Beyond GDP – Measuring Progress, Creating Impact Forum 2026

Date: 11 March 2026
Venue: Za'ba Memorial Library, University of Malaya
Lead Organiser: Malaysian CSO–SDG Alliance (MCSA)
Collaborating Partners:

- University of Malaya (Ungku Aziz Centre)
- Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER)

1. Background

The "Measuring Progress, Creating Impact: Beyond GDP Forum 2026" was convened as part of ongoing efforts to advance alternative approaches to measuring national progress beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

While GDP remains the most widely used indicator of economic performance, it does not fully capture broader dimensions of societal well-being, including income distribution, environmental sustainability, and quality of life. Globally, initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and discussions under the United Nations High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP have highlighted the need for complementary indicators.

In Malaysia, progress has already been made through initiatives such as:

- Malaysia Well-being Index (MyWI)
- Multidimensional poverty measures
- Environmental-economic accounting by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)

This forum builds on prior MCSA engagements, including a multi-stakeholder workshop held in November 2025, and represents the third convening under the Beyond GDP initiative.

2. Objectives

The forum aimed to:

- Facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue on measuring progress beyond GDP
- Explore practical pathways for operationalising Beyond GDP approaches in Malaysia

- Strengthen collaboration between government, academia, civil society, and international partners
- Examine data, technical, and policy requirements for implementation
- Consider the establishment of a multi-stakeholder technical expert advisory group

3. Participants

The forum convened approximately 130 participants from:

- Government agencies
- Academic institutions
- Statistical bodies
- Civil society organisations
- International organisations

Efforts were made to ensure inclusive participation, including gender balance, ethnic representation, and participation from Sabah and Sarawak.

4. Program Flow

4.1 Opening Session

Welcome Remarks – MCSA

Ms Omna Sreeni-Ong emphasised the need to shift development paradigms beyond GDP towards people-centred, well-being, and sustainability-focused approaches. She noted that the forum represents a continuation of earlier engagements and aims to advance implementation pathways.

Acknowledgements were extended to DOSM, University of Malaya, MIER, UNRCO, WWF, and other partners.

Opening Address

Dato' Sri Mustapha Muhammad highlighted:

- Strong stakeholder engagement
- Longstanding collaboration between MCSA and Government on SDGs
- Contributions of MIER and academia
- Importance of inclusive participation

4.2 Keynote Address

The keynote address by the Chief Statistician of Malaysia focused on the evolving role of statistics in development.

Key points include:

- Global momentum to move beyond GDP
- Malaysia's socio-economic transformation (population growth and GDP expansion)
- Limitations of GDP in capturing wellbeing, inequality, and sustainability

Key Statistical Initiatives Highlighted

- Malaysia Well-being Index (MyWI)
- Malaysia Happiness Index (MHI)
- Malaysia Human Development Index (MHDI)
- Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI)
- Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

Key Issues Identified

- Underutilisation of existing data
- Need for stronger data interpretation and communication
- Importance of citizen-generated data

Priority Actions

- Align with international frameworks
- Strengthen disaggregated data systems
- Build capacity for data use in policymaking

4.3 Presentation: MCSA Beyond GDP Initiatives

The presentation outlined work undertaken since 2023, aligned with SDG 17.19 and national policy frameworks.

Key Findings from Workshops

- GDP limitations:
    - Unequal wealth distribution
    - Inequitable access to services
    - Undervaluation of non-market contributions
    - Environmental costs not captured
- Drivers:
    - Short-term economic prioritisation
    - Lack of comprehensive impact tracking systems

Vision for Beyond GDP Malaysia

- Social wellbeing
- Environmental sustainability
- Equitable access to opportunities

- Work-life balance
- Healthy ecosystems

Framework Development

A conceptual framework has been developed based on:

1. Values
2. Lived realities
3. Multi-stakeholder participation

Proposed Next Steps

- Development of a national dashboard
- Alignment of ministry KPIs with wellbeing metrics
- Integration of citizen-generated data

4.4 Pre-Forum Survey

A survey was conducted to capture participant perspectives.

