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URBAN POVERTY AND COMMUNITIES IN HIGH RISE STRATA PUBLIC HOUSING

A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF ISSUES

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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to the series of engagements with the Malaysian Government to improve the efficacy of public service delivery and address urban poverty. It intersects with ongoing debates shaping a new development narrative for Malaysia as it transitions into a high-income economy. Central to this narrative is the concern about equity and the sharing of development benefits across the rich diversity of Malaysian society. While past accounts have emphasised Malaysia's success in providing access to key development drivers such as infrastructure, health, and education services, the new model pays greater attention to the quality of growth issues as expressed in the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030.

Against this background, new debates have emerged about the efficacy of official methodologies in targeting the poor. A key issue was the efficacy of outdated official poverty line indicators (PLI) in the context of rapid demographic and economic change in Malaysia's urban centres.[1] A World Bank-University of Malaya living standards study, for example, suggests that the official PLI is about three times below socially acceptable living standards. In July 2020 the official PLI was adjusted from RM980 to RM2,028, raising the number of households living in absolute poverty from 0.4% to 5.6% of the population.[2] The problem of targeting the urban poor is compounded by the policy shift in the 11th Malaysia Plan to focus on the B40 category — which tends to combine households facing deprivation in basic needs with households experiencing deprivation of a more aspirational nature.[3] The effect has been to create a conceptual gloss over the differentiated vulnerabilities faced by different categories within the B40 group, resulting in a blunting of policy impact on the urban poor.

In this paper, we attempt a preliminary survey of issues affecting a particular urban demographic — the communities living in high-rise strata public housing projects. The rapid urbanisation of Malaysia have created these communities over the last few decades and their physical existence can be seen in the high-rise public housing buildings dotting the landscape of Malaysia's urban centres. With a population size of about 3 million today, these communities reflect the social mobility that accompanied Malaysia's development trajectory and embodies the national aspiration for creating a broad middle class that will help the country transform into a high-income nation.

> **IN JULY 2020 THE OFFICIAL PLI WAS ADJUSTED FROM RM980 TO RM2,028, RAISING THE NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS LIVING IN ABSOLUTE POVERTY FROM 0.4% TO 5.6% OF THE POPULATION.[2]**

Concerns, however, have been raised about the sustainability of the public housing projects over the last decades. Issues of congestion, deteriorating living conditions, and anti-social behaviour in these communities have captured

the public imagination. Recognising this trend, the National Community Policy was formulated in 2018 to address the issues affecting the standard of living of these communities. The policy correctly identifies outcomes such as community empowerment, participation, and co-management of public and common property as crucial elements of a harmonious, safe, and sustainable society. However, the policy is incomplete without a clear analytical framework for understanding the drivers of social and economic change shaping and impacting the development outcomes of these communities. A critical gap in the existing policy is a conceptual framework that addresses the institutional changes needed to support the policy and inform its implementation strategy.

This paper contributes to this dialogue by locating these vulnerable communities within the broader context of Malaysia's urbanisation process and policies to provide housing to the urban poor. It provides an outline of issues shaping the development issues affecting public housing communities and points to priority areas for more detailed studies to support the design of effective policy interventions. The intent is to refine the dialogue by identifying key critical areas for strengthening the policy and identifying key elements for designing an effective public investment programme.

[1] Martin Ravallion (2019), Has Malaysia Virtually Eliminated Poverty? Economics & Poverty, Martin Ravallion's Website on the Economics of Poverty, January 21, 2019; Christopher Choong and Tan Zhai Gen (2019) "The Absolute vs Relative Poverty Conundrum", KRI Views, 5/19, Khazanah Research Institute, Kuala Lumpur; UNICEF (2018) Children Without: A study of urban child poverty and deprivation in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur, United Nations Childrens' Fund, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. World Bank draft report, "What will it take? Malaysia's ambition to become a high-income and developed economy"

[2] Syahirah Syed Jaafar (2020), "Malaysia's absolute poverty rate at 5.6% — chief statistician", July 10, 2020, *theedgemarkets.com*

[3] Gregory Ho and Suraya Ismail (2020), "Are both the B40 and M40 'Poor'?", KRI Views, 2/20, Khazanah Research Institute, Kuala Lumpur

Source : unsplash.com — CHUTTERSNAP

PART II

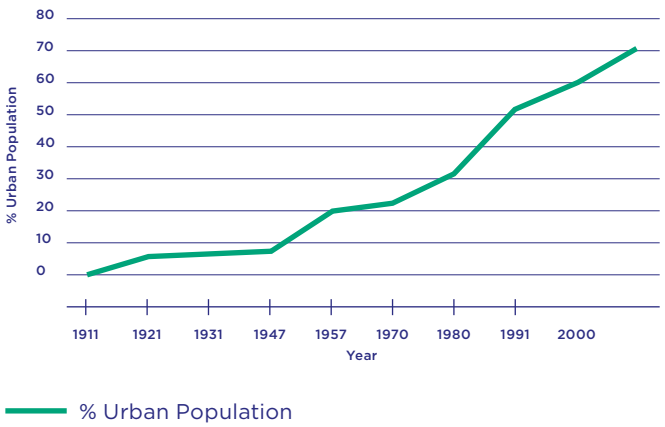
HOUSING THE URBAN POOR

1.0 Malaysia has one of the fastest urbanization rates in Southeast Asia

Malaysia is one of the most urbanised countries in Southeast Asia, doubling its share of urban population from 34.2% in 1980 to 71% in 2010. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of urban centres in Malaysia multiplied more than three-fold, from 55 to 170, along with a doubling in Malaysia's population from 13.7 million to 28.3 million between 1970 and 2010.

To appreciate the rapid pace of change that had taken place: it took England 79 years to move from a situation where 10 % of its population was urban to one where 30 % lived in towns and cities, whereas it took Peninsular Malaysia only 20 years to effect the same changes. In America, it took 36 years, in Japan, 66 years, and in Australia, 26 years.[4] Figure 1 below illustrates the dramatic pace of urbanisation in Peninsular Malaysia over the last century.[5]

Figure 1
Urbanization rate in Peninsular Malaysia, 1911–2010



2.0 The rapid urbanization process has been paralleled by a dramatic reduction in its poverty rate

In parallel with the phenomenal urban growth was an impressive growth in the country's wealth. Between 1967 and 1997, Malaysia recorded continuous average GDP growth of 7%. At the same time, it recorded a sharp and consistent drop in poverty levels from 49.3% to 1.7% between 1970 and 2012 respectively. By 2018 Malaysia was categorised as a middle-income country with a GDP per capita of USD 11,373.[6]

3.0 Over the last two decades, Malaysia reduced its slum population by more than 90%

The prevention of slum development has been an important aspect of Malaysia's poverty reduction strategy. Unlike many other Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia has managed to curtail the development of slums in the urbanisation process adroitly managing the problem of 'illegal' settlements and systematically housing the urban poor. Figure 2 below illustrates this impressive achievement by contrasting Malaysia's slum population with neighbouring countries.

