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URBANISATION AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE IN NEWLY URBANISED COMMUNITIES**Abdul Hadi Harman Shah, Julaihi Wahid and Junaenah Sulehan****INTRODUCTION**

Sustainable urbanisation begins with the understanding that what is to be sustained and developed is the quality of life of the people - past, present and future. Sustainable urbanisation is based on the premise that planners and policy makers do not have a tabula rasa, an empty slate, to begin with. Cities are a cultural identity as much, perhaps even more, than it is physical. It is more structural than it is spatial, and culture is an important ingredient to that structure, such that if cities are to sustain itself, culturally as well as physically, the planning needs to look at the potential provided for by local culture and not see it as unnecessary baggage. Even worse, we cannot assume we plan for a people without tradition or with an unimportant background. Otherwise one would be losing out on an important ingredient in community building.

Housing programmes are designed not merely to provide shelter but rather the continuity and advancement of communities. Urbanisation story of Malaysia in general and Sarawak in particular is such that new urban housing plays an important role in uplifting many rural communities into the urban. Housing programmes not serve as residential units, they provide a place where the ruralites can begin to adapt and change with the needs of the urban.

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by

Abdul Hadi Harman Shah, Julaihi Wahid
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INTRODUCTION

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Housing programmes are designed not merely to provide shelter but rather the continuity and advancement of communities. Urbanisation story of Malaysia in general and Sarawak in particular is such that new urban housing plays an important role in uplifting many rural communities into the urban. Housing programmes not serve as residential units, they provide a place where the ruralites can begin to adapt and change with the needs of the urban.

It should be noted that the main purpose of housing ownership programmes is to develop communities and not merely to create shelters that can as well be served through rental programmes. The RPR programmes in Sarawak – *Rancangan Perumahan Rakyat* – serve

this dual function of urbanising the rural as well as providing shelter. It has been argued that what is expected is that it maintains the best of the rural traits while embracing a new world view allowing the community to survive in the new millenium. An important ingredient to that success is the ability of culture to retain itself while being flexible to change. The retention of core values while adapting to changing situations is the definition of cultural resilience used in this paper.

The experience of urbanisation – sustainable or otherwise

The experience of urbanisation is becoming increasingly global. The need to be sure that the urban experience presented is that of increasing quality of life is an important consideration. When the government sets up a new housing area, the hope is that it will allow for the growth and development of the individual as well as the community. Has all that been achieved or has it brought even worse situations? Culture plays an important role in ensuring a better way of life but culture itself is usually a vague concept.

Malaysia in general and Sarawak in particular are undergoing rapid urbanisation. For decades Sarawak has taken various steps to modernise its rural population to be able to participate fully in the modern economy. Various socio-economic projects, ranging from basic-needs projects to industrial growth investments as well as educational measures have been in place to promote modernisation. However development scenario has changed much since the 1970s. New global forces bear down that change the expected impacts of many of the earlier projects designed. In this millenium and the strong interpenetration of globalisation, there is a need to assess past development and perhaps chart new directions for future planning.

A significant contributor to the modernisation process in Sarawak is the development of new housing schemes for the newly urbanised. These housing schemes represent long term experiments and the state's investment in developing new communities that are able to participate and contribute progress and modernisation.

However these experiments are not without costs, among which are the uprooting of communities and the decay of traditional values. Issues on the impact of modernisation on traditional communities have been much recorded. The decline of local values are voiced the world over and the need to handle the transition from rural to urban is still very much an issue.

The idea of modernisation is one of sustainability. It is posited that traditional communities are not sustainable in its original form. The assumption is that traditional *kampungs* are not able to participate in the modernisation process and would therefore be marginalised and socio-economically excluded from the modern, and the people vulnerable. The goal of modern housing schemes thus are to develop sustainable and strong communities that can participate and grow. These will serve as the new civilisational nexus from which development emanates.

These ideas however are not without flaws. From all over the globe the peripheralisation of urban communities are a major concern while urban poverty and vulnerable communities are on the rise. There is a need to ensure that settlement endeavours do not result in increased poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion – the antitheses of sustainability. There is also a need to ensure that the culture of the residents remains intact.

Yet with modernisation comes a different way of life. Issues of coping mechanisms needed to alleviate impacts of modernisation and changing environment need to be understood if more effective planning of similar housing schemes are to be attempted in the future. Sustainability issues of second generation and the defraying of traditional social networks without adequate urban substitute need to be analysed and made explicit. The mobility and movement of the residents to ensure access to the very modernisation process which brought them from the rural areas also requires study. Encompassing these are the meta-structure of local administration and the very concept of sustainable urbanisation.