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by

Bismillahi Rahmani Rahim
I am very pleased and honoured to be with you at this Seminar on Participatory Communication in Environmental Management and to be able to share with you some thoughts on the theme of the programme. Before that, however, I wish to welcome to Malaysia all our brothers and sisters from ASEAN who are participating in this seminar. I also bring with me the welcome and good wishes of our Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment, the Hon. Datuk Law Hieng Ding, who unfortunately cannot be with us today.

In the literature on the concept of public participation in decision-making processes, there is no universal definition of "public participation". Instead, one finds a wide range of ambiguous terms such as "self-help", "self-reliance", "community involvement", "people's participation" and "co-operation". These terms have only added to the complex task of defining it.

From a practical point of view, however, one can define public participation at the process of involving, informing and consulting the public in planning,
management and other decision-making activities which can be considered part of the political process. It is that part of the process which provides opportunities and encouragement for the public to express their views.

Public participation attempts to ensure that due consideration will be given to public values, concerns and preferences when decisions are made. Effective public participation requires the availability of adequate information in public inputs. This involves various values, critiques, questions, information, suggestions and other inputs which are expressed by individuals, groups or organisations among the general public in efforts to influence decision-making. Such inputs may be made through or formal or non-formal public participation processes, and may be solicited or unsolicited.

"Environmental management" is a topic that invites this kind of participation, for the reason that the subject covers critical issues that have implications for national as well as global survival: scarce resources, burgeoning populations, cultural differentials on global resource utilization, sustainable development, sovereignty. Very real, and also very emotional issues.
In Asia, public participation is not an altogether new phenomenon. Historically, participation and co-operative actions have taken place, especially in areas such as rural development. Community participation was a way of life in village societies in many parts of Asia, and formed a vital part of their cultural traditions.

Many of today's governmental institutions, however, have a history or tradition of being unwilling, hesitant or indifferent to working cooperatively and responsively with the ordinary people. Some studies have found that the planners, administrators and technicians somehow view ordinary folk as "the problem", and regard themselves as "the solution"! For instance, The World Bank's 1985 publication, Putting People First noted that "most government agencies have a legacy of paternalistic or technocratic, if not authoritarian, relations with their publics".

Fortunately, however, things are changing. Government agencies are becoming increasingly receptive, sensitive and responsive to the idea of true public participation in the developmental process.

In their landmark report, Our Common Future, the World Commission on Environment and Development wrote"
"The pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making", and they outlined components, of an approach to governance that promotes citizen action.

In 1988, the United Nations Environment Fund (UNEP) identified five basic functions necessary to ensure public participation:

1. **Identification of groups or individuals interested in or affected by a given action;**

2. **Citizen access to accurate, understandable, pertinent information for informed decision-making;**

3. **Open dialogue between the parties responsible for the action, interested in it, or affected by it;**

4. **Assimilation of the results of citizen consultations and dialogues into final conclusions; and**

5. **Feedback to include a statement on the final action taken and the effect of the public's comments on that action.**
All these have not been lost on the Malaysian Government, despite what some international press reports may say to be contrary. The Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, for one, has initiated concrete efforts to consult, dialogue with, and involve the active participation of various concerned sectors in the resolution of environment-related issues in Malaysia.

The following examples should suffice to demonstrate the Government's commitment to ensuring meaningful public participation in political decision-making on issues of environment and development:

1. The Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment holds regular dialogue sessions with Industries, Factories, Trade Associations, such as the FMM, MICCS and various NGO's.

2. The Hon. Minister and the Hon. Deputy Minister regularly go down to the ground to meet people who are affected by specific subjects.

3. The Hon. Minister and the Hon. Dep. Minister accept invitations to officiate environment-
related projects and programmes, on a regular basis.

4. Individuals representing various NGOs are invited to sit in specific committees such as the EIA panel and the EQC.

5. The Hon. Minister has always stressed the point that there shall exist an open channel between the Ministry on the one hand, and the public and the press on the other. Thus although we do not as a matter of practice have "public hearings", we do have dialogues sessions and a system whereby members of the public are invited to give their comments on specific projects.

We believe firmly that meaningful public participation cannot be achieved in isolation. It depends on the cooperation and coordination of NGSs and citizens groups, the media, academics and educational institutions and Government institutions and officials. If any one of these integral components is lacking or unwilling, there cannot be true public participation in environmental management and conservation, or in development at large.

We accept that communication /consultation
provides:

1. Information feeding and feed-back mechanism.
2. Avenue for reassessment, re-evaluation and rethinking on issued of public concern;
3. Reflection on ethics, values, attitudes and behaviour.
4. Public behaviour and consumption function.
5. Works towards a better decisions making.
6. Acts as a relieve-valve mechanism.

In conclusion, I believe all of us need no reminding that public participation in decision making can only be meaningful if the basic issues of communication is not forgotten. Thus, there is the need for an appropriate and effective model, the need to improve informations flow (why Taxi-drivers and patrons of coffee-shops are better communicators than newspapers and TV stations eg.!) The need to identify informations gap, and develop as well as promote a non-confrontational approach.

In short, the Ministry understands that effective project implementation necessitates close consultation and communication among the following major parties:

1. The project proponent (the doer)
2. The people (affected group)
3. The Government (mediator)

Proper communication permits each party to make known:
1. Proponent's utilization of resources to bring benefits;
2. Community's needs and concerns;
3. Authority's policy and strategies to maintain balance.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On those notes, I would like to once again thank the organisers for giving me the honour to address this angust gathering. I wish the Seminar every success and look forward to sending the proceedings subsequently. May the blessings of Allah be with you. Thank you.