

THE ROLE OF RESIDENTS, NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
AND QUASI-PUBLIC AGENCIES IN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MALAYSIA

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I. The Context of Local Government in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with a federal system of government founded on the principles of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. While the Federal Constitution delineates the division of functions and powers between the central government and the thirteen state governments into federal, state, and concurrent lists of subjects of legislative competence, it is a remarkable feature of Malaysian federalism that the balance of political and economic power is overwhelmingly tilted in favour of the Federal Government.

Local government as a subject falls within the state list, which means that all matters pertaining to local government (excepting the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan) are within the exclusive jurisdiction of the respective state legislatures. However, the Federal Government can exert indirect influence and, directly through the National Council for Local Government (a consultative body consisting of all the chief ministers of the states and an equal number of federal ministers), can ensure that state and local government authorities follow national policy. Thus, although the powers of the federal government

are limited to research, advice and technical assistance, the provision and control of finance for capital development projects provide the federal government with an effective, albeit indirect, method of asserting its will over the local government authorities.

In a federal system, local government is essentially infra-sovereign; in Malaysia, local governments are further limited in their jurisdictional competence by the principle of ultra vires, that is local governments can only perform those functions expressly enumerated in their statutes. This means that for most purposes the states are in the position of "superior government" to local authorities.

Evolution of local government in Malaysia

The modern concept of local government in Malaysia had its origins during British colonial rule. The initial forms of local authorities introduced by the British into then Malaya were transplants of their own institutions. While the laws governing the local authorities were based on English laws during the formative years of local government in Malaysia, however, local authorities in Malaysia, through the process of time, have emerged with their own characteristics and identity and laws.

Local government in Malaysia had its beginnings in the states of Penang and Malacca which were part of the Straits Settlements. It was in Penang that the British established a Committee of Assessors in 1801 to "lay out the town in a manner most suitable to the requirements of the inhabitants", ¹ and this laid the foundation for the establishment of local government in this country. Subsequently, a system of local government was established in Malacca, followed by the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, as well as in Sabah and Sarawak. Various legislations and ordinances were formulated that allowed for the setting up of Town Boards and local councils as well as elections to be held. These were for example the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance 1950 whereby provisions were made for Town Boards to be converted into Town Councils so that elections to the Town Councils could be held; the Local Councils Ordinance 1952 whereby local councils could be established in any area if so desired by the residents. In all 289 local councils were established by the end of the colonial period.²

When Malaya ³ gained its independence in 1957, the Federal Constitution came into existence and local government, outside the Federal Capital, became a state matter.

Since the early sixties, the administration of local authorities had been a cause for public concern. Allegations of malpractice and maladministration in the local authorities were often publicly debated and politicized. The three councils of Penang City Council, Johore Bharu Town Council and Seremban Town Council were especially highlighted for allegedly breaching the laws and corrupt practices among the councillors. There were other councils like the Malacca Municipality, and the Kota Bharu, Alor Star and Batu Pahat Town Councils which were unable to discharge their duties and functions effectively due to financial problems. ⁴ In the end, the functioning of these councils had to be taken over by the respective state governments and the Chief Ministers directly administered the affairs of the local authorities.

In the meantime the country experienced an outbreak of hostilities with Indonesia towards the end of 1964. This led to the proclamation of an emergency throughout the country on September 3, 1964. In the face of internal administrative and political problems within the local councils and the violent confrontation against the newly-formed Malaysian federation by Indonesia, local government elections were suspended, with the promulgation of two regulations, namely, the Emergency (Suspension of Local Government Elections) Regulations, 1965, and the Emergency (Suspension of Local Government Elections) Amendments Regulations, 1965. With these regulations, local governments in Malaysia were never to experience another election again, although hostilities between Malaysia and Indonesia were over a long time ago and positive changes had been made to local government in Malaysia.

The turbulent years of the sixties which local governments in Malaysia went through called for a re-examination and restructuring of the entire local government system. It was increasingly felt by the Federal, State and even the local authorities themselves that change was needed to improve the situation. As early as 1963, the National Council for Local Government felt that there should be a complete investigation into the workings of local councils in Peninsular Malaysia. Accordingly, in 1965, a Royal Commission to investigate into the workings of local authorities in West (i.e. Peninsular) Malaysia was appointed in July 1965 under the Chairmanship of the late Senator Datuk Athi Nahappan.

The Commission's Report ⁵ was submitted to the Federal Government in December 1969 but was only released in December 1971. The Commission submitted a comprehensive report but only parts of its recommendations were eventually accepted by the Federal Government. Nevertheless, the Royal Commission's report and its findings provided an important impetus

for subsequent deliberations on the future role and function of local government in this country. It paved the way for the restructuring of the entire local government system in Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak included) when its recommendation of a restructuring of local authorities was adopted and the Federal Government passed the Local Government Act of 1976 to facilitate the process.

The Restructuring of Local Government

With the passing and implementation of the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171), the process for the restructuring of local authorities in Peninsular Malaysia was initiated in December 1976. The Act stipulated that after restructuring only two types of local government authorities would exist, namely Municipal Councils for the urban centres and District Councils for the rural towns. Although the restructuring of all local authorities was planned to be completed within a year of the implementation of the Local Government Act, the process was rather slow. This was because the restructuring depended on the initiative of individual state governments, the channelling of grants from the federal to the state and local authorities and the re-organisation of the machinery of operations at the local level.

