FROM PUBLIC HOUSING TO PUBLIC HOMES

Towards Better and More Liveable Public Housing

by Think City

RIGHTS TO THE CITY

First published in December 2022

Cover image source :
Think City

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Published by
Think City Sdn Bhd (869941-P)
Level 1 Bangunan UAB
No 21—35 Gat Lebuh China
10300 George Town
Pulau Pinang
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Executive Summary

Public housing has been part and parcel of Malaysian development ever since the country gained its independence in 1957. Thereafter, the Federal government has spearheaded many initiatives and programmes to provide low-cost housing for citizens throughout the decades. These programmes are part of the National Housing Policy that successfully housed the urban poor and almost eradicated urban slums. While providing access to public housing has been a significant step, it is now time to strengthen the human dimension of public housing. Liveability, social cohesion and stronger participation in management will contribute to more sustainable, inclusive housing solutions and mitigate the risk of public housing turning into vertical slums.

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted and worsened the daily struggles of public housing residents. By revealing the visible cracks in the status quo of public housing in Malaysia, the pandemic has provided policymakers with opportunities for change during COVID-19 recovery. Therefore, the time is right to strengthen policy and action on improving public housing liveability. In other words, turn public housing into public homes.

Issues and Challenges in Malaysian Public Housing

Although Malaysian public housing programmes are often presented as success stories of squatter resettlement and housing the poor, the programmes are becoming unsustainable. The improvements in the residents' living standards and health have been short-lived, as their environment has become dilapidated, social structures have fallen apart and economic prosperity has been eroded. The issues faced by the public housing residents include feeling unsafe in their homes; poor livelihood and living standards; deterioration of health and quality of life; no sense of community; and substandard management of their housing complexes.

These issues are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing their vulnerability. The government's Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020-21, enforced to curb infection, had a disproportionately negative impact on most public housing communities that were already struggling to make ends meet. The primary concern is to prevent the public housing complexes (PHCs) from turning into urban ghettos, as we can see in many developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and France.

Source : Badrul Hisham Ismail

Gaps and Lessons Learned

The current public housing model cannot resolve the issues faced by its residents. These include funding for maintenance and a management system where upward accountability exists. As a result, residents are left without any meaningful decision-making power to look after their living environment.

1. **Vulnerability**
   The economic situation, coupled with the lack of social protection among urban poor communities living in low-cost housing, makes them vulnerable to economic shocks and other crises. In parallel, the dilapidation of the housing blocks also affects the quality of life of the public housing communities.

2. **Sustainability**
   While the main issue is maintenance and upkeep, there are also flaws in the initial planning which include building design, substandard construction materials and unsuitable locations caused by poor financing, lack of funds, or cost-cutting measures.

3. **Fragmented Governance, Paternalistic Management**
   There is a disconnect between the management's view and the lived reality as experienced by the residents. A power imbalance from the vertical governance structure of public housing projects has resulted in poor service delivery and upkeep. Furthermore, government agencies and management companies in charge of managing PHCs operate in a paternalistic environment where residents are seen merely as welfare recipients. This can manifest itself in the community being excluded from decision-making, resulting in a lack of ownership and belonging, which is likely to lead to less care being taken.

4. **Lack of Resident Participation**
   While some community organisations exist, there is a lack of clear participatory governance structures and downward accountabilities. Without a substantial effort to include all segments of the public housing community, the opportunity to develop community leadership by identifying community-relevant solutions and their management may be lost.

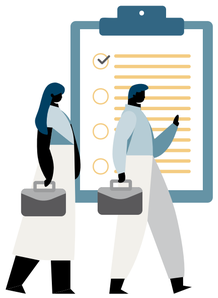
5. **Bottom-up Initiatives**
   Despite the challenges outlined in previous points, natural leaders emerge in the housing community, kick-starting various initiatives grounded in local needs. We found that rather than supporting this self-help approach demonstrating the community's resilience, it is often not recognised or even suppressed.

Recommendations

This paper proposes the following recommendations to steer Malaysia's PHCs away from the current trajectory where residents are stuck in a cycle of marginalisation, impoverishment and social exclusion. The following recommendations require further investigation and coordinated effort from multiple stakeholders:

1. Improve social protection
2. Accelerate short-term interventions addressing the impact of COVID-19 while devising long-term interventions.
3. Expand and link existing pilot projects undertaken by community development organisations.
4. Build capacity of community leaders and participatory structures.
5. Develop indicators to assess the liveability of PHCs.
6. Continue upgrading existing public housing infrastructure.
7. Explore better financing models to ensure quality built structures and life-cycle sustainability.
8. Provide more analytical work on the public housing ecosystem.
9. Develop a body to consolidate all the work on public housing.

While the recommendations are targeted at policymakers and stakeholders who have the means to institute the proposed changes, it is important not to lose sight of what these changes mean for residents on the ground. This linkage of what is recommended and why it is recommended based on the views of residents helps put the proposal in perspective.

	**Recommendations for Policymakers**	Improve social protection	Accelerate short-term interventions addressing the impacts of COVID-19 while devising long term interventions	Expand and link existing pilots undertaken by community development organisations	Build capacity community leaders and participatory structures	Develop indicators to assess the condition of the PHCs	Continue upgrading existing public housing infrastructures	Explore better financing models to ensure built quality and life-cycle sustainability	Provide more analytical work on the public housing ecosystem	Develop a body to consolidate all the work on public housing
	**Expectations by Residents**	When we are not the first ones to lose our job (and if we do, we know that our families will not be going hungry) and have good access to support services, then our focus is not just on short term survival and we can plan for the longer term.	Short-term interventions would not only help us recover from the pandemic impacts but be more resilient to the next adverse event.	Having social protection makes us more ready to participate in programmes, but organisations need to work together and tailor their programmes. We are not the welfare problem or the health problem, we are people and we are a community.	When we are part of management decisions, we are more committed to complying. We need well-trained and supported community leaders for that.	We want our voice heard in developing the indicators so that they are meaningful to us.	When our children and we feel safe and the infrastructure is working, we feel at home, we feel we belong. And we can be part of these solutions.	Renovating or building new, better quality construction and a design that supports our social interactions will also turn our houses into homes, not just now but also in the long term.	Many researchers come to research us, we request that they do research with us. Help us understand why research is needed and how it will be used. Otherwise, it may feel like an invasion of our lives and destroy the refuge a home usually is.	We see many organisations and projects. However, they don't seem to talk to each other, leading to overlap or gaps and not addressing our needs.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Affordable housing	Here we use the definition provided in the Malaysian National Affordable Housing Policy. Affordable housing is housing that is affordable to own, liveable and safe to fulfil the needs of citizens who fall within the B40 and M40 income brackets. It encompasses housing provided fully by the federal government/ state governments/ private developers or housing provided in collaboration with private developers.(1)
Digital divide	Here we refer to the digital divide as the gap between those who have easy access to technology (e.g. stable internet, devices) and those who do not.
Ghetto	Here we define a ghetto in Malaysia as a concentration of marginalised and impoverished people who are involuntarily segregated and excluded from the bigger society, in a confined space or neighbourhood, which further reinforces marginalisation and impoverishment.
Housing liveability	Here we refer to safe, attractive, socially cohesive and inclusive and environmentally sustainable, affordable and diverse housing linked to employment, education, public open space, local shops, health and community services and leisure and cultural opportunities, via convenient public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure.(2)
Low-cost housing	From June 1998 till now, properties sold for RM42,000 and below are classified as low-cost, catering to families with a monthly household income of less than RM1,500.(3)
Participatory	Here we refer to participatory approaches, processes and structures that meaningfully include all relevant stakeholders, especially members of the community, in active planning and decision-making.(4)
Paternalistic management	Here we refer to a top-down relationship between authorities and communities, where communities are seen as welfare recipients with little input in the matter. The welfare approach primarily compensates people in need for failures in the system, rather than helping to improve their circumstances over time.(5)

Term	Definition
Public housing	Housing for those of low income subsidised through public funding by the Federal or State government.[1]
Right to decent living	Here we refer to the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, water and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.[6]
Safety and security	Here we define safety and security as the condition of being and feeling safe from accidents, threats in the natural environment, as well as incidents of crime.
Slumification	Risk of a housing settlement becoming a slum.
Social housing	Housing for low-income earners or for those with specific needs provided by government agencies, local government or non-profits. Owned by local government or non-profits and rented to those with low-income.[1]
Social protection	Social protection is defined as the set of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks and enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and interruption/loss of income.[7]
Vertical slum	Here we refer to high-rise housing with slum features.

Abbreviations

List	
BPN	*Bantuan Prihatin Nasional* (one-off cash aid for B40 and M40 Malaysians during the Covid-19 pandemic)
BPR	*Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat* (one-off cash aid for B40 and M40 Malaysians)
BSH	*Bantuan Sara Hidup* (cash aid for B40 Malaysians)
CBO	community-based organisations
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CPF	Central Provident Fund
EIS	Employment Insurance Scheme
EPF	Employees' Provident Fund
HDB	Housing and Development Board
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPI	Intestinal Parasitic Infection
KDN	*Kementerian Dalam Negeri* (Ministry of Home Affairs)
KPKT	*Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan* (Ministry of Housing and Local Government)
KPLB	*Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar* (Ministry of Rural Development)
KPN	*Kementerian Perpaduan Negara* (Ministry of National Unity)
LPHS	*Lembaga Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor* (Selangor Housing and Real Estate Board)

List

MCO	Movement Control Order
MTEN	National Economic Action Council (*Majlis Tindakan Ekonomi Negara*)
MyHome	*Skim Perumahan Mampu Milik Swasta* (Subsidised Affordable Housing Scheme)
NEP	New Economic Policy
NUP	National Urbanisation Policy
ORS	Open Registration System
PAKR	*Perumahan Awam Kos Rendah* (Low-Cost Public Housing)
PHCs	Public Housing Complexes
PHSSB	*Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor Sdn. Bhd.* (Selangor Housing and Real Estate Private Limited Company)
PID	*Pasukan Ikatan Desa* (systematic local vigilance scheme)
PKENP	*Perbadanan Kemajuan Ekonomi Negeri Perak* (Perak State Development Corporation)
PKNS	*Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor* (Selangor State Development Corporation)
PPA1M	*Perumahan Penjawat Awam 1Malaysia* (civil servant's public housing scheme)
PPR	*Projek/Program Perumahan Rakyat* (People's Housing Programme)
PPR Hicom	PPR Kampung Baru Hicom, Shah Alam
PPRT	*Program Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin* (Hardcore Poor Housing Programme)

List

PR1MA	*Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia* (affordable housing scheme)
RMMS	*Rumah Mampu Milik Sarawak* (Sarawak Affordable Housing Scheme)
RMR	*Rumah Mesra Rakyat* (housing scheme)
RUMAWIP	Rumah Wilayah Persekutuan (known as Residensi Wilayah since 2019)
SELCAT	Selangor Special Select Committee on Competence, Accountability and Transparency
SMA	Strata Management Act
SOCSO	Social Security Organisation
TOL	Temporary Occupancy Licence
UBI	Universal Basic Income
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Introduction

The right to a decent living cannot be separated from a sustainable and liveable housing environment. Unfortunately, although many Malaysians enjoy decent living arrangements, this is not necessarily true for urban poor communities, especially those living in PHCs. Here, we define public housing as housing for those of low income, subsidised through public funding by the Federal or State government.[1] These public housing complexes and their communities face many challenges, from economic to maintenance and upkeep.

Malaysia has a successful history of providing access to public housing and reducing urban slums. However, there is a significant risk of public housing turning into vertical slums. This is due to both a lack of focus on human development and having residents participate in management decisions in a consistent and structured way. It is further attributed to a decline in the quality of life and social fabric in public housing.

