

Safeguarding planetary health for southeast Asia's future children



While we continue to deal with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the past months have also revealed the sorry state of our collective planetary health, including in southeast Asia. Weeks after the 2021 UN climate change conference (known as COP26), Malaysia experienced intense flooding at a scale that has never been seen before,¹ while the Philippines was once more hit by a super typhoon that killed hundreds and displaced a hundred thousand more.² In the beginning of 2022, the Stockholm Resilience Centre announced that a fifth planetary boundary has already been breached—chemical pollution, particularly plastic—in addition to climate change, land use change, disrupted biogeochemical flows, and biodiversity loss.³ Southeast Asia is central source of plastic pollution, as most of the top five plastic-polluting countries are located in the region.⁴ Furthermore, as a biodiversity hotspot, the jungles of southeast Asia offer ideal conditions for another potential zoonotic outbreak, and it is vital to prevent future pandemics at the source.⁵

Tackling these interlocking planetary health challenges requires action to address human-generated political, social, economic, and environmental causes and their dire humanitarian consequences. To advance the health and wellbeing of humanity, especially of succeeding generations, the declining state of planet Earth can no longer be ignored.

In 2021, we, southeast Asian leaders in planetary health science, humanitarianism, higher education, and sustainable business, joined forces to establish the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health. The centre is based in Sunway University in Malaysia. Our vision is to create a safe and just world where the health of humans and the planet thrive in harmony, and we hope to this goal through education, research, public engagement, and policy influence.

In the coming years, the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health will pioneer the application of a planetary health approach in Asia and the Pacific, with an initial focus on southeast Asia, to address crucial challenges that lie at the nexus of human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. The centre is also our contribution to building regional capacity and the emerging discourse

around decolonising planetary and global health.⁶ For our inaugural phase, we identified five priority themes: (1) preventing the next pandemic; (2) tackling the climate emergency; (3) creating healthy cities; (4) achieving sustainable food systems; and (5) promoting fairer economies. To tackle these areas, we will leverage the diverse capacities of Sunway University's interdisciplinary faculty and existing networks as well as forge new connections with partners from around the world.

The centre is committed to upholding five core values: (1) integrity, by demonstrating accountability and transparency to our multiple stakeholders and partners and pursuing the planetary health approach with discipline and rigour; (2) inclusion, by supporting and advocating diversity, pluralism, fairness, and equal opportunity for all; (3) collaboration, by inspiring constructive dialogue, engaging diverse stakeholders, building consensus, facilitating convergence, and forging strong and durable partnerships; (4) stewardship, by being a responsible and accountable guardian for nature and the environment; and (5) do no harm, by respecting the autonomy and dignity of all and being focused on prevention of harm to people and the planet.

The centre will provide a space for knowledge creation and sharing through transdisciplinary research and education throughout the life course, being embedded in a university and within the larger Sunway Education Group that encompasses 16 educational institutions serving the full spectrum of educational needs and aspirations from preschool to postgraduate and life-long learners. However, we also aspire to become more than an academic centre, as we are devoted to translating planetary health knowledge into policy, practice, and lasting system change. Hence, we plan to act as a strategic convener for constructive engagement and innovation creation between academia, government, business, health professionals, civil society, and young people on pressing planetary health issues. We will also use the tools of policy and diplomacy to closely advocate meaningful policy change to national governments and international organisations.

Our centre might be less than 1 year old, but we have already launched several major initiatives. We designed

For the **launch video of the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health** see <https://youtu.be/jVsE9A9DjKw>

For more **information on the centre** see <https://university.sunway.edu.my/research/planetaryhealth>

an experiential learning course titled Community Service for Planetary Health, which will be taken by all undergraduate students at Sunway University regardless of degree programme. We have conducted webinars and other dialogues related to the intersection of planetary health and innovation, business, humanitarianism, and health sector mobilisation, among others. We are collaborating with the Malaysian Government in piloting the Doughnut Economics model⁷ in the city of Ipoh and co-designing a national planetary health roadmap that will support the implementation of the 12th Malaysia Plan, with a goal to make Malaysia a net-zero country by 2050.⁸ Effectively communicating planetary health to wide audiences is vital to success; therefore, we have also created a robust and inclusive communication strategy that covers public lectures, informational materials using local languages and dialects, and a monthly column in Malaysia's national newspaper, among others. Finally, we are developing a robust youth engagement approach, which includes organising townhalls and hackathons and maximising the power of social media, to raise awareness for lasting behaviour change and to amplify the voices of the next generation. In safeguarding their future, their voices cannot be ignored anymore.

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