Briefly, the restructuring exercise was aimed at achieving certain objectives which can be summarised as follows:

1. that local government should become an effective third tier of governance and to provide efficient service to the community;
2. that local government should plan, implement, and spearhead socio-economic development in the towns and rural areas;
3. that local authorities will be in a position to meet current social and political demands in line with the goals of the New Economic Policy of the country; and
4. to provide opportunities for the people to participate in the process and activities related to the formulation of policy and implementation of development at the local government level.

With the completion of the restructuring exercise, the 374 local authorities that were previously in existence (consisting of City Councils, Town Boards, Town Councils, Rural and District Councils) have been restructured to form 14 Municipal Councils and 79 District Councils in Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah and Sarawak the restructuring had resulted in 6 Municipal Councils (4 in Sabah and 2 in Sarawak) and 39 District Councils (18 in Sabah and 21 in Sarawak). Apart from Kuala Lumpur, the state capitals of Ipoh and Kuching North and South were recently upgraded from Municipal status to that of City Councils.

II. Local Government and the Pattern of Local Participation

Local Government Functions and Activities

In performing its functions, local government in Malaysia has been empowered by three main laws, namely, the Local Government Act 1976, the Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974 and the Town and Country Planning Act 1976. Of these three Acts, the Local Government Act (Act 171) appears to be the most important legal instrument for local authorities in implementing by-laws and for fulfilling their daily functions and tasks. It defines in detail the functions of local authorities and prescribes what can and cannot be performed by local authorities in Peninsular Malaysia. Sabah and Sarawak are not bound by these Acts and their local authorities are governed by their own respective statutes. For this reason, the discussion in this section of the paper relates mainly to Peninsular Malaysia, although the functions and obligations of local government authorities are fairly similar.

According to the Local Government Act, local government in Peninsular Malaysia is given a wide range of services to perform which can be summarised under five main categories, namely Environmental, Public Health and Cleansing, Enforcement and Licensing, Public Amenities, and Social Services and Development Functions. These can be termed as the statutory functions and tasks of local authorities. While the law allows LAs (local authorities) to carry out a whole range of functions, in practice certain services are not or not adequately performed by the local authorities concerned. Depending on the financial capacity and manpower availability of each council, provision of services to the community vary between local authorities. Inevitably visible contrasts can be noticed in terms of physical development, cleanliness and beauty between one local authority area and another. Such distinct differences are normally discernible especially between areas under the MCs (Municipal Councils) and DCs (District Councils). As a matter of principle, all LAs are expected to fulfill their "obligatory" tasks (such as street and drain cleaning, rubbish collection, and other basic community maintenance services), while "discretionary" functions (such as capital development activities) are optional and may be carried out if resources are available. The expectation of higher level governments

is for LAs to play a dynamic role in local development by virtue of their position as the third level of government in the Malaysian Federal structure. In reality, most local authorities, particularly the district councils (DCs) face difficulties in fulfilling even their obligatory functions.

A recent survey ⁷ of ten sample local authorities found that all LAs provided cleansing and public health services to their constituencies. The term cleansing services is used in the Malaysian context to include drainage, refuse collection and disposal and the cleaning of roads and drains while public health means providing services in the areas of sanitation and sewerage, mosquito control and provision of health clinics. The cleansing and public health function has been found to be exclusively performed by the local authorities and remains the major activity of local government presently.

Another activity solely performed by the local authorities is that of enforcement and licensing. This activity can be perceived as a function of control; for any business activity, a licence has to be obtained from the local council before the business can operate. Illegal operators can be prosecuted by the local council under the Local Government Act 1976, and enforcement officers are empowered to mete out compounds and fines to offenders. Collections from licences and fines form a source of revenue to the LAs. while all LAs provide this service of approving and issuing of licences to business establishments in their respective areas, the total number of licences issued for all types of trades and businesses vary quite widely between local authorities. The ability to enforce rules and regulations depend largely on the staffing position and efficiency of a local authority's enforcement unit.

In most of the established local authorities, mainly the larger MCs, infrastructural facilities for recreational purposes are provided and maintained by the local councils. Many provide the very basic amenities like children's playgrounds and open fields. In this area of activity, discrepancy in terms of provision can be seen between MCs and DCs. In almost all cases, the larger municipalities are able to provide better recreational facilities, including swimming pools, public parks and gardens as well as man-made lakes for aesthetic purposes. However, for the DCs, due to their weak financial situation, few of such facilities are provided, although under the Act provision of recreational and beautification facilities is considered an obligatory service. By and large, all local authorities realise the necessity of performing this activity because it would not only create a better living environment but also improve the quality of life of its citizens.

Local authorities are expected to play an important role in the social and economic development of their jurisdictional areas. However, this depends upon the availability of local financial resources as well as grants from both the federal and state governments. An examination of this activity amongst the local councils reveals that many of them are apt to be more active in the social aspect of their development function; for example, all local councils build markets, stalls and community halls for their residents. Only a few large municipalities are able, in addition to providing social development projects, to build large scale housing, shopping and office complexes for sale and rental. Unless the councils have the finances and manpower, economic projects appear to be beyond the capacity of most local authorities especially the DCs.

The above description of the functions and activities of LAs has been general. These services appear to be useful and necessary to the communities served by local authorities. However, there are services which are also important and undertaken by local government in other countries which are not within the purview of local councils in Malaysia, for example, education, electricity and water supply and police. Nevertheless, within the defined parameters, LAs can perform a wide range of functions and tasks, limited only by the availability of personnel and financial resources and the imagination as well as the dedication of the political and bureaucratic leadership of the local authorities.

