

**The Sustainable Penang Initiative:
Creating state-society partnerships for sustainable development**

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWPNUC	Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BOLD	Bureau on Learning Difficulties (Penang)
BWS	Badan Warisan Sumatra
CAGIN	Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations Network
DANCED	Danish Cooperation for Environment and Development
EXCO	Executive Councillor
CAP	Consumers' Association of Penang
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EPU	Economic Planning Unit (Malaysia)
FEET	Forum for Equitable and Environmentally-friendly Transport
FOPBG	Friends of Penang Botanical Gardens
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HC	Healthy Cities (World Health Organization programme)
HDA	Housing Developers' Association
IBFAN	International Baby Food Action Network
I-CE	Interface for Cycling Expertise
ICLEI	International Council for Local Environment Initiatives
ICZM	Integrated Coastal Zone Management
IOG	Institute on Governance (Canada)
IMT-GT	Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle
ISA	Internal Security Act (Malaysia)
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
LA 21	Local Agenda 21
LARCC	Local Action Research Coordinative Committee (Kuala Lumpur)
MALODI	Malaysian Local Democracy Initiative
MNS	Malaysian Nature Society
MPPP	Municipal Council of Penang Island
NEP	New Economic Policy (Malaysia)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PACE	Penang Association for Continuing Education
PAN-AP	Pesticide Action Network – Asia-Pacific
PECS	Penang Environmental Conservation Strategy
PDC	Penang Development Corporation
PFP	People Friendly Penang (programme)
PHT	Penang Heritage Trust
PIFWA	Penang Inshore Fishermen's Welfare Association
PIP	Public Interest Partnership
PRA	Penang Ratepayers' Association
PSDC	Penang Skills Development Centre
PSDP1	Penang Strategic Development Plan 1
PSDP2	Penang Strategic Development Plan 2
PWA	Penang Water Authority
RM	Malaysian Ringgits (currency)
SAM	Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Malaysian Friends of the Earth)
SDIs	Sustainable Development Indicators
SERI	Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (Penang)
SILA	Sustainable Independent Living & Access (Penang)
SOS	Save Our Selves
SPI	Sustainable Penang Initiative
SS	Sustainable Seattle
STEP	Sustainable Transport Environment Penang
SUSTRAN	Sustainable Urban Transport Network Asia Pacific

TUGI	The Urban Governance Initiative (UNDP)
UMPAP	Urban Management Programme Asia Pacific
UN	United Nations
UN-ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States (of America)
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (University Science Malaysia)
WABA	World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action
WWA	Water Watch Asia
WWP	Water Watch Penang

Approximate US\$ Value of One Malaysian Ringgit:

Jan 1, 1990:	1RM = 0.37 US\$
Jan 1, 1995:	1RM = 0.39 US\$
Jan 1, 2000:	1RM = 0.26 US\$
Jan 1, 2002:	1RM = 0.26 US\$

Executive Summary

The Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) was the first project in Malaysia, and perhaps in the region, to address the challenge of sustainable development by organising popular consultations, creating community indicators, and channelling the inputs into the state's strategic development planning. Initiated by a newly-established state think tank, and supported by the Canadian government and the UN agencies, the two-year programme sought to create networks and partnerships for sustainable development involving state, NGO, private sector, media and academia.

Modelled after Sustainable Seattle, a community indicators project showcased at Habitat II, SPI was undertaken even before the federal government implemented its first Local Agenda 21s. To a certain extent, SPI flourished within a progressive community setting – Penang being home to a number of pioneering regional and national NGOs, with a state government willing to explore new political processes.

Penang is the second smallest of the thirteen states of Malaysia, with an area of only 1,031 square kilometres. It consists of two parts, Penang island in the Straits of Malacca and Seberang Perai on the peninsular mainland, linked by bridge and a ferry system. The state's population was estimated at 1.22 million in 1997, with 48% residing on Penang Island and 52% in Seberang Perai. Highly motorised conurbations and industrial areas have expanded along the coastal areas on either side of the channel, threatening Penang's fragile eco-system of major coastlines, hill lands, forest and mangrove areas.

George Town, the capital of Penang, is the second largest city in Malaysia with a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual population. George Town attained city status in 1957, and prided itself as having the most advanced, democratically-elected urban authority in the country. The city council however degenerated after the suspension then abolition of local elections around 1970.

Around the same time, when Penang's historic role as a trading port had declined and unemployment was high, the state established a parastatal agency to create the infrastructure for industrialization, international tourism and urban renewal. The export processing zone, which flourished around the international airport, was a choice location for well-known names in electronics multinationals.

In the 1980s, Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed ambitiously put the whole country on a fast track to industrialization and globalisation with his Vision 2020. The country's growth and property boom accelerated, with GDP growth averaging 9% per annum for Malaysia and 12% for Penang between 1992-1997.

Although frequently listed among the more prosperous, liveable and attractive cities in Asia, Penang's quality of life had become increasingly plagued by many 'side effects' and tensions of development. Rapid urbanization and industrialization in this land-stressed state led to loss of natural and agricultural areas, traffic jams, hill collapse, flash floods, disruptions in power and water supplies, as well as worsening air, riverine and coastal water pollution.

The launch of SPI was uncannily timely – the project was initiated at the height of Malaysia's economic boom, with the first signs of the regional economic crisis of 1997 looming over the horizon. As the country's stability and well-being has been strongly predicated on continued economic growth, the financial crisis also 1997 also triggered a far-reaching social crisis. The arrest and detention of the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and resulting events created deep cleavages in Malaysian, and especially Malay, society. The growing use of the internet, allowing unprecedented debate and access to information, generated the widespread questioning of conventional values and the political establishment.

The next few months of months of uncertainty were further dramatized by the threat of transboundary haze due to forest fires in neighbouring Sumatra. It was a good time for Malaysians to question the ideology of relentless development, examine the social and environmental costs incurred and explore alternatives.

Designing the Sustainable Penang Initiative

SPI was designed to pioneer holistic sustainable development planning, monitoring and action. In early 1997, the challenge was formulated in this way:

“Development planning in Malaysia, and by implication Penang, is very much a top-down process that relies almost entirely on conventional macro-economic measures. The five-year development plans thus formulated consist largely of target infrastructure projects for various sectors of the economy and the budget allocations for each. Each of the parts that make up the whole is conceived and formulated in isolation, with little by way of an integrated approach towards development. There is increasing realisation, especially at the level of the informed public, that such imperious yet fragmented planning with the use of limited indicators does not give a clear and holistic picture of what is happening within and to our society and environment.”

(Source: SPI proposal)

The proposal urgently called for the development of “alternative indicators ... so that the balance sheet does not comprise only skewed and uni-dimensional indices such as growth rates, GDP, per capita income, etc.” It addressed the concern that if the high rate of growth and change “persists without sufficient sensitivity to its possible effect on socio-cultural relations and the environment, it will result in phenomenal health and social costs.”

The objectives of the project were to develop a broad series of indicators for gauging sustainable development, and to develop the model for a holistic and sustainable development plan that takes into consideration social, cultural and environmental dimensions besides the conventional economic ones. It also aimed to establish a mechanism for public input and consensus-building based on partnership between government, the business sector and civil society, channel the output of the consensus process to relevant authorities in order to influence development planning and policy formulation, and establish a mechanism to continue this consensus process beyond the lifespan of the pilot project.

The proposal called for a process to promote greater public consultation and community participation in developing and using sustainable indicators for monitoring development in Penang. These indicators were to be incorporated into an integrated and holistic development plan to “guide the realisation of a Sustainable Penang in the next millennium”. (Proposal paper by SERI to IOG). The pilot phase of the Sustainable Penang Initiative was to run over one and half years (this was eventually extended to almost two years), after which the state-society process was expected to be institutionalised as an annual program.

The critical project activities were to consist of five roundtables culminating in the Penang Popular Assembly and the publication of a Penang People's Report. The five roundtables, convened about two months apart, would systematically explore the themes of Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, Economic Productivity, Cultural Vibrancy and Popular Participation. Subsequently two more Roundtables were held in Malay and Chinese languages to gather inputs from non-English speaking groups:

SPI was the brainchild of Dato' Dr. Anwar Fazal, senior regional advisor to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who lives in Penang. Awarded the 1982 Right Livelihood Award for his work in the consumer movement, Anwar had initiated and steered many national and regional NGOs. For SPI's implementation, Anwar forged a partnership between two institutions – SERI, Penang's newly established

state think tank of which he was a founding director, and the Canadian-based Institute On Governance (IOG), an organisation promoting effective governance.

SERI was constituted as a non-profit research organisation whose main responsibility is to conduct socio-economic and environmental research for the State and to recommend policy options in line with principles of sustainable development. SERI prided itself as being the first think tank in Malaysia to combine environmental concerns with social and economic ones. The state education minister was the patron of SPI as well as of SERI.

IOG supported SPI as part of its Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations Network (CAGIN) programme, sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CAGIN consisted of six pilot projects in the ASEAN region – two in Thailand, two in the Philippines, one in Vietnam and SPI in Malaysia. All six projects were designed and implemented by local organizations and supported through limited funding by CIDA-CAGIN, with the objective of spearheading partnerships between government, civil society and private sector.

The Roundtables, Forum and Report

When SERI took on the SPI project, it hired a project coordinator and a supportive administrative person. An advisory committee was established, consisting of the state education minister, SERI directors, and NGO leaders. The SERI staff consisting of environmental and social researchers also supported the events and took part in the quarterly review meetings.

From the beginning, the project had a distinct identity, with logos for SPI and the individual roundtables, reinforced by well-designed, promotional materials and merchandise in the form of brochures, T-shirts, umbrellas and stickers. Most of the SPI events were held in a new government complex specially built for NGOs.

SERI and its inaugural project SPI were simultaneously launched by the Chief Minister of Penang in October 1997, when Penang was experiencing transboundary haze. Five schoolchildren came on stage to voice the kind of world they hope to live in – a future that would be ecologically sustainable, socially just, economically productive, culturally vibrant and popularly participatory.

At the Roundtable on Ecological Sustainability, a UN-ESCAP representative promoted the indicator framework developed by the UN Commission for Sustainable Development. Sustainable development concepts such as carrying capacity, ecological footprint, and environmental space were introduced by a Penang-based ecologist and SERI director. His paper “Is Penang Ecologically Sustainable?” approached the dilemma of “sustainable cities”, calculating that highly-urbanised Penang is already consuming resources generated by ecologically productive land at least 86 times the size of the state’s own footprint.

Alan AtKisson, an American sustainability consultant, songwriter and performer, and the co-founder of Sustainable Seattle, was specially invited for this occasion. He whipped up enthusiasm with his ecological songs and made community indicators sound like fun.

The initial roundtable format was developed by a local facilitator, Susan Siew, with some inputs from AtKisson. She conducted warm-ups, getting people to relax, get to know each other, take off their hats, and express their ‘Visions’ and ‘Burning Issues’. The roundtable stirred up a lot of good energy, partly due to the fact that it was the first time this crowd was introduced to participatory-type workshops and mental-mapping exercises. Academics, scientists and engineers, were initially sceptical at first about having to draw, pin things up on the board, stick green dots on their favourite issues and role play, but in the end all got into the swing of things and enjoyed themselves.

During the Ecological Sustainability roundtable, the participants grouped themselves to discuss issues pertaining to air pollution, coastal resources, hill forest and ecosystem, transport, urban development, waste and water. The small groups brainstormed over the issues, and also identified indicators and sources of data. Then small group leaders presented their results to the larger audience and invited comments. The participants were asked to discuss approaches and solutions, and identify champions who would adopt the indicators for further monitoring and campaigning. Such group dynamics proved to be a catalyst for the emergence of two action groups, Water Watch Penang (WWP) and Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP).

The other four roundtables followed the same format. The participants were identified from different sectors - government, NGO, private sector, academia and research institutes. Each roundtable was participated by 50-100 people, or about 50 percent of the number invited. Three speakers were carefully selected for the plenary session of each event to present the global, national and local perspectives on sustainable development. The second half of the event was a facilitated participatory workshop featuring small group work. A report was compiled for each roundtable carrying the proceedings as well as a vision statement which summarised individual and group inputs.

The highlights and issues arising out of the other roundtables will be briefly described below:

The Social Justice Roundtable, which fell on Valentine's Day, was about equity, caring and sharing. The participants discussed issues pertaining to healthcare, workers, the socially challenged, family, social services, governance and civil society, housing and public amenities. The disabled persons who were present formed a group to champion the issue of disabled access to public facilities. Thus a pioneering self-advocacy network of disabled organisations was born at the Social Justice roundtable. They later adopted the name Sustainable Independent Living & Access (SILA).

At the Economic Productivity Roundtable, the participants talked about monitoring finance and capital, research and development, human resource development, environment, infrastructure and amenities, employment, land and natural resources, and governance. The global perspective was provided by Martin Khor of Third World Network, an economist with expertise on globalised trade. Martin, who comes from a well-known Penang family, took the opportunity to give us his 10 ideas for new businesses in Penang. The roundtable was facilitated by a reputable industrial trainer. The economic roundtable broadly recommended that Penang should look into green technology and green businesses as sunrise industries.

At the Cultural Vibrancy Roundtable, the questions of culture in a multi-cultural society and the language limitation of the English-medium roundtable were noted. The participants had broad discussions about the arts, cultural identity, heritage and habitat, education and youth culture. They also dealt with issues such as cultural diversity, built heritage, street culture and NGO involvement. A group of teenage journalism cadets presented their alternative views on the problem of "social ills" among the youth, which had recently become the cause of national alarm. The arts group subsequently undertook a survey of arts venues and compiled a cultural directory.

The Popular Participation Roundtable opened with the planting of a Peace Pole in the compound of the Caring Society Complex. Discussion groups were formed around the topics of voter participation, the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), participation in Structure and Local Plans, and environmental complaints. By this time SILA had come to participate routinely in SPI activities. The chairman of the society for hearing-impaired people gave a moving talk entitled "People with No Voice", through a sign language interpreter. Soon afterwards, the society conducted a voter registration exercise among the hearing-impaired as part of a longer-term effort to gain political representation in state and federal governments. This roundtable was also one of

several events around the time, marking a renewal of interest in the issue of local democracy.

As the five roundtables had been held in English, they had only been accessible to the largely middle-class English-speaking elite. To explore the opinions of non-English language groups, two additional roundtables were organised, one in the national language of Malay (Bahasa Melayu) and the other in Chinese (Mandarin). The CAGIN funding was flexible enough to accommodate the additional roundtables.

The Malay roundtable catered to a Malay-speaking, largely Muslim community, many of whom had been influenced or affected by recent political events. Discussion groups were formed on culture, environment, and economy. The Malay roundtable was concerned about issues such as cultural diversity, economic justice, environment-friendly habitats, traditional education, sustainable agriculture and religious values. In many ways, this roundtable fielded the most radical questioning of a materialistic value system. Participants were concerned about environment in not merely a material but also a spiritual sense. They saw the need for something more than a technocratic or managerial response to the environmental crisis.

At the Chinese roundtable, the chairman of a society for people with disabilities, whose members mainly came from the Chinese-speaking grassroots, spoke on access and opportunity for the differently-abled. A cultural researcher spoke on changing cultural values while a social activist spoke on housing security. Discussion groups were formed on political culture and the media, social and cultural responsibility, economic revitalization as well as housing, society and environment. The last group consisted of concerned stakeholders affected by a recent hill slope collapse, as well as those facing the impending Rent Control Repeal, which would soon result in dramatic rental hikes across the city.

As the final event of SPI, the Penang People's Forum was intended as the culmination of the SPI roundtables. The forum would engage a larger number of people in the community, as well as the press and the government, in order to communicate the results of the SPI process and elicit public and government response. The agenda of the forum was to discuss the Penang People's Report, assess government performance on indicators, and gather citizen's inputs and proposals for a better Penang. It was originally planned as a large two-day "eco-fair" focussing on the presentation of indicator results, an exhibition called "sustainability Showcase" together with a series of activities involving youth and children.

Announcements had already been printed, but the Penang People's Forum had to be postponed by SERI due to the unavailability of top politicians who were involved in by-elections in another state. The over-dependence on SERI and the SPI process on the Penang State Government was felt, and some NGOs backed out of the actual event when it was finally held in June 1999. The Penang People's Forum was scaled down to a one-day forum, with well over 100 participants, but some of the original enthusiasm and energy had been lost.

The Penang People's Forum featured a powerpoint introduction to SPI followed by "40 issues and indicators affecting Penang's sustainability". An accompanying 8-page brochure summarizing the 40 issues and indicators was distributed. Recapitulating the call made during the launching of SPI almost two years ago, five schoolchildren again voiced out their visions of a sustainable Penang, and then handed over a mock 'Report Card' to the Penang Chief Minister. The journalism cadets from the cultural vibrancy roundtable put up a small exhibition and mime to make their point, that the needs of future generations includes the psychological need for love and social belonging.

An exhibition was mounted promoting SERI, STEP, SILA and WWP as well as SERI's educational projects for continuing education and learning difficulties. WWP displayed ten bottles containing water from ten Penang rivers, showing various levels of pollution.

