

Save our vanishing kampung

CAUTION: We have to be mindful of our heritage, lest we lose our culture, richness and diversity in our pursuit of development



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I WAS transiting in Singapore some time back and got to talking to an elderly Chinese janitor toiling away at the airport terminal. Nowadays, the conversation very quickly revolves around the economy and how difficult it is to make ends meet.

In Singapore, like in Malaysia, people on the streets are the ones who feel it the most, but with one difference, according to my janitor friend. In Malaysia, there is still the vibrant kampung (village), a sanctuary where people can still have a good chance to survive when it comes to the crunch. The kampung serves as a reliable safety net, no matter how advanced the economy, provided it is kept intact.

Otherwise, the more urbanised and "developed" the kampung is, the more dire is the situation. In his own words, "*Kita sama mati lor!* (We die together)", as there is no better place to go. In fact, he made it plain that he would make his way back to his kampung in neighbouring Johor should the situation warrant it.

The city-state had somewhat exhausted whatever was left of the kampung, he lamented.

The brief encounter was a timely reminder of what a kampung is all about — a word synonymous with "abundance" before its equilibrium was tempered by "development", which we have now recognised as being "unsustainable".

Unfortunately, this lesson is not learned well, if at all. Thus, as the year comes to a close, we mourn of yet another tragedy in the making — the vanishing kampung.

This is particularly apparent in Penang, where accusations and counter-accusations have been hogging the headlines as the kampung folk are rendered into mere pawns. Reportedly, another kampung on

the island, notably Kampung Selut near Sungai Pinang, is allegedly set for redevelopment.

Some 5,000 residents, who have been living in the Sungai Pinang area since the 1960s, were given a helping hand by the then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein under the slum clearance programme for "squatters" to own land and houses.

But lately, Penang Island City Council Mayor Datuk Patahiyah Ismail insisted there was no such plan to redevelop or evict villagers.

She stressed that she had never approved of any development project at the site. However, a survey has been conducted to see if "there is a need for improvements to the village", according to the mayor.

To this, Masjid Kampung Sungai Pinang chairman Ibrahim Din

claimed a survey on the proposal to redevelop the area was sent to the villagers by the authorities.

He claimed the village was slotted to be redeveloped into a mixed housing project.

Redevelopment or otherwise, issues related to sustainable development and the sustainability of the kampung cannot be overemphasised. What is more to obliterate a whole kampung and its inhabitants under whatever pretext or ploy.

There have been too many works in literature that chronicled how the likes of kampung are disappearing or made to disappear worldwide, so much so that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) has to register them under the list of World Heritage Sites.

While some are threatened by senseless wars, others are threatened by senseless "development".

Closer to home, some have highlighted that Unesco World Heritage Site in George Town is not just about physical structure, but equally vital is the living heritage promoting lifestyles that once defined the society in a sustainable way.

Yet, they are in danger of dying because the ambience where they thrived is being transformed and

"developed", at the same time, demolishing irreplaceable values and cultures that have been the foundation of a sustainable community.

What is more if it involves unscrupulous planners and greedy developers linked to some subtle political agenda.

The immediate impact is the destruction of livelihood on which the community depends on with its long-lasting consequences. This then leads to an exodus of the younger generation as the kampung gasps for breath, leaving the elderly helplessly on their own.

In the final analysis, what started as physical (re)development will lend itself to a lingering socio-cultural suicide over a period of time!

Coupled with the disappearance of the kampung is the disappearance of local languages and traditions, which in turn, robs Malaysia of its richness, diversity and cultural balance, and living heritage.

This is one discourse that has not been fully explored in the nation's future since sustainable development is a prominent blind spot in the framework of 2020.

Given we are barely five years away from the 2020 goals of a "developed" nation, we must be mindful of what we will forever lose by targeting the kampung in the name of "development" — learning from the bitter experiences of my janitor friend!

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