Figure 2
Slum Population in Selected Countries

Country	Slum Population, 2014 (%)	Urban Poverty, 2010 (%)
Cambodia	55.1	6.4
Indonesia	21.8	8.3
Lao PDR	31.4	10.0
Myanmar	41.0	9.0
Malaysia	0.86	0.3
Philippines	38.3	13.0
Thailand	25.0	7.7
Viet Nam	27.2	3.8
Bangladesh	55.1	21.3

Malaysia slum population 2018 data. All other slum population data from 2014.[7]

In countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, with high urbanisation rates of 50%, 36%, and 55% respectively in 2018, more than a fifth of their urban population live in slums.[8] While in Cambodia and Bangladesh, the slum population constitutes more than half the urban population. In contrast, by 2018, Malaysia's slum population was less than one per cent of her urban population. Out of 24,363,730 people or 77.3% of her total urban population,[9] Malaysia's slum community was estimated at 210,012 or 0.86% of the total urban population.[10]

More impressively, within a two-decade period, Malaysia had managed to reduce the number of slum households by more than 90%, from 571,261 in 1999 to 52,503 households in 2018.[11] This achievement is paralleled by a dramatic drop in her urban poverty rate by 87%, from 2.3% in 2002 to 0.3% in 2014. In contrast, Thailand's urban poverty dropped by 65.3%, from 22.2% in 2000 to 7.7% in 2013. Similarly, Indonesia dropped by 57.2%, from 19.4% to 8.3% between 1999 and 2014.[12]

4.0 Housing the poor has been a consistent policy of the government

The Government has consistently played a firm role in housing provision throughout Malaysia's modern history. During the pre-independence era, the Housing Trust Federation of Malaya was established in 1949 to focus on housing the urban poor. In the 1960s, the Ministry of Local Government and Housing worked with state governments to initiate a 'Housing Crash Programme' that constructed 14,175 low-cost units between 1967 to 1969. During this time, modular and small low-cost housing schemes were introduced. In addition, new industrial building methodologies for high-rise strata housing were piloted in the Pekeliling Flats in Kuala Lumpur and the Rifle Range Flats in Penang in 1969.

5.0 New institutions were established to help address the rising demand for housing

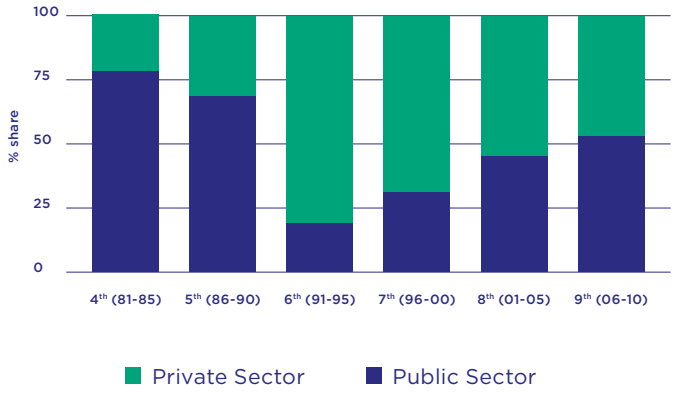
The provision of housing for the urban poor took on a new urgency after the race riots of 1967-69, which simmered across the nation and erupted in the urban centres of Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Between 1976 and 1990, the Government intensified its efforts and built 121,855 public housing units, doubling its average annual number. State governments began to take on a more significant role in this pursuit by creating state development agencies such as the *Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor* (PKNS) and the *Perbadanan Kemajuan Ekonomi Negeri Perak* (PKENP). Of significance was the establishment of the *Jabatan Perumahan Negara* (National Housing Department) in 1976 to improve housing provision for the rapidly differentiated needs of Malaysia's urbanising population. Commercially oriented government-linked companies such as Sime Darby Properties were also encouraged to support the public housing agenda.

6.0 The private sector was successfully deployed to build low-cost houses

By the mid-1980s, as the Government-led initiatives struggled to keep up with the high demand for public housing, a major policy change was instituted that harnessed the efficiency capabilities of the private sector to increase the housing supply. The housing market was differentiated according to selling price — high, medium, low medium, and low cost — and a 30% low-cost housing quota was imposed on all private sector residential development regardless of the project location. The Government also imposed a ceiling on the price of low-cost houses. fixed at RM42,000 for private sector projects and RM35,000 for public housing projects.The public housing programmes focused on high-rise strata buildings in urban areas where land scarcity was an impediment.

The results of these policy changes were impressive. Between 1971 and 2017, the private sector built a total of 3.7 million housing units without any government financial support — of which 1.2 million units were low-cost houses. This number meant an average of more than 20,000 units were built annually by the private sector during that period. Figure 3 below illustrates the changing roles of the private and public sectors in housing the country's poor.

Figure 3
Low-Cost Housing Share of Public and Private Provision from the 4th to 9th Malaysia Plan



Source : Think City

7.0 'Squatter settlement' as a geographical category for the policy targeting of the urban poor

The urban poor were targeted based on the place where they lived. These geographies were designated as *setinggan* or squatter settlements in Government planning documents, which carried a legal connotation. The term squatter denotes the 'illegal' or 'unlawful' occupation of land, whether alienated or unalienated by individuals or groups of individuals. In contrast, the term slum is used more loosely to refer to the physical environment these squatter settlements tend to concentrate. By the late 1990s, the Government had taken a firm position on the status of the squatter population and pursued a policy of 'Zero Squatter Settlement' in coordination with state governments. The position entailed the voluntary and involuntary relocation of squatter populations into new public housing projects and the demolishment of the squatter settlement structures.

> **BY THE LATE 1990S, THE GOVERNMENT HAD TAKEN A FIRM POSITION ON THE STATUS OF THE SQUATTER POPULATION AND PURSUED A POLICY OF 'ZERO SQUATTER SETTLEMENT' IN COORDINATION WITH STATE GOVERNMENTS.**

8.0 The term 'squatter' is a contested category of knowledge

The legal status of squatters has always been a contentious issue because of the relatively recent history of modern land ownership in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur was founded by the in-migration of communities seeking economic opportunities from the mining industry in the 19th century. Settlements such as Kampung Kerinchi and Kampung Haji Abdullah Hukum are examples today of that wave of migration.[13] Global events such as the crash of rubber commodity prices in the 1920s and the impact of the Second World War provided the dynamic for further in-migration into the cities. Colonial policies too encouraged the creation of slum settlements through the creation of New Villages as a strategy to combat the communist insurgency and by promoting the development of peri-urban vegetable farming to feed the growing urban population.[14]

From the 1970s, the growth of squatter settlements started to concern government planners and policymakers. These settlements were concentrated in the Klang Valley region, mainly in Kuala Lumpur and the rapidly urbanising geographies of Selangor. In the 1970s, for example, Kuala Lumpur had a squatter population of more than a third of its population.[15] The squatter settlements, however, had diverse migration histories and socio-economic characteristics. In some settlements, the squatter community consisted of multiple generations who had lived continuously on land under 'illegal' status. Other settlements had more recent

histories of displacement due to the rapid urban expansion of Malaysia's cities. Many of these communities have particular ethnic and socio-cultural characteristics.[16]

Against this background, it is noteworthy to recognise that the housing of the urban poor was a contested process that necessarily involved the coercive powers of the state. This was in contradistinction to official narratives of progress that depicted a smooth transition in the translocation of these communities. The translocation was framed in terms of urban space and sanitisation in the march to the modernity of the developmentalist state.[17]

9.0 From squatter settlement to public housing

By the end of the 20th century, official statistics recorded more than half a million squatter households in the country.[18] Partly to address the burgeoning squatter issue, and partly in response to the financial crisis of 1997, the Government created a new category of housing called the Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) or the People's Housing Programme. This Programme was in addition to the low-cost housing programme already underway. The PPR consisted of housing units available for rent at a fixed monthly rate of RM214 or purchased at RM35,000. Preference was given to squatter populations. In tandem with this policy push by the Federal Government, state governments instituted various 'Zero Squatter' programmes. Figure 4 below provides an outline of the key characteristics of the PPR.