Instead of a broader debate about sustainable development, the Penang People's Forum gave space and time to the three emergent groups WWP, STEP and SILA to present their issues. The Chief Minister sat through the presentations and made several commitments. Having recently taken over the portfolio as chairman of the Penang Water Authority, he granted half the amount asked for by the WWP as sponsorship for an educational campaign on water conservation. He also gave his commitment that the Penang State Government and the local authority, the Municipal Council of Penang Island (MPPP), would support disabled access and sustainable transport initiatives. The issue of housing affordability was raised, but in his response the Chief Minister played down the potential effects of Rent Control Repeal.

At the forum, the Chief Minister launched Initiative 2121, or "21 Ideas for the 21st Century", aimed at gathering citizen's inputs into the Penang Strategic Development Plan for the next decade, 2001-2010. Later, promoting the process of popular participation, the Chief Minister directed all of the state executive councillors to hold 'People's Forums', a sort of public question and answer session, on their separate portfolios.

The draft Penang People's Report was finalised only after the forum and quietly released three months later. The objective of the People's Report of Penang was to create public awareness, to stir debate, and to provide an educational and reference tool. The report was meant to help readers think holistically about development issues and its impacts, and link indicators to driving forces and policy.

The Penang People's Report was mainly a compilation of indicators reports, categorised as indicators of environment (14), community (21), economy (6), culture (4) and participation (4). The selection of the final basket of indicators also had the view of balancing good news with bad. The final report card showed: 6 good news, 12 mixed news, 19 challenges, 4 question marks.

In contrast to the ease and energy of the roundtables, a lot of tedious work had to go into padding up the indicator reports, due to the uneven contributions of volunteers.

Each indicator report was a write-up on the importance and definition of the indicator, the facts, interpretation, trends as well as linkages to other areas of concern. A 'What You Can Do' box provided practical suggestions of individual or group actions or behavioural change to help reverse negative trends.

The Penang People's Report also reproduced an overview of SPI, the vision statements arising from the roundtables, a directory of relevant organisations or "community yellow pages" and a record of events and fora in which SPI was presented.

Released just before the Malaysian general elections in November 1999, the Penang People's Report was never officially launched by the state government as originally intended, probably because it contained more bad news than good. It received little publicity, apart from a few media reports based on the indicators. For many of those who had been involved in SPI, the excitement of the November elections overshadowed the long-term issues of 'sustainable development'. The elections returned the ruling party to power, confirming that, in spite of a dramatic swing to the opposition, the majority of Malaysians still wished to maintain the status quo.

The SPI activities were closely followed by IOG. In each CAGIN project, a 'local action researcher' was appointed to document the project fully; however, in the case of SPI, this arrangement encountered certain problems. IOG organised meetings of the Local Action Research Coordinative Committee (LARCC) in Kuala Lumpur, Chiangmai and Penang over the almost two year period. These workshops, which revolved around project presentations, peer reviews and discussions of methodology, were attended by CAGIN project coordinators, local action researchers, developmental experts, CAGIN evaluators, and other observers.

The CAGIN project itself was evaluated at the World Conference On Governance in Manila (WorldCog), in May 1999, organised by UN and the World Bank. IOG put a higher level of preparation into this event, which represented the culmination of the CAGIN project cycle. The SPI presentation took the form of a simulated talk show, where three key players in the SPI project were "interviewed" by a Filipino facilitator. Some senior Malaysian public administrators who attended WorldCog perhaps became aware of SPI for the first time. In January 2000, a book on all the CAGIN pilot projects entitled "Opting for Partnership" was published.

The experience of SPI was also introduced in Medan, Indonesia in February 1998, on a much smaller scale. Located just across the Straits of Malacca, Medan is Penang's sister city as well as a partner city in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). The organisers used this international event as an opportunity to develop links with the Medan city authority during a time when Indonesia was just beginning its decentralisation process. The workshop identified environmental concerns such as water monitoring and traffic management, as well as social issues such as street children, HIV/AIDS education, and ethnic relations. The follow-up action consisted of producing pamphlets on each issue. The workshop and pamphlets, published more a year later, were sponsored by CAGIN, as part of a project upscaling and an experiment in replicability.

Impacts

SPI stimulated discussions on sustainable development issues in, altogether, over eight public forums and about a hundred small meetings. About 600 people participated in total, contributing a total of about 5,000 people hours. Participants came from government officers, schools and universities, business and industry, youth groups, community groups and NGOs.

SPI helped to put the challenge of sustainable development in a local context, introducing it to new audiences, as well as broadening the debate among those already conscientized. The roundtables worked by providing a common forum, promoting common agendas and multiplying linkages.

SPI was an exercise in the social mapping of NGOs and academia, as well as of the maze of government departments and hierarchy. The obligation of the local government to implement Local Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda was constantly emphasised. By identifying the functions of various government departments, SPI also helped to pinpoint specific responsibilities for implementing desired actions.

The project created opportunities for NGOs to influence government thinking and the political agenda. At the same time, it also provided politicians and bureaucrats the opportunity to tap NGO expertise and drive. State-society dialogue advanced in terms of environmental, transport and urban issues, as well as processes of public participation, sustainable development planning and the wider use of state-level indicators.

SPI also aroused great interest at the national and international levels. The Local Government Ministry took an interest in SPI as the country's pioneering LA21 type project, as it was soon to implement its own pilot LA21 projects. At a national and international level, SPI became a flagship project for SERI, judging by the number of speaking invitations and research inquiries received.

Among the most significant and last results of SPI was the birth of a new generation of citizens action groups in issues that previously lacked champions – disabled access, sustainable transport and water conservation. Though not anticipated, the organisers of SPI nevertheless realised the importance of these initiatives and nurtured them.

The three emergent groups took advantage of SPI activities, networks and resource persons, and used SERI as a secretariat. They conducted surveys, built knowledge amongst their members, and developed critiques on their respective issues. By the time the Penang People's Forum took place, the groups had developed public visibility through the media and created their own identity and websites. All three entered into long-term engagement with the government.

Water Watch Penang (WWP) registered itself as a citizens' organisation "to promote the awareness and practice of water monitoring, conservation and protection of water resources, towards the ultimate goal of a water-saving society". The Penang Water Authority entrusted its education budget to WWP to run public awareness programmes, mainly targeted at consumers and schoolchildren, creating an instant state-NGO partnership.

Sustainable Transport Environment Penang remained a loose advocacy network to promote public transport, walking, cycling and rational use of the car. It provided inputs into the state transport masterplan, tapping on the expertise and egroup of a successful regional organisation, Sustainable Urban Transport Network Asia Pacific (SUSTRAN).

Sustainable Independent Living & Access (SILA) brought together a network of organisations and individuals from across different disabilities – the orthopaedically-disabled, visually-impaired and hearing-impaired - to create a highly visible campaign for disabled access.

The campaign highlighted the need for planners and policy-makers to consider people with disabilities, so that the latter should not be 'left out' of the benefits of mainstream development. SILA uncovered a disabled access by-law of 1993 that had never been properly implemented, and initiated workshops to promote this by-law to the architects, developers, planners, and even the Municipal Council itself. Physical surveys of embarrassingly inadequate public amenities, conducted by disabled self-advocates were publicised in the press. These served to exert pressure the authorities to upgrade infrastructure according to legal requirements.

SILA members managed to enlist the support of building professionals and sympathetic officers within the local authority and Local Government Ministry. Crucial support came from UN-ESCAP, which organised self-advocacy for people with disabilities, enabling them to speaking directly to politicians, government officers and the media about their problems, needs and aspirations.

SPI also had many limitations. Without funding for indicator work and proposed actions, SPI had difficulty sustaining participation. As the local action researcher remarked, participants were enthusiastic about taking part in the SPI roundtables, but were ambivalent about long-term commitments to develop and track indicators.

SPI did not attract many business representatives, due to the latter's busy schedule. Possibly the way to get ideas across captains of industry and chambers of commerce was to brief them at working lunches rather than inviting them to forums not directly related to their businesses.

SPI was a good forum for quality of life issues but did not seriously address equity issues. SPI had little impact on workers' groups and low-income populations. As such, SPI has not resulted in the empowerment, representative capacity or material improvement of any low-income groups, with the dramatic exception of the work of SILA.

SPI's impact was confined mainly to the English-speaking elite and only minimally penetrated the vernacular speaking grassroots communities, who form the majority of the Penang population. Although the organisers tried to overcome the initial bias by organising two roundtables in non-English languages, they still fell short of tapping the whole range of voices for popular participation. Decisive factors were the limited size

and frequency of the roundtables, the technocratic language of indicators and style of discussion. The venue of the roundtables, in a government complex located in the suburbs, was also not easily accessed by those without private transport.

The possibilities of meaningful local inputs into development planning were also constrained on the one hand by the limited jurisdiction of State Government in the Malaysian federal set-up, and the other, by non-elected, non-accountable local and municipal government. The state government could not resist the imperatives of mega-projects backed by federal government, nor even compel the local government to improve its performance in matters which affect people's daily lives.

The roundtable process itself began with a bang, but instead of accumulating momentum, SPI carried on at more or less the same level of enthusiasm, only with different groups exploring different issues. The interests aroused by SPI did not converge and culminate in one event, but finally diverged into many different movements and activities. Although it was envisaged that the Penang People's Forum would continue to be the "main consultative process" used by the state government for its development planning, and for the civil society to influence state agenda, this did not happen. The "ownership" of SPI still remains with SERI and did not pass on to a larger constituency in the long-term.

Conclusion

Through these two years, SPI sometimes had to tread a thin line between encouraging popular voice and maintaining government responsiveness. There was a constant tension between the opposition and pro-government elements in civil society. The SPI team made a conscious attempt to keep discussions at local and state-level, where there was a better chance of resolving issues, rather than diverting into national-level politics which at that period was extremely polarised.

In spite of generally positive feedback, SPI had many detractors: The first group of detractors were the government planners and bureaucrats who react defensively to the idea of NGO criticism of government performance. Politicians were to some extent willing to take advantage of multi-stakeholder consultation and to work in partnership with other groups because it maximises political gains and reduces political risks especially for innovations, while it appears that more formal programmes would be needed to change bureaucratic culture. Those in government picked up some sustainable development rhetoric and were willing to carry out small symbolic projects, without however really institutionalising changes in development policies, decision-making processes and the implementing machinery.

The second group of detractors were the human rights, social and political activists, including many university activists, who were riding on the wave of widespread political protest. They saw SPI as a means for the government to co-opt middle-of-the-road NGOs and to carry out "greenwash" propaganda. Many of them, such as Aliran (a political reform group) and even SPI's own local action researcher, have often expressed scepticism about the whole process.

SPI might be remembered for promoting the concept of 'governance', as being not only the responsibility of government, and the idea that advances in governance could be made through designed civic processes and engineered public interest partnerships. Although such notions are intrinsic to civil society, SPI has brought them to greater articulation and prominence in the Malaysian context.

As Kathleen Lauder, director of IOG and the CAGIN project explained at a meeting of the Local Action Researchers' Consultative Committee, IOG had applied to CIDA to finance CAGIN as a form of "development aid". Instead of providing funds to build a bridge or hospital per se, the funding was meant to support a social and intellectual process of exploring "innovations in governance" -- building partnerships between government, business and civil society -- which might ultimately have as much social or environmental impact as physical projects.

By the end of the SPI project, popular interest in the issue of local government had been renewed. The issue had been hotly debated in the national elections, and in Penang a group had been formed to promote local democracy. The issue of repeal of rent control had exploded with rallies and demonstrations organised to draw attention to the plight of tenants.

Although there were no funds to continue with SPI, the same organisers became involved in a "successor" project which focussed on local government. This was made possible because UNDP had in the mean time developed a new programme called The Urban Governance Initiative - TUGI, or Two 'G's for Good Governance. TUGI/UNDP started a "Lead City" programme and chose Penang as the first city in Southeast Asia to be awarded with "Lead City" status. SPI was quoted by TUGI/UNDP as one of the main reasons for this and SPI was showcased at the first TUGI regional consultation organised in Penang in August 1999 for development professionals and city managers from the region.

This was followed up with a programme on "People-Friendly Penang", designed to create partnerships between the local government MPPP and citizen's groups as well as to produce physical results and visible social impact. Launched in February 2000 with an introduction to "Good Governance, the roundtables were organised for three groups of people - the disabled, the elderly and children. Each group was to identify suitable demonstration projects in specific locations, and the local authority committed itself to implementing physical improvements.

In response to heightened attention on municipal performance, the Penang Local Government Consultative Forum was established, consisting of elected state representatives, city councillors and officers from both local authorities in Penang, and civic leaders such as captains of industry and NGO leaders. However this forum plays an advisory role only, without basically changing the structure of the unelected and politically-appointed council.

In addition to serving as the secretariat for the TUGI/MPPP programmes, SERI was asked to organise capacity building for MPPP councillors and officers and to conduct a public sentiment survey on MPPP's performance.

At the state level, SERI was confirmed as the main consultants for the PSDP2. PSDP's five strategic thrusts— economic competitiveness, ecological balance, caring and sharing, cultural vibrancy and international linkages – were a modification of the five principles of sustainable development promoted by SPI. The PSDP incorporated some of the indicators, recommendations and participatory processes developed during SPI.

During the state government's own visioning exercise for the PSDP2, the need to improve ethnic relations in Penang was voiced as one of the most important issues. However, the ethnic dilemma is not specific to SPI or even Penang, but rather a Malaysian one. One of the main obstacles to sustainable development was the lack of consensus and common vision among various ethnic groups, as well as their political leadership, over environmental, social and economic priorities.

Due to communal "ownership" of issues, it has been difficult to get political support across the board. General environmental issues are seen as English-speaking middle-class concerns, whereas specific environmental issues such as hill-collapse or conversion of agricultural land affect low-income, vernacular language groups mainly. There is a great need to promote public education about sustainable development and participatory processes like SPI to different constituencies and using different languages.

Although the experience of SPI has been presented quite often, especially to research institutes, some caution has to be taken in transposing it in other contexts. A project like SPI requires a pre-existing level of modern information culture. The language of

sustainable development and indicators tend to be too technocratic to enable true popular participation. It is important to contextualise efforts towards sustainable development in ways which are locally resonant, perhaps harking to various communities' own religious, philosophical or cultural traditions, although this is all the more difficult to do in multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual societies.

Consultations over sustainable development planning need to go beyond inputs collection and report writing by the team of experts. It needs to be carried through to furthering community empowerment from the creation of permanent forums for collective decision-making. Human champions or 'change agents' are just as, if not more, important than perfect indicators, to facilitate change and carry the process forward.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) is Malaysia's pioneering project to address the challenge of sustainable development by initiating popular consultations, creating community indicators, and channelling the inputs into the state's strategic development planning.

SPI was endorsed by the Penang State Government and conducted by the state's newly established think tank: the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI). The project was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Canada-ASEAN Governance Network Programme (CAGIN) which was managed by the Institute on Governance (IOG). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations-Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) also provided support.

The state of Penang presented some unique challenges and opportunities. These include:

- a fragile eco-system consisting of major coastlines, hill lands, forest areas and major threats to water and air quality
- rapid urbanisation and large-scale property development that is causing environmental and social stress
- a vigorous multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society that has created a very special "heritage" of tolerance, respect and co-operation
- a dynamic economy that has made Penang a major player in new information technologies and tourism
- a progressive community setting - Penang has a State Government committed to the process of popular consultation as well as some of the most vibrant NGO leaders and organisations in the country

SPI and other similar programmes carried out in Penang have to some extent managed to mainstream international ideas on sustainable development. SERI and SPI have influenced State Government thinking particularly in terms of environmental, transport and urban issues, as well as processes of public participation, sustainable development planning and the wider use of state-level indicators.

Launched at the end of 1997, right at the beginning of the economic slowdown, SPI has fielded discussions about sustainable development issues in over eight public forums and about a hundred small meetings. About 600 people participated in total, contributing a total of about 5,000 people hours. Participants came from government officers, schools and universities, business and industry, youth groups, community groups and NGOs.

SPI worked by providing a common forum, promoting common agendas and multiplying linkages. The results have been highly encouraging in terms of fostering government-civil society partnerships. SPI also gave birth to a new generation of citizens action groups in issues that previously lacked champions – disabled access, sustainable transport and water conservation. However, it had little impact on mainstream business and industry, workers' groups and low-income populations.

The post-SPI period features several interesting developments. A follow-up programme supported by UNDP's The Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI), commissioned by the local government and conducted by SERI is aimed at influencing local government to look at good governance and making Penang more people-friendly.

The impact and limitations of the Sustainable Penang Initiative will also be discussed in the light of its relevance to the Repeal of Rent Control Act, a major social crisis that was quietly swelling up concurrently with the two-year course of the project, and which took full effect at the turn of the millennium.

1.1. The State of Penang

The second smallest of the thirteen states of Malaysia, with an area of only 1,031 square kilometres, Penang State consists of two parts -- the small island of Penang and the larger coastal territory of Seberang Perai on the peninsular mainland. The two geographical areas are linked by bridge and a ferry system. The state's population was estimated at 1.22 million in 1997, with 48% residing on Penang Island and 52% in Seberang Perai. Penang's highly motorised conurbations and industrial areas have expanded along the coastal areas on either side of the channel.

