

# SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AGENDA 21

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## ABSTRACT

The much-talked about issues such as the rising of heavy crime cases, problems in solid waste management, air and water pollution as well as traffic congestion deterring the quality of life among urban community members. Urgent and proactive measure is highly desirable in order to preserve and maintain the integral parts of urban's higher quality of life. All parties should take part in ongoing efforts to achieve sustainable development through various means. Local Agenda 21 (LA21) serves as one of the efforts in achieving the ultimate goal of sustainable development through better collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders including local government, non-governmental organisations and the community at large. The core principle of the LA21 program lies in the spirit of cooperation among community members, local authorities and the private sectors. This could be achieved through various activities including from the beginning such as through a comprehensive planning for the local area to achieve the sustainable development. Community members should be involved in brainstorming of the ideas and expressing their views so that authorities would be able to identify the real and arising issues in the community. Through this way a sustainable town and municipal planning could be developed and initiated. This paper discusses the importance of urban community participation in achieving sustainable development as practiced through LA21 in Seberang Perai Municipal Council, Penang.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development; community development; Local Agenda 21 (LA21)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation is an ongoing process with its ultimate goal to achieve better quality of life among urbanites. Unfortunately, as it progressing forward it was also undeliberately producing some damages affected not only the physical but also the socio-cultural aspects of the environment and the people. First and foremost, urbanisation has contributed to the overuse of natural resources many of which are not renewable. At the other end, urbanisation has also produced a great amount of solid and dissolved waste (Leitman, 1999). Often urbanisation needs and uses natural resources that could not be renewed, ecologically harmful and contributing largely to the environmental pollution (Evan et. al., 2005). For instance, a large-scale land development causes the area to be exposed to erosion, landslides and shallowing the rivers and often causing flash flood to lower areas (Bruton, 2007). The activities also lead to the socio-economy problems among urban community such as the issues of urban poverty, health, education, housing, water supply, traffic congestion, river pollution and etc. (Nijkamp & Perrels, 1994; Unsworth 2004). These are the common problems faced by urban community that often lead to the decline of the quality of life in urban areas (Fodor, 1998; Nijkamp & Perrels, 1994).

## 2. DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

A city should be capable to offer and prepare an appropriate and convenient life for its community (Abdul Samad Hadi et. al., 2006). In this respect, the development process should take into consideration the concept of sustainability so that the wellbeing and the quality of life among urban community could be achieved. Some important steps that need to be highly considered are to maintain a balance in economic growth, to prepare a proper housing planning, to offer a better educational opportunities, better transportation and health services and to strengthen the security and safety in public domain and residential areas (JPBD, 2008).

Sustainable development activities could also lead to the formation of sustainable urban community, a community that serves as a balance factor in maintaining a proper urban lifestyle that suits with the natural environment (Ibrahim Ngah; 2009). Sustainable urban community also has the capability to practise the principles of sustainable development through knowledge generation and cultural preservation (Khairul Hisyam Kamarudin & Ibrahim Ngah, 2004). Among the basic principles in producing sustainable community are to develop a community that uphold their personal and societal wellbeing, to implement the sustainable development concept that benefits not only the present community but also cares for the future generations, to practise a fair distribution of resources and to maintain affordable cost of maintenance for public utilities.

Active participation of the community members enabled the authorities to identify the basic societal needs to be addressed in developing a comprehensive planning for further development in urban areas. As authorities are facing great challenges to gather exact information and data due to time constrain and lack of staffing, active and larger participation of the urban community members would certainly be very helpful for sustainable development initiatives and developing a sustainable urban community. Better public participation would also resulted in better understanding of the best approach in urban sustainable development planning and hence this would certainly be interpreted properly during implementation phases (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002; Grove & Procter, 1966; Oii Peng Hong, 1986; Dietz & Stern, 2008).