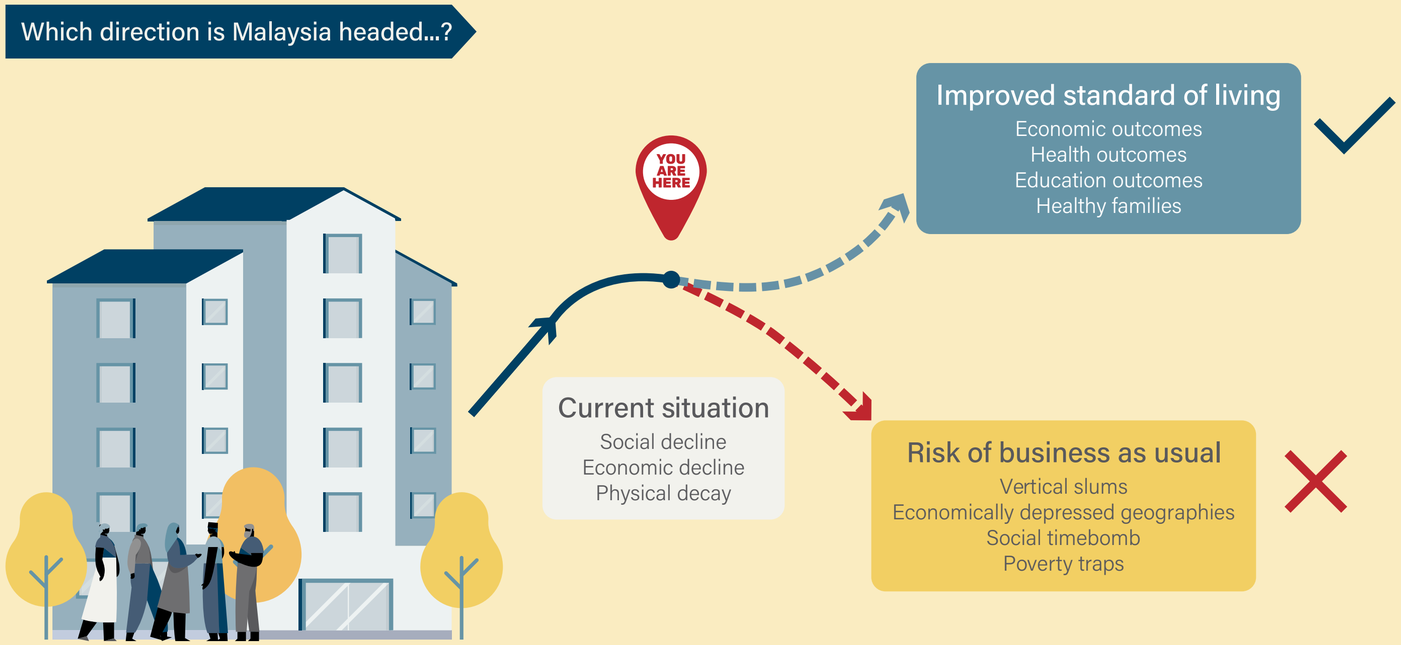


Figure 1: Potential public housing trajectories. Source: Think City

This paper aims to unravel the complexity of the management and the governance structure of public housing in Malaysia to advance a common understanding of public housing and its potential trajectory. Such common understanding can then form the foundation for cross-sector and multidisciplinary action in research, policy and practice.

After reviewing the available literature and engaging with public housing communities across the country through research and interventions, four areas of concern were identified, serving as guidance in writing this paper. They are:

1. **A lack of research in describing, understanding and analysing the social, physical and economic aspects of the public housing system as a whole rather than through a siloed discipline-based lens**
2. **A trend of developmental decline or slumification driven by an unsustainable public housing ecosystem**
3. **A lack of focus on the social and management issues in favour of mostly looking at physical upgrades as a means of addressing public housing issues**
4. **Siloed interventions within and across sectors leading to gaps or overlaps, without a platform that brings all stakeholders within the public housing ecosystem together to coordinate, collaborate, or learn from previous work**

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section sets the context of Malaysia's urbanisation process, the nation's aspirations and the challenges surrounding it. In the second section, the paper focuses on understanding the landscape of public housing in Malaysia through its historical development. We look at the national policies guiding public housing development, its typology and financing. We also map out the agencies and community-based organisations involved in the entire ecosystem. The third section investigates the issues and challenges public housing communities face. This section identifies the underlying issues of the community and how the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated them and added more challenges. We then discuss this further in the fourth section, where we connect the issues with the management and governing structure of the housing estates and the broader socio-economic condition of the urban poor communities. We also look at several case studies on the management of public housing estates in other countries. Lastly, the paper provides eight recommendations for a pathway towards liveable and sustainable public housing communities that can reverse the slumification trend.

This publication brings together information on the Malaysian public housing landscape and provides a source of reference and guidance for policy and practice change. Additionally, it can assist in aligning understanding, terminology and vision. It is hoped that actors in the public housing space reach out and engage by adding to the information collated here and initiating a community of practice liveability improvements in public housing.

Section 1

Urbanisation in Malaysia

Section 1

Urbanisation in Malaysia

Malaysia is the most urbanised country in Southeast Asia after Singapore and Brunei, with one of the fastest urbanisation rates in the region. As of 2020, 77% of the country's population live in urban areas and cities, a rapid increase from just 34% in 1980.[8] This figure is expected to grow as migration from rural to urban centres continues due to the economic and employment opportunities available in cities.

The rapid pace of urbanisation is higher than that seen in many other countries. For example, it took 79 years for England to increase its urban population from 10% to 30% of its total population. Elsewhere, it took 66 years for Japan, 36 years for the United States and 26 years for Australia. The same change only took Malaysia 20 years.[9]

Parallel to the rapid urbanisation process that the country experienced was an impressive growth in wealth coupled with a dramatic reduction in poverty. From 1967 to 1997, Malaysia recorded a continuous GDP growth of 7%, while the absolute poverty level has fallen tremendously from 49% in 1970 to a mere 2% in 2012,[9] or 6% in 2020 after the revision of its absolute poverty line.[10] In 1992, the country was classified as an upper-middle-income country with a GDP per capita of USD11,373.[9]

In terms of living conditions, throughout the rapid urbanisation period of Malaysian cities, the country has also reduced its slum population by 90%.[9] As part of its poverty reduction strategy, Malaysia has curtailed the development of slums by managing the problem of illegal settlements and systematically housing the poor. By 2018, the country's slum population was less than 1% of its total urban population, a tremendous feat compared to neighbouring countries like Thailand and Indonesia, where slum populations make up half of their urban population.[9]

From 1967 to 1997, Malaysia recorded a continuous GDP growth of 7%, while the absolute poverty level has fallen tremendously from 49% in 1970 to a mere 2% in 2012,[9]

Understanding the role of cities and urban centres as engines of growth and having seen some successes, Malaysia began to redesign its strategies and programmes. In 2006, the Malaysian government published the National Urbanisation Policy (NUP), with a follow-up policy document released a decade later. The policies are intended to drive and coordinate sustainable urban planning and development, focusing on balancing physical, environmental, social and economic development. At the same time, they aim to account for the negative impacts of rapid urbanisation, such as high living costs, unaffordable housing and environmental degradation.[11] They were designed to be in line with Goal 11 of the United Nations, which is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable and Goal 11.1, which focuses on 'ensuring access for all to adequate, safe, affordable housing, basic services and upgrade slums by 2030.'[12]

At the same time, Malaysia also aspires to transform itself into a high-income nation. The country started focusing on cities as key elements in national economic and social development during the 10th and 11th Malaysia Plans.[13] As a result, a variety of national policies and programmes have elaborated on the key strategies for urban competitiveness while adhering to the goals of urban liveability, inclusiveness, sustainability and resilience, many suffering from an implementation gap.[14] These themes are reiterated in the 12th Malaysia Plan[15], with revised targets set. The 10th to 12th Malaysia Plans also focus heavily on developing affordable housing, with the latest plan aiming to develop 500,000 affordable housings by 2025. However, gaps in policy direction on public housing liveability remain.

The 10th to 12th Malaysia Plans also focus heavily on developing affordable housing, with the latest plan aiming to develop 500,000 affordable housings by 2025.

Source : Stock Images

The Case for Inclusivity

Cities are places where people of different backgrounds gather and participate in economic activities. Whenever the conditions are favourable, cities can promote opportunities to improve lives and livelihoods. However, if the opposite happens, the most disadvantaged remain without prospects, producing high inequality. Unfavourable conditions not only lead to many people being excluded from the benefits of growth, but also disrupt the process of further economic and human development. This makes cities less economically, socially and politically sustainable in the long run.[16]

Cities are already fragmented into poorer and more well-off neighbourhoods that influence each other. Spatially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, for example, suppress house prices around them.[3] Fragmented cities produce income inequality and a suboptimal provision of public services for residents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.[16] This prevents the city's residents from participating in the political and economic process and sharing social progress. Therefore, cities must adopt a more inclusive growth model that will benefit all segments of society.

Additionally, while higher levels of government tend to focus more on economic progress, cities focus more on the quality of life of their residents.[17] Cities benefit more when all residents enjoy a high level of human development and health. Therefore, creating an inclusive city begins with securing the basic needs of all, from clean air and water to nutritious food, green spaces and quality housing, education and healthcare.[17]

The way cities are organised and how they respond to the needs and expectations of residents — from job opportunities, personal safety, environmental quality and housing — affect their inclusivity. This paper focuses on the housing issue. Poor housing conditions can be a barrier to the labour participation of certain population segments. Improving housing availability and conditions, especially amongst the most vulnerable city dwellers, will improve job access for all groups and increase labour participation — an important element in achieving sustainable and inclusive growth.

In the context of Malaysian urban dwellers, public housing communities — seen in high-rise public housing dotting the landscape of Malaysia's urban centres and created by rapid urbanisation over the last few decades — are among the most vulnerable.[9] Considering that in 2013 almost 2.8 million people lived in public and private strata low-cost housing in Malaysia[18], there is a sizeable population in the public housing community. The public housing community reflects the social mobility that accompanied Malaysia's development trajectory and embodies the national aspiration to create a broad middle class that will help the country transform into a high-income nation.[9] These communities are the focus of this paper and their consideration and inclusion in Malaysia's urbanisation process and policies is critical for Malaysia's further development.

Cities benefit more when all residents enjoy a high level of human development and health.

Section 2

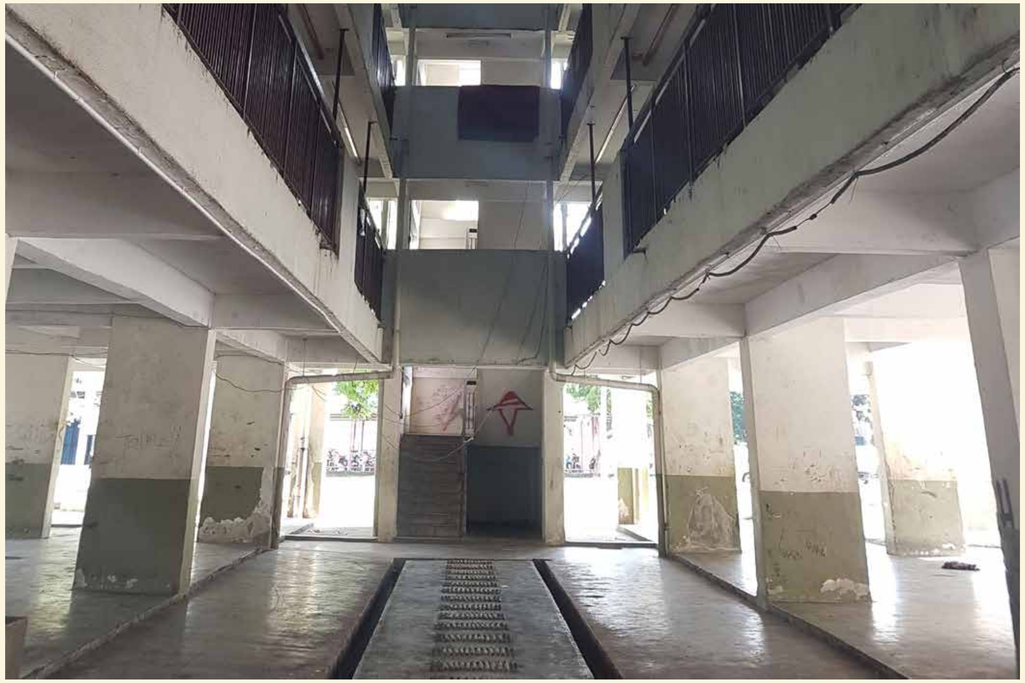
- A Brief History of Malaysian Public Housing
- Agencies and Organisations in Public Housing

Section 2

A Brief History of Malaysian Public Housing

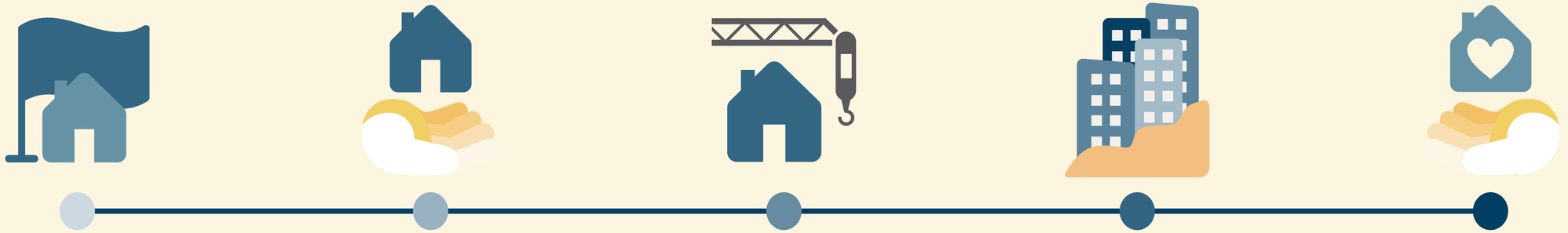
Public housing has been part and parcel of Malaysian development ever since the country gained its independence in 1957. Since then, the Federal government has spearheaded many initiatives and programmes to provide low-cost housing to citizens over the decades. These programmes are part of the National Housing Policy and have gone through five phases. These are the Post-independence Housing Phase (1957-1970), Housing for the Poor (1970-1985), Market Reform (1986-1997), Slum Clearance (1998-2011) and State Affordable Housing (2012-present).[19]

The National Housing Policy and its various phases were developed in tandem with the nation's economic and development policies, such as the five-year Malaysia Plans and the New Economic Policy (NEP), as well as local and global political-economic trends and development. Therefore, the brief history of public housing in Malaysia must be seen through these policy changes and the political-economic environment.



