

## **Refocusing Development Towards Sustainability – The Case of Selangor, Malaysia**

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### *ABSTRACT*

*Local Agenda 21 offers a holistic approach to incorporate sustainability in local policies across all sectors, with the involvement of the community. Local Agenda 21 initiatives focused on the local authority level, as this was deemed to be the level closest to the community. The bottom-up approach was promoted whereby local authorities worked in partnership with non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders. This approach is not particularly suited for the State of Selangor, Malaysia. Instead, the state government opted for an innovative and comprehensive approach, combining both the “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches, modified for the existing three tiered governance mechanism. In this approach, principles, strategies and strategic action plans were formulated at the state level with the participation of all stakeholders. These were then channeled directly to various agencies involved in policy-making, planning and implementation. These agencies, in particular the state agencies, federal agencies operating in the state and local authorities, then become jointly responsible for formulating and implementing programmes, projects and activities related to sustainable development, in conjunction with all stakeholders. The agencies are also required to formally report the progress of their initiatives to the state. It is unrealistic to anticipate a total positive response in the initiative to implement Agenda 21 Selangor, where every stakeholder whether an individual, agency or organisation, would progress forward in harmony and at the same speed. But with top-level commitment and a high level of engagement from all stakeholders, the shift towards sustainability has commenced. Notwithstanding this, long term success depends on the provision of clear policy and adequate resources, strengthening of the planning system and capacity to make multi-sectoral and integrated decisions.*

### *ABSTRAK*

*Agenda 21 Tempatan menyediakan peluang untuk pengamalan pendekatan holistik bagi penerapan kemampanan dalam dasar tempatan merentas pelbagai sektor dengan penglibatan komuniti. Agenda 21 Tempatan tertumpu kepada tahap pihak berkuasa tempatan kerana tahap inilah yang paling hampir dengan komuniti. Pendekatan “bottom-up” diberi perhatian di mana pihak berkuasa*

*tempatan berkerjasama dengan badan bukan kerajaan dan pihak berkepentingan yang lain. Namun, pendekatan ini didapati kurang sesuai bagi Negeri Selangor, Malaysia. Kerajaan Negeri telah menerajui pendekatan yang lebih inovatif dan menyeluruh, yang menggabungkan pendekatan “top-down” and “bottom-up”, yang diselaraskan bagi mekanisma governans tiga tahap yang diamalkan. Pendekatan ini melibatkan penggubalan prinsip, strategi dan tindakan strategik pada tahap negeri dengan penglibatan daripada semua pihak berkepentingan. Pendekatan ini seterusnya disalurkan kepada pelbagai agensi yang terlibat dalam penggubalan dasar, perancangan dan pelaksanaan. Agensi tersebut, terutamanya agensi kerajaan negeri, agensi persekutuan yang beroperasi di negeri, dan pihak berkuasa tempatan, berkongsi tanggungjawab untuk penggubalan dan pelaksanaan program, projek dan aktiviti berkenaan pembangunan mampan, dengan penglibatan pihak berkepentingan. Agensi tersebut juga melaporkan kemajuan inisiatif yang dilakukan secara rasmi. Dijangka bahawa respon terhadap Agenda 21 Selangor akan mengambil masa dan meningkat secara beransur-ansur. Namun demikian dengan komitmen pihak atasan dan penglibatan yang baik daripada semua pihak berkepentingan, pergerakan ke arah kemampanan sudah mula menonjol. Kejayaan masa depan bergantung kepada halatuju dasar yang jelas, penyaluran sumber yang mencukupi, pengukuhan sistem perancangan dan peningkatan keupayaan bagi membolehkan keputusan dibuat secara multi-sektoral dan terkamir.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Bruntland Commission articulated the concept of sustainable development as it is known today in 1987. In this concept, equity, growth and environmental conservation are simultaneously possible while a nation achieves its full economic potential and enhances its resource base (WCED 1987 as cited in Kirkby et al. 1995). The most simple and widely used definition for sustainable development is that of the Bruntland Report, where it is defined as *development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. In essence, this concept promotes a new pattern of development, which embodies socio-economic growth and equity, integrated with elements of environmental protection. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UNCED) brought about the first global agreement on programmes for action in all areas relating to sustainable development. A significant outcome of UNCED is Agenda 21. Agenda 21 provides a blueprint for actions in all sectors, to ensure sustainability of the planet into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The progress of implementing Agenda 21 was reviewed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development from 26 August- 4 September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

In Malaysia, elements of sustainability have been incorporated in federal policy documents in such as the 20-year Outline Perspective Plans and the five-year Malaysia Plans (Mohd Nordin Hasan 1998) since the 1970s. The quest has always been for balanced development with focus on poverty eradication and correction of social and economic disparity. Environmental considerations are also emphasized, and increasingly so over the past two decades.