Local authorities seem to be carrying out their mandated functions and perceive themselves to be doing their best. While the picture of LA performance in the 1980s shows an improvement over the preceding periods, efficiency and effectiveness of local government in Malaysia remain sub-optimal.⁸ Leaving aside the issue of efficiency and effectiveness for the moment, it should be reiterated that local governments perform an important and efficacious role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life of local communities. (Efficacy is here defined as appropriateness of the level of action and the degree of institutional responsiveness). Local authorities directly impact on the lives of at least 50 per cent of the total national population of 17.5 million Malaysians. Clearly, were the local authorities able to respond more fully in fulfilling their obligatory functions as well as assume a greater role in the performance of the so-called

discretionary function of promoting socio-cultural and economic development, the impact would be substantial. At the moment, local government in Malaysia is financially under-endowed, in comparison with the developed countries. Local authorities' fiscal needs outstrip their fiscal capacity. As an indication, local authorities' total expenditure was only about 1.5 per cent of Federal and about 9 per cent of State governments total expenditures, in 1985, respectively; in terms of per capita annual expenditure, the comparative figures for 1985 were about 50 Malaysian Ringgit for local authorities, MR 340 for state and MR 2,050 for Federal government. ⁹

In the past, local government functions and tasks were performed almost solely by the local councils, with little participation from the community. Residents and community organizations have played a minor role in local government in the past because local authorities seemed to have emphasized the maintenance, regulatory, extractive and punitive aspects of their functions and activities, such as public cleansing services, inspection, licensing and enforcement of rules, and the collection of local rates or taxes. Under this type of administration, individual residents and business establishments were passive participants, perhaps resenting that the rates and licence fees they pay have not been matched by adequate provision of LA services. Local residents, community groups, business establishments and quasi-government organizations are still only marginally involved in the planning and implementation of LA activities. Perhaps with greater local participation and public cooperation these services can be better provided and local government may be able to achieve much more. Given the unlikely prospects of any large increase in financial transfers or grants from higher-level governments and the almost predictable escalation of demands and pressures for more and better public services, greater cooperation and participation of residents and private and public sector groups will be necessary to help LAs in carrying out their functions. Responsibility for community development should not only be exercised by local government but also by the residents and various private and public organizations.

The paragraphs below analyse the nature and degree of public involvement and cooperation in local government activities.

Types and Level of Participation

'Participation' embraces many different kinds and levels of involvement. In the context of local government, at least four general

separate arrangements are covered by the term: ¹⁰ consultation, where the council identifies an issue and seeks public response; direct involvement or power sharing, where the community representatives are full members of the decision making body; community action, where groups put forward their own demands; and community self-management, where groups have control of facilities and resources.

These categories are by no means exhaustive, but they do seem to imply a system of representative or participatory democracy in local governance. In so far as public participation in local government activities in Malaysia is concerned, it is little developed. Getting people involved in local government affairs, as practice shows, has most of the time been initiated either by the local council concerned or the state government. And the willingness to respond to any local government activity is nearly always due to the expectation of gain or reward at the end. Sometimes peoples' involvement might be due to coercion or threat of sanctions for non-compliance. In this situation, the participation is controlled or mobilized. In most cases, public participation is restricted by the local council's rules and regulations and any involvement of the public in the council's activities will have to adhere to these procedures.

The activities where involvement and participation by the public are most frequent are those related to maintenance and routine services. Participation by citizens and volunteer groups will be tolerated in these areas of activities as long as the pattern of work of the council is not altered by undue demands from these people. Pressure group participation through community action where demands are made on the council is certainly not encouraged. For example, groups which are organized for community pressure or protests over issues like highway toll charges levied by the local council are frowned upon and dealt severely with. In a plural society, there is the constant danger of local issues becoming "nationalized" and cast in racial terms. Normally when such an event becomes politicized, it would not be unusual for central government to intervene to defuse or solve the issue in the national interest. Hence, the issue of representative and participative local government cannot escape from the dangers of community action being transformed into communal movements.

The activities of local government affect in a continuing way large numbers of individuals and organizations but direct involvement of individuals and organizations in the making of decisions affecting some of these activities is rather limited and restricted by the legislations.

With the abolition of local elections, each local council is represented by 24 councillors, nominated by component parties in the National Front and subsequently appointed by the state government rather than being elected through the electoral process. In this way, the councillors might be viewed as representatives of the state rather than of the citizens or area from where they come. Although their appointment has been based upon their expected ability to represent the interests of the people in the community, the extent of this ability is limited by the councillors' allegiance to their political masters. Under such circumstances, the local councillor cannot be effectively considered a true and legitimate representative of the people. Hence public participation and representation in the decision making process of the local council, in the true sense, does not exist.

This does not mean that the councillors do not perform an important function, only that if they are truly elected by the people then their role as representatives of the people might be more strongly asserted in the decision making process of the council. Presently the relationship between the council and local residents is dependent on the individual councillor's sense of duty to the community and the pursuit of his own political ambitions. While there are some conscientious councillors who are motivated by a sense of service to the community, quite bluntly, the absence of electoral process in local government means that no direct relationship exists between a councillor and the people in a constituency. There is no obligation or expectation on the part of a councillor to fulfill his promises to his electorate.