Figure 4
Outline of the Key Characteristics of the PPR[19]

Target Group	Squatter dwellers with monthly income below RM2,500 (applicant must not own a house yet)
Type of House	5 to 18 storey flats in major cities and terrace house in suburban areas
Size of House	Not less than 700 square feet
Features	3 bedrooms, 1 living room, 1 kitchen are, 1 bath, 1 toilet
Rental rate	RM124 per month

An important innovation was the introduction of the electronic Computerised Open Registration System to select of PPR recipients. The System was introduced to provide greater transparency into the selection process and ensure better targeting of beneficiaries. Between 1998 and 2016, the Government (both Federal and State) built102,630 PPR units housing 35,566 squatter households.[20]

10.0 Focus on public housing in high rise strata settlement

Public housing in Malaysia entailed both landed properties and high-rise strata properties, with the former tending to locate further from urban centres given the land value difference. In contrast, most high-rise buildings were located in urban centres where land values were higher, reflecting the preference of the urban poor to be located nearer to job opportunities. Ownership or access was based on strata titles.

This study focuses on this particular community of urban poor living in high-rise public housing strata settlements. Their population size is significant - data from 2013 provides an estimated size of the community to be 2.78 million living in more than 4,500 schemes. This number constitutes almost 10% of Malaysia's total population from the 2010 Census. Significantly, of all the high-rise public housing population nationwide, almost 65% of them, or 1,761,345 people, lived in the Klang Valley region. This number translates to almost 25% of the Klang Valley population.

Figure 5 below provides a breakdown of the public housing population living in high rise strata settlements. It is interesting to observe the significant role played by the private sector to house the urban poor — at 97.5% in Kuala Lumpur and almost 99% in Selangor.

Figure 5
Breakdown by State of Public and Private Low-Cost Strata Housing, 2013[21]

State	Stratified/High Rise Low Cost Housing				
	Public Scheme	Private Scheme	Total	Total Unit	Estimated
Federal Territory KL	59	2317	2376	130,566	652,830
Penang	29	340	369	73,541	367,705
Sabah	24	—	24	16,167	80,835
Melaka	23	80	103	14,218	71,090
Pahang	18	64	82	7,326	36,180
Johor	18	205	223	57,234	286,180
Sarawak	18	—	18	12,832	64,160
Perak	15	74	89	11,430	57,150
Kedah	13	76	89	7,754	38,770
Terengganu	12	14	26	3,706	1,853
Selangor	11	1,063	1,074	221,703	1,108,515
Negeri Sembilan	8	76	84	13,586	6,793
Kelatan	3	6	9	1,353	6,765
Perlis	3	—	3	1,378	6,890
Total	**254**	**4315**	**4569**	**572,704**	**2,785,706**

11.0 Policy success due to close coordination between federal, state, and local governments

The relocation of the urban poor from their squatter settlements to public housing projects was not an easy undertaking, requiring collaboration and careful coordination between different stakeholders and multiple tiers of government. The government's main challenge was to relocate squatters without escalating the programme's planned social and financial costs. These costs included the cost of compensation, social conflict, and potential political damage.

The main drivers of the programme were the state governments, who developed their own 'Zero Squatter' action plans. These were carefully coordinated and entailed specific legal strategies, such as offering temporary occupation licenses (TOL) to squatters on state land to avoid hefty compensation in the future. It also required close calibration with property developers to ensure the timely construction of new houses, especially when squatters had to occupy temporary dwellings prior to relocation. Moreover, it was executed through well-designated institutional structures such as a secretariat for planning and a multisectoral task force to monitor implementation. Figure 6[22] below provides an example of the systematic approach taken by the Selangor state in implementing its Selangor Zero Squatters 2005 Action Plan.

Figure 6
Example of State Government Plan for Squatter Eradication

Selangor Zero Squatters 2005 Action Plan	
Planning	The government collected data on squatters and low-cost houses. To confirm the provision of adequate low-cost and medium cost houses for target groups and squatter dwellers.
Supervision	Observing and ensuring that the development of low cost-housing was based on schedule and parallel to other types of development.
Distribution	To make sure that the distributions of low-cost housing were efficient and fair to the eligible target group and squatter occupants.
Enforcement	Prevention and immediate enforcement will be conducted on any squatter settlements and imposing measures on developers who failed to develop low-cost housing as planned and as scheduled.

[4] Yusoff, K. and Kwai-Sim, L., "Urbanization and its Effects On Health in Squatter Areas (With Special Reference To Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)," Journal of Human Ergology, 19, 1990, , p. 177

[5] Chart adopted from Shahridan Faiez and Vijayendra Rao, "The Demand-side of Public Service Delivery and the Strengthening of a New Malaysia", Think City Urban Policy Series, Issue 1, April 2019.

[6] World Bank data.

[7] Adapted from Arfanuzzaman, M. and Dahiya, B. Sustainable urbanization in Southeast Asia and beyond: Challenges of population growth, land use change, and environmental health, Growth and Change, 50:2019. Malaysia slum population data from 2018 in Dasar Perumahan Negara 2018-2025, Jabatan Perumahan Negara, Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan, Kuala Lumpur 2018, pp.

[8] Urbanization rate taken from *https://www.statista.com/statistics/455835/urbanization-in-indonesia/*

[9] Urban population *https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/malaysia-population/*

[10] Dasar Perumahan Negara 2018-2025, Jabatan Perumahan Negara, Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan, Kuala Lumpur 2018, pp. 11.

[11] Dasar Perumahan Negara 2018-2025, Jabatan Perumahan Negara, Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan, Kuala Lumpur 2018, pp. 11.

[12] Computed from World Data Atlas *https://knoema.com/atlas/Thailand/Urban-poverty-rate?compareTo=ID,VN*

[13] Johnstone (1983), "Urban Squatting and Migration in Peninsular Malaysia", The International Migration Review, Vol. 17, No. 2.

[14] Ibid. For example Salak South and Sungai Besi in Kuala Lumpur, and Thien Teik Estate in Penang.