Box 1: Malaysia's Public Housing Timeline

Timeframe
Phases
Relevant Programmes & Policies



1957-1970

Post-independence Housing Phase

1st Malaysia Plan

1970-1985

Housing for the Poor

2nd Malaysia Plan: New Economic Policy (NEP)

1986-1997

Market Reform

1986-1990: 5th Malaysia Plan

1998-2011

Slum Clearance

Selangor Zero Squatters 2005 Action Plan

2006 – 2010: 9th Malaysia Plan

2012-present

State Affordable Housing

10th – 12th Malaysia Plans, National Housing Policy (2018 -2025), National Affordable Housing Policy (2019)

Box 1: Malaysia's Public Housing Timeline (cont'd)

Phases	Timeframe	Relevant Programmes & Policies *Economic and Industry-specific*	Key Features *Historical events, Housing Programmes, Organisational Bodies*
Post-independence Housing Phase	1957-1970	1st Malaysia Plan	Pre-Independence • Housing Trust Foundation (1956-1965) • Public housing initiatives were implemented by the British but with limited results • 7,431 housing units built Post- Independence • Ministry of Local Government and Housing established • Focus on providing low-cost, small-size public housing funded by the government Key Housing Programmes • 1964: Housing Crash Programme
Housing for the Poor	1970-1985	2nd Malaysia Plan: New Economic Policy (NEP)	• To eradicate poverty and restructure society • Implementation of human resettlement concepts in national development • High rate of rural-urban migration • 121,855 public housing units built across the nation • 1981: Beginning of Private Sector involvement in low-cost property development Key Housing Programmes • 1976: Perumahan Awam Kos Rendah (PAKR) • Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor (PKNS) • Perbadanan Kemajuan Ekonomi Negeri Perak (PKENP)

Box 1: Malaysia's Public Housing Timeline (cont'd)

Phases	Timeframe	Relevant Programmes & Policies *Economic and Industry-specific*	Key Features *Historical events, Housing Programmes, Organisational Bodies*
Market Reform	1986-1997	1986-1990: 5th Malaysia Plan	• To ensure that all people live in a decent house regardless of their income • Development of low-medium and low-cost public housing • Greater emphasis on private housing companies in the development of low to medium cost public housing Key Housing Programmes • 1995: Program Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin (PPRT)
Slum Clearance	1998-2011	Selangor Zero Squatters 2005 Action Plan 2006 – 2010: 9th Malaysia Plan	• Housing for the urban poor, focusing on slum communities in urban areas • 'Zero Squatter' programmes introduced by state governments to ensure that everyone within the state owns a house. • 1997: National Economic Action Council (MTEN) in response to the Asian Financial Crisis Key Housing Programmes • 1998: Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) replaced PAKR • Rumah Mesra Rakyat (RMR)

Box 1: Malaysia's Public Housing Timeline (cont'd)

Phases	Timeframe	Relevant Programmes & Policies *Economic and Industry-specific*	Key Features *Historical events, Housing Programmes, Organisational Bodies*
State Affordable Housing	2012-present	10th – 12th Malaysia Plans, National Housing Policy (2018 -2025), National Affordable Housing Policy (2019)	• Malaysian housing policy shifts to focus more on building affordable and quality housing for all income groups Key Housing Programmes • Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia (PR1MA) • Residensi Wilayah (RUMAWIP) • Perumahan Penjawat Awam 1Malaysia (PPA1M) • Skim Perumahan Mampu Milik Swasta (MyHome) • Rumah Selangorku • Rumah Idaman Rakyat • Rumah Mampu Milik Pulau Pinang • Rumah Mampu Milik Johor • Rumah Mampu Milik Terengganu • Projek Rumah Makmur (Pahang) • Rumah Mampu Milik Melaka • Rumah Mampu Milik Negeri Sembilan • Rumah Perakku • Rumah Transit 1Malaysia

Source: Jabatan Perumahan Negara. Dasar Perumahan Negara (2018-2025), Aezhad M. Sejarah Polisi Rumah Mampu Milik Di Malaysia 2020, Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar, Abdullah YA, Kuek JN, Hamdan H, Zulkifli LM. Combating squatters in Malaysia: Do we have adequate policies as instrument? 2017 & Laporan Tahunan KPKT 2019.

Post-independence Housing Phase

The early phase of low-cost public housing development in Malaysia began during the Post-Independence Housing Phase, which lasted from 1957 to 1970. At the start, the development of low-cost public housing was under the purview of the Housing Trust Federation, which had been set up earlier by the British. The focus of the Housing Trust Federation was to provide housing in rural areas. However, due to a lack of funds and expertise, the programme oversaw limited development, with only 7,431 housing units built between 1956 and 1965.[19]

Then, in 1964, the Ministry of Local Government and Housing was established. The ministry introduced the Housing Crash Programme to build low-cost and small-sized housing in the face of rapid urbanisation and rural-urban migration. Developments under this programme included the Razak Mansion and Pekeliling Flats in Kuala Lumpur and the Rifle Range in Penang, all launched between 1967 and 1969.[19] The developments were in line with some of the objectives of the 1st Malaysia Plan to provide improved housing, community facilities, welfare and other services to the growing Malaysian population. Within two years, 14,175 housing units were built under this programme.[20]

Housing for the Poor

Following the 1969 racial riots, the Malaysian government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP). This new policy, which began with the 2nd Malaysia Plan and lasted until the 5th Malaysia Plan, aimed to eradicate poverty and achieve national unity through the socio-economic restructuring of Malaysian society. Massive urban migration occurred due to the NEP, resulting in an acute housing shortage and squatter settlements forming in urban areas. Consequently, the national housing policy shifted towards the Housing for the Poor phase between 1970 and 1985 to address the issue.[19] The flagship low-cost public housing programme, known as the Perumahan Awam Kos Rendah (PAKR), was introduced in 1976.

During this phase, the responsibility for building low-cost housing was relegated to the State government. In turn, the Federal government provided funding in loans.(19) In order to assist with the development of the PHCs, economic agencies at the State level were established, such as the Selangor State Development Corporation (Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor — PKNS) and the Perak State Development Corporation (Perbadanan Kemajuan Ekonomi Negeri Perak — PKENP), to oversee and manage the development of low-cost housings in each state. The types of housing built under this programme were detached or semi-detached houses (mostly made of wood) in the rural areas and two-storey terrace houses and flats in the urban areas. The programme managed to build 121,855 housing units across the country.[20]

During this time, private developers were also asked to build low-cost housing. In 1981, the Malaysian government directed private developers to allocate 30% of their property development to low-cost housing, with a ceiling price of RM25,000 per unit.[20]

Market Reform

From 1986 to 1997, the Malaysian government took a step back from developing housing and promoted private developers to fill in instead. This was following the global trend at the time, as well as urges from international agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for governments to reduce their involvement in development and promote the private sector and the market to provide housing for the people.[19]

This move was also in line with the privatisation trend from the mid-80s to the mid-90s. The 5th Malaysia Plan, introduced in 1986, also emphasised the increased role of the private sector. The private sector was identified to lead the country's economy. The focus was to develop new ventures to create wealth, while the public sector was to play a supporting role.[19] As a result, government funding allocation for low-cost public housing was significantly reduced.

In 1995, the Malaysian government introduced a new housing programme for the poor in rural areas. Managed by the Ministry of Rural Development, the Program Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin (PPRT) was a programme targeted at low-income groups with monthly earnings below RM3,000.[21] Interestingly, under the Programme, qualified citizens could receive financing to build their own homes or repair their existing ones (RM65,000 for Peninsular and RM68,000 for Sabah & Sarawak). The caveat was that citizens would need to fully or partially own the land they were occupying. This approach eliminated the need for the agency to carry out the building work. The programme also included financing for longhouses in Sabah and Sarawak.[21]

It is also worth noting that during this period, rural-urban migration continued, with an increasing influx of foreign migrants. This worsened the existing problem of illegal squatters, which then became the focus of the next phase of housing policy in the country.

Slum Clearance

The Asian Financial Crisis hit the region in 1997 and Malaysia was not spared. To cope with the crisis and recover the country's economy, the National Economic Action Council (Majlis Tindakan Ekonomi Negara — MTEN) was established. The initiatives conducted by MTEN included boosting the construction industry, while providing housing for the urban poor that focused on the slum communities in urban areas.[19] To achieve this, the old PAKR programme was discontinued and a new housing programme called Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) was introduced in 1998.[19]

The objective of the PPR programme is to provide low-cost housing for all Malaysians with a monthly income below RM2,500. The price for each housing unit is RM30,000 to RM35,000 for Peninsular Malaysia and RM40,500 for Sabah and Sarawak. The programme consists of an ownership scheme and a rental scheme, with a monthly rental of RM124 per month. This was later increased to RM250 per month. PPR housings are five to 18 storey flats in urban areas or terrace houses in suburban areas, with a minimum built-up area of 700 square feet consisting of three bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, a toilet and a bath.[19] To assist with the application process, a computerised Open Registration System (ORS) was established for potential low-cost house buyers to apply.[22] To date, almost 100,000 PPR units have been built throughout the country, with the majority located in the Klang Valley.[23]

This period also marked the involvement of the Ministry of Finance in providing low-cost housing through the establishment of Syarikat Perumahan Negara Berhad (SPNB). Under SPNB, Rumah Mesra Rakyat (RMR) was introduced in 2002. Its objective was to provide low-income housing to landowners with a monthly income between RM750 and RM3,000, such as farmers and fishermen. The programme provided single-storey houses with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, with a built-up area ranging from 750 to 1000 square feet.[24]

In addition, 'zero squatter' programmes were introduced by State governments. The Selangor State government, for example, introduced the Selangor Zero Squatters 2005 Action Plan, a programme to ensure that everyone in the state would legally own a house by 2005. The Action Plan included compiling data on squatters to ensure adequate housing provisions, monitoring and ensuring developments were on schedule, ensuring efficient and fair housing distribution and preventing any new squatter settlements through enforcement.[22]

The 'zero squatter' policy was continued in the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), and this time the private sector was asked to contribute again. Private developers were required to build more low- and low-medium-cost housing to support and complement public sector initiatives, but the selling price increased from RM25,000 to RM42,000 per unit.[19] Each unit would have a minimum built-up area of 550 to 600 square feet, comprising two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom.

The objective of the PPR programme is to provide low-cost housing for all Malaysians with a monthly income below RM2,500.

To date, almost 100,000 PPR units have been built throughout the country, with the majority located in the Klang Valley.[23]

State Affordable Housing

In 2012, Malaysia's housing policy shifted to focus more on building affordable housing. As a result, the Federal government, State governments, and the private sector introduced affordable housing programmes targeting middle income earners with a monthly income between RM3,000 and RM10,000. The programmes included Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia (PR1MA), RUMAWIP (now known as Residensi Wilayah), Perumahan Penjawat Awam 1Malaysia (PPA1M), Skim Perumahan Mampu Milik Swasta (MyHome), Rumah Selangorku, Rumah Idaman Rakyat, Rumah Mampu Milik Pulau Pinang, Rumah Mampu Milik Johor, Rumah Mampu Milik Terengganu, Projek Rumah Makmur (Pahang), Rumah Mampu Milik Melaka, Rumah Mampu Milik Negeri Sembilan and Rumah Perakku.[19]

However, there are several new programmes that still target low-income earners, such as Rumah Transit 1Malaysia and Rumah Mampu Milik Sarawak (RMMS).[19] Rumah Transit 1Malaysia was introduced in 2014 to provide transitional housing for young married couples under the age of 30, with a monthly income below RM3,000. Qualified couples can rent housing units for RM250 per month.[23] RMMS, on the other hand, is a programme by the Sarawak State government to provide housing to low- and middle-income earners in Sarawak, with a monthly income between RM650 and RM3,000.[19] Furthermore, the PPR programme is still being carried out, with new housing complexes scheduled to be completed.