Penang Island is only 293 sq km but contains diverse ecosystems including hill forests, coastal forests, sandy coastlines and mangroves. Most of this landscape is now urban or peri-urban, and the island itself is criss-crossed by an extensive network of roads. The island can be differentiated into five areas:

- George Town is the historic port and capital of Penang, with an urban history spanning over 200 years. Apart from being an administrative and commercial capital, the inner city is also Penang's cultural and spiritual centre. Around this dense townscape consisting of historic rowhouses, laid out in tightly organised perimeter blocks and narrow streets, are the relatively more spacious leafy green suburbs of the affluent middle and upper class.
- The southeastern part of the island formerly once consisted of fertile paddy-farming land and mangroves. The landscape has been almost completely transformed into a new township and industrial areas served by an international airport. The "Free Industrial Zone" boasts the manufacturing plants of some of the big names in the electronics industry such as Intel, Hewlett Packard, Motorola, and Seagate as well as emerging home-grown high-technology Small-Medium Industries.
- The northwestern part of the island consists of a coastal fringe with white sandy beaches. Formerly settled with fishing villages, the beaches are now lined with modern international hotels.
- The southeast of the island contains the only large pockets of scenic rural countryside with its village habitats, fruit orchards, fishing villages and mangrove areas
- Penang Hill is the island's central hill range, which rises steeply up to 2722 feet (how many metres). This important forested catchment area is encroached on by hill farming and recreational activities.

Seberang Perai, or mainland Penang, forms part of Peninsular Malaysia. With 738 square kilometres, it includes more than half the land area of Penang State. It also has a long coastline, mostly fringed with mangrove areas. The landscape is still highly agricultural, with low-land paddy-planting as well as coconut, rubber and palm oil plantations. In the last two decades, Seberang Perai has been rapidly industrialised and urbanised. As the hinterland to Penang island, Seberang Perai was initially home to some of the more polluting industries and poorer quality housing, but higher-value urban transformation is now facilitated by the development of major infrastructure around the railway and ferry terminal, as well as the addition of a major container terminal and major cross-state expressways.

The population is most highly concentrated in George Town, the capital of Penang, located on the northeast cape of Penang Island. It is the second largest city in Malaysia after the federal capital Kuala Lumpur. With changing urbanization patterns, the city boundaries have become so fluid that the name 'George Town' and 'Penang' are commonly used almost interchangeably. In fact, for as long as anyone can remember, the term Penang, which is popularly used among the majority of the state's multi-lingual population, has been used interchangeably to mean the city, the island or the state. The use of the colonial-sounding name George Town has declined for a number of reasons. In 1976 the City Council of George Town was reconstituted as the Municipal Council of Penang Island (MPPP), and the municipal limits were expanded beyond the city to include the whole island.

While the Sustainable Penang Initiative was meant to address the sustainable development issues for the whole state, the locus of debate and dialogue reflected the focus of power, wealth and intellectual activity in the city. The process of citizen participation took place mainly in George Town, and the main authorities engaged in the process were the Penang State Government and the Municipal Council of Penang Island (MPPP).

1.2. Historical Development and the Rise to Prosperity

Once part of the kingdom of Kedah, Penang's modern history traces its evolution from a British trading post in 1786, to a regional port town, to a cosmopolitan city, to an industrialised state. Penang played a pivotal role in the scheme of expanding colonial and capitalist interests that exploited the natural resources of tropical Malaya and Indonesia with increasing efficiency. It entered the 20th century as a Straits Settlement, under the British colonial administration based in Singapore.

For more than two centuries, Penang attracted settlers from the Indonesian archipelago, India and China, making it a city with one of the most culturally diverse communities. Poised at the gateway to the Straits of Malacca, Penang served as the first port of call, east of India, for transoceanic ships. For the populations of Aceh, North Sumatra, and South Thailand, it was an entrepôt for tin, rubber and tropical produce and a gateway to the west. Penang evolved into an important investment centre for the Nanyang Chinese. Through the ages, Penang has been a cosmopolitan centre with a high proportion of migrants, settlers and sojourners imbued with spirit of adventure and entrepreneurship.

A culturally diverse population evolved, whose description is only simplistically represented through census categories. Official population statistics in 1995 give a break down of 49% Chinese, 38% Malays, 11% Indians, and the remaining 2 percent "Other Bumiputera, Others, and Non-Malaysians". Penang has a lower Bumiputera (Malay and other Muslim groups, aboriginal groups) population than most other Malaysian states and, like most of Malaysia's urban areas, it has a higher concentration of Chinese. In reality, the politically constructed racial categories "Malay, Chinese, Indian" subsume smaller ethnic-cultural-religious groupings. Cultural groups like the Straits Chinese, Indian Muslims, Arabs, Thai and Eurasian minorities, have a distinctive presence and have played an important role in the urban and social history of Penang. As a centre for export manufacturing, tourism and services, contemporary Penang also has a small but highly visible community of expatriate workers (Japanese, Taiwanese, Americans, Australian, European) and a larger but "invisible" community of migrant workers (Indonesians, Bangladeshis, Filipino).

When it had achieved a population of 250,000, George Town petitioned and was granted city status in 1957, several months before Malayan independence. The growth of the old city was based on trade and commerce. When Penang's historical role as a seaport declined in the 1960s, high unemployment resulted. A major racial riot that took place across the country in May 1969 caused the federal government to address structural inequalities with the New Economic Policy (NEP). The year 1969 also marked a turning point for Malaysia as it launched into an era of development.

In 1969, the Federal Government appointed an American-based economic consultancy (Robert Nathan and Associates) to formulate a Penang Master Plan Study. As a result, the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) was established to direct and implement its major development strategies: industrial development focussing on export-oriented, labour-intensive industries, rural urbanisation and the creation of new industrial townships, urban redevelopment of new areas especially to generate more affordable housing, and finally the urban renewal of the old city centre through comprehensive redevelopment of certain areas. Since the early 1970s tourism has expanded with the construction of hotels of international standard along its northern beach.

When Penang lost its free port status progressively in the 1960s, many old shops and businesses closed down. Thus Penang began to rely increasingly on the newly emerging sectors of manufacturing. After a difficult start, industrialization and construction boomed after 1987. By 1996, industrial manufacturing was by far Penang's dominant economic sector accounting for almost 40% of jobs. The sector was led by export-oriented electrical & electronics, followed by textiles and apparels. The second most important growth industry is tourism, which complements the traditional sectors of trade and services. The construction industry, although a minor sector, places great development pressure on this land-scarce state. Agriculture, once the second most important sector after trade, has been steadily declining, particularly due to the conversion of agrarian land for industrial use and urban development. With little land and natural resources, Penang's main assets are generally perceived to be its human resources and well-developed infrastructure.

1.3. Political-administrative System

Malaysia's administrative system is characterized by three tiers of government. The federal government is highly centralized with a powerful and authoritarian Prime Minister. The federal government makes policy and regulates the areas of defence, education, health, agriculture, trade and industry, economics and finance, labour and human resources, police and internal security, transportation, power supply and distribution, telecommunications, information and broadcasting.

Although presiding over a prosperous state, the Penang State Government is land-poor and receives only a small allocation from the Federal Government. The State Government's jurisdiction is largely confined to religious and land matters. Despite its limited jurisdiction, the State Government plays a key role in coordinating major infrastructure and development projects, wooing foreign investment (especially in manufacturing and tourism) and ensuring good conditions for business. As such, it works closely with major business organizations such as the foreign manufacturers' association, the Malaysian Manufacturer's association, the five ethnically differentiated Chambers of Commerce and the international hoteliers' association.

The Penang State Government consists of 11 State Executive councillors and 33 state assemblymen who are elected for five-year terms. The State Government's territorial jurisdiction overlaps with that of the two Municipal Councils.

The Municipal Council of Penang Island (MPPP) is responsible for the island, whereas the Municipal Council of Seberang Perai (MPSP) is responsible for the mainland part of the state. The two municipal councils each consist of 24 unelected municipal councillors and district officers who are appointed by the state for one-to-three year terms that can be renewed indefinitely. In principle, the councillors have to fulfil the three criteria of being experienced in local authority affairs, successful in their professions, and deemed capable of representing the public interest. In practice, appointment is in accordance with a political formula negotiated within the ruling state coalition.

Penang had an eminent history in terms of local democracy, with George Town holding the first post-war local elections in Malaya in 1951. For many years, George Town was the richest local authority, fully autonomous and controlled by the opposition party. Local elections were suspended in 1965, and a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Local Authorities was carried out. The Commission's recommendation to restore local elections was not adopted but pushed aside time and again for reasons of national emergencies and administrative restructuring.¹ Marking the decline in popular accountability, council meetings today are held in chambers and only final decisions are released to the media.

¹ Prof. Johan Saravanamuttu. 2000. Act of Betrayal: The Snuffing Out of Local Democracy in Malaysia, *Aliran Monthly*, Issue 4.

In Penang, the State Government since 1969 has been characterised by the political leadership of two Chief Ministers from the same political party. The first was Tun Lim Chong Eu, the former Chief Minister of Penang, whose statesmanship, authoritarian style and long term political career (1969 to 1990), have sometimes been compared with that of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. With a vision that "big is beautiful", Tun Lim erected what was at the time the tallest skyscraper and the longest bridge in Asia, financed by foreign loans. Tun Lim was the driving force behind an intensive process of industrialization and tourism development at a time when the impact of such transformation was rarely questioned.

Penang's industrialization has even become a model for many medium-sized cities in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Penang industrial sector governance has successfully provided employment, skills development and higher per capita incomes. The PDC has given many briefings to many trade delegations and even set up a subsidiary called DCT consultancy to advise other governments on setting up their own economic processing zones. As the problem of unemployment in Penang has turned into one of labour shortage, Penang has redirected its industrialization strategy to target more capital-intensive high technology industries. It was the industrial sector that pulled Penang into economic recovery after the mid-1997 crisis and its economic competitiveness has even been increased by Malaysia's currency depreciation.

In PDC industrial areas and townships, the PDC is recognized as having authority over planning and regulation of many aspects of urban development. In certain cases, overlapping jurisdictions of the Municipal Councils and the PDC have resulted in inter-governmental misunderstandings and approval gridlocks. The mobilization of a parastatal agency like the PDC, the planning and development of industrial areas, which often entailed large-scale acquisition of agricultural land and its conversion into urban or industrial land conversion, could take place efficiently by-passing local government planning processes, unencumbered by any voice from the local communities. In reality, such state development strategies mainly served the national economic growth imperatives, as well as the interests of multinational corporations, foreign investors and their local counterparts.

The state's development has also been uncompromisingly propelled by the national policy of industrialisation. Since taking power in 1981 the present Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed has put the whole country on a fast-track to globalisation. His Vision 2020 imposed a national ambition of reaching industrialized country status in two generations. Malaysia's strategy for catching up with industrialized nations has included accelerating the process of urbanization, intensifying consumerism, increasing the population base to expand the domestic market, creating modern financial markets, expanding the industrial, tourism and property construction sectors, developing automotive and heavy industries, and more recently developing the IT industry.

In the 1990s, Malaysia pursued what has been likened to a Thatcherite policy of privatising major public services such as electrical supply, sewerage, telecommunications, to spur economic growth. The game of globalisation with its high stakes is played by alliances of the country's political and entrepreneurial elite, exemplifying the concept of Malaysia Incorporated. As Malaysia's economy is increasingly pressured to integrate with the global market, economic booms and busts also become closely linked to foreign capital flows and currency speculation.

With weak opposition parties, the ruling party has never lost power since Independence. The ruling party pursues an irresistible formula of chauvinistic ethnic politics contained by stable cross-ethnic coalitions made possible by a politics of accommodation. Ethnic divisions have strongly overshadowed class divisions in contemporary Malaysian politics. This is partly due to the legacy of colonial strategies of "divide and rule" as well as policies of administrative convenience, the differential treatment of ethnic groups during the Japanese Occupation and the anti-communist Emergency period in the 1950s and 1960s.

The imperative of growth is often justified by quoting Malaysia's delicate balance of power between the Malays who hold political power and the Chinese who hold economic power. The assumption is that in order to avoid ethnic conflict (such as in Indonesia), everyone must continue to have a larger piece of a growing pie. However, this paradigm was only made possible by politically constructing ethnic block identities out of hundreds of disparate groups, and pitting one block against another in economic competition. The control of resources and opportunities is constantly politicised along party and ethnic lines.

While the Malay leaders are members of the top political grouping in the country, and a powerful Malay entrepreneurial class has emerged in the last two decades, the Malay grassroots remain socio-economically marginalized. This contrast is more pronounced in the state of Penang, where the well-organised Chinese communities are still clearly the economically dominant group. With the current pattern of economic development leading to increasing community fragmentation, an alarming trend locally as well as nationally is the rising incidence of social problems among the Malays and among the even more marginalized Indian minority.

1.4. Threats to Quality of Life

Penang enjoyed a 12% GDP growth for five years up till the financial crisis in mid-1997, much of it fuelled by foreign investment flows, speculative financial markets and easy consumer credit. This growth has brought about a generally higher material standard of living but also rising inflation.

Penang ranked No 10 in 1996, number five in 1997, number 6 in 1998 and number 7 in 1999 in Asiaweek's "Quality of Life Index". The Index annually lists the 10 most liveable cities in Asia, and is probably the most widely known urban index for Asian cities. The regional business community takes it quite seriously. Last year, Penang was also listed 6th among Conde Nast Top Ten Island Holiday Destinations by Conde Nast Traveller Magazine.

Quality of life indicators	1980	1990	1998
Population	956,000	1,064,000	1,234,000
Per capita GDP	RM 3,789	RM 5,021	RM 11,631
Labour force participation rate	58.7%	63.4%	68.2%
Incidence of poverty	13.4%	8.9%	4.2%
Literacy rate	75.7	n.a.	89.9%
Life expectancy (men)	68.0 yrs	69.5 yrs	72 yrs
Life expectancy (women)	72.9 yrs	73.9 yrs	77 yrs
Population per doctor	2,778	2,309	1,129
Population per dentist	20,408	14,493	8,513
Population per hospital bed	364	354	347

Source: SERI

While among the more prosperous, liveable and attractive cities in Asia, urban living in Penang has become increasingly plagued by hill collapse, flash floods, traffic jams, sacrificed heritage, social ills and many other 'side effects' and tensions of development. Disruptions in power and water supplies and transboundary haze pose sporadic threats to quality of life and economic well-being. Less talked about but more serious are the long-term consequences of industrial activity in terms of air pollution, water and land contamination with toxic waste.

According to the Penang Environmental Conservation Strategy (PECS), the development strategy of the last 30 years has incurred severe environmental costs:

- air and water pollution, traffic congestion, increasing floods
- loss of natural eco-systems such as mangrove areas through reclamation
- haphazard development taking place rapidly in absence of local plans, and not coordinated or integrated with land use plans
- developments of hill slopes and illegal hill-cutting for agriculture

- loss of agricultural land through conversion
- loss of fisheries through land reclamation, and riverine and coastal water pollution
- pro-developer policies at expense of public open recreational space and public amenities
- no legally protected conservation forests

The PECS calls for the problems to be seriously addressed if Penang aspires to be a modern developed state. A conservation strategy is required to achieve a balance of economic development and environmental conservation, and to ensure that such development is sustainable.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is mandated by the Environmental Quality Act (1974) for projects of a certain size. The EIA process in principle has provisions for incorporating feedback and inputs from the affected public but its actual practice has been less than impressive: "The most serious weakness of the EIA process in Malaysia is the lack of significant public participation. EIAs can be submitted and approved without even the affected people knowing about such a project." (Leong Yueh Kwong, 1996)

In spite of institutional weaknesses, it could be said that Penang and Malaysia in general enjoys a good framework for urban planning due to the Town and Country Planning Act and the high standards set up in the past. Town planning is empowered by the Malaysian Town and Country Planning Act (based on the British Act). The Act was gazetted in 1976 but only adopted by the Penang State Government in 1985. The first draft Structure Plan was published by the two Municipal Councils only in 1987 and approved by the Penang State Government in 1989.

With a representative democracy system like the United Kingdom, and not a participatory democracy system like the United States, popular participation in town planning has been limited to the opportunity to submit objections during the public exhibitions that are held as part of the Structure or Local plan process. Recent amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act have allowed for more environmental protection.

Many of the problems highlighted were a direct or indirect result of haphazard urban development. Land conversions resulted in loss of natural and agricultural areas. The property boom was linked to escalating land values, resulting in a surplus of high-end apartments and offices being built, much of it for foreigners, instead of meeting the local demand for low-cost housing. New neighbourhood patterns saw increasing segregation of rich and poor – managed security condominiums for the former with private open space and amenities, and high-rise low-cost housing for poor that soon deteriorated into vertical slums. The urban and social landscape was being transformed with ubiquitous construction and rampant destruction of heritage buildings. The worst cases of uncontrolled development resulted in hill-slope collapse and ad hoc coastal reclamation. The construction of a commercial complex with underground car park on the site of an old inner city ditch resulted in ground dewatering which destabilised several hundred houses in the inner city. An increase of impervious land cover, inadequate urban drainage, coupled with river sedimentation caused by soil erosion, has led to frequent flash flooding in urban areas after heavy rains.

The demand for labour brought a large influx of foreign migrant workers as well as urban migrants. Inadequate urban waste management, congested living conditions, unchecked construction sites, unhygienic livestock breeding conditions and so forth brought about recurrent and novel infectious outbreaks (dengue/dengue haemorrhagic fever, cholera, viral myocarditis, Japanese encephalitis, Hendra-type viral encephalitis).

