

## Solar Energy Can Improve Wellbeing

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Currently, the world is facing environmental problems. Various human activities, including rapid development, have intensified our contribution to environmental degradation. Although development is necessary, our excessive reliance on conventional resources for development has contributed immensely to environmental damage. For example, our preference for fossil resources has been exacerbated by poor waste management systems. As the world develops, energy becomes precious for the world's technological advancement. And as technology advances, the well-being of our environment is paramount. This concern has a solution: a paradigm shift from conventional energy resources to renewable energies, such as wind power, hydropower, biomass, biofuel, geothermal technology and, as we will focus on here, solar power.

Solar radiation from the sun is an important source of life since it contains basic energy in the form of light and heat. Solar energy is not only important for plants, so they can carry out the photosynthesis process, but also for generating electricity.

The resource is abundant, clean, free, naturally replenishable and environmentally friendly. These advantages overcome the drawbacks of conventional fossil fuel-based power plants that rely on finite resources. At the same time, thousands of jobs can be created in the solar energy industry, especially in Europe, China, Japan and the United States. The industry can offer positive returns to the country and community.

Recently, the Prime Minister of Malaysia announced an allocation of RM260.8 billion in the 2017 Budget for operating and development expenditure. Consistent with the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan, the budget aims to elevate the bottom 40 per-cent of households to middle-class status with an allocation of RM275 million. Interestingly, RM45 million of this allocation is for a solar energy programme, the MySuria Programme.

This initiative was pioneered by a pilot programme, Sunlight at Koridor Utara, or SuriaKU, in Pauh, Perlis. It involved the Perlis government, the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority, Gading Kencana Sdn Bhd, Energy Green Technology and the Water Ministry and Sustainable Energy Development Authority.

This pilot programme was successful and later rebranded as MySuria during the 2017 Budget as an initiative to improve the economic opportunities of the B40 group.

Through the initiative, solar panels will be installed in more than 1,600 housing units to generate electricity that will be sold to Tenaga Nasional Bhd, the country's main energy provider, and each participant can earn up to RM600 in extra income monthly.

The initiative is similar to other recent efforts in many Muslim countries that are implementing green technology through solar energy programmes.

In Jordan, there are plans to install photovoltaic solar systems in 6,000 mosques. In Morocco, a solar thermal power plant provides low-cost electricity to more than a million people.

While in Malaysia, proactive measures have been taken by the government to improve the livelihood of the lower-income group through a solar energy programme that allows participants to save power consumption and generate income by selling excess electricity. The programme is expected to have long-term benefits for up to 21 years through the Renewable Energy Power Purchase Agreement under the feed-in-tariff mechanism. The targeted participants are the B40 group in northern Peninsular Malaysia.

From the Islamic perspective, the implementation of such an energy programme is in line with the concept of protection of self (*hifz al-nafs*) and the protection of environment (*hifz al-bi'ah*). Advancing these values partakes in the higher objectives, or *maqasid*, of Shari'ah, which also promote sustainability and balance in the economy and environment.

Mustafa Abu Sway in his work entitled *Towards an Islamic Jurisprudence of the Environment* (2008), views the preservation of the environment as one of the major aims of Shari'ah, in addition to the five essential values or *maqasid al-shari'ah*, namely the preservation of faith (*din*), self (*nafs*), progeny (*nasl*), intellect ('*aql*), and wealth (*mal*). Indeed, he argues that protecting the environment encompasses the other aims of the Shari'ah because the continuous destruction of the environment prevents human beings from fulfilling their role as vicegerents (*khulafa*) on earth.

According to renowned Islamic jurisprudence scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Islam advises its followers to practise moderation (*wasatiyyah*) in the use of resources, including energy and water.

Since humanity runs the risk of energy shortage, any effort to generate renewable and safe energy from the sun is highly recommended from the Islamic viewpoint. These messages are conducive to the implementation of the solar energy programme in terms of the nation's wellbeing and the balance between socioeconomic development and protecting the environment.

Malaysia is expected to implement Net Energy Metering by next year, which allows self-consumption of electricity generated by solar photovoltaic systems, while selling excess energy to utility companies. Based on the writer's experience

in solar energy research, a major challenge in setting up a solar power system is its high cost.

Therefore, to make solar energy more accessible, the initiative should not be limited to the northern peninsula but should be introduced nationwide. Given the positive development of the renewable energy sector, it is hoped that next year's budget will see an increase in allocation to boost solar energy accessibility further.

According to *The New York Times*, Malaysia is one of the biggest players in the solar energy sector, becoming the third largest producer of solar modules in the world, next to the European Union and China. This success is attributed to Malaysia's generous tax breaks for investors, relatively low labour costs and abundance of English-speaking engineering talent.

With the ability to supply a large amount of solar equipment and the country's readiness to invest, Malaysia should consider installing more solar power systems throughout the country.

This will surely make Malaysia a leader for other Muslim nations in solar energy programmes to improve the lives of the people.

## Notes

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