advisory

IMAN Research

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Based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, IMAN Research (legally registered as PanjiAlam Centre Sdn Bhd) is a think tank which focuses on security and socio-political matters. IMAN Research is spearheaded by experts with extensive local and international experience in the areas of management consultancy, social policy development, community resilience and engagement, particularly in the area of security, electoral reform, participatory urban redevelopment and psycho-social intervention within communities in conflict.

We concentrate in the domains of peace and security, ethnic relations and religious harmony. We aim to deliver sound policy solutions along with implementable action plans with measurable outcomes. To date, we have worked with Malaysian and foreign governments as well as the private sectors and international bodies, such as Google, UNICEF, UNDP and USAID, on issues ranging from security, elections to civil society empowerment.

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editorial letter

We can't believe that we have spent 2020 mostly at home. Working from home has become the norm but may not be welcome as people complain of cabin fever and boredom. Luckily for Malaysians we have our politics to break the monotony of the lockdown. Nary a week passes without a turn, twist and plots that screenwriters would pass: we don't know how historians will draft Malaysia's year of crisis.

This month's advisory looks at urban living and how doughnuts are emblems of wellbeing. You'll look at J.Co in a different light now.

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Community Resilience Through Local Sovereignty

AT THE TIME of writing, parts of the country — Sabah, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya — are put under Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), due to the rise of COVID-19 cases in these areas. People living in these areas are not allowed to leave their districts, and social, commerce and work activities are limited.[1] The decision, made by the Malaysian National Security Council (NSC), was initially questioned by the Selangor State government, which argued that it was not consulted and informed of the decision.[2]

This is not the first time State authorities have questioned decisions made on the Federal level that have direct impact on the States. In May this year, when the CMCO was first implemented, many states including Selangor, Penang and Negeri Sembilan refused to comply, citing that it is under their jurisdiction to make such decisions.[3] It is argued that local governments are in a better position to understand and deal with local, neighborhood and district-level issues. Therefore, the Federal government's decision not to include State and local authorities in their decision-making process undermines the ability of local communities to handle the crisis in their own backyard. As the issue now resurfaces, it is worth looking into the question of local governance, and empowering community resilience through neighborhood sovereignty.

1   https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/conditional-mco-be-implemented-selangor-kuala-lumpur-pu-trajaya-oct-14-%E2%80%94-ismail-sabri
2   https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/10/13/selangor-rep-slams-putrajayas-un-professional-cmco-announcement/
3   https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/05/can-state-govts-choose-to-defy-cmco-law-yers-explain/1863398

Photo credit: Joshua Rawson-Harris

The 15-minute Doughnut City

Prior to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis, the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced the '15-minute city' plan.[1] In a nutshell, the plan is to make each neighborhood within the Paris metropolis to be self-sufficient. The idea was first pushed by the Sorbonne professor Carlos Moreno. Instead of having a central business district, where most work and commercial activities are situated, and housing gradually pushed away from the center according to their affordability, the 15-minute city is an urban form where people can live, work and play within a 15-minute walking or cycling distance. This would significantly reduce commuting time, over-reliance on cars and public transportation, and would lead to a less polluted city while improving social and economic vibrancy, as well as quality of life of the inhabitants. Mayor Hidalgo pledged to make Paris such a city as part of her re-election campaign.

Soon after that pledge, however, the COVID-19 pandemic struck Western Europe and many other countries, including our own. Cities all over the world were forced to shut down. Everyone is now confined to their own homes, only allowed to leave to get their essentials. Some are not even allowed to do that; food and other basic needs are brought to them instead. Businesses and commercial activities have stopped - no work, no school, and no social activities. Cities across the globe have slowly turned into ghost towns.

In managing crises such as this, the 15-minute city would have been advantageous. If each neighborhood within a state or city is self-sufficient, having enough infrastructure such as workplaces, schools, hospitals and markets, providing utilities, goods, and basic needs, lockdowns and movement control initiatives can be easier to implement. Residents would not need to worry because whatever they need would be available within walking or cycling distance. In fact, compact urban forms such as this can even help mitigate the spread of viruses, as there will be no such thing as rush hour — traffic on roads and crowding on public transports — the very thing that the CMCO is trying to curb. There will also be no overcrowding in hospitals, schools, markets and other public places.