This focus on affordable housing continues as reflected in the 11th and 12th Malaysia Plans, as well as the latest National Housing Policy (2018 – 2025) and the National Affordable Housing Policy (2019). The later policies acknowledge deeper challenges in the provision of affordable housing, including the lack of centralised data, financing methods, supply-demand mismatch, cost-efficiency and more. The various plans also provide basic guidelines for quality affordable homes, taking into account the holistic living environment. [1, 13, 15]

New programmes but challenges providing affordable and liveable housing emerge. They threaten to erode the development gains of previous years.

Agencies and Organisations in Public Housing

Due to the vulnerability of public housing communities, many government agencies are involved in the public housing ecosystem in Malaysia. These are the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT), the Ministry of National Unity (KPN), the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) and the Ministry of Rural Development (KPLB). These ministries individually work together with various community-based organisations (CBOs) located within the ecosystem public and private low-cost housing to protect the welfare of residents within a community. Table 1 lists the government agencies and the most common organisations that can be found. However, note that not all organisations are in every housing complex.

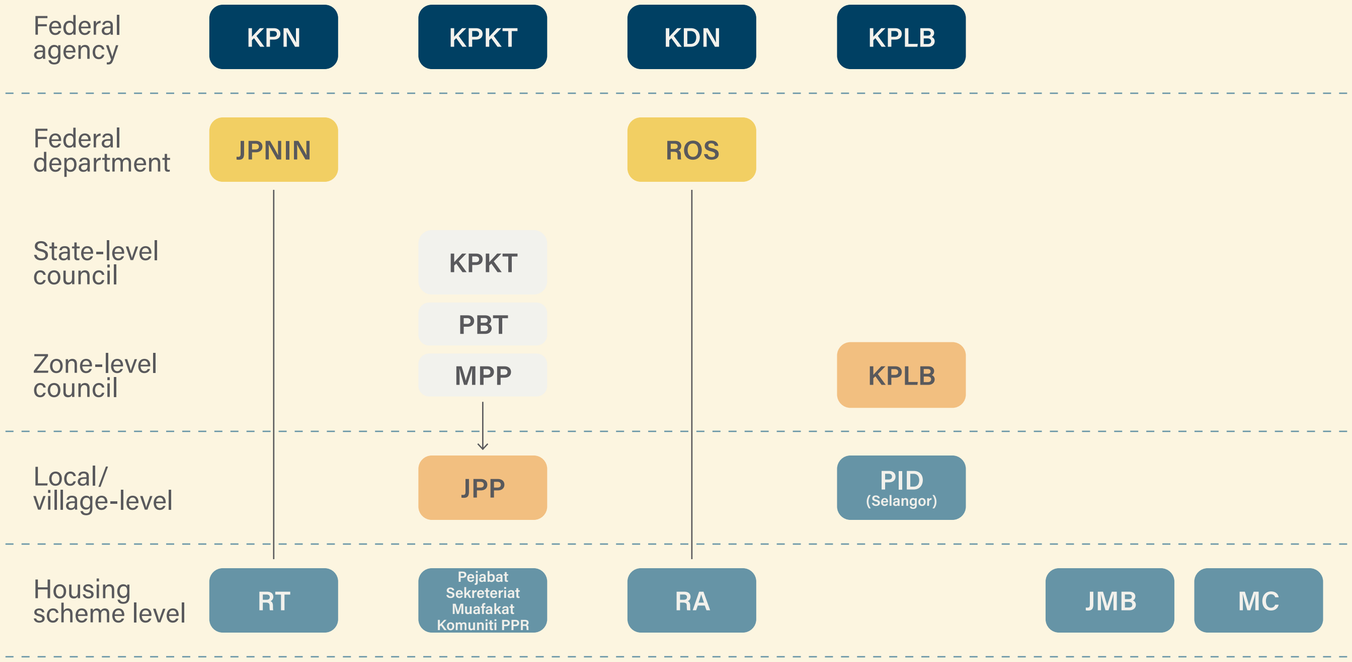


Figure 2: Structural relationship between ministries and various community-based organisations. Source: Think City

Figure 2 illustrates the structural relationship between ministries and various CBOs. It also highlights the policy and implementation silos that exist. The lack of coordination and integration leads to gaps or duplication and disregards the interdependent nature of issues and solutions. From a public housing resident perspective, agencies and their programmes present a confusing web that is difficult to access (Figure 3).

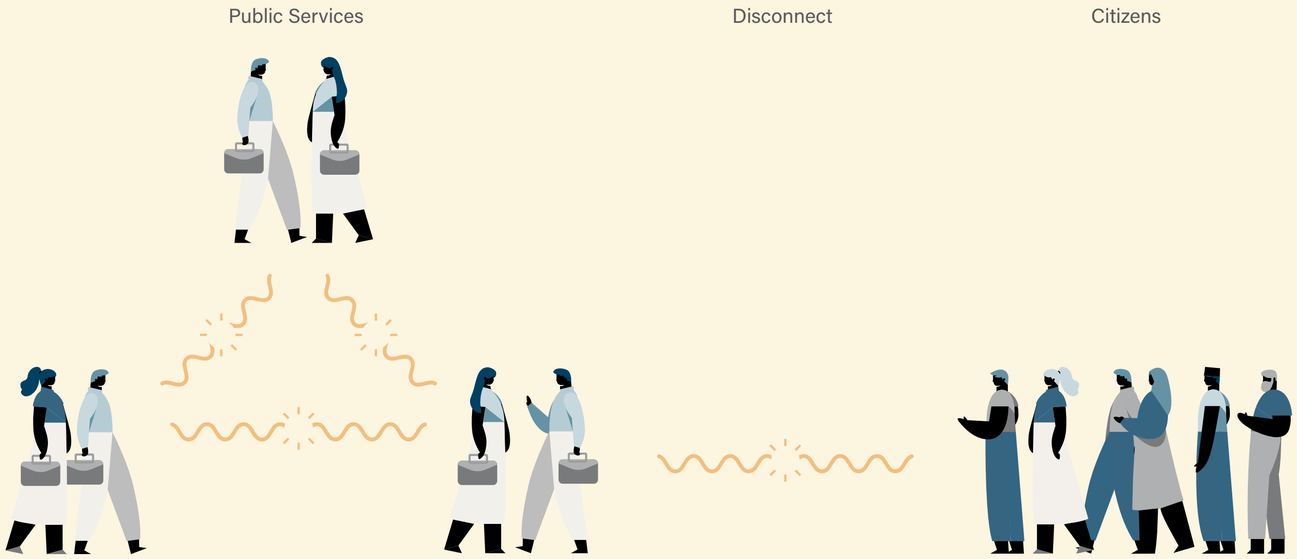


Figure 3: Fragmented services create a disconnect with citizens making access difficult. Source: Think City

Evidence indicates that the overall system tends to be bureaucratic, paternalistic and complex to navigate. Many organisations have overlapping duties, with little coordination, leading to inefficient outcomes and residents' needs not being met. Meanwhile, residents of the PHCs as primary stakeholders have few avenues to provide input. They are mostly treated as aid recipients in a top-down relationship, representing a welfare rather than human development approach. This is explored further in Sections 3 and 4.[9, 25]

Section 3

- Risking Vertical Slums: Issues and Challenges in Malaysian Public Housing
- Exposing Vulnerability: Impact of COVID-19
- Ghettos and Ghettoisation

Section 3

Risking Vertical Slums: Issues and Challenges in Malaysian Public Housing

In 2005, the Government announced that Pekeliling Flats, one of the first low-cost public housing projects built in Malaysia, would be demolished. Located along Jalan Tun Razak in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, the announcement was welcomed by many. The dilapidated seven-block complex had been deemed ‘an eyesore’ due to years of neglect.[26] Issues such as lift breakdowns, water leaks and water disruptions were common. It also became a hub for drug addicts and, even more tragically, a spot for suicides, with more than ten reported cases.[24]

While Malaysian public housing programmes can be seen as a success story for squatter resettlement and housing the poor, the programmes have failed to become sustainable and further improve the lives of the residents. Improvements in residents' living standards and health were short-lived, as their environment became dilapidated, social structures fell apart and any economic prosperity was eroded. They were further neglected and left behind from the country’s development. The fate of the Pekeliling Flats is an example of its shortcomings. The demolition process took almost a decade and during that time many other low-cost PHCs in the country followed the footsteps of the Pekeliling Flats and became vertical slums. Malaysia is now at a critical juncture. The country has the opportunity to include public housing liveability as a policy driver alongside affordability and access to build on the housing and poverty reduction gains achieved over the past decades and improve human development in public housing communities.

Five key domains have emerged from community research (Figure 4: Public housing community issues and challenges). They are interlinked and influenced by their spatial context and their neighbourhood.

1. Safety and security
2. Livelihood and living standard
3. Health and quality of life
4. Sense of community
5. Management and inclusive participation

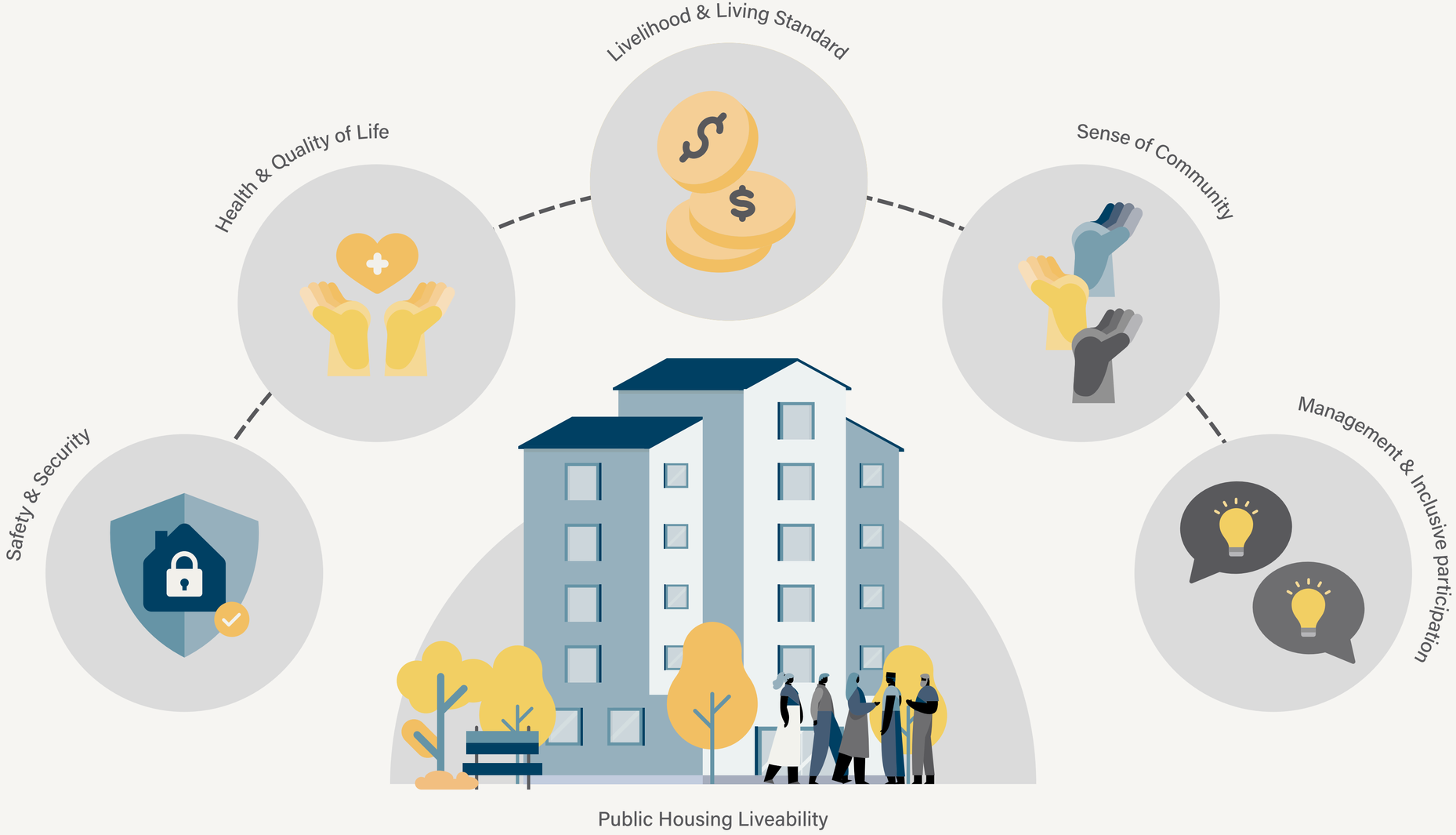


Figure 4: Interdependent public housing liveability domains. Source: Think City

Safety and Security

Among the main concerns regarding public housing in Malaysia is the safety and security of residents. From 2013 to 2018, there were at least five reported deaths of children and teenagers in several PHCs, either due to falling from higher floors or being hit by an object falling from above.[24] Substandard maintenance and upkeep have left the safety infrastructure of these buildings, such as the railings, in terrible condition, which continues to cost lives.