Key Findings

- 68.7% define progress as a balance of economic, social, and environmental factors
- 64.2% agree GDP alone is insufficient
- 23.9% support GDP as a core indicator alongside others

Key Barriers

- Lack of political will
- Data gaps
- Methodological challenges
- Policy integration constraints

Priority Indicators

- Income
- Subjective wellbeing
- Health and life expectancy

4.5 High-Level Panel Discussion

Theme: Moving from “What to Measure” to “How to Measure”

The session explored how Beyond GDP approaches can be operationalised within Malaysia’s policy framework, including the 13th Malaysia Plan.

Key Perspectives

Global and Institutional

- Dashboard approach preferred
- GDP should be complemented, not replaced
- Alignment with global frameworks is essential

Economic and Policy

- Overreliance on GDP is the core issue
- Growth does not guarantee wellbeing
- External economic dependencies influence outcomes

Civil Society

- Need to shift focus from productivity to wellbeing
- Importance of participatory approaches
- Role of citizen-generated data

Academic and Local Perspectives

- Importance of non-market and informal activities
- Need for local and qualitative data
- Value of community-level insights

Alternative Measurement Approaches

- Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)
- Composite and adjusted indices

5. Key Issues and Challenges Identified

5.1 Data and Measurement

- Uneven availability of socio-economic data
- Difficulty in measuring complex variables
- Need for improved data integration and granularity

5.2 Policy and Governance

- Continued reliance on GDP in decision-making
- Trade-offs between economic growth and sustainability
- Need for clearer policy alignment

5.3 Institutional and Public Trust

- Importance of transparency and credibility

- Role of independent institutions
- Need to strengthen public trust in data

5.4 Localisation of Data

- Lack of micro-level and community data
- Importance of qualitative insights

6. Emerging and Cross-Cutting Issues

6.1 Technological Developments

- Artificial intelligence and automation impacts on employment
- Energy demands of data centres
- Environmental sustainability concerns

6.2 Economic Models

- GDP-centric frameworks shape policy priorities
- Need to reconsider development models

6.3 Social Dimensions

- Gaps in data on children and youth wellbeing
- Potential inclusion of peace, security, and social cohesion indicators

7.Key Questions Raised

Participants raised questions on:

- Global progress towards Beyond GDP frameworks
- Institutional capacity and governance challenges
- Industry trade-offs
- Inclusion of diverse communities
- Integration into national planning
- Measurement of emerging issues

8. Key Outcomes and Insights

8.1 What Should Be Measured

- GDP remains relevant but insufficient
- Key dimensions:

    - Income and wealth distribution
    - Environmental sustainability
    - Social wellbeing
    - Social cohesion
    - Access to opportunities
- Gaps:
    - Non-market contributions
    - Environmental and social externalities
    - Informal and subsistence activities

8.2 How to Advance the Agenda

- Incremental and pragmatic approach required
- Debate between dashboard vs composite indices
- Need for clarity and simplicity in indicators
- Strengthening of data systems and integration
- Importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration
- Alignment with international frameworks

9. Conclusions

The forum highlighted that while GDP remains an important measure of economic activity, it is insufficient as a standalone indicator of national progress.

Malaysia is well-positioned to advance the Beyond GDP agenda due to:

- Existing statistical capacity
- Availability of multiple wellbeing indicators
- Active multi-stakeholder engagement

However, progress will require:

- Improved data integration and utilisation
- Stronger policy alignment
- Enhanced public communication
- Sustained collaboration across sectors

10. Closing Remarks

The closing session emphasised that development measurement remains an evolving process. While significant progress has been made in Malaysia’s statistical systems, further efforts are needed to capture local realities and address regional disparities.Participants were encouraged to continue engagement and contribute to the development of a national Beyond GDP framework.