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Editorial

Religion and waste

Religious belief in its most ideal form can be seen as a powerful force to create purposive transformations by transmitting ecologically positive habit of practice and attitudes of mind to succeeding generations that share similar religious beliefs. This concept assumes even greater significance on considering how more than half of the world's population embraces some sort of religious beliefs to guide their everyday lives.

Successful activities undertaken by religious communities in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, in implementing recycling activities, may afford a useful insight for other countries featuring a significant presence of religious communities in their socio-cultural landscape.

Hinduism: The Batu Caves temple

The Batu Caves temple (also known as the Sri Subramaniam Swamy Temple) is located on a limestone hill dedicated to Lord Muruga. It is one of the Hindu religion's major sacred areas in Malaysia. As it is located in a natural limestone cave, the temple has a very close relationship with its environment. The caves are also known for their ecological diversity, where various species of flora and fauna can be found.

Recycling activities at the temple started about 11 years ago, as a response to the launching of the national recycling day. The temple recycles bottles, cans, tins, paper, and cardboard. The temple management does not profit from recycling activities, undertaken with the sole aim of protecting the environment.

Other than the usual categories of recyclable item, the Batu Caves temple also recycles the coconuts that have been used for Hindu prayer ceremonies. The supplier of these coconuts, once a week takes away the used coconuts for recycling. The used coconuts are later sent to an oil company located in another area nearby. The temple also reuses the *malai* (garland of flowers) used during prayers. Twice a day the *malai* will be changed and the unused *malai* will be given to the devotees.

Every year, the temple also faces increased waste management challenges during the celebration of Thaipusam, with thousands of people gathering around Batu Caves to celebrate the festival. The temple has worked closely with other partners to organise, during the festival, a recycling campaign, called "Kempen Sampah Masyarakat" (community waste campaign), involving young volunteers from all walks of life.

Islam: Surau Al-Husna

Surau Al-Husna is a small mosque that has been established for the residential community of Shah Alam. The surau serves as a place for the Muslim community in the neighbourhood to

conduct prayers and other religious rituals, share religious knowledge and to gather for religious activities. Surau Al-Husna started its recycling programme since July 2005. The recycling bins were provided by the local municipality, while recycling operation are organised by the mosque committee members. Accepted recyclable items include paper, plastic containers, metal items, books and electronic devices. Since the public are not otherwise asked to separate their recyclable items, the surau committee periodically organises a "gotong-royong" (collective social activity) with the community to segregate recyclables from the mixed waste and to sell them in bulk to a recycling company. Flyers, banners and word of mouth are used to promote participation in the recycling activities.

Surau Al-Husna also collects used cooking oil. A special store room has been built for this purpose and the collected oil is then transported and converted into biodiesel by a private company. The proceeds from all of the recycling activities are used for the surau renovation and repair work and also to fund various religious activities.

Christianity: Beautiful Gates Centre

The Beautiful Gates Centre was established in 1993 and is one of the establishments under the Malaysian Chinese Methodist Church. The main objective of the centre is to provide support for people with disabilities. The Beautiful Gates Foundation started their recycling program in Petaling Jaya, Selangor in 2004, strongly believing that recycling could also provide working opportunities, skills development and an extra source of income for the disabled. The Beautiful Gates recycling program has also obtained permission from the Petaling Jaya municipality to place recycling bins at apartments and also churches.

Once collection is done, the recyclables are then sorted according to different categories at a recycling centre. Main categories of recyclables include paper, glass, plastic, clothes, furniture and electronic devices. Some electronic devices can sometimes be repaired to be reused or sold at a lower price. Finally, the sorted recyclables are then sold in three ways: One, buyers would visit the recycling centre to choose and buy the recyclables. This is usually for clothes, furniture and old computers. Two, using their own lorries, the staff from Beautiful Gates would send and sell the recyclables directly to the recyclers. Three, handicrafts made from recyclables, and items that are still in good condition are sold at the centre's own thrift shop or at the nearby flea market. All these recycling activities are carried out by the disabled staff at the Beautiful Gates Centre, with some assistance from Beautiful Gates volunteers.

Buddhist: Community of Tzu Chi Merit Association

Tzu Chi Merit Association is a Taiwan-based Buddhist non-profit charitable organisation. Tzu Chi came to Malaysia in 1989 and at present it has over 30 liaison offices in different parts of Malaysia. Tzu Chi's recycling ideas began in Taiwan in 1990, after the Grand Tzu Chi Master Cheng Yen started her environmental protection mission – with the popular motto of “using your clapping hands to do recycling”. She also urged all Tzu Chi volunteers to practice recycling in their daily lives with a loving heart. Since then, 4500 recycling points have been established in Taiwan with more than 60,000 volunteers being involved in this mission. In Malaysia, the recycling mission started in 1995. Currently there are more than 600 recycling points spread all over the country (with about 150 points alone located in the state of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur) with an estimated 10,000 Tzu Chi volunteers actively involved in the mission.

Tzu Chi uses communal-based recycling points rather than recycling bins as the main facility and modus operandi of their recycling programmes. The use of recycling points is very much in line with Tzu Chi's recycling philosophy. They believe that the collective physical act of collecting and sorting out garbage will encourage individuals to appreciate the value of waste, make them feel more responsible over how wastage can impact their immediate community and from this basis, develop the spiritual realisation to let go of the need for excessive material possession. Collected and sorted recyclables from the recycling points and centres are sold to permanent recycling contractors. All of the proceeds are usually used to fund the association's local and international relief work.

The contributors of recyclables to Tzu Chi recycling programmes are not only members of the Buddhist community, but also from members of other religious groups as well.

Key findings

Religious communities have the potential to play their role in recycling for several key reasons: the systematic way in which they operate, their ability to conduct long-term recycling programmes, the advantages of their institutional structure as an established platform for recycling activities, their multiple motivational drivers for recycling and their collective potential to expand their programmes to various parts of the broader community.

Religious communities, each in their own way, have different formalised establishments and deeply ingrained rituals, which in turn could be used to strengthen their recycling programmes. For instance, the role of houses of worship such as mosques, temples and churches are very central to a religious life. This is the place where worshippers of each religion congregate and where many community-based religious activities are conducted, be it in terms of religious worship, education and acts of social service.

As a social group, the activities by religious communities are typically driven by altruistic, communal and spiritual purposes and even for the case of recycling, such motivation can be observed in all the cases. As a whole, all of the religious communities started with the initial premise that recycling is an environmentally responsible action and therefore it should be adopted and encouraged by the community. In fact, each religious community has its own worldview on the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, and the important role of their community in environmental conservation. Islam and Christianity emphasise the role of human beings as vicegerent or stewards of nature, Buddhism stresses on the oneness and co-existence with nature; while both Hinduism and Buddhism believe in the idea of Karma, where an act of goodness towards nature will sow goodness in return.

Another religious driver connected to recycling is the act of charity. In three of the cases, proceeds from the recycling are being used for the purpose of charity in some way or another.

The religious community has also demonstrated that collectively they have the potential ability to encourage broad public participation in recycling.

In conclusion, despite the limited number of cases and the specific social and geographical context, the empirical evidence provided earlier should let the decision makers to begin thinking more tangibly about the role of religious and other social communities in supporting their recycling programmes, particularly in countries where religion has strong influence in its social-cultural landscape and day-to-day activities of public life.

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