1.5. Social and Political Context

Penang is reputed to have some of the most outstanding NGO leaders and organisations in the country, who began promoting local environmental initiatives more than 25 years ago. Today, local movements such as Consumer's Association of Penang, Malaysian Nature Society, Penang Organic Farm and the Penang Heritage Trust are among the most active in the country. Ad hoc groups are occasionally formed such as Friends of Penang Hill, Save the Botanic Gardens ad hoc committee, and various residents groups affected by major developments. In addition, Penang is home to a number of regional advocacy groups such as Consumers International, The Third World Network, Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific, Water Watch Asia, and the Asia & West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation.

Coming into office at the age of 41 in 1990, the election of the current Chief Minister of Penang Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon marked a generational change. Dr. Koh was an academic who had been involved with NGOs, including the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), and was a founder member of the Malaysian Friends of the Earth (SAM). Practically his first act as the new Chief Minister was to halt the massive tourism development of Penang Hill proposed by his predecessor. The monolithic threat to this important highland ecological reserve, water catchment area and popular recreational resort, catalysed Penang's largest environmental campaign ever. Save Penang Hill was mounted by The Friends of Penang Hill, an alliance of NGOs led by the Consumers' Association of Penang and Malaysian Nature Society. Its petition garnered 40,000 signatures and the campaign was supported by a wide spectrum of citizens, young and old, from all walks of life.

The Save Penang Hill campaigners were allowed to present their case to a full meeting of the State Executive Council and this resulted in a decision to annul the memorandum of understanding between the previous Chief Minister and the developer. To secure long-term protection of the hill, the first local plan for the island was drawn up which, in spite its shortcomings, has managed to stave off any major development on the hill for at least a decade.

Another of Dr. Koh's first initiatives was to commission the first Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDPI), published in a book entitled "Penang Into the 21st Century: A strategic plan to build a fully-developed, post-industrial society" (Penang, 1992). The plan identified 12 main challenges to the state, namely, deepening and broadening the industrial base, reviving trade and revitalizing services, expanding tourism, modernising agriculture, developing a skilled and quality-oriented workforce, optimising land use, providing adequate quality infrastructure and public services, protecting and conserving the environment, fostering a more equitable society, cultivating a more caring and integrated society, enhancing Penang's role as a regional centre and upgrading the administrative mechanism.

The PSDPI was the first key government document to espouse the idea of sustainable development as a major guiding principle for a "dynamic, progressive and resilient" economy. However, in the PSDP1 and in government policy throughout the 1990s, the term sustainable development was often used interchangeably to mean sustained economic growth.

In spite of the plan, Dr. Koh's era saw the most rapid economic growth (12% per annum for five years), accompanied by worsening environmental conditions. Apart from the Penang Hill truce, no turn around was achieved during Dr. Koh's era for other worsening environmental conditions such as hill-slope cutting and high risk hill-slope siting of cheap housing in the Paya Terubong valley, rapid loss of mangroves and agricultural land, air and coastal pollution, traffic congestion and flash floods in George Town.

1.6. Rent Control Repeal

One of the major impending social crises challenging the present State Government was the Repeal of Rent Control Act. During the construction boom, the rapid expansion of new housing made the Federal Government confident enough to enact in 1997, the repeal the Rent Control Act of 1966, which had provided cheap rental housing to lower income urban populations. The subsequent recession and stalled building projects later made it difficult for Penang to meet the needs of displaced inner city tenants.

With the largest pool of pre-war buildings in Southeast Asia, George Town's heritage has become the subject of great local controversy. About 12,000 heritage buildings had been protected by a 40-year Rent Control regime, and the complete repeal of this act by the turn of the millennium has put this heritage at risk. George Town is listed as one of the World's One Hundred Most Endangered Sites and is applying for UNESCO World Heritage status.

As a place where many sojourning diasporas settled, the city was organised through an incredibly rich and complex network of businesses and trades. Functionally specialized migrant groups meant that different ethnic groups occupied professional niches, making up complex supply chains. As consumers and producers, they routinely interacted with each other in the course of daily life. Each group was held together by language, culture, and often by a traditional civil society of clan houses, trade guilds, district associations, mariners' clubs, religious trusts, burial trusts, arts organisations and festival organisations.

One of the factors of Penang's liveability is a sort of social equity in housing that used to prevail until recently. Scholars have often remarked upon the comparative lack of slums. Although there are widespread squatter settlements, most squatters enjoy basic amenities amid peri-urban conditions. The bulk of cheap rental housing in the city centre was supplied by the rent control housing stock.

Rental increases provided for under the law were so negligible and so difficult to obtain from the tribunal that in practice rentals were virtually frozen at about 5-20% of market rate. Rent Control became a widely accepted "social contract" and tenants viewed the situation as permanent. Tenancies were bought and sold on the assumption that the controls would remain in place. The transactions, locally described as "coffee money" (kopi duit), ranged from RM 5,000 to RM 50,000 or more. Approved plans for redevelopment was a prerequisite for owners to recover possession of their premises but in reality decontrol was so slow under the Rent Control Tribunal that tenants could often hold out for handsome compensations of about RM 15,000 to RM 100,000 in the black market. Some property owners felt cheated that their properties were tied up by the Act, which deprived them of enjoying their own property.

The enormous savings on rentals enjoyed by the fortunate tenants in part made up for low salaries. It meant that many could save up enough capital to venture into business, or finance the education of their children. Many of these tenants were self-employed, worked in family businesses or were engaged in the informal enterprises such as hawking. While such traditional employment did not offer formal social security or health benefits, their well-being was ensured through mutual help systems within a traditional neighbourhood or community. Not all tenants were poor, however. Some enjoyed low rentals although they were richer than their landlords. Some primary tenants also made a fortune from sub-letting.

Up to the 1970s, it could be said that the majority of Penang's urban population worked in the inner city of George Town. The city thrived when the port of Penang flourished, and the urban communities faced massive unemployment when free port status was revoked in the 1970s. Over-congestion was a common phenomenon in the inner city and five families sharing a house was not uncommon. However, with the

rising prosperity in the 1980s, the expansion in new housing, and the creation of industrial areas and tourism belts with better paying modern sector jobs, many families moved out to the suburbs. Affluent employers, young couples who wanted to start out on their own and well-educated professionals all moved out, leaving the less educated, less physically or intellectually able siblings, their aged parents, those without motorised transport, and migrant workers whose lives were tied to the port.

When the Repeal of Rent Control Repeal was passed in September 1997, rent control was lifted overnight for all states except Penang, where a phasing out period of 2 years and 3 months was provided for. During this time, rents were scheduled to rise according to a certain formula until it reached a rental based on assessed annual value. As the annual value was suppressed, it meant that the majority of the population was probably lulled into thinking that post-2000 rentals might still be affordable to them. The majority did not fully realize how the Repeal of Rent Control would affect them until after many received letters of exorbitant rental hikes or outright eviction from their landlord's lawyers. Most of these tenants had never signed a tenancy contract in their life. It was as if a 45-year lease had come to an end, and there would be no more housing security in the future.

What was the population affected by the repeal? About 12,000 properties or more than 60,000 people was the official figure given in 1993. These were the small businesses, the working class, the marginalized poor and needy. Elsewhere, complaints about the repeal were few, but in inner city Penang, where the most number of people would be affected and property prices and market rentals were among the highest in Malaysia, the Rent Control Repeal developed into the greatest social crisis to face the low-income urban population of Penang since the Second World War.

2. Designing the Sustainable Penang Initiative

SPI was designed to pioneer holistic sustainable development planning, monitoring and action. In early 1997, the challenge was formulated in this way:

“Development planning in Malaysia, and by implication Penang, is very much a top-down process that relies almost entirely on conventional macro-economic measures. The five-year development plans thus formulated consist largely of target infrastructure projects for various sectors of the economy and the budget allocations for each. Each of the parts that make up the whole is conceived and formulated in isolation, with little by way of an integrated approach towards development. There is increasing realisation, especially at the level of the informed public, that such imperious yet fragmented planning with the use of limited indicators does not give a clear and holistic picture of what is happening within and to our society and environment.”

“There is an urgency to develop alternative indicators that would take into account the social, cultural and environmental impact of economic development so that the balance sheet does not comprise only skewed and uni-dimensional indices such as growth rates, GDP, per capita income, etc. Malaysia, and Penang, is undergoing a period of very high growth (averaging 9% per annum nationally and 12% in Penang for the past five years) and hence very rapid change. It is a matter of concern that if the present rate of growth and change persists without sufficient sensitivity to its possible effect on socio-cultural relations and the environment, it will result in phenomenal health and social costs.”

“Recognising this, the project seeks to establish a process for greater public consultation in developing and using sustainable indicators for monitoring development in Penang. The aim is to have these indicators incorporated into an integrated and holistic development plan that will guide the realisation of a Sustainable Penang in the next millennium. Through this process, a partnership that brings together government, citizen groups and the business community will be established to attain consensus on the most appropriate sustainable development plan for Penang. Agreement among these critical stakeholders will provide greater guarantee for the successful implementation of the plan.”
(Proposal paper by SERI to IOG)

The objectives of the project were to:

- develop a broad series of indicators for gauging sustainable development
- develop the model for a holistic and sustainable development plan that takes into consideration social, cultural and environmental dimensions besides the conventional economic ones
- establish a mechanism for public input and consensus-building based on partnership between government, the business sector and civil society
- channel the output of the consensus process to relevant authorities in order to influence development planning and policy formulation
- establish a mechanism to continue this consensus process beyond the lifespan of the pilot project.

The pilot phase of the Sustainable Penang Initiative was to run over one and half years (this eventually extended to almost two years), after which the state-society process was expected to be institutionalised as an annual program.

The critical project activities were to consist of five roundtables culminating in the Penang Popular Assembly and the publication of a Penang People's Report. Roundtables would be convened to systematically explore the themes of Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, Economic Productivity, Cultural Vibrancy and Popular Participation. Linkages between these five themes were also explored to promote a holistic understanding of development and its consequences.

The five roundtables, were held over 1-2 full days each, as follows:

Ecological Sustainability – November 8-9, 1997

Social Justice – February 14, 1998

Economic Productivity – April 11, 1998

Cultural Vibrancy – June 27-28 1998

Popular Participation – September 19-20, 1998

Subsequently two more Roundtables were held in Malay and Chinese languages to gather inputs from non-English speaking groups:

Balanced Development (in Malay language) – October 3, 1998

Balanced Sustainable Development (in Chinese language) – January 16, 1999.

The anticipated results of SPI were:

- Increased capacity, legitimacy and visibility of the main actor SERI as an institute that spearheads and monitors sustainable development in the state of Penang
- Formulation of the Penang Strategic Development Plan 2000-2010 on the principles of sustainable development, taking into account the indicators and mechanisms developed through the project
- Establishment of the Penang Popular Assembly as an annual forum between government, business and civil society to monitor and assess development in Penang and to make recommendations to improve the process of holistic development
- Publication of an annual People's Report on Penang to serve both as a benchmark for the successful implementation of sustainable development in Penang and a tool for popular education, and
- Documentation of the processes undergone in the course of the project in order that the methodology and experience could be shared with other states in the country which might wish to set up similar projects or formulate more holistic and sustainable development plans.

2.1. Initial Actors

SPI was initiated at a very opportune time for two reasons. First, the Penang Strategic Development Plan, 1991-2000 was running its course and the state was making preparations to develop a succeeding strategic development plan for the next decade. Second, the Penang State Government had just established the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI) as a state 'think-tank' for sustainable development.

The Sustainable Penang Initiative was conceived by Dato' Dr. Anwar Fazal, senior regional advisor to the UNDP, who had been asked by the Penang Chief Minister to be a founding director of SERI. Anwar Fazal drafted the outline proposal for SPI, sought Canadian funding and UN agency support, and recruited the coordinator. As chairman of SPI, he guided the development of SPI, playing various roles himself (from keynote speaker to general resource person). A winner of the Right Livelihood Award, 1982 (dubbed the Alternative Nobel Prize), Anwar has a thirty-year track record in co-founding and steering many NGOs, including Consumer's Association of Penang, Consumer's International, and locating, in Penang, the secretariat of international campaigns such as World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA), International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) and Pesticide Action Network Asia-Pacific (PAN-AP). As part of UNDP's Urban Management Programme Asia Pacific, he coordinated a programme for citizen's initiatives called Asia Pacific 2000, an initiative to support NGOs to address the urban environment challenge. Anwar also became Vice-President of the Malaysian chapter of Transparency International, and his specialisation in both urban issues and governance were eventually combined in UNDP's latest programme The Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI). Anwar himself has a constellation of international and local contacts that he pulled in to nurture SPI.

Two institutions made SPI possible. The founders of SERI were looking for an inaugural project. At the same time, the Canadian-based Institute On Governance (IOG), was setting up a programme in Southeast Asia called the Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations Network (CAGIN), to be sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The IOG is a Canada-based non-profit organisation founded in 1990 to promote effective governance. The Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations programme, directed by Kathleen Lauder of the Institute On Governance, in Kuala Lumpur, consisted of six pilot projects in the ASEAN region – two in Thailand, two in the Philippines, one in Vietnam and SPI in Malaysia. The six projects selected by IOG were geared toward creating partnership among the three sectors – government, civil society and private sector. Although supported through limited funding by CIDA-CAGIN, the projects themselves were designed and implemented by local organizations.

SERI, the local organisation that conducted the SPI, was founded in 1997 with a RM2 million launching grant from the Penang Development Corporation (PDC), as an agency of the Penang State Government. The formation of SERI was endorsed by the Penang State Government, in particular by the Penang Chief Minister who is also the chairman of the Penang Development Corporation (PDC), which actually provided the funding.

SERI's existence was justified by a mission statement adopted by the Penang State Government, recognizing that the purpose of development was "the betterment of the quality of life for all through adherence to the principles of sustainable development" and that "well-conceived and directed development has to be based on informed choices and that governance in a knowledge-based society must of necessity rest on a firm foundation of facts and figures".²

SERI was constituted as a non-profit research organisation whose main responsibility is to conduct socio-economic and environmental research for the State and to recommend policy options in line with principles of sustainable development. SERI prided itself as being the first think tank in Malaysia to combine environmental concerns with social and economic ones. Of the four founding directors, Anwar was an expert on human settlements and consumer issues, the second is an ecologist, the third is an economist and the fourth a public administrator. SPI was SERI's inaugural project.

The politician directly in charge of the setting up of SERI was Dr. Toh Kin Woon, the State Executive Councillor in charge of Education, Information and Economic Planning. Dr. Toh was a university lecturer in economics, an academic who became a professional politician late in life. Although the school curriculum is controlled by the Federal Government, Dr. Toh has managed to create many innovative educational programmes at the state-level. The State Educational Consultative Council (SECC) with Toh as chairman and with SERI as the secretariat, established the Penang Association for Continuing Education (PACE), and the Bureau for Learning Difficulties (BOLD) – the first organisation to provide support to families with dyslexic children – and later introduced an Arts in Education programme. Dr. Toh was the unofficial patron of SERI as well as SPI in the beginning but was later made the Chairman of the SERI Board.

The other Directors and SERI associates and consultants were mainly drawn from the local University Science of Malaysia (USM), the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) and the PDC's subsidiary DCT consultancy. Some of the very same people who had formed the think tank of the PDC, which had engineered the state's industrialization, were also behind the formation of SERI, which amongst other things would have to look at the socio-environmental impacts of such an industrialization

² SERI brochure.

strategy. The economist Lim Pao Li was simultaneously the Executive Director of SERI and of DCT Consultancy, which provided economic consultancy, expertise on infrastructure projects and advised other countries how to set up Economic Processing Zones. She was also the Project Manager of SPI, responsible for the budget and implementation of the project.

Among the first steps taken in setting up SPI was to form a Steering Group, to set out the terms for the project's operation and the project team's responsibilities. The Steering Group comprised the Directors of SERI, and one representative each of the State Government, an established NGO, business and industry, whose guidance was sought concerning how to maximize the participation of their respective sectors. However, the steering group, made up of prominent and busy people, in the end met only less than half a dozen times, and most of the decisions were made internally among the SERI team in the capacity of the Management Committee.

The author of this paper was engaged as the coordinator of the Sustainable Penang Initiative on a contract basis. My work with SPI started in August 1997 and was supposed to end in December 1998, but was extended to June 1999, with a temporary absence in April and May 2000 due to other engagements. I am a writer who specializes in cultural heritage issues, serving as Hon. Secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust since 1989 and one of the long-term coordinators of the Asia & West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation (AWPNUC) since its formation in 1991. After three years of practically full-time motherhood and self-funded historical research, I was recruited by Anwar Fazal, who also engaged my husband Abdur-Razzaq Lubis – another writer-researcher – to start the regional network Water Watch Asia and produce a book on community water monitoring. Through my work with Sustainable Penang Initiative, I have gradually extended my commitment for heritage to include other habitat and civil society concerns.

2.2. Developing the Process

The launch of SPI was uncannily timely – the project was initiated at the height of Malaysia's economic boom in mid-1997, when the first signs of the regional economic crisis began to loom over the horizon. The next two years of recession was a time of unprecedented political turmoil in Malaysia, as well as a period of reflection. It was a good time for Malaysians to question the ideology of relentless development, look at the social and environmental costs incurred and explore alternatives.