[15] See Table 4 in Yusoff, K. and Kwai-Sim, L., "Urbanization and its Effects On Health in Squatter Areas (With Special Reference To Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)," Journal of Human Ergology, 19, 1990, , p. 177

[16] See Yeoh, S.G. , "Creolized Utopias: Squatter Colonies and the Post-Colonial City in Malaysia", Sojourn, 16/1, 2001; Faziawati, A., Norsidah, U. and Norhuzailin, H., "The Implication of Slum Relocations into Low-cost High-Rises: An Analysis through the infrastructure of everyday life", 2nd ABRA International Conference on Quality of Life, Dokuz Eylul Universitesi, Izmir, Turkey, 09-14 Dec. 2015; Bunnell, T. (2002) "Kampung Rules: Landscape and the Contested Government of Urban(e) Malayness", Urban Studies, Vol. 39, No. 9. See also Jayasooria, D. (Ed.) (2016) Inclusive Development For Urban Poor & Bottom 40% Communities In Malaysia, Siri Kertas Kajian Etnik UKM (UKM Ethnic Studies Paper Series), Institut Kajian Etnik (KITA), Bangi.

[17] Abdul Aziz Hussin, Wan Hazimah Wan Hariri and Nazri Zakaria (2004). Squatters: Issues on Management, Law and Property Development, Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia Publication.

[18] Yusoff, K. and Kwai-Sim, L., op.cit.

[19] Adapted from Yusfida A., Julieven K., Hazlina H. and Farrah L., "Combating Squatters In Malaysia: Do We Have Adequate Policies As Instrument?", PLANNING MALAYSIA: Journal of the Malaysian Institute of Planners 15/2, 2017.

[20] Dasar Perumahan Negara 2018-2025, Jabatan Perumahan Negara, Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan, Kuala Lumpur 2018, pp. 11.

[21] Adapted from Syafiee Shuid, "The housing provision system in Malaysia", Habitat International 54, 2016

[22] See Table 1 in Julieven K, Yusfida A., and Hazlina H., "Eradicating Squatters through Resettlement Programme: A Conceptual Paper" MATEC Web of Conferences 66(2):00023 January 2016

Source : Think City

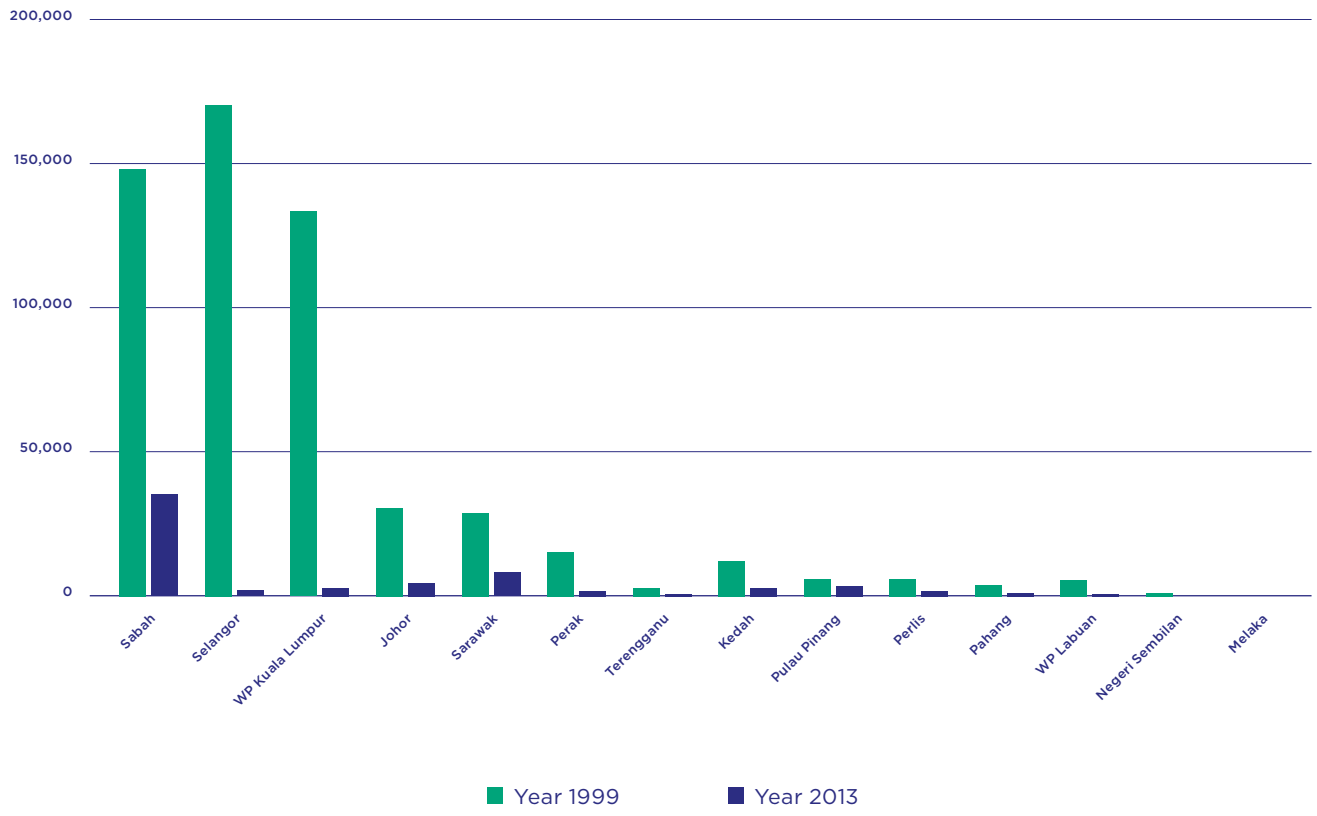
PART III

FROM PUBLIC HOUSING TO VERTICAL SLUMS?

12.0 The last two decades witnessed a dramatic decline in squatter settlements by more than 90%

By the first decade of the 21st century, the Government policy of combining public and private sector capabilities to build low-cost housing and Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) schemes had begun to pay impressive dividends. With an adequate supply of alternative housing available, squatter resettlement programmes were implemented with great firmness and efficiency. The number of squatter households nationwide was reduced by more than 90%, from 571,261 in 1999 to 52,503 in 2018.[23] Major urban centres such as Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Melaka recorded very high rates of decline of 98.5%, 97.5%, and 95.4% respectively.[24] Figure 7 below provides a picture of the dramatic decline of squatter populations according to the states between 1999 and 2013.

Figure 7
Change of Number of Households living in Slums According to State, 1999-2013[24]



13.0 Relocated squatter families live in secure habitations with access to infrastructure and services

The housing of the urban poor had helped to address the traditional problems of slum-dwelling associated with poor-quality homes and the poor availability of infrastructure and public services. In slum settlements, people were exposed to high risks in their living environment — exposure to the elements, especially during monsoon rains; fire hazards due to overcrowding of dwellings; electrocution risks arising from illegal power-sourcing; the gendering of household activities such as the collection of potable water; and health hazards arising from low levels of sanitation and hygiene.[26]

The newly housed former-slum residents, in contrast, have access to more durable modern living spaces, with significantly improved access to utilities such as electricity and potable water — literally at the turn of the tap. In addition, solid waste and sewerage systems for sanitation and public hygiene were established, and access to public health services was made available. Furthermore, most of these public housing projects are located in urban centres, which helps to improve transportation access to employment and small business opportunities and proximity to schools and other health and welfare services. With their concentrated numbers in particular urban areas, these communities also attracted the attention of politicians who were willing to amplify their demands for access to various services in return for votes.

