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Letter to the Editor

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World Environment Day: Support & Scale-Up Community-Driven Solutions

For this year's World Environment Day, most of us, as in the previous year, are celebrating the day indoors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At times like this, we appreciate the outdoors more and are eager to get out to enjoy the environment and nature, which gives us much calm and joy.

However, not all of us are fortunate to savour clear blue skies or clean air as what we sometimes encounter outside are hills being cleared, roadsides devoid of trees, concrete jungles, forests being destroyed, our lands, rivers and seas degraded by pollution and so-called development. The list is long, but what is clear is that biodiversity loss, ecosystem and environmental degradation are expected to continue, or even accelerate if more action to counter this is not done.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that by 2030, the world will require 40 percent more water, 50 percent more food, 40 percent more energy, and 40 percent more timber and fibre. We will definitely be confronted with more environmental damage and the impacts of climate change exacerbated by human activities driven by corporations to meet these demands.

UNEP states that the only way we can meet these demands is by managing our ecosystems smartly and sustainably. The call for the World Environment Day is to join #GenerationRestoration to revive and protect our ecosystems. We have to be cautious as there are also corporate-driven false 'solutions' being promoted such as 'nature-based solutions', 'climate-smart agriculture', 'sustainable intensification' and 'sustainable mining'.

In answering the call for ecosystem restoration, we must promote the real and genuine solutions, which are in the hands and knowledge of indigenous peoples, small-scale farmers, fisherfolk and local communities who offer much hope in truly benefiting both the poor and the planet.

For this to happen, it is fundamental that the government respects and recognises the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to their lands and resources, and the importance of traditional and indigenous knowledge systems in helping to protect forests and biodiversity, which promote the sustainable use of resources in harmony with nature and the environment.

Whilst communities are taking measures to restore ecosystems and protecting the environment from further destruction and pollution, the government needs to play its role by not allowing investments and approving destructive projects, technologies, dirty industries, that exploit our biodiversity resources and undermine the environmental integrity. Such bad investments also threaten the lives and sustainable livelihoods or communities dependant on natural resources.

For decades, communities in Malaysia spurred by community leaders, community-based organizations and

NGOs have taken measures to protect the environment, by undertaking initiatives to conserve and protect biodiversity and sustainably use natural resources.

We have documented practices such as community-initiated tree planting, community forest management, mangroves rehabilitation, agroecology, urban gardening, and zero waste movements. We also have the younger generation partaking in these initiatives, from collecting recyclables to creating edible gardens. These are the real solutions to address climate change and environmental damage and these are also the solutions to be resilient in times of health and economic shocks such as that prevailing now.

Communities have also been vigilant in reporting environmental crimes and pollution. We have also seen the emergence of many campaigns organized by various groups to gain support to fight destructive and polluting projects; fight land grabs; demand recognition of community land rights and territories; fight for the protection and conservation of fishing grounds, hills and forests; demand environmental and social justice and many more campaigns to uphold their rights.

From the large-scale reclamation projects planned in Penang and Melaka to the degazettement of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve and other forest reserves, public interest coalitions have taken a stand against unsustainable development projects and incoherent policies. Communities in Kuala Langat, Klang, Sungai Petani, and many others are also up in arms over plastic waste pollution and dumping.

The lack of policy coherence to genuinely conserve our biodiversity and protect the environment has to be addressed by the government. For instance, why do we not end imports of waste to keep our country clean and safe from the harmful effects of waste dumping and unregulated recycling? Why are mining proposals being considered in forest reserves? Why approve reclamation projects on rich fishing grounds, development on fragile hill slopes, toxic waste facilities and mining in forest reserves?

Whilst communities are implementing sustainable solutions, building resilience and dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, we need our decision-makers to stop unsustainable business-as-usual projects that will cause further destruction to our environment and ecosystems.

The government must recognise that indigenous knowledge and community-driven solutions are invaluable in protecting our environment, building climate resilience, conserving biodiversity and providing sustainable livelihoods that secure food and incomes. These are the types of solutions that have to be supported, scaled up and multiplied.

But most of all, good government means listening to the voices of people who are fighting for environmental justice. People must be put before profits and plunder!

Happy World Environment Day!

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