Substandard workmanship, poor quality of building materials, and management of maintenance work are often cited as major contributors to the safety problems faced by residents. Housing complexes were developed only to meet minimum requirements and are often described as 'pigeonholes' and 'chicken coops.'[27] As a result, breakdowns of facilities occur often, leading residents to feel unsafe living in their own homes. A report by the Selangor Special Select Committee on Competence, Accountability and Transparency (SELCAT) published in 2015 shows that residents of public housing are highly unsatisfied with their safety and security.[28]

Besides a fear of accidents, residents also feel unprotected from the natural environment. Due to poor design, housing units are exposed to the elements. As a result, bad weather, such as heavy rain, regularly causes flooding in many complexes, sometimes even reaching the twelfth floor.[25] Moreover, many units do not have awnings, causing rain to seep in through the window. In response, residents have no choice but to put plastic covers on their windows to try to keep the rain out. Subpar infrastructure also means that other forms of flooding can occur inside and outside these complexes, even in the absence of rain, due to issues ranging from burst pipes to clogged sewers and drains.[25]

Darkness and dampness of public housing could lead to poor air quality and ventilation

Clogged drain with stagnant water becomes breeding grounds for mosquitoes


B

On top of that, residents are concerned about criminal activities happening in their neighbourhood. According to SELCAT, NGOs working with the public housing community have reported cases of drug deals happening within the neighbourhood.[28] In addition, gang-related activity and violence are another major concern. Although residents report that there has been a decrease in gang activity and reported crimes over the past few years, many residents are still traumatised and feel that their neighbourhood is not safe for their children.[25]

Livelihood and Living Standard

In 2018, UNICEF Malaysia released a report that highlighted the poor living conditions of the public housing community in the country. Interviewing 966 households from various PHCs in the Klang Valley, the report shows that 7% of households live below the poverty line.[29] One in two households does not have enough money to buy food and 97% say that high food prices prevent them from buying healthy food for their families. In terms of work, nine in ten heads of households have semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs, and although their average working hours are similar to the national average, they are paid less.[29]

Furthermore, one in three does not have a social safety net, such as an account with the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) or the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO), and 77% of households do not have savings.[29] Not only are public housing communities struggling to make ends meet, but they are also extremely vulnerable to economic shocks, due to the absence of any social protection that might cushion the blow.

In terms of education, most household heads have low educational attainment, with only 10% of them obtaining tertiary education, while 5% have never even gone to school. As for their children, 51% between the ages of five and six years old do not attend preschool, and 2% between the ages of seven and seventeen are not in school. In addition, 31% of households do not have books for their children under 18 years of age.[29]

Health and Quality of Life

A significant finding of the UNICEF report is related to the health condition of the public housing community, especially children. Among children living in PHCs, 22% of them are stunted, 15% are underweight, and 23% are overweight or obese.[29] To put these figures into context, the prevalence of stunted and underweight children in public housing is twice the KL average, while the prevalence of overweight children is six times the KL average.[29]

Interviewing 966 households from various PHCs in the Klang Valley, the report shows that 7% of households live below the poverty line.[29]


15

This can be attributed to insufficient nutrient intake, with 12% of children having fewer than three meals a day, probably because their parents cannot afford more meals.[29] Another contributing factor is the increasing trend of buying readily prepared meals compared to home cooking. People consume food outside their homes more often due to the availability of cheap but low-quality food, long working hours and the distance from home to work.[29]

To make matters worse, a study conducted by lecturers from the University of Malaya shows that there is an increase in the prevalence of intestinal parasitic infection (IPI) among residents of PHCs, from 8% in 2002 to 23% in 2020.[30] This is a reverse trend from what we saw in the early days after the relocation of squatters, where the prevalence of IPI among the newly relocated residents of public housing decreased significantly. The sharp increase can be attributed to the overcrowding at these housing complexes and indiscriminate methods of waste disposal. Furthermore, 41% of households have not vaccinated their children or do not know their offspring's vaccination status.[31]

Box 2: Situation of Malaysia's Public Housing Community

Economy

- 7% of households live below the poverty line
- 50% of households do not have enough money to buy food
- 97% say that high food prices prevent them from buying healthy food for their families
- 9 in 10 heads of households have semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs
- 77% of households do not have savings
- 33% of households have no social safety net (i.e., no EPF, SOCSO, medical and life insurance)
- 86% of households in PHCs have experienced a loss of income during the MCO period
- 65% of households have reported buying less or cheaper food for their families during the MCO period

Education

- 10% of the heads of households have tertiary education, while 5% have never even been to school
- 51% of children between 5 and 6 years of age do not attend preschool, and 2% between 7 and 17 years of age are not in school
- 31% of households do not have books for their children under 18 years of age

Health

- 22% of children are stunted, 15% are underweight, and 23% are overweight or obese
- 12% of children have less than three meals a day
- The prevalence of intestinal parasitic infection (IPI) among residents has increased from 8% in 2002 to 23% in 2020

Source: United Nations Children's Fund. Children Without 2018, Sahimin N, Abd Khalil NS, Lewis JW, Mohd Zain SN. Post-era mass drug administration: an update on intestinal parasitic infections in urban poor communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Trop Biomed. 2020 & Ismail BH. Suara Penduduk: Isu berkaitan pentadbiran dan pengurusan perumahan awam di Malaysia. Think City Urban Policy Series, 2021.

Sense of Community

Many residents of public housing, especially those in the Klang Valley, come from squatter or informal settlements and were relocated to low-cost high-rise buildings. One negative implication of their resettlement is that the community structure and support they initially had have become fragmented. Living among strangers, they no longer know who their neighbours are. This results in a lack of engagement among the different households living in the complexes, contributing to a lack of community spirit.[32]

This seems to be a common issue in many cities that have experienced rapid urbanisation. New migrants from rural areas across the country lack the support that they enjoyed in their old communities and are now having to learn to coexist with strangers from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. To help rebuild a strong sense of community among city dwellers, many housing estates provide public amenities, which are seen to be associated with social support and a better quality of life.[33]

Unfortunately, PHCs lack facilities and spaces that can nurture engagement and interaction among new neighbours, such as community halls, recreational areas and public parks.[34] To make matters worse, building designs are also insensitive to religious and cultural needs, such as houses of worship, which frustrates communities and impacts their integration.[35] Unable to adapt to their new, urban, multicultural surroundings, this has led to other issues such as racial tension and conflict.[32]

Living among strangers, they no longer know who their neighbours are.

Management and Inclusive Participation

The management of PHCs, from rent collection to maintenance and security, appears to lack standardised quality systems. A report from the Selangor State government shows that there is a lack of coordination and cooperation between the different agencies responsible for PHCs, of which there are many, both at the Federal and State levels.[28] This not only creates confusion, but also leads to complaints from residents being bounced between the different agencies, and no action is taken to resolve any issues.[28]

There is a lack of knowledge on the determinants of residents' satisfaction with their surroundings.[34] This can be attributed to the low level of involvement by residents in the management process, as there is no clear structure for inclusive and democratic participation. In Malaysia, the provision of housing for the poor is seen as a service rendered by the authority from the top, without including the voices of the beneficiaries. The process is dominated by government agencies and private developers who are operating in a paternalistic environment. In private high-rise buildings with the Strata Management Act (SMA), management companies execute decisions that are made by residents. However, in low-cost public housing, where the SMA does not apply, residents are forced to comply with the decisions made by the management instead.[36]

Consequently, some interviewed residents of PHCs have complained that the management does not treat them with respect. Their views are rarely considered, and their pleas to fix broken facilities and infrastructure are often not acted on.[25] The management is seen to have no incentive to include the residents in decision-making processes, aside from the usual procedural feedback gathering process, which often only provides insufficient and poorly presented information.[36]

As a result, the delivery of services in PHCs, from maintenance to security and waste disposal, has been frequently unsatisfactory.[28] These services are closely interlinked with the issues and challenges mentioned above, such as health, quality of life and living standards of the residents, continuing a cycle of deprivation and social exclusion.

Box 3: PPR Kampung Baru Hicom

Example of a typical public housing complex

History, management, issues, and community initiatives observed in this location are quite typical of public housing. Causes of low liveability are varied and influenced by policy, funding arrangements, management and the community itself. Therefore, any improvements must break through silos and be identified and delivered collectively according to the needs of each community.

PPR Kampung Baru Hicom (PPR Hicom) is in Section 26, Shah Alam. It houses 980 units within three blocks. This public housing project was developed on state-owned land, under the 'Yayasan Perumahan Untuk Termiskin' (*Housing Foundation for the Poor*) endowment. It is currently bordered by the Klang River, the Kg. Baru Hicom settlement and a light commercial area.

The history of the area is best described through the history of the adjacent village, Kg. Baru Hicom. Early settlers moved into the area in the 1970s and were given Temporary Occupancy Licenses. In the early days, the village was only 12 acres large and had about 30 families, mostly made up of blue-collar workers from nearby factories. The village was known as 'Labuhan Dagang,' as traders used to dock their ships there.

PPR Hicom served as temporary housing for 180 villagers and squatters from the Padang Jawa area. The land of the villagers and the squatters was purchased by KEN Holdings Sdn Bhd and converted into the KEN Rimba mixed-use development. While most of the temporary settlers returned to KEN Rimba, 60 households remained at PPR Hicom. A small number of Kg. Baru Hicom villagers were also relocated to PPR Hicom by a commercial developer.

Building Ownership, Tenure and Management

- Landowner: Selangor State Government
- Land status: Temporary Occupancy Licence (TOL)
- Building owner: Lembaga Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor (LPHS, agency under Selangor State)
- Management: Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor Sdn Bhd (PHSSB, agency under Selangor State), since 2013. Previously managed by Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ).
- Rental rate: RM250 per month, excluding utilities
- Application waiting list: Up to 1 year

Box 3: PPR Kampung Baru Hicom (cont'd) *Example of a typical public housing complex*

The following is a summary list of challenges at the site, along with notable community initiatives. Many of the challenges below require the intervention and involvement of key stakeholders, such as government agencies and municipal councils, without which the issue remains unsolved. Community action alone can only go so far.

Community Initiatives
- Self-organised
- Supported

Challenge 1

Site Access and Connectivity

Access to and from the site is not ideal. Residents must rely on motorised transport, with limited pedestrian amenities and public transport options and further draining their limited financial resources

Challenge 2

Community Facilities

Lack of well-equipped, functional and open access facilities to meet community needs

Challenge 3

Public and Green Spaces

Very limited access to public and green open spaces within the compound, as well as within walking distance

Proposal to promote community gardening.

Challenge 4

Hygiene and Sanitation

Less than desirable at the site, with litter a common sight. Many stray cats and dogs, as well as pests such as rats, add to the problem.

A garbage collection service called 'MySampah' ('my garbage'), which charges an RM1 fee for collecting and removing garbage from units, three times a week. Coordinated via WhatsApp.

Challenge 5

Drainage

Preliminary analysis shows that the existing internal drain capacity is insufficient during heavy rain and flooding of roads and flats occurs regularly.

Challenge 6

Safety and Security

Infrastructural damage, vandalism, gang activity, burglary and break-ins

A neighbourhood watch initiative called Pasukan Ikatan Desa (PID), run by the community, in collaboration with the local police. Members include block leaders appointed by residents.

