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Environmental Awareness: Alternative Strategies Beyond Symbolism

By Sofiah Jamil

SYNOPSIS

Are existing environmental campaigns making an impact? Environmental awareness strategies should incorporate lessons from history and traditions, to bring about more effective outcomes.

COMMENTARY

2019 MARKS the 12th year of Earth Hour. What began as a Sydney-based event in 2007 to raise awareness on climate change by dimming lights for an hour, Earth Hour has spread worldwide with various cities taking part annually. The effectiveness of this annual environmental campaign, however, is debatable; much criticism cites that the symbolic action of reducing carbon emissions for an hour, is just that – symbolism.

Some reports suggest that energy use during the event has in fact, increased rather than decreased during the event. Indeed, one may get this impression, given the numerous side events that have been organised during Earth Hour, including concerts. Other observations have also noted that limiting the use of lights for an hour does not necessarily reduce carbon emissions, as electrical power generation remains constant in power grids. As a result, the “feel good” factor from switching off lights for an hour, is not only misplaced, but also over-emphasised.

Sustaining Environmentally Conscious Behaviour

Realistically, such campaigns alone will not instil sustained environmentally conscious behaviour. In many instances, individuals will not act unless they feel the financial pinch. How such a pinch is applied also requires some thought. Higher electricity prices, for instance, may not necessarily encourage individuals to reduce their consumption.

Rather, in some countries, it potentially provides a reason for individuals to protest against the establishment for further increasing the cost of living. Similarly, carbon taxes ultimately affect consumers as companies seeking to maximise their profits push the costs over to their customers.

What is arguably lacking from existing environmental awareness campaigns, is the sustained experiential awareness of resource scarcity. In the case of Singapore, given the fact that majority of residents start from a point of easy access to resources, they generally lack an acute experience of being without resources. Two approaches could be taken – learning from tribulations, and learning from traditions.

Learning From Tribulations

Learning from tribulations of energy insecurity would potentially allow individuals to experience what it is like to be without a constant supply of energy. In fact, Singaporeans have in recent months been exposed to a few tribulations of energy insecurity – namely in the form of electrical blackouts.

Arguably a real Earth Hour, the disruptions to industrial, business activities and household activities, have been tremendous. Depending on the size of businesses entities, the costs of electrical outages can range from as little as S\$1500 per hour to (in the case of Google in 2013) \$175,000 per minute. Moreover, cybersecurity vulnerabilities are no doubt a major concern for start-ups and the fintech industry in Singapore.

That said, the intangible benefits of such incidents are worth noting. On the one hand, surface-level public reactions to blackouts seem to suggest that Singaporeans have a fairly low resilience to sudden disruptions in public services. This is also consistent with societal reactions to other disruptions – e.g. flash flooding and train breakdowns – as well as, and surveys of societal preparedness in times of disaster.

On the other hand, silver linings have also appeared in the form of greater sense of community action. According to the Business Times' coverage on the island-wide blackout on 18 September 2018, one driver noted that he had “never seen people being so considerate while driving” at traffic junctions.

In light of these considerations, there are opportunities that could be taken to communicate the need for greater appreciation of resources and thus more impetus to save resources and not take it for granted. It remains to be seen how well such an initiative will go down with various sections of Singapore society.

Public communications strategies will also need to think through how to effectively balance messages that promote a sense of security and sufficiency, with the awareness of vulnerability and scarcity.

Learning From Traditions

A second strategy would be to learn from existing traditional practices that advocate limited use of resources. Such practices can in fact be found in various world faith

traditions, all of which contain principles on caring for nature and/or God's creation. In Bali, the annual Hindu ritual of *nyepi* warrants a day without electricity. The Sabbath tradition in Judaism makes this abstention a weekly affair.

Other major faith traditions also have the opportunity to incorporate abstention from various forms of consumption. Ritual periods of fasting in Islam, and abstention during Lent in Christianity are prime times of introducing initiatives of reducing one's carbon and water footprints. Buddhist and Taoists traditions also encourage minimalism – which in fact can also be found in some teachings in Islam and Christianity.

Some headway has already been made in promoting faith-based environmental initiatives in Singapore. Fitree, a Muslim environmental group, has engaged mosques during the annual Ramadan period in promoting environmentally conscious practices. More recently, a car-pooling app was launched for Muslims to use when participating in the supplementary evening (*Tarawih*) prayers during the fasting month of Ramadan.

Inter-faith Environmental Action

With such wealth of environmental ethics within religious traditions, steps can be taken to promote inter-faith projects. Not only would this facilitate environmental awareness, but also potentially add value to existing inter-faith dialogues but working collaboratively on real projects.

The launch of the Faith and Nature environmental guide book in 2014 is one example of an inter-faith dialogue and online resource for faith communities to take the first steps in greening their faith community premises and activities. The inter-faith discussion, along with the book launch, was held in Singapore by Young AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals) in collaboration with Firstfern Training and Consultancy.

Secular organisations also stand to benefit through working with faith-based organisations. Some secular entities may be adverse or not familiar with interacting with faith communities. Yet, in a region where religion plays a significant part of people's lives, collaborations on addressing environmental challenges provides a bridge for communities to better understand commonalities rather than differences.

With these alternative suggestions, the opportunities for increased environmental awareness efforts can in fact stem from unlikely places. Beyond symbolic "feel good" environmental activities, there is much to learn and build on crises and traditional/cultural practices.

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