Tech-Driven Sustainability: A Renewed Hope for a Sustainably Developed World

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The realm of corporate compliance in Malaysia is full of daunting acronyms and processes. The EQA (Environmental Quality Act 1974), CPA (Consumer Protection Act 1999), and TCFD (Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosure) are all legislative instruments guiding businesses through the labyrinth that is Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance.

After the unveiling of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 by the United Nations, ESG compliance is under an ever-stronger spotlight – pressuring businesses to check the ESG box. But while the goals frame sustainable development as “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet”, its 17 goals, 169 associated targets and 232 indicators of success can make the mission a lofty aspiration, rather than an imperative.

Indeed, the SDG Report of 2023 showed merely little progress, underscoring the dire consequences of an unsustainably developed world which are already being felt today by the most marginalised and disadvantaged populations. It puts out an unabashedly urgent callout to its stakeholders to redouble their efforts to remedy the slow progress for the sake of global human security.

"Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda will be an epitaph for a world that might have been," cautions Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Despite these foreboding signs, the optimist in me still rejoices because while progress towards the SDGs is slow, the progress of technological development is not!

Since the introduction of the SDGs, technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and 5G have matured rapidly, revolutionising production and operations. This transformation has empowered businesses to operate with newfound velocity and efficiency, yielding significant returns on investment.

The tools at our disposal now allow us to predict, monitor, develop and innovate solutions like never before. The advent of 5G alone has ushered in an era of unparalleled connectivity, reaching even the most distant corners of the planet and nurturing digital economies worldwide. Augmented by AI and IoT, once-aspirational objectives like supply chain transparency, emissions tracking, and alternative energy adoption are now attainable realities for governments and businesses across the globe.

In fact, a recent study by the Force for Good Initiative affirms the transformative potential of well-applied technology. The study suggests that harnessing technology can slash the cost of achieving the SDGs by an astonishing USD 55 trillion, making 103 of the 169 targets achievable.

It is no longer an overstatement to say that the trajectory of human progress now hinges on technological advancements; it all depends on how it is used.

Thus, technology companies, like TM, now bear a profound responsibility beyond merely being providers and distributers. Our business decisions, products, and solutions are no longer just about “the bottom line”; we must recognise that those elements now have the potential to shape our nation and the world at large.

TM prioritises responsible business practices ingrained as the organisation’s DNA, aiming not just to reduce environmental impact but to actively contribute to the societal development of the country. Just recently, TM received three accolades at the United Nations Global Compact Malaysia and Brunei Network's (UNGCMYB) Forward Faster Sustainability Awards, for its commitment to developing a sustainable and inclusive ecosystem.

CREATING IMPACT AT SCALE BY EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY INTO OUR CORE OFFERINGS

Technology firms are in a unique position to foster widespread impact by ingraining sustainability into their products and solutions towards attaining sustainable development.

Global industry giants have already made significant strides in this direction. Google's Carbon Sense suite, for instance, empowers users to accurately monitor and report carbon emissions stemming from Google Cloud usage, supplemented by actionable recommendations for emission reduction through Active Assist. With 1.42 million websites hosted on Google Cloud, including prominent entities like Spotify and Intel, this emissions monitoring framework enables Google's extensive user network to embrace sustainability and environmental accountability within their own operations.

TM has also embarked on a journey of sustainable innovation by leveraging technological solutions. Our collaboration with the Ipoh City Council has used AI to reduce traffic congestion by 51% during peak hours, which is a welcome relief to the citizens of Ipoh! This transformation not only improves the daily commutes of the residents, but also reduces the state's monthly carbon emissions by 7,500 kilograms – demonstrating how technology-driven solutions can enhance quality of life while fostering sustainability.

In spreading sustainability and environmental accountability through our own network, TM foresees vast potential on our home front. Embedding sustainability to the core of our solutions and operations directly impacts our ecosystem including approximately 400,000 SMEs who are our customers, which represent 34.7% of all SMEs in Malaysia. Imagine the impact we can make if almost 40% of Malaysia’s SME population (1.15 million) adopted sustainable business operations through our technological solutions! The transformation potential across the Malaysian business scene is significant, an opportunity that TM is uniquely positioned to seize and lead by example.

MAKING SUSTAINABILITY MAKE BUSINESS SENSE

However, in our mission to inspire others, technology companies should not confine ourselves to merely offering solutions that enable sustainability to others. Here is where walking the talk really counts.

In doing so, TM has initiated a series of programmes aimed at curbing carbon emissions and has already seen the early dividends of embedding sustainability within our internal operations.

TM's energy efficiency initiatives, for example, have resulted in more than 90 million kWh reduction in energy consumption and accordingly cost savings amounting to more than RM20mil. Some of the initiatives include:

- ***Network Element Shutdown*** which shuts down and migrates underutilised networks to ensure only highly efficient networks remain in operation.

- ***Energy Performance Contracting*** which outsources energy performance to a contractor to enhance our facilities' systems. Simple measures such as switching to inverter air conditioners has resulted in reduced electricity consumption.

- ***Energy Efficiency Optimisation (EEO)*** initiatives which focus on low-hanging fruits within our consumption habits, including lighting optimisations and power factor corrections.

So, what's the key takeaway here? It's simple: sustainable solutions and operations can be a means to create genuine value for all, with technology as our ultimate ally. Our commitment to sustainability is not just about compliance; it's about creating enduring value for long-term success. By prioritising ethical, responsible practices, we build trust, resilience, and a brighter future for all.

These may be the early days where TM and the world are starting to embed sustainability and technology into every aspect of life, but we are beginning to crystallise a vision of a world where the two will effortlessly walk hand in hand. As long as technology companies continue in this endeavour to deliver more sustainable solutions to the world while refining its own operations, I remain hopeful that a sustainably developed world, liveable by all, is well on its way to becoming a reality.