Challenge 7

Food Security

Covid-19 highlighted food security issues within the community.

Food bank set up by PERWACOM, a community-based organisation of women residing in PPR Hicom.

Challenge 8

General Community Wellness

- Education, recreational and tutoring activities for children and youth.
- Free medical support.
- Upskilling activities such as marketing courses and grant writing.

Exposing Vulnerability: Impact of COVID-19

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Malaysia was in January 2020 and by the end of March, the Federal government introduced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of the virus. Although the intervention was effective in flattening the infection curve at the time, it had a detrimental effect on social and economic life. Unemployment soared and the country experienced its slowest growth recorded since the Asian Financial Crisis.[39]

The restrictions had a disproportionately negative impact on public housing communities where most were already struggling to make ends meet. Many were wage labourers and dependent on daily wages with very little savings, if at all. Many had to close down their small businesses and remain at home in overcrowded and stressful living environments. Many more lost their jobs as their employers took cost-cutting measures to preserve cash flows.

Economic Precarity and Insecurity

The public housing community has been severely affected by the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO). Data from Think City's K2K (Kita-2-Kita) programme show that within the first few months of the MCO, a total of 86% of households in PHCs experienced a loss of income.[25] Furthermore, 21% of households reported not having enough food for their children for two or more days, while 65% of households reported buying less or cheaper food for their families during the MCO period.[25]

On top of that, their lives are insecure due to the lack of a social safety net that can cushion the economic blow that they and the rest of the populace are facing. A 2021 study by UNICEF Malaysia and UNFPA on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on lower-income families shows that 45% of households do not have an account with EPF or SOCSO as of March 2021. This number is higher among working female heads of households and household heads with a disability, an alarming 50% and 92%, respectively.[40]

The MCO enforcement also prohibited the operation of informal markets, such as night markets and farmers' markets. These markets had been both the source of income and affordable produce for some of the low-income communities, and their closure affected the communities tremendously. A study by the Khazanah Research Institute showed that PPR households visit these markets more than once a week, and their closure led to the market traders losing their income and households losing access to affordable provisions.[41]

To ease the hardship felt by the lower-income group, the Malaysian government responded with aid programmes, such as the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) and the Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat (BPR). Even before the COVID-19 crisis, there were existing cash-handout programmes such as Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH), which according to a study by Think City, about 75% of public housing residents were able to access.[25] However, these programmes are insufficient, especially during an emergency when the needs are greater and more immediate.[25]

Education Gap

The drive for digitalisation has been accelerated by the pandemic and includes the digitalisation of the education system. However, the public housing community continues to lack access to digital education platforms, meaning that children in this community lag in educational outcomes compared to their peers from more well-off families. Instead of closing the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the digital divide has made education less accessible to the latter.

Most households in PHCs (57%) have access to two smartphones. However, 63% of households have two to four children under the age of 18.[25] Thus, there is still a lack of access to smartphones to accommodate the needs of the entire family. On top of that, not all of them have access to the internet. The housing blocks have access to free Wi-Fi provided by the government but it is only available in the common space on the ground floor of each block. This access was not possible with the MCO in place.

Digital learning is still a very new experience for many and is not yet able to replace face-to-face learning. Children had a hard time concentrating and maintaining interest, while parents lacked the ability and time to monitor their children's progress in class. As one parent said, 'For school, the children are getting their learning materials through WhatsApp groups. But for big families, studying at home is difficult. A lot of disturbances from the younger siblings. They can only do what they can.'[25]

Another concern among many parents is for children entering their first year of school, as many of them are still unable to read. Many parents prepare their children before they enter school by conducting reading classes. However, during COVID-19 and related lockdown measures, they were unable to do so. 'Next year they are entering their first year of school, but most are still unable to read… We're afraid once they are in school, mixed with other children, they will be left behind', shares one parent.[25]

'Next year they are entering their first year of school, but most are still unable to read… We're afraid once they are in school, mixed with other children, they will be left behind'

Anxiety and Fear

Public housing residents live in constant anxiety and, to some extent, fear. Residents' precarious and uncertain economic situation often prevents them from paying their rent on time. Furthermore, the management typically implements measures that do not benefit the residents such as eviction.[25] Even during the COVID-19 crisis, there have been incidences of strict enforcement of rent payments. Efforts to negotiate have fallen on deaf ears, as said by a tenant, 'To negotiate, we would have to go to the management office and sign an oath. We still need to pay but through instalments. And if we complain too much, they would just say "leave then." That's how they do things.'[25]

Some tenants have also complained of exploitation by their former employers that made them unable to access some forms of government-provided assistance, such as BPN and BPR. As one resident of a public housing complex says, 'Some were laid-off without termination letters. So, for the ones who didn't get the letter, they can't apply for aid from the government. If you don't have the letter, how can you apply? You have no proof.'[25]

Even when they are entitled to receive aid, they are still afraid to demand it, highlighting the lack of voice in this group of people. The disbursement of government aid such as food vouchers goes through bureaucratic channels that were severely disrupted during MCO3.0, and because of that public housing residents had a difficult time receiving it. As one resident recounts, '... the voucher for June could only be redeemed in July, only on Thursdays. But since the 5th (of July), the office was closed for two weeks. They only operate the counter half a day on Saturdays, but not many of us get the chance to redeem them... if we say too much, they will say we're not grateful.'[25]

Ghettos and Ghettoisation

The concept of ghettos has many parallels to public housing, and it is useful to understand how Malaysian public housing fits and where it does not fit the characterisation. Sociologist Loic Wacquant defines ghettos as socio-spatial spaces designed to isolate and exploit a dishonoured community and can be characterised by four elements, which are

i) **stigma,**
ii) **constraint,**
iii) **spatial confinement and**
iv) **institutional parallelism (alternative social structures and norms).**[42]

While the public housing community in Malaysia is not a dishonoured community, there is some stigma attached to living in public housing. Analysing previous literature on ghettos, Xu and Luo argue that existing accounts on ghettos are too general to be applied directly and they do not provide an analytical framework to assess the gradual decline of neighbourhoods. However, features of ghettoisation can be analysed through the physical dilapidation, economic deprivation and social marginalisation of the neighbourhood.[43]

Based on existing literature on ghettos and ghettoisation and put into the local context, public housing communities seem to be experiencing similar elements of stigma, constraint and marginalisation found in ghettos in other major cities, although the underlying problem is economic rather than ethnic segregation. Therefore, this paper defines ghettos in Malaysia as a concentration of marginalised and impoverished people who are involuntarily segregated and excluded from the larger society, in a confined space or neighbourhood, further reinforcing marginalisation and impoverishment. The degree of ghettoisation can be analysed by investigating:

i) **the physical dilapidation of estates,**
ii) **the economic deprivation of residents and**
iii) **the social marginalisation of neighbourhoods.**

When it comes to the Malaysian PHCs, the main concern is to prevent them from turning into urban ghettos, as we can see in many developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and France. Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Grenfell Tower in London, and our Pekeliling Flats are among the extreme cases that we have witnessed, and measures should be identified to prevent them from happening again. Therefore, it is important to develop a sustainable model for public housing management that not only prevents PHCs from becoming ghettos but also alleviates and improves the living economic and social conditions of residents to create a more sustainable public housing community.

Box 4: Public Housing in the City of Changsha, China

Decay of public housing is not just a Malaysian issue

This case study highlights that public housing in China also struggles with various levels of decay. The question that arises is whether urban PHCs that concentrate the urban poor in segregated areas are doomed to deteriorate or whether they can be designed and managed in a way that counteracts decay.

Changsha is the capital of Hunan Province in central South China, with a total area of 11,816 km^2 across six districts: Yuelu, Kaifu, Furong, Tianxin, Yuhua, and Wangcheng. From 2008 to 2018, the city constructed 229.2 thousand units of public housing to house its growing population. 134.8 thousand units (59%) were economically affordable housing for the lower-middle-income group and 94.4 thousand units (41%) were public rental housing for the lower income. By the end of 2018, almost one-quarter of the city's households were living in public housing projects.

Over the years, the PHCs began to develop physical, economic and social decay. Among the issues faced are the following:

- Physical decay
- Original design and construction deficiencies
- Lack of operation and maintenance funding
- Inept property management
- Economic decay
- Distribution aimed at disadvantaged people
- Residualisation process and outmigration of working class
- Spatial mismatch and unemployment
- Social decay
- Geographical isolation from other classes
- Prevalence of vandalism and crime
- Stigmatisation of territorial image

Similar to issues faced by many other countries, the PHCs in Changsha seem to promote physical dilapidation, economic deprivation and social marginalisation if the downward spiral of physical, economic and social decay continues.

Source: Xu Y, Luo D. Is China's public housing programme destined to fail? Evidence from the city of Changsha, Population, Space and Place (2021).[43]

Section 4

Identifying the Gaps and Lessons Learned

Section 4

Identifying the Gaps and Lessons Learned

The issues surrounding public housing are not unique to Malaysia. From one perspective the public housing programme in Malaysia can be seen as a success story of slum relocation and upgrading, serving as an example for many developing countries. However, Malaysia also seems to be repeating the mistakes of many developed countries, especially when it comes to the upkeep and maintenance of our PHCs. The current model cannot resolve the issues facing PHCs and their residents, which include funding for maintenance and a management system with upward accountability that leaves residents without meaningful decision-making power to look after their living environment.[25]

Urban scholars David Madden and Peter Marcuse put forth the concept of 'residential alienation' to describe housing experience marred by precarity, insecurity and disempowerment.[44] Under the conditions of residential alienation, households are unable to shape their domestic environment as they wish. Furthermore, they struggle to fulfil their needs and freedom, while experiencing a lack of social power.[44]

This describes the living experience of the public housing community in Malaysia. Their lives are precarious and insecure from an economic standpoint because many of them do not have stable and secure income as blue-collar workers and wage labourers. They are also socially and politically disenfranchised, as years of neglect and exclusion from developmental programmes and decision-making processes have left them feeling disempowered and unable to take full charge of their lives.

As their immediate environment and surroundings deteriorate, so does their health status and quality of life. This was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing lockdown measures. Already excluded and isolated from the rest of society, the public housing community is facing bigger challenges with even less power and ability to turn the tides and survive the crisis.

Vulnerability

The economic situation and the lack of social protection among the urban poor community living in low-cost public housing in the country make them vulnerable to economic shocks and other crises, which can worsen their already precarious situation. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and its mitigation strategy on the public housing community have caused more job loss and underemployment, increasing their dependence on cash assistance and food basket programmes to get by.[40]

Added to the mix is the degree of dilapidation of housing blocks, which also affects the quality of life of public housing communities. The promise of a better living environment when moving from squatter settlements to new vertical homes was short-lived. Over the years, their homes have become rundown and unliveable due to maintenance issues.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve the livelihood of the public housing community to make it more resilient and shock-proof. It is also important to ensure that members of the public housing community are financially independent. Existing employment or self-employment-related schemes must be improved to create better job opportunities, which in turn will provide better earnings to these households.[40] In addition, social protection programmes must be strengthened to provide a solid foundation for the community to stand on, especially in times of crisis. This should be on top of continuing existing cash assistance and food basket programmes, which have helped the public housing community during the harsh lockdown periods, but alone are insufficient to take the community out of the cycle of dependency.

It is also important to constantly monitor the physical condition of the housing complexes, from the buildings to their immediate surroundings. As discussed in previous chapters, deterioration of the environment has a direct impact on the health and quality of life of residents. Lives have been lost due to broken infrastructure and the safety of the rest is significantly jeopardised. Therefore, solutions must be found to improve the living environment of the public housing community.

Sustainability

When it comes to sustaining PHCs, beyond issues surrounding maintenance and upkeep, there are also major flaws in the initial planning, such as building design, substandard construction materials and unsuitable locations. However, they are all caused by poor financing, lack of funds, or cost-cutting measures imposed before, during and after the construction of the complexes. Even land value affects the overall cost of building the houses, as well as the provision of adequate space, social infrastructure and facilities to provide a better living environment.[34]

Repair and maintenance are long-term tasks that must be performed consistently by the building management.[45] However, building managers face financial constraints in maintaining the buildings. Low rent collection is a universal issue across all public housing in the country and funding delays from the government also hamper maintenance, repairs and improvement works.[28] The challenge is to find a solution that is both sustainable and financially viable.

The challenge is to find a solution that is both sustainable and financially viable.

Box 5: Singapore's HDB Flats

A public housing model that works in its context

Singapore is generally considered a leader in public housing. Their model works in their context and shows that public housing issues can be resolved. Although blind replication of the model would not work, there are principles and processes that can be learned.