Depending on his dedication, or more appropriately his ambition for future higher-level political office, generally a councillor may listen to the views, problems and suggestions of constituents and pursue them with the local council concerned. Under certain circumstances some councillors have set up temporary centres or mobile units to handle complaints and problems. Such "meet the people sessions" normally deal with routine matters concerning an individual's rather than the community's problems as a whole. These sessions often take the form of problem-solving and helping an individual overcome local council red-tape rather than participation or involvement in council activities. In such situations the councillor acts more like a middle-man or mediator, transmitting demands or complaints to the relevant authority on behalf of the client. Working within the given code of rules of the local authority, such a relationship between councillor and citizens is understood and accepted and action will be normally taken by the local authority on behalf of the councillor to settle the identified problem. This kind of "street-level" political processing of citizen grouses is most active during general elections in the country.

While the practice of appointive councillors may appear to satisfy the ruling National Front federal and state governments, some groups, including, surprisingly, some LA bureaucratic administrators, feel that actual public participation in the decision making process of a local authority is conspicuously lacking, resulting in apathy towards local government matters. The relationship between a local council and the community it serves should preferably be direct and not only through the councillors.

The argument is that as ratepayers, they are entitled to expectation of representation and local authorities should provide for this role to the public. Direct participation in the affairs of local government could be seen as one area where there can be more involvement of citizens. Representatives of the community, NGOs, voluntary organisations could be appointed councillors. Representation of such people in the council will allow a direct means of participation in the process of decision making of the local council concerned. It can be assumed that the interests of each group will be seen as being represented and considered in matters involving them and the council.

Although the local councillors are the most appropriate "political" representatives of constituents, in many cases the elected state assemblyman or member of parliament might play a more effective role in pressing constituency demands or intermediating on behalf of individual clients with the local authority bureaucracy. This was best exemplified by the tireless and effective constituency-work of the opposition member of parliament in the Kuala Lumpur Federal territory seat of Bukit Bintang. In general, while "higher-level" politicians (i.e., state assemblymen, members of parliament, ministers, etc.) of the same party try not to interfere in the political territory of local councillor, inevitably, because state and parliamentary constituencies overlap with local authority boundaries, these politicians are often involved in local level issues. Often this is because the local situation might invite "outside" interference due to its intrinsic political opportunity or as a result of the operation of the pervasive network of patronage politics. Positive as well as negative outcomes have arisen from such interventions: in some cases, property rates have not been collected for years and property revaluation exercises have not been undertaken; political lobbying has resulted in uneven development of areas and misallocation of resources; while in other cases, upper level political interference has increased the access of LAs to augmented financial resources for local development.

The ordinary individual does not perceive himself to possess high efficacy in influencing policy-making in government, even at the local level. Hence, the deference accorded to the politician. The ordinary resident is a passive participant in local government, paying his annual rates and complying with the by-laws of the local authority. If there are opportunities for the individual ratepayer to play a more active part, this is not obvious to him.

Normally, what is allowed is public participation through consultation. This is where the local council will seek public response over an identified issue. Once more the involvement of the public will be at the level of providing feedback or input through suggestions over matters raised by the local authority concerned. This is particularly so in the area of structure and master plans. Participation by the citizens, NGOs, professional and business associations, in fact all concerned, is encouraged through meetings, forums and dialogues where the comments from individuals and interest-groups may be taken into consideration before the planning policies are finalised. In so far as the local authority is concerned, the involvement of the public in such matters has to be within the parameters set by it. The public is consulted, its opinions considered, which may or may not influence the final decisions and actions taken by the council.

While opportunities are given for involvement, it appears constrained. Individuals, voluntary organizations and NGOs are rarely seen to really exert much influence on the policies of the local council. Support from political parties is especially important in influencing policy decisions in Malaysia. In many cases, pressure and interest groups when unable to achieve their objectives will seek the backing from political parties. With the increasing importance given to the role of political parties, local authority activities tend to be politicised. This creates an atmosphere of tension which, if it escalates to inter-ethnic antagonism, invites the central government to intervene and when this happens, public participation is inevitably curtailed.

It is unrealistic to think that local authorities can be insulated from the larger national political process. What can be suggested is that the role of political parties and partisan "politiking" in council activities be reduced or balanced by the involvement of a wider network

of social and economic organizations. Thus, organizations like the citizens watch group, consumers associations, environment protection society, neighbourhood associations, Rotary or Lions Clubs and other voluntary organizations, and private sector companies could be given more opportunities to articulate their opinions without political interference. Cooperative participation from this sector can lessen the politicization of public interest issues and allow true involvement of the public in local government activities. Issues pertaining to the pollution of the environment, beautification, improving the quality of life of residents and preserving the heritage of the community should be handled by the residents and voluntary organizations concerned and not by the politicians only.

There are certain areas of local government activities where public involvement is more apparent. This is especially so in social and economic activities. But even in this the local authority assumes that it has to act for and on behalf of the community. Hence the local authority undertakes a whole range of activities, initiates their implementation and guides their daily operations. This is not to imply that the community plays no role in such activities, only that in many cases it is a passive relationship between the community and the local council. The council appears as the active partner in this type of relationship and the community it represents takes on the role of a passive follower and receiver. This can be seen when local authorities organise programmes for cleanliness or beautification or initiate health campaigns. Normally, the community will be mobilized to participate in such projects with the support and influence of party action-groups or politicians or some luminary.

However the local authority concerned cannot be expected to be responsible for such community services all the time. This is where the community and other voluntary organizations can be expected to play a crucial role. This is especially important for the rural areas where district councils are faced with perpetual financial constraints and cannot be expected to continually support and be the active partner in providing social services to the community.

