



FINANCIAL LITERACY FOR YOUTHS



Journalism Article – Dr Renard Siew
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Engineering a Civilisation: Working towards Sustainability



Dr Renard Siew (Right), a graduate from the University of New South Wales(UNSW) in Australia in Civil Engineering, who has also obtained a PhD in Sustainable Value Chains from the University of Cambridge. The doctor is currently the Economic Advisor for Sustainability at Sime Darby as well as Head of Communications for Global Shapers Kuala Lumpur. I had the pleasure of interviewing him at the behest of FLY: Malaysia on a Wednesday morning, before classes, with a cup of coffee from Starbucks. We talked about the future: green townships, the implications of water price, and zebra crossings for the old.

The Man with Three Hats

Dr Renard has and is currently accomplishing a great many feats. One individual satisfying three roles: A corporate proponent at Sime Darby; A researcher at the



centre of energy and environmental market; and a civil society activist at Global Shapers Kuala Lumpur. What binds him in all three roles --in what he said with utter glee-- is his passion for advancing the effort towards sustainability.

The interest started at home. Like many of us who inherit our parents' traits by proximity, Dr Renard's interest in sustainability came from his grandmother, who had a strong passion for recycling. The practice of recycling seemed to be such a quaint if not small civil accomplishment, but it grew to be his ambition and he decided that the route to sustainability would parallel his career path.

“I thought perhaps I could do civil engineering because I could engineer a civilisation; to make the world a better place.”

The track to sustainability led him to pursue his studies in civil engineering at UNSW under the sponsor of a Sime Darby Scholarship, then venturing into research. He investigated the nuts and bolts of how to build 'green townships' which factored in several questions about the development of an urban campus such as: the types of building materials, life cycle analysis, the effect of carbon cycle emissions on electricity, and on the financial side, how to find funding for such infrastructure. The key objective of his study was to develop a framework to implement sustainability in investment decision making.

Another hat he wore was as a member of civil society. He explained to me the intricacies of the recent water crisis. With most things, problems are never point-blank simple. The problem wasn't just that a shortage occurred and the government should just send someone over to fix it. A lot of the problems come from pricing. In the ensuing water crisis that occurred in Selangor, Dr Renard explained that there is a lot to consider when it comes to marking water as a commodity; if it is priced too cheaply, many would take it for granted, and if it is priced exorbitantly, water becomes a luxury. It is easy to simply urge the government to fix these issues with water, but a chicken and egg problem would arise because funding comes from the bills we pay. Therefore, he stresses on the need for strategies that raise awareness among Malaysians to start a practice of conservation, especially youths because a practice like this needs to be inculcated at a young age.



“Sustainability is quite futuristic, and in my mind, in 10 years, you would be getting jobs you didn’t think existed. Learn as much as possible—don’t be afraid to explore or box yourself in a particular industry.”

What he meant was that university is a place for you to explore different areas of interest; to leap at the opportunity to try new things. It was there where he managed to hone the skills for advising people on how to achieve sustainability. He explains that engineering, as a course, requires the student to be ‘hands on’, and a curriculum with such a strong practical aspect contributes to real life applications.

The Corporate Collective

An obstacle on the road of sustainability is obviously the money needed to finance such initiatives. In Malaysia, it is difficult to gather enough funding to fuel projects that act on sustainability because you would have to convince corporations and their individuals that sustainability is a core principle that aligns with their objectives. This is difficult because even in the broader context of society, you have people who maintain a disbelief on the existence of climate change or are dubious of its impending necessity. So what Dr Renard has been trying to do over the decades is to create a collaborative of corporate entities to pool funding for sustainability.

One of the fruits of that effort would be the conservation of water. The collaborative is involved in the national transformation roadmap which aims to tackle the problem of water scarcity from a holistic angle. Businesses often forget the kind of impact water scarcity has on their operations because certain corporations focus entirely on revenue maximisation. Dr Renard revealed flaws that follow that kind of business logic. Without water, you lose irrigation for agriculture, which results in a shortage of water that leads to a shortage of food. In refusing to recognise the impact of water scarcity, businesses unknowingly forgo the basic necessities to sustain a business and its people.

“I deal with different stakeholders, each with different interests, so it is difficult to align everyone towards a common goal, but they have to look at different perspectives so it is hard to get everyone on board for policy related ideas.”



In the corporate world, the greatest challenge he faces is convincing people to join in the venture for sustainability. I reiterate this because embarking on this new initiative is important to protect any kind of future we gift to our children. For Malaysians, there is an apparent problem of how our society tends to push responsibilities to another person. They often fall into a very individualistic line of thought. Malaysians remain sceptical of climate change as a problem, and they begin to question: how does this affect our daily lives?

“Some of them would say: I am the lone ranger in trying to take public transport, but what impact would that have collectively? So why would I need to do this? If everyone thinks this way, we are heading towards doomsday.”