Creating a sustainable urban community is not one party initiative or base only on one deciding factor, other parties particularly the authorities should also take more active role through effective policy implementation and practicing a good governance (Rogers et. al., 2008). In the Eighth Malaysia Plan the government has put a greater emphasise on systematic

planning and effective management of every project to ensure the success of sustainable urban development.

### 3. THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AND AGENDA 21

Local authority office in each urban area is a government institution initiated to have a closer link with local urban community. It was through this entity that national policy and agenda disseminated to the people so that the goal of creating a sustainable urban community could be achieved. Due to its importance towards achieving this goal, local authorities throughout the world have been considered as one of the most significant entities in the countries. Local authorities were given a special focus by the United Nations during the Rio Earth Summit 1992 under the 'Local Agenda 21' (LA21) initiative, specifically on the effort to formulate a strategy for sustainable development (Gouldson & Roberts, 1999). Chapter 28 of the Local Agenda 21 has outlined:

*“Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development”*  
(Agenda 21, 1992)

It was clear that local authorities were given a greater role in managing urban areas towards achieving sustainable development and developing a sustainable urban community particularly through its own policy and regulation. Prior to LA21, local authorities role were always seen as limited to certain policy implementation often control at central government or national level authority (Hom, 2002). This change of role has been endorsed by the United Nations to boost the effort of rendering success to the mandate of the global environment (Brugmann, 1996).

LA21 document with 40 chapters related to sustainable development was officially signed by 179 countries, and later published and distributed to member countries (Hill et. al., 2006). Several sections concentrated on the urban sustainability. Chapter 3 elaborates on efforts to combat poverty, Chapter 4 on the aspects of the changing consumption pattern, Chapter 6 promotes and protects human health conditions, Chapter 7 promotes sustainable human settlement development and Chapters 19, 20 and 21 related to environmentally sound management of hazardous wastes, solid wastes and radioactive wastes (Satterthwaite, 1999).

The implementation of LA21 in Malaysia had started back in 2000 involving four local authorities in the pioneer project including Kuantan Municipal Council, Miri Municipal Council, Petaling Jaya Municipal Council and Kerian Municipal Council. Initially, the program was funded by the United Nations' Development Program (UNDP) up until 2002. Two LA21 guide books have been published entitled 'Malaysia LA21 Guide Book and Case Study' and 'Malaysia LA21 Training Manual'. Between years 2003 to 2008 the programme was expanded to other local authorities involving 46 Municipal Councils and District Councils (Malaysia, 2003; Mariana et. al., 2008). In 2011, the number increases to 117 local authorities (Local Government Department, 2011). The great commitment shown by these local authorities to implement LA21 is a good sign towards achieving and strengthening sustainable development in Malaysia.

The LA21 program also promotes the cooperation among urban community, local authorities and private sectors in local area planning initiative to achieve sustainable development. LA21

also emphasises on the role of local people in analysing issues related to sustainable development and later picked up by local authorities to form an appropriate action plan to address the arising issues. This is part of the documentation from Agenda 21 which stresses on local problem-solving especially in rural areas, guided by an action plan and program implementation (Mariana et. al. 2008). LA21 program is also in line with government efforts to promote and inculcate environmental-friendly culture and practices among fellow Malaysians through active involvement of private sectors and non-governmental organisations. Closer collaboration is instilled between the stakeholders and NGOs in addressing environmental and natural resources issues. This collaboration should also be able to enhance the efforts of environmental protection and natural resource preservation, and later to contribute towards the improvement of the quality of life among urban community (Malaysia, 2006).