For the larger and better off municipalities in the urban areas, while the question of ability of financing these projects may not arise, with the participation of the community, it will allow the local council to channel its resources to improving its services in other areas. The kinds of roles to be played by the community, the various organizations and quasi-agency bodies can now be explored.

Areas For Active Cooperation and Participation

Individual residents and voluntary organizations tend to participate more in social services while the quasi-public agencies and the commercial establishments are involved in economic activities.

Participation in local government activities through community self-management is quite apparent in the urban areas. Yet again, such programmes are normally initiated by the local authority concerned which will provide the financial and leadership support and management at the initial stages of the project development. These projects, once under way, are then passed over to the residents to manage. The residents are encouraged to form their own organizations or associations normally under the guidance of the local authority to manage these projects.

Under such initiatives the Kuala Lumpur City Hall has organized various projects towards improving the community especially the lower-income groups and for those living in high rise flats. For the lower income groups living in the squatter areas of Kuala Lumpur, City Hall has organized a programme, code-named "NADI".¹¹ This programme involves the setting up of Kindergartens for children, setting up study centres for school pupils, and classes for basic skills training in sewing, pottery or handicraft, by City Hall which also maintains and pays the teachers' salaries. For every NADI project, a sub-committee is formed in the local area comprising of both residents and officers of the City Hall who will supervise the operation of the activities. Under this programme, City Hall has set up hostels to cater for those students who are weak and poor, giving them a place to live in and study. Facilities are provided and maintained by City Hall with mobilised cooperation from the residents. To help raise the income of some of these householders who may be involved in home cottage style industries, City Hall has also lent its support to these people in the form of marketing their products for them. These people are mainly the housewives and are organised into functional groups to work on specific items, e.g. sewing clothes, and City Hall will then help them to dispose of their finished products.

In Malaysia the Kuala Lumpur City Hall appears to be the only local authority that is involved in this type of community service programme. Although on the initiative of the local authority which mobilizes support from the residents to cooperate with it in providing this type of service to the community, it is a form of participation highly encouraged by the local authority. It is viewed as a goal of the local authority

to reduce community dependency, eventually, and to provide the residents and other voluntary organizations an example of the kind of community participation which offers mutual benefits to residents and the local government.

In the above case, financial assistance and leadership come from the council itself. For similar community improvement programmes to be undertaken in other local council areas, these two factors have to be available. Unless a local authority can contribute effectively in terms of money and guidance, the question may arise then as to how long such programmes can be sustained even though cooperation and participation from the residents may be present. The problem of poor attitude amongst the residents appears to be a constraint to the success of such programmes. For as long as the local authority provides the guidance, material, and finance there is little question of failure, but the withdrawal of any of these ingredients tends to result in such programmes being discontinued due to the lack of initiative, dedication and cooperation amongst the residents. There is little wonder that programmes of this nature are not initiated in other local council areas other than City Halls.

Similarly with cleanliness and beautification programmes that are implemented amongst the resident communities, especially those living in high rise, low-cost flats: these campaigns are normally embarked upon with much enthusiasm on the part of the local authority which will mobilise the residents in what are called "gotong-royong" (mutual self-help) projects to clean up the dirty areas. Local councils will provide the tools, transport and even food to the volunteers who participate in these projects which normally are of short duration. Longer term programmes may involve the residents themselves beautifying their surroundings with flowers and plants that can be bought at subsidized prices from the local authority. Initially enthusiasm is high especially with the involvement of the local authority, local councillors and perhaps a political personality. Usually, this form of cooperation will continue as long as the local authority constantly participates and monitors the situation. Committees may even be established amongst the residents but as the experience of the Shah Alam Municipal Council has shown, once the local council decides to take a back-seat or play a passive role and allow the community to lead, the programme will also slowly lose its momentum. The local authority has not only to generate community participation but also to nurture it for a long time. The community's attitude is to be blamed. The thinking of the citizens seems to be that the staff of a local authority are paid to serve and citizen participation in community activities is a voluntary luxury.

There are, however, groups that seek to influence the policies and programmes of the local authority and local authorities have been known to react positively to their suggestions. Local councils are subject to a variety of influences from public interest groups. Normally demands from pressure and interest groups can be quite significant especially made within the jurisdiction of the local council. In such areas as pollution, health hazards, and environmental degradation, the environmental groups have been quite successful in creating awareness amongst the citizens and mounting community campaigns to pressure local authorities to pass legislation on such issues.

In the pursuit of development, local authorities have also been reminded by these groups and organisations of the need to preserve the cultural heritage of the towns especially the old buildings with historical links to the state. Indeed, conscious efforts have been made to preserve these buildings and in fact local authorities have been known to prosecute offenders who knowingly destroy these buildings.

With rapid socio-economic development and the growth of a larger middle class, there has been an increase in associational group activity and hence the proliferation of interest and pressure groups. The arena of action of these single or multiple-issue interest groups or associations transcends local or state lines; often they speak to a national audience, but some do carry out local community mobilization activities in support of, or opposition to, specific social interest issues. The role of the more social welfare-oriented organizations may go beyond that of cooperating with the local authority or even state governments to that of actually providing services to the community themselves. These voluntary activities, e.g. providing voluntary services to the mentally handicapped, spastic children, drug rehabilitation centres, abused and abandoned children, and the old and infirmed, have helped to lessen the administrative burden of local authorities as well as state and federal governments. Unfortunately, the role of these organizations in community service has not been given the due recognition that it should. There is little direct relationship between these voluntary groups and the local council, except perhaps for organizations like the neighbourhood associations. Any form of cooperation on the part of the local authority appears to be on an ad hoc basis.

