

The dumb side to dumpsites

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It seems like only yesterday that news about the many mega projects in the country filled the media. Nowadays, mega projects are hardly in the news, except the one about a bridge that is not to be.

Today's headlines tend to be more on the mega-mess of sorts, viz environmental degradation, polluted air and rivers, smelly water and, more recently, poorly managed dumpsites.

These give the impression that our development thus far has not been balanced and, less still, sustainable.

Take the case of the Sungai Kembong open dumpsite near Semenyih, for example.

This is a pre-Independence dumpsite, over 50 years old, built at a time when there were no laws to govern its construction and maintenance.

The bund surrounding it collapsed recently because of heavy rain, resulting in leachate leaking into the river and contaminating the water.

Consequently, water supply to thousands of households in Selangor had to be cut off for several hours due to the high ammonia level.

There is still the danger the bund may break again if there is heavy rain, said the Department of Environment's director-general.

This is in view of the huge volume of rubbish being dumped every day, adding to the stress on the embankment.

The walls therefore need reinforcing — but the question is how long it will last if a huge volume of rubbish continues to be dumped at the site every day.

The Dewan Rakyat was told that all the 155 open sites nationwide would be closed. These will be replaced by "sanitary landfills".

But this method is by no means problem-free and not without negative effects unless stringent technical requirements for waste and landfills are introduced and enforced.

There is also a need to cater to the different categories of waste — municipal waste, hazardous waste, non-hazardous waste and inert waste to name a few.

In developed countries, the landfills are regulated through guidelines for design, construction and use, depending on the type of waste present within the landfill, to prevent any danger.

The guidelines cover physical barriers such as liners and collection systems to control releases of leachate, to the underground soil bed or aquifers, as well as soil contamination.

Procedures to protect the public from exposure to the disposed waste, be it in the form of debris, dust, odour and noise pollution, must be in place.

A well-run landfill should not only be hygienic but also cost-effective.

Certain waste, for instance, may not be suited for a landfill, namely flammable and explosive waste, as well as potentially infectious hospital and other clinical waste.

Many landfills tend to be publicly operated and paid for through taxes, although some authorities charge a "fee" to reduce or recover the cost of site operations.

For this reason, typically, in non-hazardous waste landfills, the waste is confined to a small area and compacted to reduce its volume.

Otherwise, the area will expand, at times to the edge of rivers, as in the case of Sungai Chembong and Sungai Kundang.

In the 1990s, alternative methods of waste disposal were introduced, including recycling, converting the waste to more useful items, or biodegradable ones.

Some countries, such as Germany, banned the disposal of untreated waste in landfills a few years ago.

Other alternatives such as incineration are viewed with suspicion and often are the centre of controversy.

What these translate to is that it is more important to tackle the problem at source — meaning generate "zero-waste", or at least as little waste as possible.

This is indeed an important long-term solution and a vital initiative towards sustainable development where resources are conserved as much as possible.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi alluded to this when he gave a talk recently at the Kuala Lumpur Business Club:

"If my economic policy is only about tax and spend without any thought given to structural changes, what will I leave for future generations?"

"I don't want to leave a debt burden or contingent liabilities. I don't want to succeed today so that the future generations have to pick up the tab."

The PM was being cautious about living beyond the regenerative and absorptive capacity of the country's sustainability.

This is one aspect of human capital that has been sorely missing when we narrowly interpret success in economic terms alone.

So it is incumbent on us to clean up the mega-mess as soon as possible or the next generation will be left with a dirty, stinking and destroyed environment.

It has been estimated that it will take about 15 years to treat a dumpsite once it is closed and it will cost the taxpayer a lot of money.

Whether we realise it or not this is the dumb side to dumpsites.

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