In 1960, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) of Singapore was established and tasked with building large quantities of low-cost housing for the citizens of the young country. Starting as housing for the poor, the programme has since evolved to provide quality housing for both lower-income and middle-income groups. By 2020, more than 80% of Singapore's population lived in these government-built housing blocks, also known as HDB Flats.

The HDB obtains its operating funds in the form of low-interest loans from the government, as well as receiving a substantial annual subsidy from the government's budget. These apartments are then sold to citizens and permanent residents at a highly subsidised rate on 99-year leases. Short-term tenancies of renewable two years' duration are also offered to families who cannot afford to purchase 99-year leases. Besides being low-cost, the HDB also allows buyers to use their savings in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) to purchase flats. The HDB Flats are maintained and upgraded through the Home Improvement Program that contains essential and optional components. These improvements must be paid for by the owners but at highly subsidised rates.

Besides a strong economy, the success of the HDB programme can be attributed to strong political will. The Singaporean government has pledged to provide affordable and low-cost housing for all its citizens and permanent residents. This gives them the strength to develop policies and programmes that have allowed them to build for the masses at an accelerated pace, without worrying about political ramifications.

Box 5: Singapore's HDB Flats (cont'd) *A public housing model that works in its context*

Source: Lye Lin-Heng, 'Public Housing in Singapore: A Success Story in Sustainable Development', APCEL Working Paper Series, May 2020[46] & 'HDB's success cannot be replicated by any other country... here's why', Singapore Today, March 29, 2017[47].

Fragmented Governance, Paternalistic Management

In the experience of engaging with the public housing community, the disconnect between the top view of management and the lived reality on the ground as experienced by the residents is evident. Due to the vertical governance structure, where the management and service delivery providers are accountable to those above them and not to the tenants, there is a power imbalance that results in poor service delivery and upkeep, while leaving the tenants at the mercy of the management and third-party contractors.

In Selangor, for example, PHCs are under the purview of the Lembaga Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor (LPHS), and the management of the complexes can fall under the Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor Sdn. Bhd. (PHSSB). Structurally, the PHSSB reports to the LPHS. Meanwhile, PHSSB hires third-party contractors to provide services, such as waste disposal. In turn, they report to PHSSB. Residents and their feedback are generally excluded from this relationship, despite being the main stakeholders who live in housing complexes and deal with any maintenance and services.

Furthermore, government agencies and management companies in charge of managing PHCs operate in a paternalistic environment. Public housing residents are seen as welfare recipients instead of stakeholders that contribute to decision regarding services they receive. Unfortunately, when public housing is seen as a last resort to house the poor, they are indirectly seen as second-rate. If this is the view of the management, the situation will barely improve for the residents.

This also reflects the ‘service delivery’ culture among public officials in Malaysia, in which they develop a simple binary relationship with the public: Public officials deliver services, while members of the public are expected to behave simply as clients.[48] This service-delivery relationship focuses more on the supply side, where the allocation of services and resources is decided at the highest level, rather than looking at the demand side, which considers the needs of the public.[48]

At the same time, there is little integration among the different government agencies responsible for the PHCs. Each agency tends to work in a silo, unaware of the initiatives done by the others. Even at the local level, formal organisations, such as the Neighbourhood Watch and the Residents’ Association, do not seem to work with each other, despite having similar interests. In some PHCs, there is tension between government-sponsored entities and resident-driven associations, even though both have voluntary membership structures.

Even at the local level, formal organisations, such as the Neighbourhood Watch and the Residents’ Association, do not seem to work with each other, despite having similar interests.

It is important to improve this structure to give residents more power to participate in determining their livelihoods, as well as to be a part of the management accountability process. Low-income households are less likely to move to a different house or neighbourhood compared to higher income groups.[34] Therefore, they must be accepted as stakeholders of the neighbourhood and given adequate power and responsibility. They are not just a transitional community that needs a bit of help to be able to move and live elsewhere. Sharing responsibility with residents can also break the welfare mindset, as well as increase their sense of belonging and ownership.[35] Most importantly, there is a need to improve tenant-management relationships and establish a mechanism that will ensure quality service delivery from the management to the residents of the PHCs.

Box 6: UK’s Charter for Social Housing Residents

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in June 2017, the UK’s Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government released a Social Housing White Paper that establishes a new Charter for Social Housing Residents. The Charter consists of seven main elements that set out what every social housing resident should be able to expect. The objectives were to improve the management's accountability and the safety of tenants and their living conditions. The seven items of the Charter are:

- To be safe in your home
- To know how your landlord is performing
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator for tenants
- To have your voice heard by your landlord
- To have a quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To be supported to take your first step to ownership

Source: ‘The Charter for Social Housing Residents — Social Housing White Paper’, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, United Kingdom. [49]

Resident Participation

Participation is about the redistribution of power and enhancing the ability of the community to influence outcomes. In the context of public housing management, that would mean redistribution of power among residents to allow them to influence decision-making processes. Specifically, the redistribution of power should enable residents, who are currently excluded from political, economic and development processes, to be included through information sharing, goals and policy setting, resource allocations and distribution of benefits.

Improving management accountability for better living conditions

Scholar Sherry Arnstein provides a typology of eight levels of citizen participation to differentiate between what she calls 'empty ritual participation' with having real power to influence process outcomes.[50] Arranged in a ladder pattern, she begins with *manipulation* and *therapy*, which practically means 'non-participation'. Next, is what she calls 'tokenism', with the typology of *information*, *consultation* and *placation*. For Arnstein, 'tokenism' only allows the have-nots to hear and have a voice without having any power to decide. Finally, actual participation only occurs at the next level, what she calls 'citizen power' where the have-nots would enter into a *partnership* and be able to negotiate. The upper rungs would be *delegated power* and *citizen control*, where the have-nots would obtain the majority of decision-making power.[50]

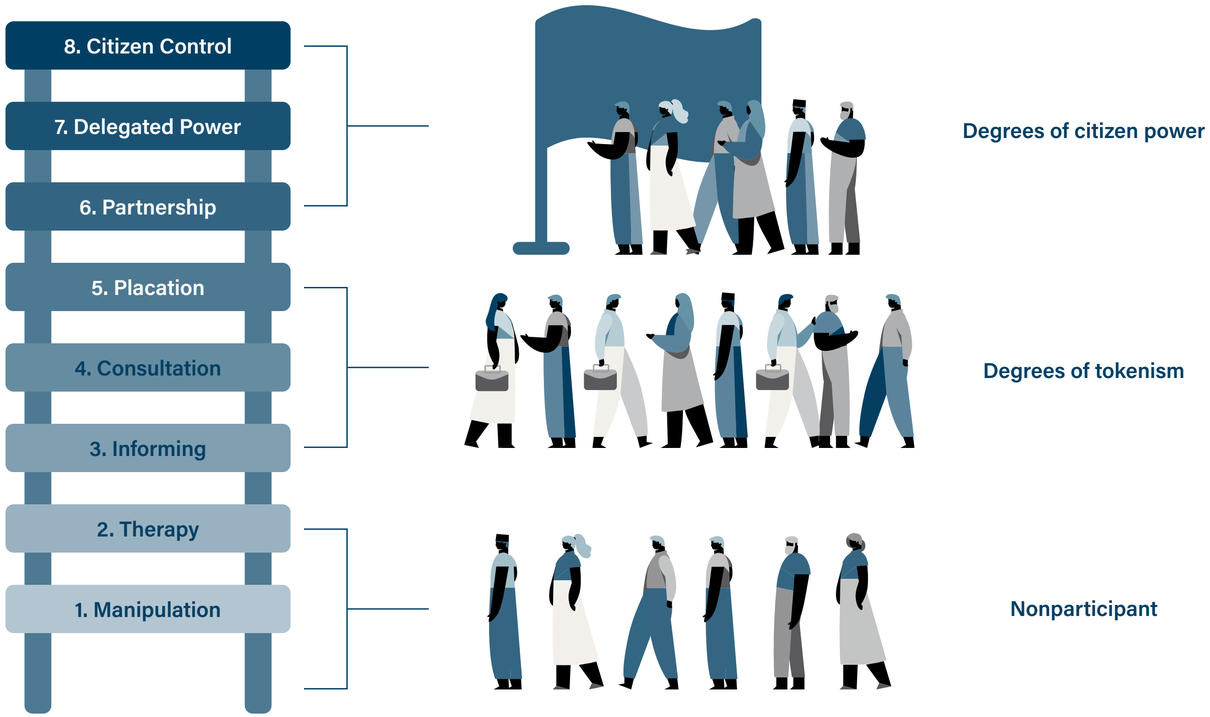


Figure 5: Ladder of citizen participation. Source: Sherry Arnstein (1969), Ladder of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Planning Association in: https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/

Following this typology fully might prove difficult, as Arnstein acknowledges the limitations of her proposal. For example, opponents of participatory processes would argue that it is more costly and less efficient, promotes separatism and is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism, among others.[50] These are valid arguments. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that without a concerted effort to include all voices of the public housing community, efforts to solve any problems and improve lives would not be successful.

Building an inclusive city also requires putting people at the heart of governance. An inclusive city fosters democratic engagement and active participation of the public in decision-making processes by creating participatory structures and processes that would not only allow more public involvement but are also more transparent and open.[17]

Bottom-up Initiatives

Despite the challenges faced by the public housing community, from livelihood and economic challenges to managing their housing complex, there are many initiatives taken by the community members to improve their situation and make life within the housing blocks better. Instead of solely relying on the authorities, the management and third-party contractors, residents take responsibility for their environment and surroundings. The initiatives taken range from maintenance and providing security to planning. Residents of public housing are also taking charge of their safety. Although each complex has security guards, the guards are only responsible for ensuring the safety of the properties, not the residents. Therefore, it is up to the residents to take care of their safety and each other. As a result, a neighbourhood watch initiative called Pasukan Ikatan Desa (PID) was formed. Although created by the State government, the PID is run entirely by the community, collaborating directly with the local police force. Members of the PID include block leaders from the public housing complex, informally appointed by residents of each block.[25]

Taking matters into their own hands also establishes networks and builds relationships with organisations outside their housing blocks. From non-governmental organisations to youth groups, charity groups, local hospitals, and local universities, residents of PHCs have been building relationships through collaborations and joint services to fill in the gaps and needs of their community.

When it comes to formalised community-based organisations mentioned in the earlier chapter, we found that they may not adhere strictly to the laid-out mandates and functions, although it is evident that the welfare of residents always comes first. However, it is worth noting that cooperation among the organisations, especially between the Residents' Association and Neighbourhood Watch, does not always materialise although interests for the community may be similar. Moreover, despite having voluntary membership structures, there is also tension between a government-sponsored entity and a resident-driven association.

Nevertheless, cooperation does happen. Looking at a public housing complex in Selangor as an example, residents set up an association to work with community partners and private funders to support the residents' welfare. Among the initiatives developed through these collaborations are a food bank, educational, recreational and tutoring activities for children and youth, free medical support and upskilling activities such as grant writing and marketing courses.[25]


menuju Allah, maka berlarilah, jika
sulit bagimu maka berlari kecillah
Jika kamu lelah maka berjalanlah dan jika
mpu, merangklah. Nanti
erbalik atau berhenti
Bisa
Hari Minggu
TAR KEHADIRAN
AM PEJABAT
thinkCITY

Box 7: Austria's Social Housing in "Red Vienna"

Red Vienna is the name given to the sixteen years after World War I when the Austrian Social Democratic Worker's Party governed the city and undertook one of the most ambitious social housing programmes ever. Although the programme was started more than a century ago, its legacy still receives attention from many observers. It can be seen as one of the most successful housing programmes.

The three main drivers of success in Vienna's social housing programme are:

1. There was control over the private housing market — Regulations such as rent and eviction control were already in place, where the private market was not as lucrative and exploitative as in other cities. In addition, there were requisitions of underutilised and unnecessarily vacant private housing, which were then reallocated according to a complex but objective formula that focused on housing needs.
2. There was city support for self-help activities — Squatters around the city were given legal status and architectural services, materials, transportation and utilities. Cooperative housing activities were also supported, where the title and control of housing built with public resources were transferred by the city to the cooperatives.
3. There was direct municipal construction and ownership of housing — A progressive tax on housing occupancy was earmarked entirely for housing construction. New constructions of social housing complexes and the land needed to build them were fully funded by this occupancy tax.