#### **4. CASE STUDY: LOCAL AGENDA 21 IN SEBERANG PERAI, PENANG**

LA21 was officially launched in Seberang Perai Municipal Council in June 2002 in line with the launch of the second phase of LA21 at national level involving all Municipal and City Councils. A special committee related to the planning and implementation of LA21 has been established comprising various parties. The committee was headed by the President of Seberang Perai Municipal Council who served as the project manager, assisted by LA21 Management Committee consisting of a director and two facilitators. The MPSP LA21 Management Unit is responsible to perform several functions including: i) managing the implementation of LA21, ii) providing technical support, iii) monitoring progress, iv) coordinating logistic support, v) providing administrative and secretarial support, and vi) serving as a facilitator. LA21 director and facilitators were the back-bones of the initiative in developing and deploying the LA21 program in Seberang Perai Municipal Council. The LA21 Management Unit also served to coordinate LA21 programs with the assistance from other parties including Unity District Officer, officer-in charge of police district (OCPD), State and Federal Departments, several directors at the Seberang Perai Municipal Council as well as non-governmental organisations.

The LA21 Project Management Committee role is to connect local authority with other parties in implementing LA21. This committee was also responsible to form, initiate and operate special task groups, conduct meeting regularly, monitor the project's progress as well as to implement and monitor the action plans. The role of this committee in the study area was very large and in terms of LA21 implementation there was another party that played an important role in guiding the LA21 program in Seberang Perai Municipal Council namely the Council Members. The Council Members have a very close relation with local community and thus this could facilitate and speed up the bilateral relations between Seberang Perai Municipal Council and the public.

LA21 working teams played a direct role in implementing the programs in the field. There are six LA21 working teams in Seberang Perai Municipal Council which also involved community representatives. The working teams are LA21 Eco-friendly Working Team, LA21 Women Excellent Working Team, LA21 Green Industry Promotion Working Team, LA21 Electronic Waste Disposal (*e-waste*) Working Team, LA21 Animal-care Working Team and LA21 PPR Ampangan Flat Working Team. These working teams carried out the programs according to the scope, analysing local issues in depth, proposing objectives, actions and markers, preparing the action plan draft and implementing and monitoring the action plan.

Various programs implemented throughout the year covering a wide range of activities. The increase in the number of programs organised showed that they were all well received by the public. In 2008, there were only 51 programs and this number increased to 61 in 2009, 141 in 2010, 170 in 2011 and 2012, and 62 activities in 2013 (Seberang Perai Municipal Council, 2014). Among the programs regularly implemented and had received encouraging responses

from the public are mud ball making program, throwing mud ball into the river, kitchen waste compost program, recycling program, LA21 exhibitions and environmental awareness workshops. These programs had well received and participated by various levels of society including members of residential areas and school students.

According to the LA21 Director for Seberang Perai Municipal Council, the main objective of LA21 in this area is to assist the council in managing issues related to sustainable development. Initially, LA21 program should be able to solve the problems related to waste management, environmental pollution, poverty and the rest through the inculcation of social awareness, changing of attitudes and community's collaboration in working together to protect the environment. Observation in the study area shows that LA21 did created awareness within the community to protect the environment (LA21 Program Director, Seberang Perai Municipal Council, 2011).

Seberang Perai Municipal Council had successfully implemented various programs throughout the year with the cooperation from private sector as well as the public. It was discovered that the programs organized were able to deliver the knowledge, inculcate the awareness and train skills in protecting the environment. The implementation of LA21 programs in Seberang Perai Municipal Council was also achieved its success due to commitment shown by officers and members of the council who had spent a great deal of time, ideas and energy. The participation of urban community in LA21 programs is entirely voluntary in nature and they have shown a great cooperation spending their weekends purposely for the programs. While the commitment shown by the management of Seberang Perai Municipal Council was heavily driven by Penang State Government's policy known as "*A Cleaner Greener Penang*".

The LA21 program in the study area was also received overwhelming responses from local residents from Taman Sri Rambai, Taman Keenways, Taman Desa Damai, Taman Bagan Lalang at Central Seberang Perai, Penang. Public participation in the LA21 programs is greatly influenced by their knowledge about the program and other external factors such as their time availability, confidence towards the achievement of the programs' objectives and on the credibility of the community and political leaders. On one hand political factor had successfully attracted many followers from specific political parties to take part in LA21 and on the other hand it also distracted followers from other political parties to take part since many of these later group assumed that the programs were politically motivated and do not represent their political belief.