I asked Dr Renard what his proudest achievement was and he said to me, “It is being able to start on a project that I care about and knowing that I have made a dent in an issue that I’m trying to resolve. His civil society movement is to investigate the methods to improve the quality of life for senior citizens. He began his introspection by noticing the fact that only 10 seconds is allocated for people to get from one side of the road to the other at most crossings, and for a senior citizen that kind of feat remains a difficult challenge. Furthermore, Malaysia will be achieving an aging population status by 2030, whereby more than 20% of our demographic would consist of senior citizens. He posed the question of whether our society is ready to embrace this change. Do we have the right infrastructure and environment? He tries to lobby governments to act on this issue seriously. There are policies in place for people who belong in this demographic but they only remain as policies. We need enforcement. The doctor strongly urges that people to start looking into retirement homes so that we may provide an acceptable quality of life for the aging population. We need to make sure that the aging population has a voice.

“What constantly motivates me is that when one of these people come up to me and say “Thanks for lending me a voice””.

A Stepping Stone to Progress

To further reiterate his stance that policy should not just remain as policy, and great ideas shouldn’t just remain as hollow text on a document -- what brings power to



words are the actions they inspire. As a nation, we have talked about policies to the moon and back until the point that it has become near-perfect and almost bulletproof. We need to evolve from this by starting to enforce the actions detailed in those policies. He shares his discontent on how there is such a disparaging lack of enforcement. Furthermore, he elucidated his belief by positing that campaigns should not be a one-off thing where its excitement inevitably dies. For example, we could construct flashy campaigns such as “Bebas Plastic Selangor” but it may very well die soon, unless we think of ways for continuous engagement and learn of ways to incentivize the public—especially when it is a culture that is not so embedded into our community. That culture exists today in Japan. The country has experienced mercury poisoning in the mid-1950s, and that history has affected their generation for ten to fifteen years. Kids were being born paralyzed due to the Minamata disease, and so they have felt the brunt of allowing complacency to exist within a society. Now when you look at their culture, waste segregation starts at house-point for many of the people—it has become part and parcel of their lifestyle.

“Malaysia shouldn’t have to go through an advent where we take things for granted. We do not need to get there for change to come.”

He left this subject with an inspiring quote: “Youths are a very powerful catalyst to encourage and inspire influence. We need more youths to step up to the plate, and champion something they believe in”. This serves as a reminder of how youths today are so distracted by the various responsibilities we hold, but should never forgo the fight for sustainability in exchange for our own agendas.

Digging into the specifics, Malaysia can begin to achieve sustainability by working on a guideline or framework for the building of green townships, and Dr Renard opines that we shouldn’t think about just building cities but about the entire community. He states that we should include a broad range of demographics and keep in constant engagement with them, be it the young or the elderly.

“I was toying around with the idea of walkability. There are certain concepts around transit-oriented development—with every 15 minutes of walking you need to come across some form of transportation because at this point it is make-or-break.”

The basic idea: if anyone feels that taking public transport is at all laborious, they would definitely opt for purchasing a car. If that happens, we would be facing a problem of (more) congested roads in the foreseeable future as we will not have enough space to accommodate these cars. We have to think about this if we want to avoid having a lifestyle where we lose 2 to 3 hours on the road after a tiring day of work. Urban planning therefore has to encompass all these considerations.

Dr Renard also fiddled with the idea of implementing urban farms into cities. In today's age, no young person would ever consider being a farmer because you would have to move to an outskirts location and it is simply not lucrative enough to be one. If everyone moves to a city to become a corporate we would lose people to cultivate food which is, needless to say, extremely vital. A solution to this problem which Dr Renard suggests is to integrate vertical farming into our cityscape. This is made possible by incorporating hydroponics to aid in vertical farming. He says that Singapore was one of the first countries to pioneer this initiative, followed by Malaysia. The doctor was very encouraged to see that Malaysia has started educational programs to teach millennials how to cultivate city farms.

During this interview, he took the liberty of answering one of my most pressing questions: Why has there been a disparity of beliefs on things that seem absolutely agreeable? I wanted to understand why there was a proportion of people who are agnostic towards the possibility of climate change. Dr Renard purported that sceptics of climate change exist because it is an issue that doesn't directly affect them. He elaborated with an interesting pyramid analogy, where the bottom of that pyramid would be your experiences and that shape your beliefs followed by actions.

“One way to change that belief is to have people move to Africa or Siberia—coffee farmers face the brunt of climate change—they have noticed that the slight change in temperature has reduced yields by 50% over the years and that affects their quality of life.”

Scepticism toward climate change exists because they live in a world where they have been fed by a silver spoon. Dr Renard stresses on the importance of how



everyone should think of themselves as a global citizen and care about things that happen on a worldwide scale.

It is very commonplace to hear educators stress about these teachings in the classroom but we lack the ingenuity to teach these things creatively. The simplest thing we could get students to do is just to pick a goal and start a project. In doing so, we get students to think about global issues in a very systemic perspective.

Another interesting concept he introduced to me was the idea of green capitalism and the nature of being a socially responsible investor. The idea entails investing in stocks or initiatives that will bring about a greater positive externality.

“You get trillions of dollars—where would you like to allocate or invest your funding in? It should be in real areas that have a real impact such as renewable energy or companies that are invested in doing good, caring for society or working towards achieving some of the sustainable development goals.”

At the end of the interview, he says that in the light of capitalism, we need to be wary of what we are investing in. If we don't, we could end up investing in mining or coal operations that damage the climate, and in turn, destroys the world as we know it. Capital is what shapes movements, and choosing what movements to fund is another step which we have to consider.