These families, therefore, had a secure living arrangement that would allow them to focus on personal development and upward social mobility.

14.0 Positive impact can be detected in health outcomes

The positive impact of squatter relocation into public housing projects can be inferred from reported Intestinal Parasitic Infection (IPI) incidences. A common cause of chronic infection in slum communities, IPIs act as an indicator of individual health and the environmental quality of the relocated communities in their public housing settings.

A review of IPI incidence in the literature since the 1970s by Sinniah and colleagues shows a significant trend of decline over more than four decades among the urban poor. For example, between 1970 and 2002, the prevalence of IPI among slum dwellers declined from 95% in 1970 to 20.6% in 2014. This decline may be attributed to the improvements in safe water supply, solid waste management, and access to public health services provided by the government. This decline is even more dramatic among squatter communities who relocated to public housing projects — from a high of 35.2% in 1983 to 5.5% in 2013.

FROM PUBLIC HOUSING TO VERTICAL SLUMS?

A case study of a community of slum dwellers in Sentul who were relocated to public housing showed a decline of IPI prevalence from 81.2% to 8.8% within a year of relocation. In the same study, the prevalence of children with IPI dropped from 83.2% to 17.6% within one year of moving into the public housing project.[28] The literature suggests further that the improvements in public hygiene, sanitation, and water quality, among others, impacted positively upon health outcomes.

15.0 However, the health dividends are showing signs of sliding

A recent 2019 survey of IPI incidence in the PPRs has detected early signs that the health dividends of relocation may be sliding. Stool samples collected from PPR residents showed a higher prevalence of IPI at 22.5%, compared to 17.0% detected in non-public housing samples.[29] This represents a four-fold increase in prevalence from the last recorded finding of 5.5% in 2013.[30]

The same study found a significant correlation between the waste disposal method and the prevalence of infection of the parasite *A. lumbricoides*. This finding points to solid waste management and the overall hygiene of the public housing environment as important factors in determining IPI prevalence.

Additionally, this recent finding provides an epidemiological context to the 2018 UNICEF report on child poverty that found that 22% of PPR children below the age of five were stunted while 15% were underweight. The prevalence of IPI, as we know, impacts the nutritional health of individuals resulting in negative development outcomes such as diminished cognition, poor educational attainment, and inability to work, thus reinforcing the poverty and developmental challenges of affected communities.[31]

A RECENT 2019 SURVEY OF IPI INCIDENCE IN THE PPRS HAS DETECTED EARLY SIGNS THAT THE HEALTH DIVIDENDS OF RELOCATION MAY BE SLIDING.

16.0 Public housing communities have high levels of dissatisfaction with the standard of living

A literature survey shows a high level of dissatisfaction with the living environment in low-cost flats and PPRs. This author has also observed this dissatisfaction. In many of these public housing communities, there has been an apparent deterioration of living standards and high-stress levels. Figure 8 provides an example of levels of dissatisfaction recorded in a 2018 survey of public housing communities in the state of Selangor.[32]

Figure 8
Percentage of Highly Dissatisfied and Dissatisfied in high rise low cost housing issues

No	Issue	Percentage (%)
1	Lift maintenance	97.65
2	Lift size	95.10
3	Lift numbers	94.51
4	Handicap facilities	91.18
5	House workmanship	86.47
6	Plumbing system	85.88
7	House design	81.96
8	Material quality	79.41
9	Safety walking under uncovered corridor	77.65
10	Staircase condition	69.61
11	Corridor spaces	68.24
12	Fire door	66.86
13	Internal ventilation	56.27
14	Drainage system	52.16
15	Corridor lighting	47.06
16	Noise	37.84
17	Criminal cases	27.06
18	Roof leakage	15.29

17.0 Dissatisfaction arises from five categories of interrelated themes

The issues affecting these communities are complex. The issues also vary across different public housing projects. However, they have some common themes and can be categorised as follows:

i) Poor building design and quality. The public housing projects have undergone through multiple design evolutions and have shown significant improvement from the early designs of the 1970s and 1980s. However, issues continue to arise regarding the limited spaces available for public interaction, such as public halls and open green spaces. The density and scale of buildings may also be a factor. Many of the newer public housing projects involve high-rise buildings of up to 18-storeys, housing between 1,000 to 5,000 people in a single block. A survey by Think City found that residents in the low-rise KMC flats in Kuching had higher social capital than the residents in the high-rise PPR Sungai Bonus. At the same time, poor design has, among other things, created the susceptibility to water damage, especially during heavy rain, inadequate water pressure for the plumbing system, inadequate lift capacity to transport residents efficiently, and an inefficient waste disposal system. Quality issues include corridor railings that rust quickly and lose their integrity. There have been numerous cases of children falling through these corridor railings to their death. The same quality issues apply to stairway railings.

ii) Breakdown of common infrastructure. Frequent breakdown of lifts followed by long delays in repair is a common complaint. Some communities wait for years before the lifts are operational again. At least one reported brake failure incident resulted in a lift plunging five floors. The breakdown of lifts creates a significant burden for residents living in high-rise buildings. For some social groups such as the elderly, handicapped, pregnant women, and women with very young children, the absence of a lift service creates acute levels of difficulty and stress for everyday living.

Lighting systems that break down are not repaired on time — resulting in the poor lighting of common areas such as corridors, staircases, parking areas, lifts, and more. Drain and manhole covers that are damaged or missing are not replaced on time, causing danger to children and attracting rubbish. Broken motorcycle shed roofs and connecting corridors are left unattended for long periods, allowing water puddles to form. The slow resurfacing of service roads around buildings are also a source of water puddle and potholes — creating physical difficulties and a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Exposed cables and wires are left unattended and pose a hazard to the public.

iii) Deterioration of sanitary and hygiene environment. A key aspect of sanitary and hygiene breakdown is the poor management of solid waste. Systematic rubbish collection is difficult to manage, and many families face the frustrating sight of other people's rubbish being left along the corridor outside their flats. Many buildings do not have rubbish chutes. and households are expected to dispose of rubbish in the main rubbish collection centre on the ground floor. When the lifts don't work very well, it creates difficulties for people living on the upper floors to dispose of their rubbish — and some people resort to throwing them outside of their apartment windows or corridor, thus spreading rubbish in public spaces. Waste is also disposed of along the building's open spaces, such as staircase landing, corridors, and unoccupied units that have been broken into

The poor maintenance of common infrastructure compounds the problem as rubbish gets collected in and clogs the drains, creating foul odour and noxious discharge. The solid waste build-up at the waste disposal centre is a common sight in some project locations, with waste overflowing out of the rubbish skip and liquid waste leaching out of the base. The smell of urine can be distinguished in many parts of the public housing complex arising from the indiscriminate discharge of urine, especially by children. Messages on corridor walls exhorting against urinating in public spaces are common in many of these projects. Broken sewage pipes that are not fixed quickly are another source of sanitary and hygiene risk. Water puddles and outflow from broken water tanks and clogged drains provide the medium for spreading disease in these localities. The unhygienic environment unsurprisingly attracts rat infestation, scavengers, and vermin.

