2020

May

FEED YOUR NEIGHBOR, SOLVE BIG PROBLEMS

Darrel Webber | Senior Advisor

There is a saying in Malaysia, "*Kais pagi, makan pagi. Kais petang, makan petang*." Loosely translated, it means, "What you scrape together in the morning is just enough for the morning, and what you scrape together at night is just enough for that night."

The expression is especially relevant now as Malaysia enters a second month of quarantine to limit the spread of the coronavirus, leaving poor and impoverished residents to fend for themselves.

But it also holds lessons for the looming challenge of climate change. In both instances, strategies that do not begin with collaboration and investment to put food on the table and lift people out of poverty are not going to succeed.

I knew soon after Malaysia's prime minister announced a 14-day Movement Control Order (MCO, a.k.a "lockdown") in early March that it would last for more than just 14 days. So, my family and I began preparing for our prolonged stay at home. We did not know what to expect in terms of access to essentials. We bought more canned food than we usually do, and I am proud to say that we did not go on a toilet paper buying spree.

Around March 23 my social media streams began filling up with story after story of people who could not afford to stay at home. Many who depended on daily wages continued to venture out to sell street food or vegetables or other such goods and services in violation of the MCO. They were all suffering — single mothers, the elderly, and the less able the most severely.

Eager to help, I started with a donation to a fund created by a member of parliament to distribute food within her constituency (where I am also a constituent). Then, around the same time, my colleagues on the board of a local nonprofit unanimously agreed to mobilize our teams to buy and distribute food to 35 rural villages. I later combined resources with ex-classmates to purchase and distribute food packages to a hundred households.

Image available online: view image

A man receives food near Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia, delivered to help local residents during the coronavirus outbreak.

These were modest efforts, but through them I realized our ability to manage this pandemic, to “flatten the curve” of its spread is largely dependent on the ability of those most vulnerable to abide by the MCO, people who understand the health and legal repercussions of venturing out onto the street, but who do so in order to put food on the table.

In the same way, our ability to meet the climate crisis will depend on whether or not families in developing nations — many of them in the tropics — can continue to put food on their own tables.

In order to keep global warming below 1.5°C, the world is asking tropical forest nations to keep their forests standing by shifting their development paths, requiring them to forgo a model the developed world is still using today: trading natural assets for socioeconomic gain. Even the biggest proponents of climate action are countries that continue to trade their natural assets for development. Despite this, the world is imploring tropical forest nations to change their ways and to embark on experimental paths.

One such experiment is to leverage markets to clean up supply chains, decoupling them from deforestation. And to some extent markets and companies have made efforts to do so. Many companies have made public pledges committing to zero-deforestation supply chains.

The call for these interventions is coming mostly from the furthest end of global supply chains, but their cost is overwhelmingly borne by nations at their beginning, by small-scale commodity producers in tropical countries.

Given how globally connected we are and because we have seen commitments made by the biggest names in traded commodities to end deforestation in their supply chains by 2020, we should have seen a major shift in terms of deforestation rates. Well, 2020 is here and deforestation rates continue to be alarming. We know that 3.6 million hectares of primary forest was lost in 2018. That is an area the size of Belgium. The total tree cover loss in 2018 was at a record high of 12 million ha. And reports now suggest that deforestation in the Amazon has hit new highs in the first two months of 2020. So it is quite evident that, despite the well intentioned commitments, we have yet to flatten the deforestation curve.

One reason is that tropical countries fear the cost of keeping their natural assets locked away is too high. They fear that locking in their assets will be at the cost of human development, at the cost of having food on the tables of the people in their lands.

As with the coronavirus pandemic, the determining factor in our success or failure to tackle climate change will be how the neediest in society fare. There are two paths forward.

The climate community can continue imposing high standards and expectations that all tropical forest nations must do better — without any support — simply because it is the right thing to do. Or… it can accept, just as I have been convinced during this pandemic, that the best way to help us mitigate climate change, globally, is to look out for our struggling neighbors.

And feeding your neighbor, in the context of climate change solutions, is easier said than done.

Instead of making demands without consultation, developed nations and market actors should be grounded in the realities of the regions and sectors where they are imposing these demands. They should realize that there will always be an arduous journey toward meeting these standards and *invest* up front in that journey. Promises to invest *once* the journey is made will have little traction. People do not need food in the future. They need it immediately.

Similarly, they should identify and *quickly invest* in regions and sectors that have shown genuine interest in working on climate change and have shown early signs of positive action. And they should invest and build on multi-stakeholder platforms at the local level that can share accountability in making commitments and take action on the ground, where it matters.

Today there are a number of regions in the tropics that have taken meaningful steps toward a low emissions development pathway. Unfortunately, their journey is a lonely one. They have received scant recognition and little to no investment.

I sincerely hope the lessons learned in this pandemic will not be lost when we go into our fight with climate change. For now, those of us who can, let’s take care of our neighbors. Realize that we are all connected, and that the connection can only remain strong if we take care of our weakest in the link.

Apply the same for climate change. Feed Your Neighbor.

This piece originally appeared on Mongabay