a circular economy – the reuse, recycling, upcycling and repurposing of materials to minimise environmental pollution, conserve natural resources, and generate economic value – has been enshrined in national plans for over two decades, from the Eighth Malaysia Plan to the current 12th Malaysia Plan.

However, success remains limited due to various challenges, including regulatory gaps, lack of awareness, economic constraints and even public scepticism.

To move from aspiration to reality, the government must undertake a radical, transparent and inclusive overhaul.

First, consolidate and empower. Currently, waste management, environmental regulation, industry incentives and urban planning are scattered across federal, state and local authorities, with overlapping jurisdictions and conflicting priorities. The government must immediately establish a high-powered circular economy authority reporting directly to the prime minister.

This body must have the mandate to cut through bureaucracy, harmonise policies across the relevant ministries and hold all stakeholders accountable. It must be the singular command centre for the nation's zero-waste mission, equipped with real authority and a clear, time-bound roadmap under the upcoming 13th Malaysia Plan.

Second, rebuild trust through radical transparency. Public distrust, especially regarding pro-

LINEAR ECONOMY



ENERGY FROM FINITE SOURCES

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jects like incineration plants, is not irrational; it is a symptom of decades of opaque decision-making and perceived lax enforcement. The government cannot engineer consent through slick PR campaigns about "proven technologies". It must earn trust.

This means launching a national circular economy dashboard – a publicly accessible, real-time portal showing data on waste generation, recycling rates, landfill capacities, emissions from treatment facilities and enforcement actions.

It means mandating and publishing independent environmental impact assessments for all waste infrastructure projects, and genuine public consultations must be held before the sites are

CIRCULAR ECONOMY



ENERGY FROM RENEWABLE SOURCES

selected. Communities must be treated as partners, not obstacles.

The Department of Environment must also be strengthened with more inspectors and greater prosecutorial power, and public reporting of violations must be non-negotiable.

Third, communicate with clarity and context. Communicate the circular economy not as a cost but as an opportunity for green jobs, innovation, cleaner neighbourhoods and resource security. A nationwide, sustained public education campaign, leveraging influencers, community leaders and school curricula, must demystify segregation, highlight successful local initiatives and make "reduce, reuse, recycle" a

tangible civic duty.

Finally, pivot to a data-driven, incentivised ecosystem. Policies without rigorous monitoring, evaluation and adaptive learning are merely declarations. The government must invest in a robust national waste data infrastructure. This data should then drive policy such as implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes that mandate brands to manage the life cycle of their packaging with fees modulated by recyclability.

Data should inform fiscal policies like offering significant tax breaks to companies designing circular products or using recycled materials, and for municipalities that achieve high diversion rates.

The 13th Malaysia Plan must move beyond visionary chapters to allocate specific budgets, define strict KPIs, and name responsible entities. The circular economy agenda is too critical for our environmental resilience, economic future and social well-being to be lost in the gap between plan and action.

Malaysia has the frameworks; now it needs the focus, fortitude and, most importantly, the faith of its people. The government must lead this transformation not from a distant podium but from the front with open books and a willing ear.

**PROF DATUK
DR AHMAD IBRAHIM
Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI
Policy Studies
UCSI University**

(The writer is an adjunct professor at the Ungku Aziz Centre for Development Studies, Universiti Malaya.)