This is not the only compact city idea that has been floating around recently. In 2019, Amsterdam announced the 'Doughnut Model' for the city. Building on the circular economy concept (an alternative to traditional linear economy, circular economy aims at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources), the model developed by British economist Kate Raworth focuses on creating a safe and just urban environment that promotes social wellbeing and environmental sustainability. The 'Doughnut' consists of three layers: 1) the inner circle represents the social foundation of the internationally agreed minimum social standards of living, including access to adequate health, resources, peace and justice, 2) the outer circle of the 'Doughnut' represents the ecological ceiling of the planet, where exceeding it will be detrimental to life and livelihood, and 3) a safe and just space between the social foundation and the ecological ceiling, where humanity can thrive.[2]

On top of creating the building blocks towards a circular economy and transitioning towards a new economic system, the Doughnut model also pushes for the designing of mixed-use districts and buildings. This will enable a more efficient use of space, while at the same time minimise the effects of transportation and overall negative climate impacts. In addition, the mixed-use districts also have the potential to be more cohesive, as well as encourage and facilitate more collaborative and sustainable behavior.

Both Paris and Amsterdam, as well as many other cities around the world, are currently struggling to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Some are still under a

1   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign
2   https://www.kateraworth.com/2020/04/08/amsterdam-city-doughnut/

lockdown, some are beginning to relax restrictions to restart their economy and social lives, while some are dealing with new waves of infections. However, the new normal, a term overused these days, is more than just practicing physical distancing and self hygiene. It also requires us to relook at how we have been managing our districts and neighborhoods — their people, resources and economy. We need to resist our zoning and scale-economy reflexes. The two models borne out of the two cities are surely worth looking into and adapted by others.

Decentralisation

Power redistribution is a key element in building local sovereignty. In order to achieve this, there is a need to redistribute power to scale down governance and planning to a district or neighborhood level. Our country consists of diverse neighborhoods, each unique in their own way, with different sets of problems and challenges. For example, Lembah Pantai is different from Kampung Pengkalan Maras, Kota Tinggi is different from Beluran, and so forth. Hence, when it comes to planning, decisions need to be tailored towards the needs of specific places, instead of generalising planning and policies for the entire city, let alone the state or nation as a whole.

Instead of having planning and governance organised in a vertical fashion, which would mean the entire planning comes from top command — in the Malaysian context, Putrajaya — states and cities would be better off if the planning and coordination of different services are localised at the district or neighborhood level. As we can see now with the current governance system that is practiced in this country, the over-centralisation of decision-making power has caused highly unequal development. Infrastructural developments are concentrated in specific areas while others are neglected.

We can see this in the challenge that Sabah is facing in dealing with the current spike in COVID-19 cases. There have been reports of insufficient health facilities and personnels to cope with the number of cases.[3] If the state and its local governments have more autonomy and power — both politically and financially — in developing their own infrastructures and industries based on their own needs, they might be more equipped to deal with the current scenario.

A recent study on decentralisation conducted by a local think-tank shows that the gains of redistributing central power include bringing about better productivity gains, enabling better policymaking, curbing corruption, as well as nurturing democracy as it would include greater participation from citizens and residents.[4] Planning that requires intimate and intricate details of district knowledge, such as commercial block redevelopment, building a local hospital or locating neighborhood houses of worship, should be put in the hands of people who have knowledge and intimate relationships with the neighborhood and the people living in it.[5] On top of that, economic growth will be enhanced because local governments understand the growth barriers in their local economies better than the Federal level. The end goal is to reach neighborhood sovereignty, where each neighborhood is self-sufficient and autonomous.