In October 1997, SERI and SPI were simultaneously launched by the Chief Minister of Penang. The acting UNDP head was invited to speak at the launching. The launching program featured five schoolchildren voicing the kind of world they hope to live in – a future that would be ecological sustainable, socially just, economically productive, culturally vibrant and popularly participatory.

During that month, Penang was experiencing intermittent transboundary haze from the forest fires in Sumatra, a phenomenon that proved worrying for health reasons in addition to affecting investor confidence and tourism arrivals. Haze was exacerbated by local industrial and automobile emissions. The issues of ecological sustainability had never seemed more urgent.

In November 1997, a half-day seminar on "Sustainable Development: from Concept to Action" was held, followed by a one and a half day roundtable on Ecological Sustainability. Dr. Aslam Khan from UN-ESCAP promoted the indicator framework developed by the UN Commission for Sustainable Development. He related sets of driving force-state-response indicators to chapters of the Agenda 21.

The speaker on community-level indicators projects was Alan AtKisson, co-founder of Sustainable Seattle, a sustainability consultant, songwriter and performer. AtKisson, who had just finished a national project of compiling "The Community Indicators Handbook", was able to share with us the methods, techniques and lessons learnt

from the Sustainable Seattle experience as well as examples from other projects in the US. He whipped up enthusiasm with his ecological songs and made community indicators sound like fun.

The role of the roundtable facilitator was played by Susan Siew, co-director and communications coordinator of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA). An international NGO lobbyist, Susan gained her exposure to facilitation techniques from years of attending international workshops. She had also spent several years in Seattle as a designer working with several cultural institutions there. Susan collaborated with Alan to formulate the first roundtable process and facilitated four out of the five main roundtables. Throughout the SPI period, her optimistic personality never failed to energize our discussions.

The local speaker was Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, SERI director and team leader of the Penang Environmental Conservation Strategy project. He had the task of introducing sustainable development concepts such as carrying capacity, ecological footprint, and environmental space. In his paper entitled "Is Penang Ecologically Sustainable?" Dr. Leong approached the dilemma of "sustainable cities", calculating that highly-urbanised Penang is already consuming resources generated by ecologically productive land at least 86 times the size of the state's own footprint.

The "Roundtable on Ecological Sustainability" stirred up much enthusiasm, partly due to the fact that it was the first time Penang people were introduced to participatory-type workshops. Academics, scientists and engineers, were initially sceptical at first about having to draw, pin things up on the board, and role play, but in the end all got into the swing of things and enjoyed themselves.

In his book "Believing Cassandra"³, Alan makes his observations of that session: "It's amazing to see how far across the globe this idea of citizens choosing their own measures of progress and sustainability has travelled. Despite the obvious cultural differences, Sustainable Penang feels very familiar. Over seventy-five civic leaders in health, business, environment, government, cultural heritage, and social welfare have come together to select a new set of indicators for Penang, a prosperous, diverse, and beautiful city. Today, unfortunately, Penang's beauty is shrouded in smoke from the forest fires in nearby Sumatra. After small group reports on key issues, "votes" for the "most popular" indicators, and after the occasional humorous song, a remarkable birth occurs. A local doctor stands up and gives an impassioned impromptu speech on the problem of water quality in Penang. "The streams our children play in are polluted," he says. "No one is even monitoring this issue". On the spot, he calls for the creation of a new civic group, to be called Penang Water Watch. In the space of a minute, a founding board of directors is formed from among the participants of the roundtable. Within a year, there will be volunteer monitoring teams, and an excellent guidebook for local teachers, officials, and activists." AtKisson concluded by saying that, "the process of developing indicators -- which can seem very abstract -- can have very tangible spin-off effects."

2.3. The Roundtables

During the Ecological Sustainability roundtable, the participants grouped themselves to discuss issues pertaining to Air Pollution, Coastal Resources, Hill Forest & Ecosystem, Transport, Urban Development, Waste and Water. The small groups brainstormed over the issues, and also identified indicators and sources of data. Then small group leaders presented their results to the larger audience and invited comments. The participants were asked to discuss approaches and solutions, and identify champions who would adopt the indicators for further monitoring and campaigning.

³ AtKisson, 1999, pp. 161-162

The roundtable was enriched by the presence of academic consultants who had taken part in the PECS, the environmental planners who were involved in DANCED-ICZM, as well as the regional coordinator of SUSTRAN, members of the Malaysian Nature Society and officers of the National Poison Centre (NPC). From this roundtable there emerged two action groups, Water Watch Penang (WWP) and Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP).

The other roundtables followed similar format, and the highlights will be briefly described below:

The roundtable on Social Justice, which fell on Valentine's Day, was about equity, caring and sharing. The participants discussed issues clustered around the themes of Healthcare, Workers, Socially Challenged issues, Family, Social Services, Governance & Civil Society, and Housing & Public Amenities. The disabled persons who were present formed a group to champion Disabled Access to Public Facilities. Thus a pioneering self-advocacy network consisting disabled organisations was born at the Social Justice roundtable. They later adopted the name Sustainable Independent Living & Access (SILA).

At the third roundtable on Economic Productivity, the participants talked about monitoring Finance & Capital, Research & Development, Human Resource Development, Environment, Infrastructure & Amenities, Employment, Land & Natural Resources and Governance. The speaker offering the global perspective was Martin Khor, the economist of Third World Network, who is widely known for his views on globalised trade. Martin, who comes from a well-known Penang family, took the opportunity to give us his 10 ideas for new businesses in Penang. The roundtable was facilitated by Boonler Somchit, the director of the Penang Skills Development Centre, which provides training for the industrial workforce. The economic roundtable broadly recommended that Penang should look into green technology and green businesses as a sunrise industry.

In view of the dearth of cultural dialogue previously, two days was insufficient for the Cultural Vibrancy Roundtable to come to terms with the many important issues. The question of culture in a multi-cultural society is a complex one, and the language limitation of the English-medium roundtable was noted. The participants had broad discussions about the Arts, Cultural Identity, Heritage & Habitat, Education and Youth. They dealt with issues such as cultural diversity, built heritage, street culture and NGO involvement. The Arts group undertook a Survey of Arts Venues and compiled a cultural directory. A group of teenage journalism cadets presented their alternative views on the problem of "social ills" among the youth, that had recently become a cause of national concern.

The Popular Participation Roundtable opened with the planting of a Peace Pole in the compound of the Caring Society Complex. It was attended by several politicians including city councillors and the only state assemblywoman from the opposition party. Discussion groups were formed around the topics of Voter Participation, the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), participation in Structure and Local Plans, and Environmental Complaints.

As the five roundtables had been held in English, they had only been accessible to the largely middle-class English-speaking elite. To explore the opinions of non-English language groups, two additional roundtables were organised, one in the national language of Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and the other in Chinese (Mandarin).

The Malay roundtable catered to a Malay-speaking, largely Muslim audience. Planned before the widely celebrated arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, the event ran into some difficulties as a result of the divisions that arose almost overnight among the Malay community. It was a tense time in Malaysian politics. Some of the NGO personalities who had been invited earlier dropped out last minute in order to keep a low profile. I had to act as the moderator and facilitator while my husband, Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, spoke on Islam, Economy and Environment as scheduled. The national writer

laureate Dato' Abdullah Hussain spoke on traditional wisdom and civilizational values. Although the number of participants was small, the quality of discussion was high. Discussion groups were formed on Culture, Environment, and Economy. The Malay roundtable was concerned about issues such as cultural diversity, economic justice, environment-friendly habitats, traditional education, sustainable agriculture and religious values. In many ways, this roundtable fielded the most radical questioning of a materialistic value system. Participants were concerned about environment in not merely a technocratic but also a spiritual sense.

At the Chinese roundtable, Dr. Toh Kin Woon introduced SPI, Tan Kuan Aw of SILA spoke on access and opportunity for people with disabilities, a cultural researcher Ong Seng Huat spoke on changing cultural values and Ong Boon Keong of Penang Organic Farm spoke on housing security. Discussion groups were formed on Political Culture & the Media, Social & Cultural Responsibility, Economic Revitalization as well as Housing, Society & Environment. The last group consisted of concerned stakeholders affected by a recent hill slope collapse and the impending Rent Control Repeal.

2.4. Penang People's Forum

The Penang People's Forum was intended as the culmination of all SPI activities. The forum would engage a larger number of people in the community, as well as the press and the government, in order to communicate the results of the SPI process and elicit public and government response. The agenda of the forum would be to discuss the People's Report on Penang and to gather citizen's inputs to the State Government. Its deliberations were to include:

- an assessment of the performance of the government as measured by sustainable development indicators,
- the state of Penang with regards to economic progress, ecological sustainability, social justice, cultural vibrancy and popular participation
- proposals for action to be undertaken by government, the business sector and citizens groups to overcome shortfalls and enhance performance in specified areas.

Originally planned for end 1998, it was postponed to March 1999 and then again to June 1999. The plans for March 1999 included a large two-day event focussing on the presentation of indicator results, an exhibition called 'Sustainability Showcase' together with a series of activities involving youth and children. Among those who had agreed to participate in the forum and exhibition were over 10 NGOs, about 10 government departments and a few businesses, including a leading hotel chain that had just been certified for environment friendly programmes. The event was meant to be a mass mobilization of 'people for a liveable and sustainable Penang', and would cast a spotlight on the response of government leaders and bureaucrats to the recommendations and indicator reports presented on the occasion. Brochures had been printed and sent out, but the Chief Minister asked for a last minute postponement because all the key members of the Penang State Government had been called to lobby in out-of-state elections.

All the Malaysian think-tanks had been invited to be observers and a think-tank meeting on sustainable development had been planned, but this had to be cancelled. Observers had been invited from Medan city and Sumatra Heritage Trust, but the trip had to be called off at the last moment.

Three of the workshops went ahead, the Water Watch Penang's River Walk, which was its first public event, the Malaysian Nature Society's Recycling for Children, and the Faith & Nature Workshop: Promoting the Ohito Declaration on Religions, Land & Conservation (which puts forward a common stand for all major faiths towards the environment).

Eventually held in June 1999, the Penang People's Forum was scaled down to a one-day forum, with well over 100 participants. Some of the original enthusiasm and energy was lost and SPI did not end with a bang as envisaged. The over-dependence on the SPI process on the Penang State Government was felt, and some NGOs backed out of the final event.

The Penang People's Forum featured a PowerPoint presentation of SPI followed by '40 issues and indicators affecting Penang's sustainability'. An accompanying 8-page brochure summarizing the 40 issues and indicators was distributed. Recapitulating the call made during the launching of SPI almost two years ago, five schoolchildren again voiced out their visions of a sustainable Penang, and then handed over a mock 'Report Card' to the Penang Chief Minister. The STAR Brats, the youth group which had earlier been involved in the discussion on 'social ills', put up a small exhibition and presented an original mime to make their point that the needs of future generations included the psychological need for love and social belonging.

An exhibition was also mounted featuring SERI, STEP, SILA and WWP as well as SERI's educational projects PACE and BOLD. WWP displayed ten bottles containing water from ten Penang rivers, showing various levels of pollution.

Instead of a broader debate about sustainable development, the Penang People's Forum gave space and time to the three emergent groups WWP, STEP and SILA to present their issues. The Chief Minister sat through the presentations as promised and made three commitments -- first having recently taken over the portfolio as Chairman of the Penang Water Authority, he granted half the amount asked for by the WWP for sponsorship of an educational campaign on water conservation. He also gave his commitment that the Penang State Government and the MPPP would support disabled access and sustainable transport initiatives. The issue of housing affordability was raised, but the response of the Chief Minister played down the potential effects of Rent Control Repeal.

The Chief Minister also launched Initiative 2121, or "21 Ideas for the 21st Century", aimed at gathering inputs from citizens to help shape the future of Penang. The best inputs would win prizes, be channelled into the Second Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDP2), and might have a chance of being implemented.

The project period ended with the Penang People's Forum in June 1999, but it was not until October that the full People's Report of Penang was published, towards the end of the CAGIN project cycle, when the final accounts were being called. The book came off the press just before Malaysia's general elections. Publicity about the report had to wait until the country had settled down after the elections.

3. Implementing the Sustainable Penang Initiative

3.1. The Roundtables

The basic roundtable processes of SPI consisted of:

- Identification of different sector stakeholders and representatives and their representation at SPI roundtables.
- The communication of sustainable development concepts and critique by the speakers.
- Warming up to Participation
- Getting participants to identify and prioritise issues
- Getting participants to identify and communicate indicators
- Catalysing cooperation between different sector representatives

- Identification of different stakeholder groups and their representation at roundtables

Before each roundtable, the SPI project team brainstormed on the discussion list of topics and issues related to the themes of the roundtable. Then speakers and participants were identified, based on their association to these topics and issues. Participants were invited from government, private sector, professional associations, NGOs, concerned individuals, academia and think tanks. The roundtables were meant to be inclusive, not exclusive, recognizing that people from all sectors, socio-economic levels, and political and social orientations could make valuable contributions to the roundtable.

For each roundtable, about 100-150 people were invited and about 50-100 people actually participated in each of the five roundtables. Participation for the two non-English roundtables was 30-40 persons each. Lunch and teas were provided to encourage participation and save time, but this also presented a funding constraint on the number of participants.

Academia, NGOs and think tank consultants were best represented at the roundtables. Quite a few progressive politicians and bureaucrats gave up their weekends to attend, although some important ones stayed away. Representatives of business and industry usually gave the excuse that they were too busy. A small core group of people attended more than one roundtable, and a few attended almost all of them.

- The communication of sustainable development concepts and critique by the speakers

Toh Kin Woon and Anwar Fazal were the guiding lights at most of the roundtables. Toh would give an opening speech expressing the state's interest in sustainable development and its commitment to popular participation. Anwar would remind the audience to look at the problems of the world holistically, positively and constructively. The roundtables started out with three plenary speakers presenting global, national and local perspectives on the topic. A panel discussion helped to clarify questions addressed from the floor. The sessions then broke for lunch.

- Warming up to participation

After the plenary session, the actual "round tables" began. The audience would be seated at random with about with 6-10 people to a table. The facilitator or sometimes two co-facilitators, introduced each activity by turn. The first activity was always "getting to know you". Jokes, drawing sessions, games often broke the ice and helped people to introduce themselves to others round the table. Throughout the roundtable sessions, people were constantly being asked to work with other people. The purpose of these participatory activities were also to get people to "take off their hats", and to be more relaxed and informal. Setting the social ambience was extremely important to getting the right kind of discussions going.

- Getting participants to identify priority issues

When the participants were sufficiently warmed up, the facilitator introduced the second activity. Participants were asked to identify personal “burning issues” and “visions for Penang” by writing key words or drawing symbols on coloured cards. When everybody’s cards were put up on the wall, then the floor was asked to vote for priority issues with green dots. There was usually much discussion at this point, as people were excited to see that other people felt strongly about the same issues. The priority issues were then clustered together into topics by the organisers during tea break.

- Getting participants to identify and communicate indicators related to issues

The second part of the small group work consisted of indicator development and communication. The tables were marked according to broad areas of concern and the participants seated themselves according to which issues they were interested in. Each group was asked to pick a leader, a scribe and a presenter. The facilitator asked each group to come up with specific issues, indicators, sources of data, possible actions, and propose who would research the indicator and or take up action. Presentations were usually made on large sheets of paper or on OHP transparencies.

- Catalysing cooperation between different sector representatives

The small groups represented a microcosm of multi-sectoral partnership. A group might typically consist of one government officer, one academic, one regional expert or think tank person, two NGO representatives, and two concerned citizens. When time allowed, different participatory approaches were experimented with, such as role-playing, fishbone visioning and resource sharing through a “power tree”. The latter two are mental mapping games whereby participants write down their ideas of what needs to be done, or their skills and resources, and paste them onto a skeletal diagram to construct a “fish” or a “tree”, which allows everyone to create a holistic vision or power network made up of parts identified by individual participants. For that afternoon, their team had to cooperate on concise common tasks, such as coming out with indicators and recommendations. These exchanges made different sector representatives realize they had to share information and work together for change. Ultimately, the causes that moved ahead were those that struck a synergy between different sector stakeholders.

Critical Factors for the Roundtables

The following are some critical factors that contributed to the success of the SPI roundtables:

- conceptualising the five roundtable themes
- mapping out stakeholders and “issue communities”
- applying technologies of participation
- providing neutral common ground
- exploring linkages and promoting common agendas
- promoting SPI through media and internet

- Conceptualising the five roundtable themes

The complex question of sustainable development was broken down into five roundtables to achieve all-round participation and exploration of issues. This format allowed the forums, spread out over the course of a year, to give equal weight to environmental, social, economic, cultural and political concerns. It also allowed the linkages between these areas to be explored.

The five themes had previously been used by UNDP in its Urban Management Programme Asia Pacific (UMPAP), and the Asia Pacific 2000 programmes. In his correspondence, Alan AtKisson consultant for The Community Indicators Handbook wrote, “You are doing things differently than any group I’ve encountered before, with your series of 5 round tables, and the slow accumulation of your indicator set over the course of a year and a half. As I said in Penang, I think this is a wise as well as an

innovative strategy ... (however) it does raise the challenge of maintaining press attention, participant enthusiasm, and cross-disciplinary dialogue."⁴

- Mapping out stakeholders and issue communities

Organising SPI roundtables offered an occasion not only to identify issues, but also the different sector stakeholders. Knowledge was built up about the stakeholders "out there" who would be interested in the same issues. A great deal of matchmaking and networking resulted in some productive partnerships. A directory of social and environmental organisations in Penang was compiled early on and this later became the "community yellow pages" of the Penang People's Report.

