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### LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A CARING COMMUNITY: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF RESIDENTS IN A NEW LOW-COST HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN SARAWAK

Gill Raja and Dolly Paul Carlo

#### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

A feature of development is an increase in new estates to house families with low incomes. Such estates create the challenge of how to transform a collection of family units into a caring community.

This paper explores the experiences of residents who have recently moved into a new estate of low-cost flats on the perimeter of an urban area in Sarawak—a state that has a strong tradition of community living and good inter-racial relationships.

The authors argue that to maintain and foster these traditions, the State needs to lay the foundations by (a) developing bond between neighbours through paying attention to how the physical environment affects the social life of a community, (b) facilitating the formation of effective community leadership, (c) providing opportunities for the migrants to stay connected to their communities of origin, (d) enabling the fledgling community to develop effective links to external resources and (e) fostering the development of norms which encourage consideration and care of each other and the shared environment. Ideas on how to practically implement these goals are discussed in relation to building social capital, community landscaping and promoting empowering partnerships between a range of stakeholders. The need to engage residents early in the community life of the estate is stressed. This can be facilitated by employing trained community-oriented social workers to work on the estates.



# LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A CARING COMMUNITY:

## Exploring the experiences of residents in a new low-cost housing development in Sarawak

*by*

Gill Raja and Dolly Paul Carlo

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## FOCUSING ON NEW FOUNDATIONS

The word 'foundations' evokes images of buildings under construction, while the term 'caring community' conjures pictures of people united and reaching out to each other in the spirit of friendship and reciprocity.

Across Malaysia construction of estates to house families is a common site. Developers and local authorities grapple with the economics and the structure of the buildings, their impact on the surrounding environment and how to deal with the increased traffic flow.

Yet who is giving thought how to transform these dwellings into homes and these estates into the desired caring neighbourhood communities? Just as buildings need firm foundations if they are to be strong, so do new social groupings if they are to blossom into healthy communities.

The focus of this paper is therefore to examine the foundations of one such fledging community to explore what lessons can be learnt. The chosen community was a new estate of low-cost, walk-up flats. Both the physical and social foundations were examined as people affect, and are affected, by their environment.

A low-cost development was selected as its residents were deemed more likely to face potentially problematic issues (e.g. higher population density; less facilities, more dependency on public services) than people living in up-market developments, yet have less financial resources and influential networks to help them resolve these difficulties. The particular estate chosen was also the home of the co-author so enabled an insider view of the issues and interactions and easy access to other respondents.

## BEFORE BUILDING COMMENCES

No developer would start work on the foundations of an estate until he had a clear picture of the desired outcome and the necessary supporting pillars required to achieve this goal. Similarly, it is necessary to examine what is meant by the term caring community and what factors are required to support the formation of such a cohesive unit.

### Caring communities

#### *Caring Communities Form a Caring Society*

At the beginning of this article it was stated that caring communities implies people are united and reach out to each other in the spirit of friendship and reciprocity. More commonly the term caring society is used in Malaysia, given the emphasis placed in Vision 2020 on this concept. The seventh challenge, in this defining document for the country's development, makes it clear that the caring concept is envisioned to be part of the cultural practice of the country, encompassing all aspects of caring and have at its core a strong and resilient family (Mahathir, 1991).

The document, however, does not go into detail of how these desirable outcomes will be achieved, or how the pillar of the family is to be strengthened to care for its own members, whilst also contributing to the welfare of the wider society. Evidently, for such goals to be achieved at the national level, the multitude of communities and families which constitute society need to embrace these objectives, and actively work towards their achievement, rather than just endorse the sentiments while leaving people in need to struggle alone. Yet how can this be done? What support do they need?

As Cho pointed out back in 1990, caring society is a slippery concept yet it reflects Malaysians' yearning for an ideal and their disquiet with the apparent reduction in compassion in a more complex developed society (Cho, 1990). It sets a direction for public policy but raises many questions for discussion, including who, other than the

family, are the pillars and how can they work together to establish the caring culture.

### *Community care*

Other countries have approached the issue from a different direction. Internationally the term community care is frequently used to stress that people who require the help of others should receive this within their own home setting rather than in some impersonal, isolated residential institution. The term came into common usage in the 1970s and 1980s to highlight a philosophy of care for people of all ages living with disabilities, either physical or mental, which affected their ability to live independently (Pilgrim & Johnson, 1997). In the Malaysian concept it is seen in the policy of Community Based Rehabilitation, practised by the Department of Welfare, an increasing number of NGOs and more recently the Ministry of Health.

Across the world, community care is also a fundamental principle of child-care services. For well over a generation, professional social workers have striven to keep children in a family and community setting which meets their needs, including children who have shown their problems through delinquent behaviour. The philosophy is also behind many rehabilitation programmes for adult offenders, as seen in probation orders, and community-based support for drug addicts – both steps Malaysian policy makers are becoming increasingly interested in.

Given the scope and history of community care there is a wealth of discourse on the subject. It includes:-

- Definitions of community: - Such definitions now recognise that communities can be based on common location, interest, identification, culture or activities.
- The significance of the local community within this diversity: - The neighbourhood community has a specific relevance as it is the immediate environment; is potentially