Other factors also contributed to the success of LA21 programs including the public trust and confidence in their leaders and close neighbourhood relationship and contacts as observed in the study area. Most of the respondents who attended the program said that they had received the information regarding the programs mostly from their contacts and neighbours. The findings from this study show that 43.2 percent of respondents attended the program after received the information from their contacts, 20.4 percent after received the information from neighbours, 15.6 percent from family members and the remaining 12.8 percent from community leaders. Overall, this finding also proved that the sense of togetherness among community members had contributed partly to the success of LA21 programs organised by the council.

Knowledge concerning sustainable development had a significant positive relationship with the level of awareness in sustainable development and the desire to participate regularly in LA21 programs. This mean that higher knowledge about sustainable development contributed to the higher level of awareness in sustainable development and interest in the LA21 programs. The awareness of sustainable development also influenced the respondents' interest to participate in the LA21 program. These three variables are closely inter-related.

The implementation of LA21 in the study area also shows that respondents' experience in participating LA21 program had a significant positive relationship with their knowledge on sustainable development. This means that if the respondent get involved in LA21 programs their knowledge about the environment and issues related to sustainable development is also increased. Most of the participants agreed that they are interested in attending the program regularly. A total of 23 percent of respondents are interested in joining the program each week, 25.6 percent are interested in joining the program every two weeks and 24.8 percent are interested in participating in the program once per month. This large percentage shows that the respondents' interest in LA21 program is good. However, the results of this study show that respondents' interest to participate in planning and implementing the program involving the LA21 committee and attending dialogues with government agencies are below average.

The result of this study also shows that LA21 program had created an impact in increasing knowledge, developing skills, inculcating positive attitudes, aspirations and behaviour towards sustainability. Descriptive analysis of these outcomes show that the score increased after respondents participated in the program. Mean value of each question generally increased by 1 after respondents participated in the program compared to the scores prior to the participation (see Table 1). These changes show that the LA21 programs had successfully provided inputs to the participants. The classification of the level of knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations and behaviour of the respondents before and after the program which was divided into three levels namely 'Low', 'Medium' and 'High' also reflected that the number of respondents under the 'High' level was larger after the participation (see Table 2). The 'Low' and 'Medium' showed completely contrasting pattern where it was found that the number of respondents that fell into these levels smaller after they had participated in the programs. This shows that after participating in the programs more respondents had better level of understanding, skills and positive attitudes.

**Table 1: LA21 Program Outcome**

ITEM		(1) Very Low	(2) Low	(3) Moderate	(4) Good	(5) Very Good	Min
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
Knowledge about environment	Before	12 (4.8)	40 (16.0)	94 (37.6)	66 (26.4)	38 (15.2)	3.31
	After	4 (1.6)	6 (2.4)	24 (9.6)	92 (36.8)	124 (49.6)	4.30
My knowledge about sustainable development	Before	31 (12.4)	79 (31.6)	85 (34.0)	36 (14.4)	19 (7.6)	2.73
	After	5 (2.0)	25 (10.0)	73 (29.2)	90 (36.0)	57 (22.8)	3.67
My knowledge about Local Agenda 21	Before	68 (27.2)	77 (30.8)	70 (28.0)	25 (10.0)	10 (4.0)	2.33
	After	13 (5.2)	44 (17.6)	74 (29.6)	82 (32.8)	37 (14.8)	3.34
My appreciation on the environment	Before	15 (6.0)	31 (12.4)	73 (29.2)	88 (35.2)	43 (17.2)	3.45
	After	4 (1.6)	6 (2.4)	22 (8.8)	70 (28.0)	148 (59.2)	4.41
Responsibility to the environment	Before	4 (1.6)	41 (16.4)	121 (48.4)	74 (29.6)	10 (4.0)	3.18
	After	0 (0)	5 (2.0)	26 (10.4)	87 (34.8)	132 (52.8)	4.38
Interest in environmental protection efforts	Before	14 (5.6)	32 (12.8)	72 (28.8)	77 (30.8)	55 (22.0)	3.51
	After	1 (0.4)	13 (5.2)	21 (8.4)	69 (27.6)	146 (58.4)	4.38
Know how to manage solid waste	Before	15 (6.0)	46 (18.4)	100 (40.0)	61 (24.4)	28 (11.2)	3.16
	After	1 (0.4)	10 (4.0)	35 (14.0)	95 (38.0)	109 (43.6)	4.20
Know how to conserve the environment	Before	13 (5.2)	44 (17.6)	99 (39.6)	62 (24.8)	32 (12.8)	3.22
	After	1 (0.4)	13 (5.2)	39 (15.6)	82 (32.8)	115 (46.0)	4.19