iv) Deviant and risky social behaviour. The breakdown of environmental quality is paralleled by a similar breakdown in the social sphere. A common gripe is the vandalism of public infrastructure such as lift mechanisms. Lift buttons and lighting are common targets of vandalism. Electrical wires, cables, and the metal railing protecting stairways become objects of theft. Light bulbs are broken and CCTV cameras damaged. The public car park sometimes becomes a site for stripping parts from stolen cars. Glue sniffing and harder drug consumption are issues in many of the sites. In some locations, the youth are drawn to gangsterism. Unoccupied apartments are sometimes broken into and become sites for vice activity. The broken lighting system in public spaces, including lifts, become sites for sexual attacks on female residents. While vehicle owners constantly worry about the safety of their property. The throwing of objects from the upper floors of the building is a common risk, and there have been a few reported deaths resulting from this deviant behaviour.

v) Households experience significant financial stress. Households here refer to the B40 category or those with a median household income below RM3,000. Many have fragile livelihood strategies and are highly vulnerable to shocks. A Unicef survey of PPRs in 2018 found that about one in three households were financially vulnerable, earning less than RM2,000 per month, while 77% had no savings. Similarly, a survey by Think City of PPR Sungai Bonus in Kuala Lumpur found that 11% of residents admitted to having no savings, 32% to insufficient savings, and a further 29% to savings to cover a short term. In terms of food security, almost half (42%) of households in PPR Sungai Bonus did not have sufficient funds for food in the past 12 months. The Unicef survey, which focused on child poverty, also found that about 22% of children below the age of five were stunted, 15% were underweight, and 12% of children between the ages of 5-17 had less than three meals a day.

Recent studies have raised doubts about the efficacy of official poverty indices in capturing the vulnerability of public housing communities.[33] The Unicef survey of PPRs, for instance, highlights that the official definition of poverty would suggest that only 7% of households lived below the official poverty line. However, the study demonstrated that in relative terms, more than 85% of the households surveyed would be considered poor.

18.0 Low levels of trust and social capital prevent communities from organizing themselves

A large component of the issues affecting these communities relates to the civic responsibility necessary for the upkeep and maintenance of common property infrastructure and spaces. Resolving these issues requires the cooperation and collaboration of communities. However, low trust and poor social capital within these communities prevent collective action from overcoming issues of common interest. For example, when the author queried a respondent why adults were not sanctioning children who urinate indiscriminately in public spaces, a common response was the fear of retribution by the children's parents. The most common retribution was the anonymous vandalism of vehicles, an important source of livelihood for many.

Residents cannot organise better policing of their building from criminal activity and anti-social behaviour. Residents tend to avoid the building courtyard, fearing missiles and projectiles falling from above. What should have functioned as a space of social convergence had become a negative space filled with risk. Visitors, researchers, and journalists who naively venture into these spaces risk experiencing the ignominy of being greeted with urine, soiled diapers, and other assortments of detritus from above.

The prevalence of deviant behaviour and petty crime creates an environment of insecurity. For example, in some projects, the fear of damage to motorcycles, a vital livelihood enabler, compels residents to push their vehicles into the public lifts to park them on the residential floors where they will be safer than the designated parking spaces. Invariably, such actions damage lifts, corridors, and other public spaces.

These public housing projects support large population numbers ranging from 1,500 to 20,000 people. Here, some social networks exist in these places based on historical relations, communities of practice, and informal and formal cultural, recreational, religious, and political associations. These networks can provide some support to members, but not everybody has access to these networks. Further, these networks seem unable to mobilise the necessary scale of a community organisation to address the common issues outlined in Paragraph 15 above. Even though formal community-based organisations exist, such as the joint management board or the neighbourhood action committee (*rukun tetangga*), they tend to suffer from legitimacy issues. Consequently, they are ineffectual in helping communities address the issues that matter.

19.0 Poor social accountability results in weak service delivery to communities

Poor accountability relationships handicap the delivery of services to public housing communities. For example, federal, state, local government authorities, appointed government-linked companies or private-sector contractors could administer the services at any one time. In addition, there is ambiguity about the reporting line within government departments responsible for overseeing the public housing projects. For example, a state's Commissioner of Buildings reports to the State and the Federal Government. This ambiguous reporting line creates opacity in the accountability and governance of the subject matter.

> **SOME SERVICES SUFFER FROM JURISDICTIONAL AMBIGUITY WHEN THEIR UPKEEP AND MAINTENANCE FALL LEGALLY OUTSIDE OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT, YET RESIDENTS EXPECT THE GOVERNMENT TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY.**

Some services suffer from jurisdictional ambiguity when their upkeep and maintenance fall legally outside the Government's responsibility, yet residents expect the Government to assume responsibility. The maintenance of roads and drainage within the perimeter of public housing is one example. There is also opacity in delineating accountability between the delivery of service and the management of service providers. The system is framed in terms of upward accountability between service providers and the entities that manage them, with very weak consideration for downward accountability to the residents. Such a system disempowers communities and prevents them from having a say in the quality and performance of service providers.

Feedback from PPR managers suggests that the financial model for management and upkeep is not sustainable. This unsustainable model is compounded by high default rates that negatively impact the maintenance budget. At the same time, the weak accountability framework also compromises the effectiveness of the local government to collect rent in the PPR or management fees at the low-cost flats respectively. The local government's poor service delivery and poor financial position of households create the environment for delinquency in rental and fee payment. Residents question how the funds have been managed while management decries the lack of adequate budgets to conduct routine maintenance. A negative cycle ensues that worsens the default rates in the collection. Action is normally taken when politicians, seeking to appease potential voters, intervene and secure alternative funding from sources such as the State

Government, Federal Government, or NGOs. However, these funds are often inadequate in size and timing to address real problems and are susceptible to elite capture.

The opaque system of accountability in service provision creates opportunities for abuse and corruption. This system further contributes to the deterioration of service quality to the communities. Without a voice in the way services are planned and delivered, the communities do not have any systematic way to provide feedback and resolve problems in a timely manner. For example, in the PPR Kota Damansara, despite repeated complaints by residents and NGOs about the poor quality of corridor and stairway railings, it required the tragic death of a child who fell through the rotten safety railings to instigate the authorities to take remedial measures.[34]

20.0 Government response has been inadequate

Over the last decade, the Government has tried various approaches to stem the tide of decline in living standards. However, the attempted initiatives have not provided sustainable outcomes because they tend to focus on hard infrastructure solutions to what is clearly a problem of social accountability and community empowerment. Government investment into 'soft infrastructure' issues that build social capital and enhance community engagement has been woefully inadequate.

Solutions that come are often too little too late and do not address the systemic issues of decline in the public housing communities. Instead, because residents and communities do not have systematic mechanisms to channel their voices, they resort to lobbying politicians who provide ad hoc and superficial solutions. These ad hoc solutions may involve activities like giving the buildings a new coat of paint, providing new rubbish bins, or repairing the roof or a broken water tank — but failing to address the fundamental issues of weak social accountability and poor social capital. Some respondents have also suggested cynically that hard infrastructure solutions are preferred because they are more amenable to corruption.