Non-governmental organizations are particularly suited to assist local authorities in undertaking social development activities. And unless local authorities are in the position to provide financial support, certain community services may not be provided or sustained.

This is where the role of the voluntary organizations and NGOs will be needed to support or supplement the activities of the local council. In Malaysia, local authorities are seldom in a position to provide financial support to NGOs but can still co-operate with the voluntary organizations by giving them the necessary administrative backing and institutional support of their plans and activities. The collaboration of the local council is important and necessary because these NGOs are not substitutes for local government. Local government is the legitimate and mandated provider of local public services, but there is no reason why NGOs may not help in administering and implementing these services.

While NGO participation in local government activities tends to be within the context of providing social services to the community, the role of private sector companies and quasi-public agencies is more apparent in the area of economic activities.

Local government does enter into commercial relationships with private firms, groups and other government agencies. Sometimes the relationship may be for a single activity or may continue over many others. It is predicted that there will increasingly be more cooperative activities, involving economic transactions, between LAs and private firms. The common form of participation by private companies is usually in the areas of privatization contracts and joint-venture projects. In increasing frequency, maintenance services of the local authority are now handed over to private companies to manage on a commercial basis, e.g. solid waste collection, car parking and grass cutting. The degree of success of such privatization projects varies between local councils, but this seems to be an area of participation actively pursued by local government in an effort to reduce cost and increase efficiency.

In joint-venture projects, the cooperation of the private sector is sought especially in the construction activity of the local authority. Most of the larger municipalities are quite enterprising and capable of forming partnerships with private sector companies in building low-cost houses, flats and apartments on a cost-and-profit-sharing basis, in most cases with the local authority providing the land and the private company involved in the construction of the project. Unfortunately many of the poorer district councils may not be able to contribute land or capital and hence find it impossible to embark on any joint-venture projects with the private sector.

The role of private companies, statutory bodies and other government agencies holds much potential in the local community and should be exploited by local government. Local government being the local planning

agency as well as having powers to approve licences for businesses to operate can easily seek the cooperation and support of this sector in its economic development activities for the community. Industrial and commercial companies can be requested to sponsor development projects which may benefit the community in which they are located, such as building and maintaining bus shelters, landscaping open grounds and beautifying landmarks. All these can be done in collaboration with on-going campaigns of the local authority for the community. Housing developers may be required to donate multi-purpose community halls to the local council who may then allow the residents to use them for a nominal fee. Fees collected will in turn be used to upkeep these facilities. Residents may be requested to form committees to maintain these facilities or amenities, to promote community self-reliance. This is one area where citizen participation can be effectively utilised. This is especially so for sports complexes, where the residents associations may be assigned the responsibility to manage the recreational facilities with some assistance from the local council. Indeed this form of public participation, which involves cooperation between the private sector, local government, and residents, should be further encouraged. In addition to providing funding support to landscaping, adoption of traffic-roundabouts, and tree or flower planting programmes, local business firms have been known to contribute to sporting events or competitions (e.g. Chess Competitions) organized by LAs. On the other hand, foreign firms (e.g. multinational companies) prefer to support national events sponsored by central or state government. In either case, private firms are beginning to demonstrate increasing social responsibility, that is corporate citizenship, by contributing financial or material support to the social activities of local authorities.

In areas where local authorities also face difficulties in providing certain community services, the role of this type of partnership can be further exploited. Library facilities for the community can be operated with the cooperation and participation of the public. In fact a host of useful functions, related to the community in which the local authority serves, can be operationalised by inter-group cooperation and support.

Thus far in Malaysia, local authorities have been involved mainly in routine and maintenance activities due to financial and personnel limitations. To provide beyond this is sometimes impossible especially for the smaller councils in the rural areas. In this respect, public

participation, using a variety of mechanisms and modalities, should be fully exploited and encouraged by the local councils. In fact the supporting role of these organisations will be important in enhancing the effectiveness of local government.

The discussion has concentrated on participation in local government by individuals and NGOs and largely ignored the role of local-level agencies or branches of federal and state governments. In the urban municipal and the rural district council areas will be found a number of deconcentrated departments of federal ministries, statutory bodies and public corporations. In some cases, other government agencies may be involved in local authority activities, usually capital investment projects, because such projects are funded by federal or state authorities. These development projects, especially in the rural district councils, are significant contributions to the infrastructure-building of the locality. Often, however, the development efforts of quasi-public agencies, such as the Federal Urban Development Authority or the State Economic Development Corporations, may compete with and, in specific cases, duplicate the activities undertaken by the LAs. In all too many cases, LAs are not informed of planned capital projects nor consulted in their implementation, resulting in local councils having to bear the recurrent cost of maintaining such capital assets. Where there have been conscious attempts at joint-planning and consultation, the development projects implemented by higher-level government and quasi-public agencies have relieved the administrative burden of the local authorities and benefited large numbers of residents. Given the uneven distribution of resources, local authorities will continue to depend on assistance, including direct participation, from superior units of government. While this injection of resources will enhance the quality of life of LA communities, it might also have the effect of making these communities more dependent on government - contrary to the objective of making local authorities autonomous and self-reliant.