As of 2020, more than 60% of Vienna's residents live in cooperatives, government-owned, or government-subsidised housing. These houses are fully paid for by revenues derived primarily from a steeply progressive, productive and stable tax. Rents are kept low, amounting to less than 5% of income for most workers, and secure tenancy is given to all residents. Social services and community facilities — the infrastructures of neighbourhood life — were built into the planning and construction process, at a very high level of quality and quantity.

At the same time, the substantially better-off residents of the city are still able to use their resources to acquire above average housing for themselves in the private market. However, in general, public priorities, not private profit, established the policies that dominate housing constructions and uses.

Source: Blumgart, Jake. 'Red Vienna: how Austria's capital earned its place in housing history', City Monitor, 30 Dec 2020[51] & Marcuse, Peter. 'The Housing Policy of Social Democracy: Determinants and Consequences', The Austrian Socialist Experiment, Westview Press, Inc, 1985.[52]

A combination of housing supply, secure tenure, services, participatory management (cooperative model) and financing became a successful mix

Section 5

Towards Better and More Livable Public Housing

Source : unsplash.com — MI PHAM

Section 5

Towards Better and More Liveable Public Housing

Community

- Expand existing programmes
- Improve social protection
- Accelerate COVID-19 recovery

National Policies

- Consolidating body on public housing
- Invest in data and research

Management

- Sustainable financing models
- Stronger community leaders
- Upgrade existing infrastructure
- Liveability indicators

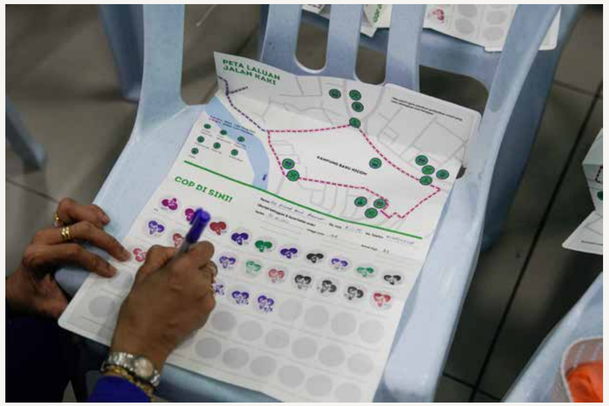
Recommendations

The right to a decent living should be enjoyed by all, regardless of their social standing. Liveable and sustainable housing is a crucial element of that right. This is in line with the goal of adequate housing conditions as proposed in the UN Habitat Fact Sheet 21 on Adequate Housing, the Sustainable Development Goal 11, as well as Malaysia's National Housing Policy, which calls for quality housing for all.

To achieve this goal, the entire public housing ecosystem must be rethought, covering governance, management and infrastructure, as well as improving the socio-economic circumstances of the urban poor more broadly and starting by:

- Recognising the importance of public housing liveability for people and Malaysia's development trajectory
- Understanding that facets of liveability are interdependent, requiring stakeholders across agencies and sectors to coordinate
- Fostering multidisciplinary research in public housing for deeper understanding, effective implementation and measurement of progress
- Addressing not just symptoms but also causes of poor liveability

Therefore, this paper proposes the following recommendations to steer Malaysia's PHCs away from the current trajectory in which residents are stuck in a cycle of marginalisation, impoverishment and social exclusion. The recommendations focus on three areas: Strengthening the community, strengthening the overall management system and strengthening national policies and programmes. These recommendations require further investigation and coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders.



Strengthening the Community

1. Improve Social Protection

Social protection is one of the key elements in providing a solid foundation for urban poor communities to help them improve their lives and livelihood. Therefore, improving existing social protection programmes is important to make them more meaningful and effective in providing financial independence. The programmes should include income support and better access to social services such as education, healthcare and public transportation. Income support can be done through robust and targeted cash handout programmes, improvements in zakat distribution, implementation of a living wage, or even the possibility of implementing a Universal Basic Income (UBI).

Furthermore, many from urban poor backgrounds work in the informal and gig sectors, contributing significantly to the nation's economy. Government policies should focus on enhancing social protection for these workers, who are currently vulnerable to labour exploitation. These measures include EPF and SOCSO benefits, as well as supporting their enrolment in the Employment Insurance Scheme (EIS) programme. (53)

2. Accelerate short-term interventions addressing the impact of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on the public housing community must be addressed, specifically with respect to livelihoods, healthcare, nutrition, learning and play areas. This should be done through public-private partnerships, government agencies, or community development organisations. Additionally, existing government programmes that address livelihood building and income recovery, such as localised job-matching and skills grants, should be linked to public housing communities.

3. Expand and link existing pilots undertaken by community development organisations

Existing pilot programmes that address key learnings to inform policy decision-making and implementation need to be further supported, expanded and linked. For example, PHCs with successful programmes such as the K2K Aktif Bersama (promoting a healthy lifestyle and well-being) and K2K Idol (reducing community stress and connecting neighbours) by Think City should be scaled up. At the same time, such programmes can support the capacity-building efforts of government agencies and other NGOs to expand and deepen their engagement with the public housing community.

Strengthening the Overall Management System

4. Build capacity of community leaders and participatory structures

When a community has a stronger voice and a role in managing its public housing complex, more relevant and sustainable solutions can be found. Standardised and recognised capacity building initiatives for existing leaders should be created and offered on an ongoing basis. New community leaders should also be developed. Access to such training should not be limited to community leaders in elected roles, but others in informal leadership roles, including youth with leadership potential.

Formal management structures should be reviewed and opportunities for more participatory approaches identified and tested. Training and ongoing capacity-building of community managers have the potential to professionalise and standardise management practices.

5. Develop indicators to assess the liveability of PHCs.

Developing a toolkit that can be used by all stakeholders, from residents, community members and management, to assess the current liveability of any given public housing complex in the country, identify the causes of the problem and design interventions that can be implemented to improve the situation.

The toolkit should be developed based on engagements with experts and the community, complemented by existing literature and reports. The indicators need to highlight the condition of the housing complex and residents and assess the causes behind the symptoms. For extensive and repeated use of the toolkit, the shortlisted factors should be accessible, and the follow-up action for interventions and implementation should be effective.

Most liveability tools are at the city scale or do not cover the range of physical, social, economic and spatial domains identified here. A tool could be devised based on the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index[54], a liveability tool developed for low and middle-income countries[2] and Think City's Urban Resilience Analytics and Collective Impact Platform[55] that has been adapted to housing level and is participatory.


FORWARD
TOGETHER

6. Continue upgrading existing public housing infrastructure

Existing PHCs and their infrastructures, such as common facilities, playgrounds, solid waste management, lighting, ventilation and lifts, need to be regularly upgraded and maintained. Prioritisation of such activities must be carried out with the meaningful participation of public housing residents.

7. Explore better financing models to ensure built quality structures and life-cycle sustainability

Better financing models need to be developed. As new generations of public housing are built, they need to take on the lessons learned and avoid past mistakes, striking a balance between building and fostering physical and social infrastructures.

Strengthening National Policies and Programmes

8. Provide more analytical work on the public housing ecosystem

There is much to learn about our public housing ecosystem, from the programme design to financing, implementation and management. Deeper analytical research that explores sustainable public housing models is needed. This can be done by further investigating and analysing the current ecosystem and focusing not just on access to public housing, but also on its quality.

Investigation and analysis should include a review of the existing condition, the current governing and management structure and how they can improve the situation on the ground as experienced by the residents of the PHCs. Therefore, more resources must be allocated to carry out these analyses for researchers, professionals and community workers.

9. Develop a body to consolidate all the work on public housing

This paper shows that multiple government agencies are responsible for the public housing programmes and multiple community-based organisations work with the public housing communities. Therefore, it is important for these agencies and organisations to communicate to better coordinate and complement each other’s work. For example, it is advisable to develop a task force, committee, or board to consolidate the different responsibilities and work done by various agencies and organisations.

Conclusion

An inclusive urban future is necessary for resilience. A crucial element of this inclusivity is better and more liveable public housing. Poor housing conditions can hinder certain segments of society from participating in urban life and neither public housing communities nor cities would achieve their full health and productive potential.

As this paper has shown, improving housing liveability has the potential to prevent public housing from turning into vertical slums that trap residents in poverty. We can achieve liveable public housing through strengthening the community, a participatory management system and national policies and programmes.

Many issues need to be addressed, and many actions can be taken to tackle symptoms and causes of poor liveability. Improving social protection, developing indicators to assess the condition of the PHCs, providing more analytical work on the public housing ecosystem and developing a body to consolidate the work on public housing will be a step in the right direction, although it should not end there.

If sustained and scaled, the right policy choices and action plans made today could determine the resilience of our public housing and contribute to that of urban centres and the country.

Appendix

Table 1 List of Government Agencies and Community Based Organisations.

Government Agency	Description
Kementerian Perpaduan Negara (KPN) *Ministry of National Unity*	A ministry under the Prime Minister's Department to promote national unity based on the National Unity Policy (Dasar Perpaduan Negara).
Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan (KPKT) *Ministry of Housing and Local Government*	A ministry leading the prosperity of urban communities and a sustainable environment.
Kementerian Dalam Negeri (KDN) *Ministry of Home Affairs*	A ministry that ensures the security and peace of the country are guaranteed and the well-being of the people is preserved.
Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar Malaysia (KPLB) *Ministry of Rural Development*	A ministry to improve the well-being of rural communities holistically and effectively.
Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional (JPNIN) *Department of National Unity and Integration*	A department under the Ministry of National Unity focused on enhancing and strengthening the social cohesion of Malaysian society through inclusive integration efforts based on the Federal Constitution and National Principles.
Registrar of Societies (ROS)	A department under the Ministry of Home Affairs that operates non-governmental organisations and political parties.
Jabatan Kerajaan Tempatan (JKT) *Local Government Department*	A department under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to provide expertise and advisory services to Local. Authorities in planning and implementing socio-economic development programs in line with the national direction.

Table 1 List of Government Agencies and Community Based Organisations. (cnt'd)

Government Agency	Description
Pejabat Pembangunan Persekutuan Negeri / Jabatan Pembangunan Persekutuan Negeri *State Development Office / Federal Development Department*	State-based development offices reporting to the Implementation Coordination Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, to coordinate and implement federal development projects.
Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan (PBT) *Local Authority*	Local Authorities can be divided into the following three categories: 1. City Council/Hall (Majlis/Dewan Bandaraya) 2. City Council (Majlis Perbandaran) 3. District Council (Majlis Daerah)

Community-based Organisations	Description
Majlis Perwakilan Penduduk (MPP) *Residents Representative Council*	A council set up at the Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan/ Pejabat Pembangunan Persekutuan Negeri/ Jabatan Pembangunan Persekutuan Negeri level to coordinate the Jawatankuasa Perwakilan Penduduk journey at every zone.
Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung (MPKK) *Council of Village Community Management*	A council that plans and executes the development plans of a village with the participation of the local community using the bottom-up approach towards a thriving, prosperous and harmonious village.
Rukun Tetangga (RT) *Neighbourhood Watch*	A voluntary programme aimed at helping to promote community development in Malaysia. The establishment focuses on residential areas in the city, suburbs and high-risk areas.

Table 1 List of Government Agencies and Community Based Organisations. (cnt'd)

Community-based Organisations	Description
Residents Association (RA) *Persatuan Penduduk*	A body made up of a group of individuals from the same neighbourhood who have agreed to manage all community concerns.
Jawatankuasa Perwakilan Penduduk (JPP) *Residents Representative Committee*	An initiative by the Federal Government to help State Governments and Local Authorities interact directly with residents and bring up any issues to be resolved together.
Program/Pasukan Ikatan Desa (PID)	An organisation established by the Selangor State Government to ensure safety in traditional villages.
Pejabat Sekretariat Muafakat Komuniti PPR	A body established in every PPR community to ease the process of building relationships between the community and government agencies, private agencies and NGOs.
Joint Management Body (JMB)	A statutory body formed to manage and maintain the subdivided building and common property in a strata development. Their jurisdiction would cover private low-cost housing and purchased properties.

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Acknowledgements

Think City would like to acknowledge Citi Foundation as the funder of the Rights to the City programme. This paper is published as part of this programme and is fully aligned to Citi Foundations' Community Solutions approach that supports efforts that break down silos and bring stakeholders together to develop and scale solutions to the most pressing challenges confronting disfranchised communities around the world.

Think City would also like to acknowledge the writers of the White Paper: Badrul Hisham Ismail, Uta Dietrich and Dr. Shahridan Faiez, and thank the reviewers E Hun Tan and Jaideep Singh from the Research for Social Advancement (REFSA) for their editorial comments.

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