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## Way forward depends on us

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Workers installing a solar panel in Trino, Italy, last month. Clean energy is one of the great hopes for healing a polluted planet. — Reuters



This April 5 underwater photo shows worryingly bleached and dead coral on Australia's famed Great Barrier Reef, which is teetering on the brink as more corals die off due to high ocean temperatures. — AFP

# Way forward depends on us



## Planetary Health Matters

By Jemilah Mahmood

FOR the last year my team and I have been preparing for a global meeting on planetary health which was hosted this week at Sunway University.

It finished yesterday and, for me, was a moment when Malaysia came of age on the connection between the health of the planet and the health of its human and other inhabitants. Our country has set the bar for how others should be acting on the significant challenges we all face on the triple threat that confronts us all: climate, nature, and pollution.

At this global gathering that brought together scientists, researchers, politicians, civil servants, activists and many others from around the planet, we took the time to consider several challenges. To do this we deliberately created panels with young people speaking up, providing advice to the older generation who will likely not be around when they have to face the impact of this planetary emergency.

Firstly, figuring out what's important. We are all assailed daily by media and social media – each tweet, TikTok video and news item telling us what's important, where we should be prioritising our focus and content, how to get the attention of others. So we took a step back, and tried to work out what are the key things that we need to do to help everyone understand the

The global summit on the planet's health held in Kuala Lumpur this week developed the Kuala Lumpur Call to Action. Take the time to see what you can do for our beleaguered planet.

importance of the connection between our health and the health of the planet.

Secondly, we were able to demonstrate what Malaysia is already doing on planetary health – from hosting this global meeting to developing the national planetary health action plan, which will help policy-makers, politicians and others start to consider the planetary health impacts of development planning and other areas of public policy.

Here we are making exemplary progress as the first country in South-East Asia to develop such a plan, but the hard decisions and work are yet to come in terms of coordination, revising and implementing regulations, accelerating innovation, rethinking policy priorities and, of course, supporting behaviour change across all sectors of our society and economy.

Thirdly, we recognised the need to focus on turning evidence to action. Richard Horton, Editor in Chief of the Lancet journal recently quite courageously wrote “among scientists, there is a naively simplistic approach to translating evidence into action. Publish your research in a high-impact journal. Issue a press release. Hold a press conference. Post some tweets. Record a podcast or video. Prepare a call to action. You do not have to be a Nobel laureate to realise that this strategy is not working.”

He has a point, and so we resolved to increase our coordination capacity to deliver action based on evidence. The global Planetary Health Roadmap and Action Plan that were developed in the lead up to this meeting will help to propel us forward.



Sights like these, of a wildfire in the Dadia National Park in Greece last year, are becoming more common as the planet becomes increasingly unhealthy.

Fourthly, we agreed that summits like this one, with their significant carbon and ecological footprints need to deliver.

Our commitment to do that was enshrined in the Kuala Lumpur Call to Action issued yesterday afternoon. This meeting provided a strong consensus on the need to carve out a bold forward path. But, as always, the tough work is just starting.

You might be asking yourself “Why is this relevant to me?” My answer is because we are all in this together.

We all have a role to play through how we live our daily lives, the choices we make about what we buy, how we travel, what we wear, where we order our online shopping from. And we all also have a larger role, which is to help drive change, to speak up, to express views, to speak truth to power.

The fact is that when it comes to addressing planetary health challenges, we have the solutions. They exist.

We are making steady progress on expanding the use of renewable energy sources like solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal power.

There have been advances in developing better energy storage solutions which can help address the intermittency of renewable energy sources and enable widespread adoption.

Electrifying sectors that currently rely on fossil fuels, such as transportation and cooling and heating can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We can improve energy efficiency in buildings, transportation, and industrial processes, all of which can reduce energy consumption and lower emissions. We can aggressively green our cities to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, lower the impact on rising temperatures, and create healthier environments for all.

Carbon capture and storage technologies can capture CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from power plants and industrial processes and store them underground, preventing them from

entering the atmosphere.

We can use bioenergy from sources like agricultural residues and forestry waste. Dedicated energy crops can help replace fossil fuels in sectors where electrification is challenging, such as aviation.

We can adopt a regenerative economics approach, where resources are reused, recycled, or repurposed, thus reducing the need for virgin materials and decreasing emissions associated with resource extraction and production.

But taking all of this to scale relies on effective governance – and it is here that our citizens need to apply pressure.

Implementing supportive policies such as carbon pricing, subsidies for renewable energy and energy efficiency, and regulations that incentivise low-carbon technologies can accelerate the transition to a fossil fuel-free future.

Additionally, internationally binding treaties and legislation can pave the way towards a more just and equitable transition.

The summit, the Kuala Lumpur Call to Action, and the Planetary Health Roadmap and Action Plan can help to steer us in this direction, but real tangible implementation will rely in no small part on all of us.

Details on the Kuala Lumpur Call to Action are here: [bit.ly/43VtYlg](https://bit.ly/43VtYlg). The Planetary Health Roadmap and Action Plan is available here: [bit.ly/3xw6nEJ](https://bit.ly/3xw6nEJ).

**Dr Jemilah Mahmood, a physician and experienced crisis leader, was appointed the executive director of the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health at Sunway University in August 2021. She is the founder of aid organisation Mercy Malaysia and has served in leadership roles internationally with the United Nations and Red Cross for the last decade. She writes on Planetary Health Matters once a month in Ecowatch. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.**