Methods Used in Promoting Public Participation

Local authorities have an armoury of coercive instruments (Fines, confiscation, prosecution, etc.) to ensure compliance to laws and regulations from constituents. These methods have been the major means to secure compliance to administrative orders especially in the areas of cleansing, public health and regulatory functions. But the compliance-based or coercive structure of relationship has not been

successful in eliciting popular participation and involvement in local affairs. As communities become more sophisticated and the range of functions expands with rising expectations, LAs have experimented with a wider assortment of non-coercive methods in generating community cooperation and involvement.

In initiating community projects and programmes, for example, local authorities are adopting a more "marketing approach" to encourage public participation in these activities. As mentioned previously, committees are formed at the local community level where, through persuasion and social pressure, residents are recruited to participate in sponsored projects. Administrative guidance is usually provided in community self-managed projects by an officer of the council sitting in the committee as an ex-officio member. Where necessary, financial support might have to be provided by the local council to ensure the success of sponsored projects. In the example of the NADI projects in Kuala Lumpur, trainers and teachers are provided by the City Council.

In developing countries, participation tends to be mobilized rather than voluntary, with social, cultural and political activities taking the form of mass campaigns. Many local council activities are conducted in the form of campaigns. Through campaigns, residents and operators of business establishments are persuaded to participate in beautifying and keeping their environment clean, to use standard-sized rubbish bins, to maintain clean toilets, and a host of other useful activities. From the perspective of local government administrators, public apathy and negative attitudes towards community service require tedious and sustained efforts at communication and re-socialization. Thus, many of the large LAs are investing time and money in inculcating greater civic consciousness by publicity through the print and radio media, through telephone "hotlines" and complaints bureaus, and through dialogue or meet-the-people sessions. In addition to these modalities, the Shah Alam Municipality has sponsored various "fan clubs" called sahabat or friends of the local authority. One such fan club using cooperation of parents-teachers associations and with the participation of schoolboy scouts, the police, and council enforcement officers conduct weekend patrols in the lake garden to check on the indiscriminate throwing of rubbish. Other sahabat or fan clubs operate within the schools; still other groups involving voluntary organizations like the St. Johns Ambulance and the Red Crescent Society have been mooted to help inculcate attitudes of cleanliness and civic-mindedness.

To maintain the momentum of local campaigns, local authorities have been known to subsidise certain items like potted plants or flowers that are bought by the residents. Other "resources", such as badges, car stickers, name tags, refreshments, and other incentives might have to be provided by the sponsors. For those that respond well by having beautifully maintained gardens, official letters of appreciation and recognition are issued to these people. Inevitably, there is a yearly round of campaigns and competitions among hawkers, shopkeepers, factories, etc. which culminate in the bestowal of plaques or certificates at award-giving ceremonies at the end.

For the private sector business organisations, their participation in local council projects or contribution towards campaigns will be rewarded. For these organisations recognition will usually take the form of letters of appreciation; but more important to the companies is the administrative goodwill that has been cultivated with the local councils concerned.

The extent of success of local government in eliciting support using such methods which are non-coercive in nature tend to vary between local authorities and also between projects within the same local authority area. It is noticeable that the local council is not only the initiator of the project but usually has to be the active partner in community projects to ensure continuity and success. Unfortunately, there is still a tendency for people or organizations to participate only if there is social gain or economic benefit to be derived. Without such incentives, participation might be reluctant and intermittent.

In previous paragraphs, we have noted the trend towards privatization and marketization of local government activities. This mode of economic participation by private sector firms will certainly increase. In addition, there will be greater sharing to the economic benefits and costs of constructing and maintaining social infrastructure such as stadiums, playing fields, and multi-purpose facilities. For example, Kuala Lumpur City Hall splits the revenue from rental fees for the use of sporting facilities with the various sports associations or residents committees but pays for all major maintenance expenditures. In the social sector, in the relationship between local authorities and private companies, the latter is more likely to bear the cost of construction with the local council bearing the maintenance costs. Thus, private companies (including multinational corporations) have funded the building of bus shelters, taxi stands, road signs, play grounds, and other beneficial projects.

Difficulties in Mobilizing Cooperative Participation

Local government is confronted with a problem of lack of appreciation on the part of the public for local authority functions and services. The attitude of the public has to change. Residents have to be aware of the role of local government in the community and the need for voluntary participation in order to enhance further the quality of services of the local authority. Unfortunately, apathy tends to be matched by a negative attitude that government should do everything. Activities which have economic value to residents tend to be more attractive but there is evidence that social consciousness is rising on issues such as pollution, traffic congestion, toxic wastes, and neighbourhood security.

As the level of education and affluence rises, residents are likely to be more assertive of their rights and hence more inclined to demand a role in local decision-making. The challenge is whether local authorities are in a position to handle the participative pressures that may be generated as a consequence of rapid social and economic development. Contrary to accepted wisdom, participatory government requires administrative infrastructure and resources.

Some local officials have negative attitudes towards the public. To improve the level of cooperation from the public, local government has to be seen to be of value, in short that it is responsive to the needs of the community. It is, therefore, not perverse to suggest that a strategy to increase public cooperation and participation in local government must focus on responsiveness to client needs.¹² Large numbers of local government personnel will have to be re-socialized towards the view of local public management as public service and the community as the clientele rather than the traditional enforcement-oriented and coercive style of administration.