The patronising approach of government officials and political leaders also contributes to the breakdown of trust and social capital deficiency. This breakdown happens when particular community-based organisations (CBOs) are promoted and utilised as conduits for engagement with the residents — often through handouts. Because these CBOs were not created democratically and lack downward accountability, they tend to be dominated by particular interest groups who control the way resources are distributed to the communities. Unhappy residents form alternative CBOs aligned with other patrons but also suffer the same problems of democratic accountability. The result is the creation of multiple CBOs within the same public housing complex that compete with one another for resources and create an overall environment of distrust and competition. As a result, the weakest and poorest residents tend to be marginalised from these programmes and fail to receive benefits.

Additionally, the government authority or company administering the management of the PPRs wield certain powers over the residents. They do this by utilising the threat of disabling water supply to households who fail to pay their monthly rent and from their position to influence the annual extension of rental lease of households. Such power relations sometimes become abused and cause resentment among residents. Various respondents point to the lack of transparency and sharing of information that gives the management company greater power over residents. Households are not given copies of their lease agreements, and when complaints about services are made, no record or documentation is shared with residents.

21.0 The Covid-19 crisis has intensified the deterioration process

The Covid-19 pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, which subsequently engulfed the whole planet, had precipitated health, economic and social crisis in Malaysia. On 18 March 2020, the Government abruptly imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO) resulting in a nationwide COVID lockdown. The restrictions had a disproportionately negative impact on the public housing communities — most of whom were already struggling with fragile livelihood strategies and were financially stressed. Many were dependent on daily wages with very poor savings. Many had to shutter their small businesses and remain at home in their overcrowded and stressful living environments.

Furthermore, many more lost their jobs as their employers undertook cost-cutting measures to preserve cash flow.

ON 18 MARCH 2020, THE GOVERNMENT ABRUPTLY IMPOSED THE MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER (MCO) RESULTING IN A NATIONWIDE COVID LOCKDOWN.

Anecdotal evidence points to an increase in domestic abuse and mental health issues. A 72-year-old respondent interviewed by the author described how, in addition to living alone and coping with food shortage, she was unable to administer her insulin injections during the MCO as she could not purchase her supply of needles. Her grown children, who were her only source of support, lived too far away and could not visit her due to the official travel restrictions. In one PPR visited by the author during the MCO, with about 5,000 population, people remained in their respective homes for fear of contracting the disease — creating an eerie atmosphere of stillness and silence. At the same time. respondents were concerned that once the MCO was lifted and people could move more freely, conflicts may emerge. Old infractions become amplified, and people lash out their frustration and anger.

22.0 Post-Covid, the public housing projects risk becoming urban poverty traps

At the current trajectory, the slide in the standard of living risks shaping a new urban poor category in the public housing communities. This urban poverty category is driven by mutually reinforcing environmental deterioration and social breakdown dynamics. As such, residents in these dwellings risk getting caught in a negative spiral of low educational attainment, low income and job opportunities, poor support structures and health outcomes, a negative outlook and lower participation in the broader national developmental narrative. With the continued deterioration of its socio-economic fabric, these public housing projects will be forced to transform from symbols of Malaysia's modernity into the early shoots of Malaysia's new generation of vertical slums.

It is pertinent to note that the issues affecting Malaysia's public housing projects have not yet reached the depth of complexity as seen in the Low-income Housing Projects or *Banlieue* in France. The public housing projects in France have become visible geographies of concentrated social marginalisation, making them vulnerable to the stigmatissation that amplifies pre-existing structural inequalities. Consequently, they have become sites for anti-state protests and riots, reflecting the frustration and grievance of a dispossessed and marginalised population.[35]

23.0 National Community Policy

Recognising the deterioration in the standard of living of public housing communities, the Government, through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Well-being, formulated the National Community Policy in 2018. The policy identifies eight challenges faced by these communities:

1. Failure to pay rental and building management fees
2. Selfish and irresponsible behaviour in the use and maintenance of the common property
3. Poorly managed sanitation and hygiene environment
4. Weak support system internally and externally
5. Communities are not united and poorly organised
6. Apathy towards weaker members of the community such as children, elderly, handicapped, women, and single mothers
7. Social problems among youth
8. Widespread vandalism resulting in losses to the public and government property government

treats the problems as simple externalities rather than tackling the institutional environment that impacts the standard of living of these communities. Therefore, to a large extent, it emphasises awareness-raising and education of the communities rather than addressing institutional reform.

FROM PUBLIC HOUSING TO VERTICAL SLUMS?

Absent is a framework for understanding the economic, institutional, and social development processes that produce poverty in these public housing projects. A framework to inform the reform agenda would necessarily involve the cross-sectoral participation of multiple agencies and sub-national partners. This policy gap creates implementation and outcome challenges — as interventions are designed without reforming the institutional relationships governing these communities. Therefore, they are unable to attract the necessary public investments to justify development returns. What is needed now to strengthen the policy is mapping the public housing communities through community empowerment and social accountability framework.

[23] Dasar Perumahan Negara 2018-2025, Jabatan Perumahan Negara, Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan, Kuala Lumpur 2018, pp. 11.

[24] Sabah continues to show significant squatter settlements and a relatively slower decline possibly due to its complex history of attracting migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia.

[25] Adapted from Syafiee Shuid, "The housing provision system in Malaysia", Habitat International 54, (2016), pg.218

[26] Yeoh S.G., "House, 'Kampung' and 'Taman': Spatial Hegemony and the Politics (and Poetics) of Space in Urban Malaysia", Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2006)

[27] Sinniah, B., Hassan, A.K.R., Sabaridah, I., Soe, M.M., Ibrahim Z. and Ali, O. (2014) Prevalence of intestinal parasitic infections among communities living in different habitats and its comparison with one hundred and one studies conducted over the past 42 years (1970 to 2013) in Malaysia, Tropical Biomedicine 31(2)

[28] Che Ghani, M., Noor Hayati, M.I., Ali, O. & Baharam, M.H. (1989)."Effect of rehousing and improved sanitation on the prevalence and intensity of soil transmitted helminthiases in an urban slum in Kuala Lumpur", Collected papers on the control of soil-transmitted helminthiases, 4.

[29] N. Sahamin, J. Lewis and S.N. Mohd Zain (2020). Post-era mass drug administration: An update on intestinal parasitic infections in urban poor communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Tropical Biomedicine (accepted for publication)

[30] Sinniah et al (2014), op. cit

[31] Hotez, P.J. (2008). Neglected infections of poverty inUnited States of America. *PloS Neglected Tropical Diseases 2*: e256 (PMC free article) [PubMed]; Hotez, P.J., Fenwick, A., Savioli, L. & Molyneux, D.H. (2009). Rescuing the bottom billion through control of neglected tropical diseases. *Lancet 373*: 1570-1575.]