Selangor is the first state in Malaysia to embark on a comprehensive programme to develop and incorporate sustainability strategies for all levels of governance. Sustainable development in Selangor incorporates a vision framed by political processes at both the global and national levels, requiring environmental considerations to be brought into the mainstream of economic and social policy. This paper describes briefly the scenario in Selangor that is driving the move towards sustainability. An account of the initiative and the challenges anticipated in sustaining this effort is also discussed.

#### THE SCENARIO IN SELANGOR

Selangor Darul Ehsan is undoubtedly one of the most successful states in Malaysia with respect to socio-economic development. From 1970 up till the economic crisis of 1997, the economic growth of the state as reflected by the GDP has generally been in the range of 9% annually (Government of Selangor 2000). The state has managed to weather the economic crisis by taking various measures including increasing its competitiveness, expanding its economic base and restoring the confidence of local and foreign investors. The industrial sector is the main contributor to the GDP, and spearheads the Selangor vision to achieve developed status by the year 2005. In line with this vision, infrastructure development has been emphasized, and by capitalizing on federal projects, Selangor currently has the best transportation network system as well as port and airport facilities in the country. In addition, sophisticated telecommunication and postal networks as well as the almost ubiquitous supply of electricity and piped water throughout the state ensure that Selangor residents enjoy a high standard of living in the state.

Development has made Selangor an ideal land of opportunities for migrants from other parts of the country. The population in the state has increased drastically by about 9% annually between 1995 and 2000, from 2.7 million to 3.9 million (Halimatun 2001a). In terms of area, Selangor with 7956 square kilometers represents only 2% of the total area in Malaysia. However, the current population density of residential areas in the state is about 13 times higher than the national level. The increased population is stressing the state's resources and is threatening the ability

of the government to ensure that the residents enjoy a reasonable quality of life. Signs of unsustainability have become more pronounced, particularly in the late 1990s. This is manifested by the increasing economic divide between urban and rural areas, imbalance in the accessibility to public amenities as well as marginalisation and poverty in certain sectors of the communities. Social problems such as high crime rates as well as erosion of family values have been rising, as reflected by increasing rates of divorce, domestic violence and juvenile crime (Government of Selangor 2000).

In addition to this, Selangor is also paying the price of not giving enough emphasis to environmental matters. Environmental policy in the state has often been subordinated to economic and employment policy, and is in many instances treated as an unrelated issue. As a result of rapid development, several negative elements related to the environment have surfaced. Poor air and water quality poses a considerable challenge to the state. Apart from this, geohazard occurrences such as floods, flash floods, landslides and subsidence have increased over the past decade. This is partly due to inherent weaknesses in the implementation of development plans (Pereira & Ibrahim Komoo 1998).

Realization that new approaches are required to ensure proper planning in response to the challenges motivated the Town and Country Planning Department of Selangor to initiate a project to develop strategies and actions to shift the direction of development towards sustainability. The state government, already well aware of the need to ensure development that is sustainable provided strong support and readily funded this initiative.

## THE MOVE TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

### **The Approach**

Since UNCED in 1992, many countries have gone on to incorporate sustainability strategies into their policies at the national, provincial and local levels. International funding agencies have also promoted many Agenda 21 initiatives, particularly in developing countries. Many of the Agenda 21 initiatives have focused on Chapter 28, which focuses on implementation of sustainable development at the local level of government.

Local Agenda 21 offers a holistic approach to incorporate sustainability in local policies across all sectors, with the involvement of the community. Local Agenda 21 initiatives focused on the local authority level, as this was deemed to be the level closest to the community. The assumption was that at this level, there would be autonomy to levy taxes and develop policies within most sector areas.

The bottom-up approach was promoted whereby local authorities worked in partnership with non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders. With time, it became apparent that such initiatives have not been particularly effective in the local context, especially in the absence of supportive policies from the national levels of government (Voisey et al. 1996; Williams 1996). Furthermore, Local Agenda 21 is treated as being less important compared to mainstream development planning activities, which are essentially “top-down” in approach (Counsell 1999). For example, in Sweden where the national government has a strong reliance on the municipal level, the lack of a national Agenda 21 strategy has inhibited Local Agenda 21 work. There is insufficient guidance from the national level and funding is limited to assist local sustainable development efforts (Eckerberg & Forsberg 1998). In fact, before the World Summit on Sustainable Development, local governments conveyed the message that action plans “are impossible to implement in isolation from the policies, investments and programmes of other spheres of governments” (ICLEI 2002).