A starting point is to make local government administration more comprehensible to residents and groups by improving information and making procedures more simple for clients. Some of the negative perception or distrust of local government bureaucracy might be reduced by improving access. As demonstrated by the experience of some of the more forward-looking local council administrations, greater openness and easier access to the local authority have had a favourable impact on public opinion and attitude. Improving access would include administrative actions to locate offices or service points at convenient places, to make forms and regulations more easily understood, or to reschedule opening hours to cater to the needs of working people. All

this suggests that local authority administration will have to adopt a more "marketing" approach to increase responsiveness to its clientele. Thus, it seems eminently sensible for LAs to have more solid data on community needs and priorities in order to plan more effectively the kinds of services to be provided and the mode of delivery. Through sample household surveys, some of the larger municipal councils have garnered strategic information about their communities for future planning. In addition, some LAs have installed "hotlines" for complaints and enquiries, and dialogue sessions are held to familiarize citizens with the policies and programmes of the councils; all these mechanisms, besides improving the image of the local authorities, could encourage active participation.

There is a vocal view that more participation in local affairs will result if elections were re-introduced into local government. As mentioned before, local government elections were suspended in the 1960s because of the emergency situation brought about by Indonesian confrontation. However, the continued freezing of local democratic elections is ascribable to the fear that local councils, especially in the urban areas, might be dominated by opposition parties. This, coupled with a tradition of administered government, might account for the reluctance of the National Front-controlled federal and state authorities to agree to electoral local government. While public cooperation and involvement are not contingent on electoral politics, the absence of political accountability and control exerted by directly elected representatives over local authorities must be a constraining factor in generating enthusiasm and popular participation in community activities.

III. Conclusion

Local authorities have not, by their own admission, been very successful in mobilizing residents and organizations to be more involved in the life of the community. This is because local councils have until recently been concerned with system maintenance and enforcement (i.e. law and order) functions; hence the attitude towards the people is condescending and rule-oriented. With the increasing emphasis given by government to social and economic development, local authorities must change both their attitude and their mode of operations. This is because, with limited financial and manpower resources, local authorities will need to generate local support and cooperation to contribute to local development.

The prospects for a fuller cooperation and participation from individuals, organizations and quasi-public bodies are not necessarily pessimistic even if the record of government-community partnership has, thus far, been indifferent. The opportunities are provided in various enabling acts for local authorities to play a more dynamic role in local development and to mobilize the community behind such efforts. Local authorities clearly need to be more adequately endowed with funds and skilled personnel to play a catalytic role in the local areas. Human resource development has been a neglected factor in local government. In addition to training of local government officers in community mobilization and participation skills, there are areas for improvement in the physical, spatial and temporal arrangements for organizing or managing the interface between local government and clientele groups. Improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of local government will automatically enhance the image of local authorities in the eyes of the public and strengthen cooperation.

There is an untapped reservoir of talent and resources for community participation in Malaysian towns and cities. Increasing wealth and rising education are helping to stimulate demands for more sophisticated urban services and less willingness to accept administrative decisions without question. If local authorities cannot satisfy locally generated demands and pressures for better facilities and amenities, they will find themselves bypassed by central or state government agencies as pressure or interest groups lobby for higher-level political intervention. By the same token, with rising levels of social and economic development, there is a greater willingness to pay for services and amenities that will improve the quality of life. Thus, the traditional modalities of participation such as "gotong royong" (or self-help) schemes will probably disappear from the urban environment (though continuing to be viable in the rural towns), to be supplanted by increasing resort to user-charges in local government services.

There is, therefore, likely to be more rather than less work for local government with rapid urbanization and industrialization. This administrative load is more easily and adequately carried out with the fuller involvement and participation of the local community.

Footnotes

1. Malaysia, Report of the Royal Commission on the Remunerations and Conditions of Service in Local Authorities and Statutory Authorities. Vol. I and II (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, Dec. 1972).
2. Ibid., p. 23.
3. "Malaya" refers to the Federation of Malaya incorporating the 11 states of penang, Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Melaka, Negri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan. "Malaya" became "Malaysia", a larger federation of 14 states, with the merger of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak with the peninsular federation in 1963. In 1965, Singapore separated from the Malaysian federation.
4. Malaysia, Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry to Investigate into the Workings of Local Authorities in West Malaysia. (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, Dec. 1968), pp.27-28.
5. Ibid.
6. Dept. of Local Government, Kuala Lumpur, "Strateji-strateji Kementrian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan Dalam Konteks Rancangan Malaysia Ke 5", Paper presented at INTAN, Kuala Lumpur 3 - 8 May, 1984.
7. Phang Siew Nooi, Stephen Chee and Siti Rohani Yahya, Local Authorities Revenue Equalisation System. A Study of Ten Sample Local Authorities in Peninsular Malaysia. Report submitted to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1989.
8. See Asian Development Bank, Urban Development Policy and Programme Study: Malaysia. Final Report, Volume 1: Policy and Programme Framework. October 1986; and Phang, Chee and Siti Rohani, op. cit., pp. 57-68.
9. Phang, Chee, and Siti Rohani, op. cit., pp. 65-68.
10. J. Stewart, Local Government: The Conditions of Local Choice, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983).
11. Kuala Lumpur City Hall, "Program NADI", City Hall publication. The NADI programme was established by KL City Hall in 1980 and includes

all socio-economic projects aimed at improving the standard of living of the poor income group in the city. This programme has within it a variety of projects whose objectives are to increase the income of the people, improving educational levels and de-worming activities.

12. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Administration as Service, The Public as Client (Paris: OECD, 1987), pp. 20-22.