My Capacity in reducing environmental pollution	Before	3 (1.2)	74 (29.6)	124 (49.6)	48 (19.2)	1 (.4)	2.88
	After	0 (0)	18 (7.2)	55 (22.0)	97 (38.8)	80 (32.0)	3.96
Sense of belonging	Before	7 (2.8)	32 (12.8)	71 (28.4)	85 (34.0)	55 (22.0)	3.60
	After	0 (0)	9 (3.6)	20 (8.0)	70 (28.0)	151 (60.4)	4.45
Sense of community	Before	17 (6.8)	38 (15.2)	84 (33.6)	75 (30.0)	36 (14.4)	3.30
	After	3 (1.2)	15 (6.0)	32 (12.8)	82 (32.8)	118 (47.2)	4.19
My desire towards environmental protection	Before	8 (3.2)	27 (10.8)	128 (51.2)	85 (34.0)	2 (.8)	3.19
	After	0 (0)	11 (4.4)	30 (12.0)	79 (31.6)	130 (52.0)	4.31
Environmental friendly practices	Before	11 (4.4)	35 (14.0)	84 (33.6)	72 (28.8)	48 (19.2)	3.44
	After	1 (0.4)	11 (4.4)	15 (6.0)	91 (36.4)	132 (52.8)	4.37
Environmental friendly lifestyle	Before	9 (3.6)	34 (13.6)	76 (30.4)	87 (34.8)	44 (17.6)	3.49
	After	2 (.8)	6 (2.4)	21 (8.4)	84 (33.6)	137 (54.8)	4.39
My commitment in reducing pollution	Before	16 (6.4)	60 (24.0)	111 (44.4)	47 (18.8)	16 (6.4)	2.95
	After	6 (2.4)	28 (11.2)	65 (26.0)	89 (35.6)	62 (24.8)	3.69

**Table 2:** Level of Knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations and behaviour before and after the program

ITEM		Before Program	After Program
		N (%)	N (%)
Knowledge level	Low	12 (4.8)	0 (0)
	Medium	192 (76.8)	94 (37.6)
	High	46 (18.4)	156 (62.4)
Attitudes level	Low	1 (0.4)	0 (0)
	Medium	126 (50.4)	17 (6.8)
	High	123 (49.2)	233 (93.2)
Skills level	Low	3 (1.2)	0 (0)
	Medium	176 (70.4)	39 (15.6)
	High	71 (28.4)	211 (84.4)
Aspirations level	Low	1 (0.4)	0 (0)
	Medium	131 (52.4)	30 (12.0)
	High	118 (47.2)	220 (88.0)
Behaviour level	Low	5 (2.0)	1 (0.4)
	Medium	143 (57.2)	35 (14.0)
	High	102 (40.8)	214 (85.6)

## 5. EFFECTIVENESS OF STAKEHOLDERS' ROLE IN LA21 PROGRAM

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government through the Department of Local Government had successfully introduced LA21 concept to local authorities in Malaysia with the total of 117 local authorities taken the initiative and implemented it in 2010. Organisational guidance and assistance including the financial supports and training courses facilitated many local authorities to carry out the program in their respective areas. However, some problems had also faced by the department including the problem of the provision of financial assistance, lack of supporting staffs, poor monitoring system and promotional activities.