Given this global scenario, the approach adopted by the Selangor government was innovative and comprehensive, combining both the “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches, modified for the existing three tiered governance mechanism (Government of Selangor 2000, 2001). In this approach, principles, strategies and strategic action plans were formulated at the state level with the participation of all stakeholders. These were then channelled directly to various agencies involved in policy-making, planning and implementation. These agencies, in particular the state agencies, federal agencies operating in the state and local authorities, then become jointly responsible for formulating and implementing programmes, projects and activities related to sustainable development, in conjunction with all stakeholders. The agencies are also required to formally report the progress of their initiatives to the state.

### **The Outcomes**

The state government has published and declared Selangor’s Commitment to Sustainable Development. The Commitment articulates the government’s desire to achieve sustainability in ten key areas i.e. economic growth, social development, environmental conservation and natural resource utilisation, governance, human resource development, public participation and responsibility, industrial expansion, agriculture and rural development, infrastructure development and urban settlements.

Selangor’s Commitment to Sustainable Development underpinned the project on Strategies for Sustainable Development and Agenda 21 Selangor, which was initiated in 1998. The main objective of this project was to formulate strategies and action plans for implementing sustainable

development, in line with the government's aspiration to achieve developed status by the year 2005. Among the documents that have resulted from this project are:

- ❖ Strategies for Sustainable Development in Selangor (1999)
- ❖ Agenda 21 Selangor (2001)
- ❖ Guidelines for Implementing Agenda 21 Selangor (2002)

**Strategies for Sustainable Development in Selangor** is guided by Selangor's Commitment to Sustainable Development. It also embraces the aspiration framed by political processes at the global level as articulated in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The recommendations in this document takes into account governance mechanisms that prevail in Selangor as well as existing approaches that incorporates environmental considerations in the process of balanced development (Government of Selangor 2000). Four fundamental principles are introduced. These are a comprehensive approach to decision-making, integrated and participatory planning, an appreciation of cross-sectoral inter-relatedness, and incremental change. Policy statements present various principles and strategies related to cross sectoral and sectoral issues. Cross sectoral issues include economic, community and environmental sustainability, in conjunction with human resource development, good governance as well as public participation and responsibility. Sectoral issues include sustainability in resource utilisation, urbanisation and industrialization as well as infrastructure, agriculture and rural development.

**Agenda 21 Selangor** is a strategic action plan to develop the state based on a holistic approach and the concept of sustainability (Government of Selangor 2001). Over 700 strategic actions have been identified based on the strategies for sustainable development. The formulation of the action plan utilized participatory techniques such as round table dialogues, focus group discussions and consensus building involving all stakeholders, as well as results of research on the current status of development. There are three main components to Agenda 21 Selangor. These are the critical agenda, sectoral agenda, and cross sectoral agenda (Ibrahim Komoo & Pereira 2002). The critical agenda highlights preparatory measures that have to be taken immediately in order to implement Agenda 21 Selangor. Such measures include updating of information networks, identification of special implementation agencies, capacity building and enhancement of public participation. The sectoral agenda highlights measures that could be an extension of existing programmes, and can thus be implemented easily in the short and medium terms. The cross sectoral agenda requires a paradigm shift in

order to be implemented as it demands a major shift in the current system of governance. This agenda has to be implemented in stages, in a continual manner, taking into account the overall level of readiness of all stakeholders. The implementation of Agenda 21 Selangor requires various stakeholders to translate the strategic action plans into programmes, projects and activities suited for their needs. A state level Sustainable Development Council has been established to coordinate this exercise and monitor the progress of the state towards sustainability. The Council is supported by a Steering Committee and an Implementation Committee, and assisted by a Sustainable Development Unit as the Secretariat.

**Guidelines for Implementing Agenda 21 Selangor** outlines the practical steps to translate the strategic action plans of Agenda 21 Selangor into programmes, projects and activities for subsequent implementation (Government of Selangor 2002). It covers aspects of policy and decision making, planning and implementation of sustainable development, as well as and monitoring of sustainability. It also takes into account a comprehensive approach to decision-making, the need for integrated planning, and an appreciation of cross-sectoral inter-relatedness as well as gradual incremental action by stakeholders. The guidelines can be utilised by all agencies in the federal, state and local levels, as well as the private sector, community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations to produce their respective Local Agenda 21 Selangor. The government agencies and local authorities in Selangor have already commenced on the process of preparing their respective Local Agenda 21 Selangor (Halimatun 2001b).