- Applying technologies of participation

At SERI Roundtables, participants were always given something to do, to put things up on the wall, to vote, to spearhead discussions or to present. The participatory approach was considered novel in Penang and even in Malaysia, and generated much excitement. Many processes were introduced by the facilitator Susan Siew. In addition, facilitation skills were also found among people with experience in corporate sector team-building. During the CAGIN peer reviews, I found out they are much more commonly used in development projects in Thailand and The Philippines. After experiencing the SPI roundtables, SERI, SILA, Friends of the Penang Botanic Gardens (FOPBG), Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and other organisations continued to use and experiment with similar approaches.

- Providing neutral common ground

SPI, and in particular the small group sessions, created opportunities for people to speak frankly on common issues of concern. Government officers and academics were often distrustful of NGOs, whereas outspoken environmental and social activists often found avenues of collaboration closed off to them. The SPI forums created a safe social space in which representatives from different sectors could exchange ideas on "neutral ground". As one participant commented at the Ecology Sustainability roundtable, the event had brought together a number of people from different sectors who 'would normally not talk to each other'. It was a place for one to wear several hats, or alternatively 'take off one's hat'. All the participants found that they had something in common – that is, that they were all concerned citizens who want to see a better and more liveable Penang.

- Exploring linkages and promoting common agendas

Academics, activists and government officers saw the SPI as a means of publicizing their concerns and research work, seeking ideas and expertise from other sectors, and helping to get the message out to the public. Participants were invited to make current announcements and disseminate publicity materials, brochures and posters. All sorts of good agendas were encouraged and strengthened. Linkages were always explored between different issues, so that people could see how, for example, problems in one area also had impacts in others. This opened up the possibilities of finding allies from people working in different fields.

- Promoting SPI through media and internet

SPI was mainly promoted through the media and existing networks. SPI received good coverage in the English and Chinese press, but was left out of the Bahasa Melayu (Malay) papers. The launching and Roundtable on Ecological Sustainability received generous press coverage. Most of the time, however, the press only covered politicians' speeches and did not stay for the main programme.

The project had a distinct identity reinforced by well-designed promotional materials to be sold or given out to participants. Materials included brochures that doubled as posters, files and recycle labels made of recycled paper, stickers bearing the colourful logo, cotton T-shirts, canvas bags and umbrellas.

⁴ Alan AtKisson, email to SERI dated 18 December 1997.

During the last 3 years Penang and Malaysia experienced a networking boom due to the expanding use of the internet. By April 1998, a website had been created for SERI and SPI. The roundtable reports and a directory of organisations were posted on the website. A few inquiries were received via website, but most people preferred to call in. Email was regularly used to send out notices, exchange information and pass on contacts.

Obstacles Encountered during the Roundtables

The following were obstacles which detracted from SPI's ability to achieve to a common vision of sustainable development, and which SPI roundtables had difficulty transcending:

- Resonance

SPI was designed to promote concepts like sustainable development planning and community indicators, concepts appealing to state policy makers, international funders and professional planners, but less resonant for other sectors. The name "Sustainable Penang Initiative" itself was not catchy or even easily pronounceable (unlike the alliterative appeal of "Sustainable Seattle" or the punchy "Medan Bagus"). In spite of the attractive promotional materials, the slogan was perhaps too culturally alien to find its own constituency. The whole project of having community indicators was not only unfamiliar, but too technical and abstract for most people to follow.

- Prevailing concepts and values

It has been remarked of the sustainability projects in the U.S. that, "Sustainability is now a buzzword in the US. Most people talk about it without realizing that it means consuming less." SPI had the same problem of getting people to think long-term and be more committed to sustainability. Views on sustainable development ranged from "slow down development, save the environment," to "why not get rich quick, clean up later?". We also heard comments like, "who cares about long-term sustainability when we are just concerned about surviving this economic crisis?" and "yes, we need sustainable development, but right now we don't have the resources to do so... ". On the whole, participants tended to mistake sustainability, ecological sustainability and sustainable development to mean liveability, environmental quality and sustained economic growth, and felt much more passionately about the latter concepts. SPI was part of an educational process about sustainability, which has only just begun in Penang.

- No funding for citizens' engagement

Without funding for indicator work and projects, SPI had difficulty sustaining participation. While enthusiasm was usually high after the roundtables, some participants later cooled off because the proposals could not be followed with further research or actions. We felt that there should have been some funding for citizens to work together to develop the indicators. Minimal funding such as paying for retrieval of data, expenses for meetings and community surveys, would have gone a long way to mobilize a few additional groups. Many wonderful ideas were contributed, but most people needed to witness some concrete results. A small grant to implement the best and most workable ideas would have convinced many people that it was all worthwhile.

- Representation

Due to Penang's multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural context, SPI had difficulty getting equitable representation in one go. Due to the size of the roundtables and the fact that it was conducted in English, there was greater participation of English-speaking experts and activists, mainly from middle-class backgrounds, rather than non-English speaking grassroots community leaders. Representation from business and industry was noticeably weak, whereas NGOs, policy researchers and academia were probably over-represented.

Representation was felt to be extremely good at the Ecological Sustainability Roundtable. However, at the Social Justice roundtable, which was hastily prepared,

the fact that poverty was not felt to be a pressing issue, indicated that low-income groups were not being represented. At the Economic Productivity roundtable, industry professionals and policy researchers and analysts predominated, and business leaders and petty traders were visibly underrepresented. Language and cultural limitations was felt during the Cultural Vibrancy roundtable, when issues of cultural diversity and identity were discussed. At the Popular Participation Roundtable, again, representation from workers groups and low-income groups was weak. Although the roundtables in Malay and Chinese (Mandarin) were organised, again due to the small size of these roundtables, the representation was unsatisfactory.

The SPI design had certain biases which the project team did not fully understand or make explicit. With hindsight, I think that these biases were caused by

- orientation and cultural background of the project team itself
- the tendency to select representatives from organised groups, when many important low-income constituencies remain unorganised (for example, the tenants affected by the Repeal of Rent Control were not sufficiently organised to take advantage of SPI until the pilot phase was over).
- language and language orientation in a linguistically fragmented Malaysian society
- the context of a "divided Penang" (more on this in the Conclusion)

Although we tried to overcome the initial bias by organising two roundtables in non-English languages, we still fell short of tapping the whole range of voices for popular participation in "holistic" sustainable development planning.

3.2. Development of Community-Level Indicators

A main objective of SPI was to develop "sustainable development" indicators to:

- serve as benchmarks for sustainable development
- serve as alternatives to the conventional ones used in macro-economic planning, and help to provide a more holistic picture of the state of Penang
- be incorporated into the Penang Strategic Development Plan 2

The idea of indicator development was built into the SPI roundtable process, where group work included proposals of indicators related to the issues raised. Through discussions at the roundtables and in follow-up groups, we felt that the indicators should also:

- reflect the burning issues identified by participants of the SERI roundtables
- reflect the controversial impacts or side-effects of development resulting from market forces or top-down planning
- mobilize community involvement in the development and monitoring of the indicators themselves

The Challenges of Indicator Development

On the whole, the indicator development part of SPI project involved a lot of hard work. Most of the time it was difficult to develop indicators that were strongly linked to sustainability, satisfied scientific or technical standards and also attracted real champions and mobilized community.

- Receptiveness to indicator development work

Participants tended to feel more passionate about 'burning issues' than 'cool indicators'. Not everyone agreed with the strategy of developing indicators to promote sustainable development. The concept of "sustainability indicators" resonated with a few groups, such as environmentalists and social scientists, but most lay persons felt that the concern with indicators was too technocratic. Having been excited by the issues, most people wanted to put their energies into actions, not indicators.

- Follow-up work on indicator development

Groups formed during the roundtables were encouraged to have follow-up meetings to agree on "smart" and "do-able" indicators. Although rather ad hoc, the follow-up meetings continued to sustain enthusiasm and strengthen networking. Short-term email discussion groups were started. Where possible, these groups were provided

with technical support, for example by putting them in touch with other local or national resource persons.

Some groups persevered in follow-up discussions on indicator development, some actually tracked down data and refined indicators, while others simply dropped out after one or two meetings. A group of young professionals set up a follow-up group to discuss the efficiency of the manufacturing industry in energy consumption, water consumption and waste management, realising that this information was not being monitored by the industrial sector. Although the SPI project team was excited to get professionals involved in this issue and offered support, the group found it difficult to commit the time to undertake the necessary research and it fizzled out after a few meetings.

- Source and type of data

In many cases, we had difficulties sourcing data, and this influenced the choice of indicators. We found that some indicators were only available at national level, or state level, or institution level. The Department of Statistics regularly publishes national-level data but state-level data were not easily available. Certain environmental data collection, for example on air pollution and coastal water pollution, was being privatised, and would only become available at prohibitive costs. Some government departments were not responsive, although those that were cooperative supplied whole sets of indicators. Some indicators did not "mature" until it came time to writing the report. This gave the SERI team the tedious work of chasing people to deliver the indicators they had promised, check the data, and try to even out the very uneven results.

- Diverse approaches to indicator development

Approaches to indicator development were not well defined. As a result, academic groups tended to take highly technical approaches, while community organisations sometimes took very innovative ad hoc approaches. There was great difficulty in reconciling the different types of indicators, and there were inevitably differences between the evaluators as to which indicators were acceptable. It was difficult to organise a Technical Review Committee for the wide range of indicators. Instead, selected indicators were sent to respective experts and the SPI team itself put the whole lot together.

In the end, several main sources of indicators were used.

- government data, which tend to provide state-level indicators
- indicators from previous research, mainly supplied by SERI or DCT associates
- indicators contributed by NGOs, especially social organisations
- original community surveys

The first three sources of indicators were useful to highlight certain issues, but the original community surveys typified citizens' engagement in community indicators.

- Champions and owners

The SPI process was about collectively identifying indicators, and finding champions who would take "ownership" of them. Although it might have been hypothetically possible for the SPI team to actually research and write up the indicators, the object of the SPI process was to enlarge the circle of people who wanted to take ownership of issues and indicators and work together. Some champions stepped forward at the end of the roundtables, while others joined the work later on. SERI also encouraged the formation of the three advocacy groups. Nevertheless, many important indicators had no champions and therefore were not realized.

Community Participation in Indicator Development & Monitoring

The idea of community environmental monitoring (CEM) was introduced and in a few cases, there were strong enough champions to make it happen. Some examples of community participation in SPI indicator development are described below:

- Crow count as an indicator of unmanaged waste (indicator of environment)

The Bird Council of the Malaysian Nature Society announced the project through their newsletter and the newspaper. Members of MNS and the public counted 7,290 crows flying home to roost in the evening. The distribution of crows reflected areas of poor waste management and major open landfills. The crow count was publicised in the newspapers. The Crow Count example has been held out by SPI as the most easily understood exercise in community indicators. However, it did not inspire the local government to respond to the problem.

- Disabled access in public facilities (indicator of equity)

Over many meetings and workshops, and after learning about the technical requirements for disabled access, members of SILA realized that no public facilities in the state were fully accessible. All fall short of the Malaysian Standards stipulated in the 1993 by-law, which has hardly been enforced. The group organised several trips to government buildings, shopping complexes and hotels to confirm their impressions through more systematic audits. After the publication of the Penang People's Report, SILA announced the dismal facts in the newspapers during a bank opening where the disability groups were invited to test the building's disabled facilities.

- Cultural infrastructure (indicator of culture)

A group of performing arts advocates conducted a survey of almost 60 venues to report on the state of cultural infrastructure in Penang. Several months after the People's Forum 1999, a campaign for "returning the Town Hall to the people of Penang" was mounted by a coalition of arts, culture and heritage groups. Several months after the publication of the report, the survey was updated to prove to the local government that cultural infrastructure was inadequate and hence the disused Town Hall was urgently needed for a strategically located public performance venue. Negotiations resulted in the compromise for the partial use of the Town Hall for civic and cultural uses and the other half for municipal offices. It also marked the beginning of a working relationship between arts groups and the local government.

- Signage culture (indicator of culture)

A family surveyed 55 major and minor roads and found that only 133 out of a total of 577 required street signs or road signs were found at the junctions. Within a few months, the survey was published in the Penang Heritage Trust newsletter. The local newspapers picked up the indicator, and the MPPP responded by instating some of the missing signs. All this happened before the publication of the Penang People's Report 1999.

3.3. People's Report of Penang

The People's Report of Penang was compiled with the following objectives:

- To create public awareness; to provide a focal point for discussions about sustainable development and raise these issues to a higher level of public debate.
- To provide an educational tool that could be used by teachers, private and public decision-makers, and community organisations.
- To serve as a handy reference to help journalists keep tabs on important issues.
- To monitor issues, actions and policies that impact on sustainability and quality of life in Penang and to provide some benchmarks by which we can judge if things are improving or getting worse.
- To demonstrate links between the five areas of concern – environment, community, economy, culture and participation
- To get ideas, recommendations and feedback that could become an important input into the Penang Strategic Development Plan for the next decade.

The Penang People's Report, originally to be called the "People's State of Penang Report", was meant to serve as "a living tool for community involvement". It was to consist of indicator reports, together with a diagnosis of the state's performance as measured by the sustainable development indicators, proposals for action, and a "yellow pages" for the community.

- Finalizing and disseminating the indicators

The first half of 1999 was mainly spent refining the indicators. In the end, 40 indicators were fully developed and so much information was compiled that it was decided to summarise the results and only release an 8-page concise report during the Penang People's Forum in June 1999. This concise report was converted into an even more concise PowerPoint presentation to the Chief Minister at the forum. More fine editing was needed and finally the full report was published by October 1999.⁵ As the report was sponsored by CIDA-CAGIN, it was distributed free to all individuals, NGOs and government agencies that contributed to the report, as well as the media. They are also sold at cost to members of the public.

- Contents

The Penang People's Report 1999 is a 126-page document that contains, inter alia:

- calendar and overview of the Sustainable Penang Initiative 4 pages
- report summary 8 pages
- reports on 40 different indicators 1-3 pages each 81 pages
- Roundtable Vision Statements 14 pages
- emergent activity groups 3 pages
- initiative 21.21 1 page
- Directory of Contact organisations 3 pages
- the Sustainable Penang Initiative in other fora 3 pages

- Contributions and involvement of different sectors

The indicators were contributed by SERI and DCT consultancy, NGOs, academia, government departments and concerned individuals. The government departments involved included the Department of Environment, Penang Development Corporation, the Integrated Agriculture Development Program, the State Town & Country Planning Department, the State Health Department, and the Penang Public Library Corporation.

- Categorization

Problems were encountered in trying to fit the indicators into the five themes of Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, Economic Productivity, Cultural Vibrancy and Popular Participation. For example, many indicators were about environmental quality instead of ecological sustainability in a technical sense. Similarly, indicators of economy might reflect economic diversity, rather than productivity in a narrow sense. In the final report, the categories were labelled indicators of Environment, Community, Economy, Culture and Participation.

The breakdown is as follows:

- 14 indicators of environment
- 12 indicators of community
- 6 indicators of Economy
- 4 indicators of Culture
- 4 indicators of Participation

- Educational and mobilization value

Each indicator report carried the following clarifications

- Importance & Definition
- Facts, Interpretation & Trend
- Linkages & What You Can Do

A brief example of 'Cycling as sustainable transport' is provided overleaf.

⁵ The Sustainable Penang Initiative: Penang People's Report 1999, published by the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI), 1999.

Figure 1. Cycling as sustainable transport

The whole indicator report is meant to help readers think holistically about development issues and its impacts, to link indicators to driving forces and policy, as well as other indicators and actions. Each indicator report includes a 'What You Can Do' box providing practical suggestions for individual or group action to help reverse negative trends. A directory of issue-based organisations is included at the back of the book to facilitate networking.

- Getting the tone right

The choice of indicators was not purely technical. There was an attempt to pull in a broad range of partners in indicator development, to get different sectors of the society involved. There was also an attempt to balance bad news with good news, and, as summarised on the following pages, the report card showed:

- 6 good news
- 12 mixed news
- 19 challenges
- 4 question marks

- Impact of the indicator report

If measures of performance could change behaviour, the SPI Report should be a big catalyst toward sustainable development. After working so hard to compile the report, we thought the SPI Report would work miracles.

The report was quietly released a month before the general elections 1999. It was not exactly campaigning material. The report may have been regarded by many as too verbose and technical. The report was never officially launched by the state, probably because it contained more bad news than good. After the report was released, a few media reports were made based on the indicators, but the result was far from an avalanche.

Later when I read Alan AtKisson's book, I realized that the publication of Sustainable Seattle's indicators met with a similar fate. "Long-term trends are not news", a newspaper editor told him. Later on, Alan had to wonder, "What concrete changes have resulted from the effort? It's hard to say ... We're beginning to understand, at a deeper level, that institutional change of this sort takes place over years, even decades."⁶

The case study on SPI suggested that the list of 40 indicators after one and a half year of consultation was perhaps "too ambitious". For example, Sustainable Seattle took 5 years of consultation and discussions to settle on a list of 20 indicators out of an initial list of 150. "An examination of the indicators of the SPI indicates that there are number of conceptual and practical problems in their use for assessing sustainability" not least because the vision of sustainable development has not been sufficiently clarified. As a result, "The SPI indicators are a mixture of scientific and technical indicators, requiring instruments and laboratory facilities and those which are more community based." The evaluators also commented that the link of the some of the indicators to "sustainability" is rather "tenuous". Nevertheless they applauded "the fact that a list of 40 indicators has emerged, including some which are of relevance for development planning," and suggests that "more relevant and useful indicators could emerge" as a result.⁷

⁶ Atkisson, 1999, pp. 165, 167

⁷ Chan, 1999, p. 9.