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[33] Martin Ravallion (2019) Has Malaysia Virtually Eliminated Poverty? Economics & Poverty, Martin Ravallion's Website on the Economics of Poverty, January 21, 2019; Christopher Choong and Tan Zhai Gen (2019) "The Absolute vs Relative Poverty Conundrum", KRI Views, 5/19, Khazanah Research Institute, Kuala Lumpur; UNICEF (2018) Children Without: A study of urban child poverty and deprivation in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur, United Nations Children's' Fund, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

[34] In PPR Kota Damasara a 15-year-old boy fell to his death in 2019, a 4-year old girl in 2018 and a 6-year old boy in 2015. See: *https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/01/28/accident-boy-fall-kota-damansara*, *https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/04/16/15-year-old-boy-dies-in-seven-storey-fall-in-kota-damansara/1743608*, and *https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/four-year-old-girl-dies-after-falling-balcony-HUARCH578125*

[35] See Michalis Moutselos (2019) Fighting for Their Neighborhood: Urban Policy and Anti-State Riots in France, Social Forces

Source : Think City

PART IV

FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

24.0 The COVID-19 crisis has forced people to consider new paradigms for transformation

The Covid-19 crisis has shown people the limits to the government's capability and forced communities to recognise that they need to reduce their dependency on the Government and address problems themselves. Residents were forced to organise collective action activities to prevent the spread of the virus in their dwellings. Regulations had to be drawn up to practice and enforce physical distancing in public spaces and especially to manage the movement of children. The threat of the disease was a brutal reminder of their interdependency and underscored the importance of having a shared community.

The crisis has also highlighted the vulnerability of these communities to decision-makers and the public at large. There is general agreement that the public housing projects represent a particular aspect of Malaysia's development model that needs to be addressed comprehensively.

THE THREAT OF DISEASE WAS A BRUTAL REMINDER OF THEIR INTERDEPENDENCY AND UNDERSCORED THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A SHARED COMMUNITY.

25.0 Public investments are urgently needed in social accountability and community empowerment

The National Community Policy provides the appropriate policy platform to design a public investment programme to reverse the decline in the standard of living and reduce the risk of falling into poverty for the public housing communities. For example, a programme can be designed to strengthen social accountability and community empowerment. Such investments will stop the deterioration in the standard of living and reverse the declining socioeconomic trend. These investments can produce three key outcomes:

- Communities with a strong capacity to organise themselves can implement collective action programmes to solve problems in the public housing complex.
- A service delivery system that consistently delivers quality services and is fully accountable to the communities.
- An adaptive policy-making framework that can produce positive outcomes for public housing communities while having sufficient flexibility to meet the unique needs of different communities in different geographies.

26.0 Public investment programme to focus on changes in accountability relationships affecting public housing communities

The public investment programme would focus on strengthening the accountability relationships that create positive outcomes for the public housing communities. The programme will be based on a modified accountability framework derived from the World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor. This modified accountability framework will involve changes to the way the following three key actors function in the context of the public housing projects:

i) Community. This will entail changes to the capacity of communities to organise themselves and implement collective action programmes that meet the democratically agreed priorities of the community. Such a community organisation would have more substantial client power to ensure service providers' performance improves. They will also develop the capability to express their 'voice' to demand better services from service providers and decision-makers in the Government.

ii) Service Providers will be subject to transparent service level agreements to deliver quality and responsive services. Key performance indicators (KPIs) will be developed together with the community and monitored by the communities. Poor performers will be sanctioned, and high performers will be rewarded. A key aspect of the change will be that service providers will be accountable to the community.

iii) Decision-makers will have to develop clear incentive frameworks structured towards producing positive outcomes in the public housing projects. The service delivery supply chain will be clearly defined,, with accountability relationships distinctly identified and assigned. This will necessarily entail resolving jurisdiction ambiguity issues and clarifying lines of reporting and assignment of responsibility to appropriate departments. Care must be given to ensure that the system is not static but continuously learning and matching supply with demand as the communities undergo positive change and transformation.

Figure 9 below provides an illustration of the key change needed to effect transformation.

Figure 9
What needs to change?

An accountable and adaptive approach to service delivery

Community

- Better organized to enable collective action
- Create effective community organizations to solve common problems
- Enhance client power to ensure services are provided
- Strengthen voice to demand for better improved services

Service Providers

- Ensure provision of quality and responsive services
- Legally enforceable compact with Community and State
- Service standards well-defined with KPIs
- Poor performers are sanctioned and high performers are rewarded
- Accountable to community

Decision Makers

- Establish effective incentives to create and outcome-oriented system
- Clear accountabilities assigned in service delivery supply chain
- Continuous learning & enhancement of 'match' between supply and demand for services

28.0 Utilize digital platform to enable community engagement during Covid-19 crisis

A key constraint to traditional community empowerment and development programs is the need for social distancing arising from the risk of Covid-19 infection. Until a vaccine is developed for the disease it is unlikely that community gatherings and activities can be undertaken with the same intensity pre-2020. This is a major setback for ensuring that community initiatives are planned and implemented with effective participation and guided by democratic processes of selection and decision-making.

However social distancing does not mean that communities cannot interact with one another. Digital platforms are already playing effective roles in intermediating the relationships between individuals and communities even before the Covid crisis. Post-Covid policymakers will have no choice but to utilize innovative digital platforms to facilitate communication, interaction, and transactions between the Government sector and communities (G2C). The crisis has accelerated the advent of digital government and governments would do well to focus on developing digital infrastructure and services to enable citizens continued access to public services.

29.0 Example of a G2C pilot project in Selangor during the Covid-19 crisis

The Covid-19 crisis necessitated urgent action by the state government to provide food aid to the communities under stress in the public housing projects. Apart from the challenges of observing the social distancing requirement, the program was concerned about ensuring the targeting of recipients so that the people who needed aid the most were not neglected or fell through the cracks. A digital platform was customized to facilitate the food aid program by providing the following features:

- An objective and robust verification process of recipient utilizing an electronic verification technology
- Transparent eligibility criteria that are mediated and confirmed via the digital platform
- An interactive questionnaire that required beneficiaries to provide verifiable data
- A data analytics capability to improve targeting of recipients and refine more sophisticated products and services

FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

Figure 10 below provides an illustration of the 2-stage process for targeting the urban poor. In stage 1 selection is made based on existing government databases regarding the location of public housing projects and their associated population characteristics.

1. Target the Geography of Poverty

1,174 low cost housing schemes

>220,000 housing units

1.1M residents (2013)

2. Target specific housing scheme

Eg. PPR Kota Damansara

3. Target public housing communities

Eg. Desa Mentari has 20,000 population

When a particular community has been identified for the aid program, the digital platform is downloaded onto the mobile phone of recipients. There a verification process is made that matches the identity of the recipient against a digital algorithm. Upon verification, a unique digital identity is generated and matched against the address of the recipient and augmented further by additional data inputted via a questionnaire. The second stage enables the system to determine eligibility so that, for example, a 42-year-old man would not be eligible to receive aid meant for single mothers. Or a person from Block-B of the complex cannot claim to be a recipient of a program meant for Block-D residents. Figure 11 below provides an illustration of the second stage of the process.

1. Create Digital Identity

2. Eligibility Verification

3. Secure Access to Emergency Support Program

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