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YOUR OPINION

Sharing responsibility for protecting natural heritage

BUDGET 2027 has naturally drawn public attention to household finances, including cash assistance, personal income tax relief and measures to ease the cost of living.

Allocations for environmental sustainability, including initiatives focused on green technology, renewable energy and carbon reduction have also increased.

However, funding for biodiversity conservation deserves far greater consideration as safeguarding our wildlife and natural ecosystems is fundamentally tied to long-term national well-being.

Under Budget 2027, the government has increased the Ecological Fiscal Transfer (EFT) allocation to RM270mil to support state governments in conserving the country's natural heritage, and also set aside RM65mil to support approximately 2,500 community rangers.

In addition, RM15mil from palm oil industry cess collections will support environmental conservation, particularly the protection of endangered wildlife habitats.

The proposed purchase of old fishing nets is another welcome initiative to prevent abandoned

nets from harming marine life.

But increasing public spending is only part of the solution. The fundamental question is how national budgets can actively mobilise private-sector capital to bridge Malaysia's staggering RM4bil biodiversity financing gap, a deficit highlighted under the National Policy on Biological Diversity and the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (Biofin).

Relying heavily on public financing places much of the financial burden on taxpayers.

Biodiversity finance offers a way forward by encouraging governments, businesses and investors to share the costs and responsibilities of protecting nature.

Budget 2027 may be improved by providing stronger incentives for both state governments and

private actors to preserve natural resources rather than convert them for short-term commercial gain.

One way to achieve this is through the EFT mechanism, which serves as a vital compensation tool for states that forgo revenue by keeping their forests intact.

Public funding may be allocated to improve the EFT mechanism in terms of refining how conservation payments are calculated. For example, funding could take into account the ecological importance of forests, the costs of managing protected areas and independently verified conservation outcomes.

Where appropriate, the government could explore complementary tax or financial incentives for private landowners and

community-managed conservation areas, ensuring those who safeguard vital habitats do not bear the financial burden alone.

Future budgets must also integrate established capital markets into conservation efforts. The Bursa Carbon Exchange (BCX), for instance, offers a platform to trade carbon credits and Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs).

Generating carbon credits through verified forest conservation and restoration projects can unlock continuous private revenue streams for local ecosystems.

Overall, Budget 2027 represents a commendable step forward, recognising that healthy ecosystems maintain public well-being and mitigate severe economic losses from climate-driven disasters.

Moving forward, national budgets should do more than just announce fiscal allocations. The government must articulate clear strategies for crowding in private investment, measuring tangible ecological outcomes, and ensuring financial support reaches the communities on the frontlines of conservation.

By strengthening existing funding mechanisms and mobilising responsible private investment, Malaysia can build a more sustainable approach to biodiversity finance while ensuring that the responsibility for protecting its natural heritage is shared more fairly across society.

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MALAYSIA has the highest diabetes rate and the second-highest obesity rate in Asean. Although sedentary lifestyles contribute to both problems, the bigger culprit is sugar consumption.

On average, Malaysians consume 16kg of sugar per capita annually, half from food and the other half from drinks. This is roughly twice the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendation for adults.

The human toll only tells half the story. The other half is financial – a public health system increasingly strained year-on-year treating diseases that are preventable.

That said, it's not as if we haven't tried. Multiple measures to reduce sugar consumption have been introduced by the government, including the sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) tax on non-alcoholic drinks; award of the Healthier Choice Logo (HCL) to food and beverage products that meet specific, pre-determined nutrient thresholds within their respective categories; and the "kurang manis" campaign to promote healthier drinking habits.

Despite the government's best efforts, why do Malaysians still struggle to manage their sugar

Road to reducing high sugar consumption



Photo: dpa

consumption? The answer lies less in willpower than in the dining environment.

It's worth noting that the government spends RM500mil annually on subsidies for sugar manufacturers. This subsidy actually undermines its war on sugar.

Furthermore, Malaysians lack the information needed to measure how much sugar they are consuming. Take pre-packaged beverages as an example. An HCL-approved 1.5 litre bottle of soda may list 4.7g of sugar per 100ml. But what the label does not make obvious is that drink-

ing an entire bottle would mean consuming 70.5g or nearly three times WHO's recommended daily limit of 25g.

Gauging sugar levels in freshly made drinks is even harder. At food outlets and restaurants, options include "less sugar", "normal sugar" or "percentage-based sugar levels" – none of which allow average Malaysians to monitor their daily sugar intake.

Another factor contributing to the persistently high sugar consumption is the environment in which people choose what to

drink. Few food establishments these days offer free water or "air kosong", pushing consumers to buy either bottled mineral water or other beverages.

Ultimately, our sugary preferences are heavily shaped by the country's sweet-inducing environment.

This, combined with the inability to measure sugar content, creates, a recipe for overconsumption.

Any policy direction to address the problem starts with the sugar subsidy. Policymakers may want to bite the bullet and phase out the subsidy for two reasons – to improve fiscal sustainability and signal that health is a priority.

Second, access to drinking water should become the default rather than the exception. France, Spain and Portugal have implemented stronger policies mandating free drinking water in dining outlets. Given that boiled water is already widely used by Malaysian food vendors, this measure is both realistic and workable.

Finally, policymakers must amend labelling regulations to

ensure that all sugar sweetened beverages disclose the ingredients of the entire beverage, including sugar, regardless of serving size.

For freshly-made drinks, policymakers should mandate that establishments standardise and disclose the estimated content of sugar in each beverage.

While there are concerns over subsidy removal and implementation costs, alleviating health costs comes first.

Non-communicable diseases cost Malaysia an estimated RM64bil in 2021 alone – more than double the Health Ministry's total budget allocation.

The focus should shift towards creating an environment that supports informed and healthier consumer decisions.

If we are truly serious about reducing sugar consumption, we should focus on making the healthier choice the easier choice.

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THE recent revelation that an OpenAI agent breached an Australian government health portal while performing a research task is a chilling escalation in global cybersecurity.

We are no longer defending against human hackers or static code; we are facing autonomous, goal-oriented algorithms capable of bypassing systemic firewalls without human intervention.

For Malaysia, this warning arrives at a precarious juncture. Our rapid national digitalisation efforts, like centralising citizens' sensitive data into systems like MyDigital ID and Padu (Central

AI governance law must possess statutory teeth

Database Hub), create an increasingly valuable honeypot of sovereign data.

However, the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010 does not apply to the federal and state governments.

In an era where foreign AI agents can breach external systems independently, this legislative blind spot creates a distinct gap in public sector accountability.

When an autonomous AI breaches a sovereign system, the

immediate legal question is accountability. Major developers frequently describe such incidents as actions their models "did not intend".

We must not allow technical autonomy to become a shield for corporate liability. As Australia discovered, voluntary disclosure can result in catastrophic delays; OpenAI took nearly three months to notify the Australian government. In a landscape where AI operates in milliseconds, delayed reporting is a severe governance

failure.

Fortunately, Malaysia is currently shaping its regulatory future through the proposed AI Governance Bill. This is our opportunity to codify robust legal safeguards.

Specifically, the Bill's proposed "AI Incident Reporting" framework must possess statutory teeth. Taking cues from the European Union's AI Act, Malaysia should mandate strict reporting deadlines for serious incidents involving high-risk AI systems –

generally within 15 days and 10 days where a death is involved. There must be meaningful financial penalties for delayed disclosure.

The law must unequivocally establish that legal responsibility cannot be displaced onto the AI system itself. Accountability must remain traceable to the developer or deployer who exercised control over the system.

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