This is even more true as we are dealing with the current CMCO, where residents of KL, Selangor and Sabah are stuck in their own districts. If each neighborhood within a city is self-sufficient, having enough infrastructure such as workplaces, schools, hospitals and markets, providing utilities, goods, and basic needs, lockdowns and movement control initiatives can be easier to implement. Residents

Photo credit: Wonderlane

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3   *https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/547064*
4   *https://www.ideas.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/PI59-Reviving-the-Spirit-of-Federalism.pdf*
5   *Jacobs, Jane. "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Random House, 1961.*

would not need to worry because whatever they need would be available within walking or cycling distance. In order to achieve all this, power needs to be redistributed, from the hands of a select few to the majority whose lives are affected. Power needs to be redistributed from Putrajaya to local governments, and from authorities to regular citizens.

Participation

Another crucial aspect in redistributing power is to involve local residents in decision-making processes, especially where planning is concerned. There are many types of participatory planning that are being practiced around the globe, each with their own pros and cons. And of course, different models would work in different places, taking into account their socio-political and historical context, as well as their capabilities to manage them.

In essence, participation can be defined as the redistribution of power, and the ability of citizens to influence outcomes. In the context of governance, that would mean the redistribution of power among citizens to allow them to influence decisions in planning and policy-making processes. Specifically, the redistribution of power that would enable the "have-not citizens" — those who are excluded from political and economic processes — to be included through information sharing, goals and policy setting, resource allocations, as well as distribution of benefits.

In further defining participation, scholar Sherry

Arnstein provides a typology of eight levels of citizen participation, to differentiate between what she calls "empty ritual participation", with having real power that is needed to influence the outcome of the process. Depicted in the pattern of a ladder, she begins with manipulation and therapy, which practically means "non-participation." Next is what she calls "tokenism", with the typology of informing, consultation, and placation. For Arnstein, "tokenism" only allows the have-nots to hear and to have a voice, without having any power to decide. Real participation only occurs in the next level - what she calls "citizen power" - where the have-nots would enter into a partnership and be able to negotiate, and the topmost rungs would be delegated power and citizen control, where the have-nots would obtain the majority of decision making power.[6]

Following Arnstein's typology to the teeth might prove to be difficult, as she herself acknowledges the limitations of her proposal. Opponents of participation would argue that it is more costly and less efficient, it promotes separatism, is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism et cetera. These arguments are valid indeed. But it is also important to acknowledge that without real effort to include all members of the community, the haves and the have-nots, especially in a city like Kuala Lumpur with multiple minority groups — some are not even documented[7] — many voices will not be heard.

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6   Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35,. No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224

7   According to a report by U.S. Department of State, many of the foreign labors in Kuala Lumpur include persons that are trafficked into the country, either voluntarily, or as victims of human trafficking. https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/282798.pdf

Efficiency vs Equity

A lot of the argument against this sort of power redistribution, the kind that puts planning and governing on a smaller scale, as well as opening up for more diverse group of people to enter the decision making process, say that it renders the city inefficient, that the planning process will take too long, or worse still, nothing will ever materialise. This approach to planning can be seen as inefficient — each neighborhood and districts having different plans of their own might be messier than having a centralised administration, where planning and decision making can be standardised and done on a bigger scale. However, every other means to govern a diverse populace without victimising certain groups of people, mostly the have-nots, have failed. And it is also important to take note that not all kinds of planning should be done at the local level. Planning that involves building and managing large infrastructure, such as the water system, drainage, power grid and so forth, would still require city-wide planning, administered by city authority.

Besides, inefficiency is in fact, a good thing. What is deemed to be inefficient — the existence of multiple administration doing similar work at different localities, small-scale local enterprises instead of large and well-established ones, and different groups of people putting new meaning to the community — is the thing that promotes the neighborhood and district's vitality, the key ingredients for the strength of the community.[8] Our future should include local neighborhoods that are self-sufficient and self-sustainable. It should be a place where people can live, work and play without unnecessarily increasing carbon footprint. As the country is also becoming more urbanised, it should be an integrated urban fabric, where all of life's essentials are just around the corner. In order to achieve that, we need to empower local neighborhoods to be more autonomous, and to promote local sovereignty. ■

8   Jacobs, Jane. "The Economy of Cities." Random House, 1969.