Figure 2. The People's Report Card

Was it worth it? The indicators have been adopted as "alternative indicators" for the formulation of the PSDP2. Often indicators are but one element in a wider campaign. Only time could tell whether the final selection of indicators was useful. There will be future opportunities for people to take up individual indicators or even the whole report.

3.4. Disseminating and Replicating the Sustainable Penang Initiative

Due to its innovative approach to opening the debate in sustainable development, and some real achievements in sparking citizen engagement and public-civil society partnership, the example of the SPI has been solicited and presented at a number of local, national and international fora. In the second half of the project period, there were an increasing number of requests by other institutions in Malaysia or abroad for SERI to talk about SPI.

Members of the SPI team have taken turns to disseminate the SPI experience to other forums. In addition, key persons on the periphery of the SPI experience were also encouraged to present SPI in order to encourage them to take ownership of the project. (See Appendix)

The following are the various types of forums at which SPI was presented:⁸

Presentations at local state-level forums, to raise support for SPI and to enlarge local participation from all sectors:

- a symposium organised by USM's housing, planning and building students
- a women's forum on gender-sensitive governance,
- the launch of the Healthy Cities' programme

National-level forums, to promote the model of SPI for inspiration or replication:

- Workshop on Indicators of Sustainable Development (SDIs) in Malaysia organised by Malaysia's public administration training institute INTAN.
- SPI was presented as a model of participation for establishing an e-community in an affluent suburb of Kuala Lumpur. The seminar, called Subang Jaya 2000 was organised by Malaysia's leading internet services provider, MIMOS, and was attended by representatives of the Local Government Ministry as well as the Mayor, council officials, residents' associations and NGOs of Subang Jaya.
- The Town & Country Planning Department has been appointed the agency responsible at the national level to implement urban development planning based on sustainability concepts. The Department has started implementing a few action plans such as the 'Sustainable Cities Programme' (APEC), and Sustainable Urban Indicators Program (Habitat Agenda), and the Sustainable Urban Environment Program (Agenda 21). SERI was invited to present SPI as an input towards the 'Study of Sustainable Urban Indicators for Malaysia'.
- The Malaysian Economic Planning Unit (EPU) observed SPI processes and indicator development. In the year 2000, EPU introduced its pilot Local Agenda 21 projects in four urban centres in Malaysia.

International environmental, sustainable development and civil society forums, at which different types of innovative projects were presented.

- Asia Pacific Cities Forum (APCF)
- Civitas@ Kuala Lumpur 1998
- Regional Consultation on Good Urban Governance organised by TUGI
- Medan Bagus (meaning Good Medan)
- Bali International Symposium on Cultural Heritage Conservation, July 2000

⁸ For full details, see "The Sustainable Penang Initiative in Other Fora", p. 121, The Sustainable Penang Initiative Penang People's Report 1999.

Politicians, businessmen and professionals who had been involved in the project in one way or another, were quite happy to present or represent the SPI at prestigious international forums.

- Penang's leading conservation architect, Laurence Loh, presented SPI as a strategy towards sustaining existing urban environments at the 2nd Yokohama Design Conference organised by CityNet and the City of Yokohama.
- The secretary of Indian Chambers of Commerce represented SPI at the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum in the Philippines
- The State Executive Councillor Toh presented SPI at the International Conference on 'Penang Towards the New Millennium', organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute.
- Toh presented SPI at "A Voice for All: Engaging Canadians for Change" in Canada.
- The Mayor presented SPI at the Asia Pacific Mayor's Environmental Summit in Hawaii
- A City Councillor presented SPI at the Asian Mayors' Forum organised by the ADB in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

CAGIN forums. The SPI experience was presented at the CAGIN Local Action Research Coordinative Committee (LARCC) Meetings in Kuala Lumpur, Chiangmai and Penang. It was useful for obtaining feedback and constructive criticism and reviews from our peers involved in the other CAGIN projects, as well as CAGIN evaluators, developmental experts and other observers.

The CAGIN project itself was evaluated at the World Conference On Governance in Manila (WorldCog), in May 1999, organised by UN and World Bank. The IOG placed great emphasis on the presentations of the case studies at this forum. The level of preparation for this event was much higher -- Toh Kin Woon, Khoo Salma and Naziaty Mohd. Yaacob representing SILA, were "interviewed" by a Filipino facilitator in a "talk show" style. Some senior Malaysian public administrators who attended WorldCog perhaps became aware of SPI for the first time.

The experience of SPI is being related to Medan, Indonesia. Located just across the Straits of Malacca, Medan is Penang's sister city as well as a partner city in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT).

Instead of calling their project a "sustainable initiative", the Indonesians used a short punchy phrase "Medan Bagus!", meaning Good Medan. The pilot workshop of Medan Bagus in Sumatra, Indonesia was organised in February 1998 with a small grant from CAGIN.

SPI was presented at the workshop attended by one representative each from 50 Medan-based NGOs. The Indonesian organisers were Yayasan Humaniora (The Humanitarian Foundation), Medan's most established NGO and the newly-formed Badan Warisan Sumatra (Sumatra Heritage Trust). As Indonesia was just beginning a decentralisation process, the organisers used this international event as an opportunity to develop links with the Medan city authority.

The issues identified at the Medan Bagus Workshop included environmental issues like water monitoring and traffic management as well as social issues like street children, HIV/AIDS education, and ethnic relations. In December 1999, CAGIN again provided a small grant for Badan Warisan Sumatra to produce educational pamphlets on some of the issues identified.

After the end of the CAGIN project cycle, UNDP's TUGI is continuing to support the relationship between Penang and Medan. Medan is the main regional counterpart in the Penang 'Lead City' programme. The planning officer invited by UNDP-TUGI to Penang is now the Deputy Mayor of Medan. Badan Warisan Sumatra and the Medan City Council are also involved in the field-testing of TUGI's Report Card on Good Governance in Cultural Heritage Conservation in June 2000.

3.5. Evolution of the Sustainable Penang Initiative

The project itself gave rise to new developments and demands that SERI accommodated and pursued:

- The “spin-offs” from SPI, the three new emerging groups, nurtured by SERI staff and SPI events and sometimes SPI budget, gained a vibrant life of their own. SPI resources and energies were used to support these meaningful new initiatives, without any insistence that these groups be tied to the SPI process. The members of WWP, SILA and STEP have taken active advocacy of their issues.
- The SPI team received quite a number of invitations to speak about SPI. While speaking engagements encouraged SERI staff to constantly update their documentation and also gather constructive feedback, it was also demanding of SERI’s limited staffing, time and resources.
- Project upscaling with Medan Bagus
- Many things were organised by the SPI team but not officially under the SPI banner. One of the more important initiatives was a small meeting convened by Anwar Fazal on 18 December 1998, International Day of Solidarity with Migrant Workers, to discuss how to make Penang a caring city for migrants. One of the recommendations was to urge the Malaysian government to ratify the UN Convention on migrant rights. A forum was organised a year later by the migrant workers themselves and this will hopefully become a regular annual event.

Sustainability

As a pilot project, SPI was fairly successful in raising a vision for a “sustainable Penang” by building consensus among those who have had the opportunity to participate in it. It also succeeded in nurturing a culture of popular participation that engages state and local government in constructive dialogue and partnership. However, for the ideas of sustainable development and popular participation in governance to penetrate much deeper and wider into the Penang society, the process may have to be repeated more often, with different groups and in other languages.

The roundtable process itself began with a bang, but instead of accumulating momentum, SPI carried on at more or less the same level of enthusiasm, only with different groups and exploring different issues. The momentum of SPI did not converge and culminate in one event, but finally diverged into many different movements and activities. The “ownership” of SPI has not passed onto the public at large, and still remains with SERI.

The anticipated result of establishing “the Penang People’s Forum as an annual forum between government, business and civil society to monitor and assess development in Penang and to make recommendations to improve the process of holistic development” has not been achieved. The concern for holistic sustainable development has not yet become sufficiently resonant with popular culture, nor has it become important enough to government priorities or NGO culture to warrant an annual forum. At the moment it looks as though a bi- or tri-annual forum and report might be more appropriate until the demand for such a process gathers more support and momentum amongst its stakeholders.

Although it was envisaged that the Penang People's Forum would continue to be the “main consultative process” used by the state government for its development planning, and for the civil society to influence state agenda, this did not happen. SPI has helped to increase the frequency of consultation and opened up the terms of debate, but these flurries of consultation have not been locked into SPI. At some point in the future, however, it may seem necessary to the Penang public, state and NGO society to again pull together the different strands of discussion into one consultative process about the future of Penang.

When the CAGIN project cycle ended, SPI also ran out of funds. With changes in SERI’s staffing, and in view of the fact that there is currently no budget allocated yet for SPI2, the future of SPI is uncertain. Sustainability programmes inspired by SPI are

still continuing, but no longer under the SPI umbrella. The experience of SPI itself is still being presented occasionally. Meanwhile, SERI will continue to look for further funding, both from local and foreign sources, to continue with the Penang People's Forum and to organise roundtables in additional areas or with different target groups.

Development Aid for Governance

In IOG's view, the CAGIN projects suggests a model of governance programming: "one which lets local partners lead, looks beyond the public sector alone, enhances knowledge, measures change in quality of governance and leaves behind concrete and tangible processes and mechanisms."⁹ This approach advocated by IOG and tried out in the CIDA-funded CAGIN projects, are fully documented in the book "Opting for Governance". The book is meant for use by academia in public policy courses, and provides insights for policy makers and development practitioners.

Kathleen Lauder, director of IOG and the CAGIN project once explained at a meeting of the Local Action Researchers' Consultative Committee that IOG had applied to CIDA to finance CAGIN as a form of "development aid". Instead of providing funds to build a bridge or hospital per se, the funding was meant to support a social and intellectual process of exploring "innovations in governance" -- building partnerships between government, business and civil society -- which might ultimately have as much social or environmental impact as physical projects.

Funding

The SPI was mainly funded by CIDA as one of the CAGIN projects managed by the Institute On Governance. This sponsorship paid for the coordinator and administrative assistant, all the expenses of the roundtables, documentation, printing of reports and administrative support. A contract was also made out to a Local Action Researcher to carry out the documentation and evaluation.

SERI managed the project based on the financial guidelines drawn up by CIDA-CAGIN. Flexibility was allowed in budgeting so long as the expenditure was justifiable. Gains were made in foreign exchange rates due to the devaluation of the Malaysian currency in 1997. As a result, SERI was able to make the budget stretch to pay for unscheduled events and meetings. CIDA-CAGIN also gave two small grants to support the Medan Bagus initiative, as part of the upscaling of the SPI project.

Although the formation of emergent groups such as SILA, STEP and Water Watch Penang were not anticipated as a result in the original SPI project design, both SERI and CIDA-CAGIN were flexible enough to make the development of these groups an additional priority. SERI hosted some meetings, played the role of secretariat and provided a lot of initial support to these groups even when the activities were not carried out directly under the SPI banner. With sufficient perseverance, the three groups eventually managed to source their own funding.

Technical Support

The CIDA-CAGIN pilot projects were loosely guided but closely monitored by a small IOG team based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. No Canadian or foreign experts were directly involved in the six pilot projects. Instead, the IOG team monitored the project by getting constant feedback from the local coordinators and "local action researchers" who were supposed to adopt a "participatory action research methodology".

The IOG team visited each project for quarterly site reviews, and organised half-yearly Local Action Research Consultative Committee (LARCC) regional meetings in Kuala Lumpur, Chiangmai and Penang. Officers of Canadian or UN agencies were often present as advisors and observers. The meetings included briefings by development

⁹ Joaquin L. Gonzalez III, Kathleen Lauder, Brenda Melles, *Opting for Partnership*, Governance Innovations in Southeast Asia, Institute On Governance, Ontario, 2000. The article is entitled "The Sustainable Penang Initiative: Involving Citizens in the Development Planning Process".

experts, and peer coaching in research methodology by those involved in other CAGIN projects. This network shared experiences, and distilled findings and lessons learnt. As a culmination of the CAGIN meetings, the LARs or project coordinators presented their case studies at the World Conference on Governance (WORLDCOG) in Manila, Philippines in June 1999. This event marked the end of the CAGIN project cycle, when the results of the six projects were presented by the local organisations to be evaluated by the main sponsor CIDA.

The SPI project also received technical support from several other international organisations. UNDP which has been reaching out to NGOs through its Asia Pacific 2000 programme to support NGOs in initiatives to meet urban challenges, and with publications like Urban Voices, Urban Links, was a source of new paradigms, ideas and networking. UN-ESCAP provided initial briefings about sustainable development indicator methodology, while one of the divisions provided substantial technical assistance to SILA as part of their Agenda for Action of the Asia and the Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. The Sustainable Urban Transport Network Asia Pacific (SUSTRAN) helped to build up awareness and expertise on sustainable transport issues through email discussion group, resource centre, and network of experts.

Documentation

The documentation on SPI consisted of the following

- 16-28 page Roundtable reports were prepared by the Coordinator for the five main roundtables. The reports documented the proceedings in sufficient detail that they could be used as minutes for follow-up action, or as a guide for anyone wishing to replicate the processes. The report also contained a vision statement incorporating the wish list of the participants, a list of reading materials that had been given out at the roundtables, and relevant contacts and websites.
- Press clippings.
- Quarterly evaluation reports were compiled by SERI and submitted to IOG.
- Papers were given by the speakers.
- Each Local Action Researcher was required to write up a "case study" to be disseminated at the World Conference On Governance in Manila, April 1999. A 32-page SPI case study was written by Chan Chee Khoon together with three other authors.
- The Penang People's Forum in June 1999 was videotaped, but as it took place right at the end of the project period, the proceedings were not reported.
- The 126-page Penang People's Report 1999 was published in October 1999.
- IOG also documented the process as part of its own monitoring programme. Some of this was published in the IOG newsletters. In January 2000, a book on all the CAGIN pilot projects entitled "Opting for Partnership", by Jay Gonzalez, was published by ISEAS.

Evaluation

Of the six CIDA-CAGIN projects, SPI has consistently been assessed rather favourably both from the viewpoint of conceptual approach and overall social impact. A CAGIN reviewer commented that, "The SPI is probably the most successful of the six CAGIN projects in terms of stimulating new networks which meet to discuss issues and objectives. The main drivers of the SPI are a group of people with shared interests in sustainable development, preservation of the cultural and economic heritage, equity and participation. The community of like-thinking individuals who know, like and trust one another and share knowledge and values is able to work together very effectively".¹⁰

Feedback from a CIDA evaluator was generally positive, but included serious doubts about how the Vision of the Economic Productivity Roundtable, which still aimed for enhanced corporate productivity, could be reconciled with the concerns of the other roundtables.

¹⁰ Chan Chee Khoon, Leong Yueh Kwong, Tan Pek Leng and Evelyn Teng, Sustainable Penang Initiative: Case Study of a Community and Sustainability Indicator Project, CAGIN, Ontario 1999, p. 8

The project team periodically carried out internal evaluations. Each SPI roundtable was followed by a post-mortem. Evaluations were also performed in-house among the SERI directors and staff before the quarterly reports were sent to the Institute On Governance.

Each of the CAGIN pilot projects was documented by a Local Action Researcher, an academic appointed by the local organisation. The Local Action Researcher was required to give constant feedback to IOG and was guided in terms of research methodology by IOG's own chief Local Action Researcher, Jay Gonzalez, a Filipino lecturer in public administration based at the National University of Singapore. The first Local Action Researcher dropped out for personal reasons, and the second one came in late in the project. Only at the fourth roundtable was an evaluation form introduced for participants to fill in.

The Local Action Researcher appointment went to Dr. Chan Chee Khoon, a USM lecturer in epidemiology and the founder of the Citizen's Health Initiative, formed to provide a critical perspective on the issue of the privatisation of healthcare. The campaign, launched at the first SPI roundtable, was targeted towards healthcare professionals, and maintained its network through the internet.

In the SPI case study, the Local Action Researcher has evaluated feedback from the participants on the process:

"From questionnaires distributed at the conclusion of the Roundtables, as well as from more informal feedback, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of participants were enthusiastic about the SPI and the Roundtables that were organized. They appreciated the opportunities to meet with like-minded people in a mutually supportive ambience, to network and to exchange experiences, and to voice their opinions on significant current issues in Penang to the relevant parties, in particular to state authorities and agencies. They were happy as well to help identify indicators to monitor sustainable development in Penang.

