



POLICY BRIEF: HAZE AND GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN MALAYSIA

How improved communications can reduce negative health impacts from haze pollution and support haze-free consumer behaviour

Context

Haze pollution is a serious burden on Malaysia's environment, society, and economy, with the latest research estimating the total economic cost of the 2013 haze at RM1.5 billion (Mohd Shahwahid, 2016). Malaysia has in place several comprehensive action plans for a whole-of-government response to haze.

However, there have been calls for improved government communication to the public both during and outside haze periods. Research by a team of collaborators led by the University of Nottingham Malaysia into public knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour related to haze pollution also reflects this need. Based on our research findings, we offer recommendations to improve government communications in terms of preparedness, public support during haze episodes, and consumer awareness.



Key recommendations for the National Haze and Dry Weather Steering Committee¹

1. Maintain continuous haze-health literacy campaigns to enable the public to make good health decisions during haze
2. Initiate a public hotline for mental and general health support during haze episodes
3. Run a year-round public relations campaign to increase awareness on sustainability certification labels and how consumers can personally contribute to resolving haze

¹ This committee is officially named *Jawatankuasa Induk Jerebu dan Cuaca Kering* in Bahasa Malaysia. It meets twice yearly and consists of various government agencies related to haze crisis management. It is chaired by the Minister responsible for the environment and the Ministry of Environment and Water acts as its secretariat.

“A better communication policy could be realised by ... better use of social media to promote and create public dialogue on critical issues, multi-stakeholder activities such as field visits, and active public engagement with governmental agencies to positively influence the policy process.” - Local and Transboundary Haze Report, Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM) 2018 (p.18)

The need for improved communication on haze

During haze periods, such as in 2015 and 2019, the government rightly focuses on emergency response. Outside haze periods, the focus is on technical prevention and disaster preparedness.

While such established policy measures remain important, a 2018 UN Report titled “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies in Asia and the Pacific” highlights the need for transformative measures to deal with the haze, including novel public communication strategies, to avoid even larger losses in the future. This need has been echoed by various government and non-governmental stakeholders.

Our research

These sentiments are reflected in two important findings of our project. First, most Malaysians assign a high level of responsibility to the Malaysian government to find solutions for the haze.

Secondly, there is a lack of confidence among the Malaysian public in the current policy direction in responding to haze, both at the national and regional level. We believe that this has translated to a sense of hopelessness among Malaysians, who see little prospect of a haze-free future.

69% of respondents think the haze situation in Malaysia will be worse 25 years from now

In short, the Malaysian public is not confident that the haze condition will improve but still hold the government responsible for solving this issue. Understanding and managing public sentiment is important as this can help build social legitimacy and public acceptance of broader government efforts (Ives and Kendal 2014).

Methodology

1. 355 survey responses (July 2019 – Klang Valley) with 107 individuals re-surveyed during October 2019 haze
2. Focus group discussions with 17 demographically representative participants (January 2020)
3. In-depth stakeholder interviews (January-March 2020)

Based on our research findings, improved and consistent communication on haze will increase the Malaysian public’s confidence in the government’s role towards a haze-free future, alongside improving the public’s ability to protect themselves during haze and to contribute to resolving the haze problem.

Detailed recommendations

Recommendation 1: maintain continuous haze-health literacy campaigns to enable the public to make good health decisions during haze

Our research showed there is a low level of understanding and preparedness amongst the public regarding the haze; in other words, there is low haze-health literacy.

Only 1 in 2 people understood that performing moderate exercise increases the amount of pollutant matter a person inhales

A lower understanding will translate to even higher healthcare costs during haze as the public cannot make good decisions about their health. While some public health issues like dengue are discussed all year round, haze-health literacy has been generally communicated only during periods of haze.

Our findings also indicate that people have more haze-health literacy during haze episodes, but this knowledge does not link to more engagement in health protection behaviour. Conversely, outside of haze episodes, the more people know about the haze, the more they declare that they would engage in appropriate behaviours in the event of haze.

We interviewed public health expert Dr Khor Siew Kheng, who pointed out that government agencies like the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education must play important roles in improving health literacy, which is still low among Malaysians.

Hence, interventions to increase haze literacy should be consistent both during and outside haze periods to effectively promote health protection behaviour. We recommend haze-health literacy campaigns be run year-round on all major communication channels, and the health impacts of exposure to air pollution, in general, should be included in the national syllabus.

Recommendation 2: initiate a public hotline for mental and general health support during haze episodes

Our results show that many Malaysians are mentally affected by the haze. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health has reported increases in calls to the MOH-Mercy MALAYSIA Psychosocial Support Helpline and other government agencies’ helplines related to mental health issues (Bernama, 2021).

This shows the great demand for psychological support in times of crisis. Similarly, we recommend that a hotline be established during haze periods. If callers experience heightened stress levels or face other mental health issues during the haze, they must be referred to mental health support services.

72% of respondents agree or strongly agree that several consecutive days of haze makes them depressed

This will work with Recommendation 1 to increase preparedness and will help address latent related mental health issues during haze periods. Data collected from calls to this hotline could also contribute to a better understanding of the links between haze and mental health, which was noted as a priority area during an ASM Forum on the Impact of Haze on Human Health in 2017.

Recommendation 3: run a year-round public relations campaign to increase awareness on sustainability certification labels and how consumers can personally contribute to resolving haze

We found that the public has a strong understanding of the connections between key agricultural sectors and the haze. Out of a list of 29 different parties, respondents on average assigned high responsibility for *causing* the haze to palm oil business interests (second highest, after the Indonesian government) and the pulp-and-paper business sector (fifth highest).

However, this has not translated to the belief that consumer pressure, including checking sustainability labels and buying products made from sustainable sources, can encourage more sustainable and responsible business practices. We also found a low awareness of existing sustainability certification labels, implying that Malaysians are not aware of ways to exert their consumer pressure effectively; although Malaysia has spearheaded several major sustainability labels like RSPO and MSPO.

Overall, respondents assigned more responsibility for solving the haze to corporations than to themselves as consumers

Deputy Secretary-General at the Ministry of Environment and Water, Dr Nagulendran A/L Kangayatkarasu, emphasised during a webinar in July 2020 that there is a need for improved communication, education, and public awareness about how consumer behaviour is linked to the haze. Likewise, we recommend a year-round, full-fledged public relations campaign similar to the current “*Sawit Anugerah Tuhan*” campaign to raise awareness on how Malaysian consumers can use sustainability labels for responsible consumption to personally contribute towards solving the haze issue.

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Further reading

[ASM Local and Transboundary Haze Study](#) (2018) Varkkey H (ed), Kuala Lumpur: ASM

[The Link between Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices in Relation to Atmospheric Haze Pollution in Peninsular Malaysia](#) (2015) De Pretto L et al, PLoS ONE 10(12)

[What Impact is the Haze Having on Peninsular Malaysia?](#) (2016) Mohd Shahwahid HO, EEPSEA Policy Brief No 2016-PB6

[Malaysia's Role in Transboundary Haze Pollution: Reconciling Policy with Public and Consumer Values](#) (2021) Wong PY et al, TECSEA Blog

[The role of social values in the management of ecological systems](#) (2014) Ives CD and Kendal, D. Journal of Environmental Management 144(1)



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