Generally, Seberang Perai Municipal Council had obviously successful in implementing various LA21 programs throughout the year with the cooperation of the private sectors and the public at large. Programs organised had enabled the public to be exposed to new knowledge, awareness and skills concerning the efforts to protect the environment and to participate in sustainable development initiatives. Although most of the programs were focussing on selected housing estates, schools and industrial areas within the Seberang Perai region, the LA21 program had shown its ability to grow in larger areas in the future.

The role of government agencies such as Department of Environment, Department of Agriculture, Department of Irrigation and Drainage, Department of Veterinary Services, Department of National Unity and National Integration and the Department of Education is highly regarded as they had contributed very much in assisting the council to implement LA21. However, participation among private sectors is seen as at lower level and something need to be done in order to attract them to participate. Many of the existing private sectors involved were those who had previously worked with the Seberang Perai Municipal Council in implementing the LA21 program. They had shown strong commitment and delivered sustained contributions in form of financial assistance. The Seberang Perai Municipal Council need to develop better relationship with private sectors in order to attract them to work together in LA21 program.

## 6. STRENGTHENING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LA21

Generally, the implementation of LA21 in Malaysia does not received much attention at national level. In the future, the state governments should do more in order to mobilise local authorities in promoting and implementing LA21 program. Formulating new policies that concern more on the issues of preservation and conservation of the environment could indirectly drive local authorities to carry out LA21 programs aggressively. For instance, in Penang the implementation of LA21 through *Cleaner Greener Penang* policy had a big impact. LA21 implementation, which is currently voluntary in nature, should be made compulsory to all local authorities. It is about time the program be mandated directly to all local authorities by state government in collaboration with private sectors, government departments, schools and other stakeholders.

The implementation of LA21 programs focussing on specific areas had unfortunately neglected other larger areas, especially the suburbs. In the future, the LA21 program should be expanded to larger areas and covered the entire area under the management of the local authority. This requires close cooperation between local authorities and community and other organisations in the area. Community leaders and organisations should also play their role in getting LA21 program organised within their areas.

The programs should also be diversified to include the participation of various group of people regardless of race, political party and belief, age groups. Programs that are beneficial and having a great potential towards improving the society and environment at large should



be introduced in the future without sacrificing its attractive nature so that more participation could be derived.

Structural improvement of the implementing organisations particularly the local authorities in Malaysia is highly needed in order to address LA21 program in a specific manner. A special unit that focussing their tasks only on planning, implementing and monitoring programs related to LA21 should be established. This special unit could assist and cooperate with other departments and serve as a one-stop-center for entire LA21 programs related to sustainable development and the environment. To ensure the effectiveness of this unit, it must comprise of experts trained in sustainable development.

At community level, a special committee deals specifically on the environmental issues or sustainable development should also be established. For instance, at Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) level there should be a special committee focussing on sustainable development and environmental conservation. This requires committee members to be knowledgeable in the subject, having environmental interest and awareness on sustainable development, at least to the level of dissemination of programs' objectives to the lower level. The committee members should also need to be active working together with government agencies and other parties involved in carrying out sustainable development agenda.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Effective implementation of Local Agenda 21 would become the basis for establishing sustainable communities in urban areas. LA21 programs as implemented by Seberang Perai Municipal Council had shown that there was an increase in knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations and behaviours related to the sustainable development among the people who participated. Efforts to realize sustainable community require a proper planning and continuous commitments among many parties involved to achieve the desired goal as states in LA21.

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