#### FUTURE CHALLENGES

It is unrealistic to anticipate a total positive response in the initiative to implement Agenda 21 Selangor, where every stakeholder whether an individual, agency or organisation, would progress forward in harmony and at the same speed. Stakeholders have limited time, capacity, resources and understanding to analyse all conceivable options in translating the strategic actions into programmes, projects and activities suited for their needs. This is one of the reasons for proposing incremental change as a fundamental principle in the implementation of Agenda 21 Selangor. Unfortunately, the concept of incrementalism is much maligned because it is associated with a sluggish pace of improvement, in a world where many perceive as needing significant political, economic and social reforms. A fair number of criticisms have been leveled at this concept but many of these have been found to be groundless (Weiss & Woodhouse 1992). Incremental changes are

reportedly not proactive, lacking goal orientation and ambitions. They are also viewed as being excessively conservative, the practice of changes in small steps denoting an inherent limitation on the desirable size of the policy shift. This may be true to a certain degree. However, the spirit of incremental change proposed for the implementation of Agenda 21 Selangor does not exclude calls for rapid scale-ups that are not incremental in nature. There may be occasions where urgent need justify drastic shifts rather than small steps. Successful implementation requires that clear political consensus on goals be obtained early on, so that the stakeholders can make the necessary up-front commitments. Thus, one of the challenges in implementing Agenda 21 Selangor is to recognize occasions that require drastic shifts and respond in an appropriate manner, especially when mistakes are revealed and goals change.

The approach adopted to implement Agenda 21 Selangor was designed to encourage gradual assimilation of sustainability principles at all levels of the government machinery within the state. The formulation of principles, strategies and strategic actions utilised several participatory techniques. A “space” was created to engage policy and decision-makers from all levels of the government i.e. the state agencies, federal agencies operating in the state and local authorities, as well as community-based organisation, non-governmental organisations and the private sector, in refocusing development towards sustainability. Using this approach, sustainability principles have a better chance of being incorporated into statutory planning processes and infiltrating all spheres of government in the state. As the government agencies and local authorities implement their respective Local Agenda 21 Selangor, the challenge will be to maintain the use of participatory techniques and experiment with new participatory structures and methods, to create the necessary “space” to revitalize policy and decision-making.

Mindset changes are critical to bring about development that is sustainable. The mindset of every individual, group, committee, implementation agency and decision-making body have to be focused on achieving sustainable development objectives. To bring about mindset changes, the need for holistic approaches as well as long term and integrated planning have to be understood and appreciated. The knowledge that natural resources are finite and that there is a limit to the carrying capacity of the environment has to be acknowledged and respected. In addition, the value of real development, where well being of the local community is central, should be inculcated. The challenge lies in effecting mindset changes that enshrine sustainability principles as a way of life, so that in every policy, programme and plan proposed as well as decision made, the trade-offs between environment and development is given serious consideration.



In order to address challenges posed by cross sectoral issues holistic and integrative approaches are required. Policies and legislation on cross sectoral issues as well as guidelines for preparing holistic policies, plans and programmes are critical for successful implementation of Agenda 21 Selangor. In addition, the governance system has to be adequately modified so that it does not impede the institutionalisation of the sustainable development agenda. These two aspects pose a major challenge for the sustainability of the Agenda 21 Selangor initiative. There are several prerequisites that have to be met before addressing this challenge. These include provision of adequate resources, enhancing the capacity of human resource, development of an integrated database for informed decision-making, and increasing the participation of local communities.

Monitoring and reporting mechanisms are critical to measure progress towards sustainability. In this context, it is important that sustainable development indicators be identified and utilised. Sustainable development indicators will provide a quantitative measure for the government and community to assess progress and set targets for achievement. It can also be used to modify the implementation of Local Agenda 21 Selangor, to suit the needs of specific areas. The challenge will be to identify a core set of indicators and a flexible framework to measure progress at the state, agency and local levels, and report this information to the community.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The move towards sustainability in Selangor requires top-level commitment and a high level of engagement from all stakeholders. Its success depends on the provision of clear policy and adequate resources, strengthening of the planning system and capacity to make multi-sectoral and integrated decisions. This initiative, albeit at the initial stage, is significant in serving as a living exemplar of the praxis of sustainability. It has the potential to contribute to a sustainable world, not only by its substantive physical inputs and outputs, but by educating the broader audience about what is possible when there is commitment from key bureaucrats as well as tacit political will.

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