"They were more ambivalent, though about a long-term commitment to develop and track the indicators. This was especially so if raw data was not routinely available from existing sources, and substantial work was needed to obtain the primary data and to process and interpret it. From informal discussions with a half dozen NGOs, the development of indicators and their monitoring did not rank high within each organization's scale of priorities."¹¹

The SPI case study listed the following contextual factors as contributing to the success of SPI: Penang's compact, relatively developed and urbanised state with human and infrastructure resources to sustain a broad-based citizen's initiative; the longstanding tradition of NGO activism; competent and enthusiastic staff, supporting staff and volunteers; and liberal, open-minded elements within the State Government leadership receptive to ideas of broader-based governance.¹²

It also identified the factors responsible for the project's shortcomings. The internal factors included: lack of shared consensus among project staff; inadequate project oversight and monitoring; ad hoc communication; and the absence of a coherent strategy for developing sustainability indicators and nurturing their continuance. The external factors were: cleavages within the Penang society accentuated by linguistic and cultural heterogeneity which resulted in unbalanced representation at the Roundtables; limited jurisdiction of State Government in the Malaysian federal set-up which severely constrained the possibilities of meaningful local inputs into

¹¹ Chan, 1999, p. 9.

¹² Chan, 1999, p. 11.

development planning; and last but not least, non-elected, non-accountable local and municipal government.¹³

Strategic Position of SERI – Opportunities and Constraints

SERI was ideally positioned to organise mediated forums for obtaining multi-sectoral inputs. Due to its strong association with environmental issues, more than one government officer has described SERI as an NGO, while the NGO's themselves saw SERI as part of the government. The successful participation of SPI by government, academia and NGOs is largely due to SERI members' strong long-term association with these sectors.

As the state's think-tank, SERI has access to state personnel and information. SERI's position as environmental consultants to the state in the Penang Environment Conservation Strategy, as well as secretariat to the Penang Educational Consultative Council, provided many professional, academic and social contacts and possibilities for working with other groups. SERI's appointment as the main consultants for the PSDP2 meant that it could fully apply the participatory approach, innovative processes and indicators to the formulation of PSDP2.

SERI's dependency on the Penang State Government support and funding also meant it had always to play a non-confrontational role and not give away privileged information. SERI promoted sustainable development in a general way but could not make an open stand on current issues. To steer discussions away from direct challenge to the state government during politically troubled times, SPI's original concept of Political Participation was changed to Popular Participation, whereas the Penang Popular Assembly was renamed the Penang People's Forum.

A serious limitation of SERI is that it is controlled by English-speaking technocrats of largely the same socio-cultural background, which makes it less versatile in dealing with grassroots, rural communities or non-English language communities. SERI's close alignment to the politicians of Gerakan (the party that controls the State Government) also distances it from other political parties within the ruling coalition.

As a new institution combining many technical competencies, SERI was characterised by creative energy, decentralised decision-making and flexible working arrangements. However, the existence of multiple chains of command sometimes led to lack of coordination among the project team. The skeletal support structure made up of people busy with many other agendas and activities resulted in lack of cohesiveness within the team itself. Strange to say, many SERI members themselves did not identify strongly with the SPI project and continued to carry out other projects without reference to the SPI process.

¹³ Chan, 1999, p. 12.

4. Impact of the Sustainable Penang Initiative

What was the impact of SPI on Penang? As described below, the impact is difficult to identify with any precision, since the SPI centred on making connections and fostering change rather than on designing and implementing action plans. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that the SPI project probably had a greater influence on:

- the Penang State Government than on the local government
- civil society NGOs than on the business sector
- the middle class than on the working class
- the English-speaking elite, rather than the non-English speaking groups
- quality of life issues rather than equity issues

Impact of SPI on SERI

The Sustainable Penang Initiative has to some extent achieved the anticipated result of fostering "Increased capacity, legitimacy and visibility of SERI as an institute that spearheads and monitors sustainable development in the state of Penang". This involvement in SPI enlarged the capacity of SERI staff themselves – environmental managers, economists, social scientists, research consultants – to look at sustainable development in a relatively more people-centred, holistic way. SPI brought together many professionals and activists and certainly SERI's range of contacts and resource persons. SPI certainly heightened SERI's visibility not only in Penang but also elsewhere. Judging from speaking invitations, research inquiries and consultancy offers, SERI's experience with Sustainable Penang Initiative and expertise in sustainable development are being increasingly sought.

Impact on Civil Society

The Sustainable Penang Initiative presented a unique opportunity for Penang's civil society to strengthen itself through synergistic partnerships, mobilize broader community participation across different interest groups, and to influence the political agenda. By mapping out many issue-based communities and acting as a catalyst by bringing people together, SPI saw an accumulation of issues, strengthened networking among NGOs and other civic groups and progressively developed a synergy between civil society, academia, media and state.

Penang has a fairly large middle-income group, and a significant English-speaking well-educated elite, many local and regional NGOs and a large local university. The project also had the advantage of drawing on the experience of a large pool of both volunteer and professional activists. SPI's sustainable development debate was nurtured within this "enlightened" middle-class civil society, with a "window to the world". The issues were discussed at a more sophisticated level, and adapted to a local context, before the ideas were translated into other languages.

An important impact of SPI was to get sustainable development issues into the Chinese press at a time when the Chinese-speaking civil society was just starting to flourish. The Chinese-speaking society in Penang is perhaps the most dominant and cohesive in terms of its role in the economic sector, and especially the small trading sector, the education lobby, and an emerging consumer market. The bilingual participants who volunteered to help organise the SPI roundtable in Chinese language were and continue to be involved in areas like AIDs/HIV, disabled access, economic revitalization, traditional philosophy and the shaping of the local Chinese cultural worldview.

Impact on the Business Sector

SPI did not manage to attract the substantial participation of either business and industrial employers or workers' unions. This is one of the reasons why the issues of the manufacturing sector and tourism sector were not adequately addressed.

Many business people expressed general interest and made supportive comments, but were just too busy to attend. The business community may have looked at SPI as low on their list of priorities but were not adverse to it. For example, of the few business representatives who did join our roundtables, an entrepreneur representing the Indian Chambers of Commerce later presented SPI at a business for social progress workshop held in The Philippines, while a valuer and an economist who took part in the roundtables later played a role in the multi-stakeholder dialogues held to address the Repeal of Rent Control issue.

We realised that the business sector would have to be approached differently, for example by co-organising lunch talks through the Chambers of Commerce and manufacturing associations. SERI later attempted to organise a Business and Industry roundtable but did not manage to do so within the scope of the pilot project.

Impact of SPI on Poor Communities

When the Penang Chief Minister attended the CIDA-CAGIN's LARCC held in Penang, he expressed concern that the main roundtables were not accessible to the vernacular speaking grassroots communities, who form the majority. Most Malaysian politicians would have shared this view, as most of them are grassroots community leaders usually fluent in two or three languages.

Ironically, SPI events took place at the Caring Society Complex, a large new building with ample meeting and car-parking facilities built by the government for several dozen health and welfare NGOs. Its location in the contiguity of several important suburbs was ideal for motor vehicle users, but was less accessible to pedestrians and bus users. The locus, language and culture of SPI itself were exclusive and distant from the poor constituencies.

Very few poor communities in Penang would have been organised to take advantage of a process like SPI. The few neighbourhood improvement committees that were identified and invited did not send representation probably because the process and themes were considered too abstract and unrelated to their needs. We realised that for such discussions to be held among vernacular-speaking grassroots meant that the roundtables would have to be conceptualised not at state-level processes focussed on different themes, but as geographically specific local-level processes held in one neighbourhood after another.

Accordingly, SPI has not resulted in the empowerment, representative capacity or material improvement of any low-income groups, with the dramatic exception of the work of SILA. This network of disabled groups, at the moment comprising mainly low-income and significantly non-English speaking members, seems to be achieving more widespread results, primarily through the efforts of self-advocacy.

4.1. Links to National and International Sustainable Development Efforts

The Sustainable Penang Initiative is probably the first project to promote community indicators for sustainable development in Malaysia, and possibly also in Asia. ("Sustainable Taiwan" and "Sustainable Chennai" in India were also being undertaken around the time, although it has not been possible to obtain data on them.)

At the time of the launch, UN-ESCAP was trying to introduce national-level sustainability indicator projects employing pressure-state-response indicator methodologies developed by the UN Centre for Sustainable Development. While such an approach might have been adopted by a more conventional think tank, we chose to promote sustainable development through community-level sustainability indicators that could be "chosen by (or with) local communities to express and articulate sustainability problems and aspirations in ways that are meaningful and "resonant" to ordinary people, and ideally capable of being collected by them". (Levett, 1997)

The Sustainable Penang Initiative took as its model, Sustainable Seattle, a community indicators project showcased during the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul. Sustainable Seattle has been highly applauded for the creativity with which it pioneered a process for building community and political support for sustainability. Its "report card" on sustainability, produced in an imaginative style, provides an attractive reference on current trends. Its value as an educational tool lies in its ability to sum up, in one or two pages, the definition, interpretation and linkages of the issues selected.

Like the Sustainable Seattle project, the declared objective of the Sustainable Penang Initiative was to establish a broad set of relevant and reliable indicators that can inform planning and influence decision-making, with the aim of changing individual and community behaviour. In theory, the main objective of both the Penang and Seattle projects was "to change our personal and collective behaviour in ways that will steer our community on a more sustainable course" (AtKisson et al., 1995).

In a recent review, the Secretary-General of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) pointed out that Sustainable Seattle has had limited or even questionable success with its avowed goal of establishing "bellwether tests of sustainability", while it had better success as a catalyst for public rethinking of priorities and in exploring linkages between trends. The review argued that the project had not managed to improve Seattle's trends significantly in the five years since it was launched, and that the failing could have been due to the fact that the exercise was not linked to the state planning processes. This reviewer was critical also of Sustainable Seattle's indicator reporting which lacks the range and technical sophistication of, say, a State of Environment report. (Brugmann, 1997)

In response to the above, a committee member of the Local Agenda 21 Model Communities Programme debated that while Sustainable Seattle and community indicators projects in the U.K. may have been somewhat unsatisfactory as technical and managerial tools for measuring conditions and performance, nevertheless they have been highly effective in generating public communication and participation in sustainable development. They have also been successful, to varying extents, in setting the political agenda. (Pinfield, 1997)

While looking to Sustainable Seattle as a "best practice", we realized the necessity of modifying and adapting it to the Penang context, and also of linking the whole exercise to the state planning process. In fact, SPI started out with a stronger link to the State Government, so that the results and recommendations might have a better chance of being used as input into development planning.

Comparing Sustainable Seattle and the Sustainable Penang Initiative

- Sustainable Seattle (SS) began in 1992, SPI started in 1997 and was inspired by SS, based mainly on SS report of 1995 and through the direct influence of Alan AtKisson
- SS formed a civic panel and developed its indicators over four workshops with hundreds of people discussing a cross-section of issues, SPI explored issues over five theme-based roundtables with groups of 50-80 people at a time.
- SS produced 40 indicators of sustainable community grouped into themes of Environment, Population and Resources, Economy, Youth and Education, Health and Community, SPI produced 40 indicators of sustainable development grouped into the themes of environment, community, economy, culture and participation.
- SS mainly hopes to influence city governance through mobilization of civil society and publication of indicators, SPI has more direct links to state planning process and hopes to continue change through three emergent groups

According to the Report of the Regional Consultative Meeting on Internationally Sound and Sustainable Development Indicators¹⁴, "Economic, social and environmental

¹⁴ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Towards Indicators of Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific*, United Nations, New York, 1997

indicators have been developed and used in Malaysia for many years. However, they have been used sectorally, and until recently no attempt had been made to develop sustainability indicators that reconciled economic, social and environmental imperatives. There is increasing awareness in some high-level government circles of the need for indicators of sustainable development as an important tool to provide policy and decision-makers, the public, business and industry and the international community with tools to measure changes and trends in the sustainability of the development process in Malaysia."

The Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department, which is responsible for institutional coordination, designated the Department of Statistics and the Institute of Environment and Development (now called LESTARI) at the National University of Malaysia as lead agencies in work on indicators of sustainable development in Malaysia.

The Regional Consultative meeting concluded that emerging priorities for Malaysia are:

"building consensus on the utility of indicators of sustainable development at the local and national levels; (b) increasing awareness and understanding of indicators of sustainable development; (c) developing local capacity in the development of indicators of sustainable development; (d) setting priorities on a suitable basket of indicators for sustainable development at the local and national levels; and (e) establishing mechanisms for field-testing of prospective indicators of sustainable development."

4.2. Links to other Sustainable Development Projects in Penang

During the project period (mid 1997 to mid 1999), several other initiatives were being carried out in the local milieu. When SPI was launched in October 1997, the Penang Government was finalizing the Penang Environmental Conservation Strategy (PECS), drawn up by a team of consultants headed by a well-known ecologist Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, who then became one of the founding directors of SERI. The Economic Planning Unit was setting up an Integrated Zone Coastal Management Programme in Penang, in technical cooperation with the Danish aid agency DANCED (Danish Centre for Environment and Development). The Healthy Cities programme was launched in Penang by the State Health Department in mid-1998, after it had been successfully carried out in two other Malaysian cities.

Links between Penang Environment Conservation Strategy (PECS) and SPI

- SPI started at the tail end of PECS and just as the report was being compiled
- PECS was a study commissioned by the Penang State Government
- PECS was conducted by DCT Consultancy; some of these same consultants helped to form SERI and then joined SERI.
- some SPI environmental indicators were derived from PECS work
- many recommendations of PECS were further promoted by SPI e.g. SPI catalysed the creation of WWP advocacy in water management

Links between Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and SPI

- ICZM project cycle started before and ended after SPI
- ICZM is a programme conducted by the State Economic Planning Unit and USM with DANCED expertise and funding
- ICZM contributed coastal indicators to SPI
- SPI processes had an influence on ICZM particularly in the area of public education and stakeholder participation
- ICZM foreign consultants and local team participated in SPI roundtables and interviewed SPI team members for inputs
- ICZM coordinator later went to work for SERI

Links between SPI and Healthy Cities (HC) programme

- While the HC programme in Malaysia had already successfully carried out in two cities in Malaysia, HC Penang was launched in middle of SPI project cycle
- HC was organised by government, that is the Penang State Health Department
- The experience of SPI was presented in first part of HC programme targeted at government departments
- HC sought cooperation from SPI for public participation
- The Penang State Health Department contributed indicators to SPI
- Although HC would have potentially had more impact on government bureaucracy, HC was not sustained

Links between SPI and People-Friendly Penang Programme (PFP)

- SPI project period is mid-1997 to mid-1999, PFP project period begins in early 2000
- Both have been conducted by SERI using participatory approaches, based on the themes Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, Economic Productivity, Cultural Vibrancy and Popular Participation.
- SPI was main factor for Penang being identified as 'Lead City' by UNDP and this led to UNDP providing support for PFP
- SPI is mainly foreign-funded by CIDA-CAGIN and supported by UNDP, whereas PFP is mainly locally funded by MPPP and supported by UNDP/TUGI
- SPI organises roundtables according to issues, while PFP organises roundtables according to stakeholder groups (elderly, children, disabled persons)
- SPI develops indicators to be adopted by State Government and encourages actions, whereas PFP develops action plans to be implemented by the local government
- SPI aims at influencing state-level policy on sustainable development, whereas PFP aims at influencing city-level policy on people-friendly urban environment

4.3. Links to Sustainable Development Policy Planning

Towards the end of the project period, SERI was confirmed as the main consultants for the PSDP2. Using some of the indicators, recommendations and participatory processes developed during the SPI pilot phase, SERI and the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC), the state's industrial training institute, conducted the initial briefings to the Penang State Government for the PSDP2. The inputs from SPI were meant to help make the PSDP2 more comprehensive, integrated and holistic.

The first programme was a two-and-a-half-day retreat during which the Chief Minister and his executive councillors and heads of government departments took part in a visioning exercise. This high-powered group arrived at five strategic thrusts of the PSDP2 – economic competitiveness, ecological balance, caring and sharing, cultural vibrancy and international linkages – based on, but being a modification of, the five principles of sustainable development promoted by SPI.

The Penang State Government then announced a number of action plans, most of them conventionally industrial, tourism and infrastructural, but also including initiatives such as setting up a Centre for Sustainable Development, implementing more environment education and conservation programmes, conserving and enhancing Penang Hill as an ecology park, developing George Town into a living heritage city, preserving the state's historical and cultural heritage, and addressing and accommodating the needs of women, youth, the disabled and the elderly in development.

Demonstrating its commitment to popular participation, the Chief Minister directed all of the state executive councillors to hold People's Forums on the issues in their portfolio, Dr. Toh Kin Woon was the first to do so, organising Penang's first Education Forum in August 1999 at which questions were raised non-stop from the floor. The

responses highlighted the reality of absolute federal control over education, and how the State Government could only influence very peripheral aspects of education

The Penang State Government has now declared sustainable development as a central principle but the process of mainstreaming it is slow and far from consistent. As a foreign expert working in Penang commented, "It is one thing to get the government to accept a policy, however institutionalisation and implementation do not necessarily follow." Part of the problem is the lack of accountability of the government bureaucracy to the public, which could certainly be improved by having better performance reporting.

In the meantime, discrepancies abound especially above and below the level of state planning. Mega-projects involving federal interests such as the "third link" (an undersea car tunnel), major highway and reclamation projects are considered beyond question by the state, although the environmental and social costs might be considered highly unacceptable. Municipal level policies have remained generally unchanged, and smaller projects that may cumulatively exacerbate flooding and pollution are approved as a matter of course.

Links between SPI and Second Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDP2)

- The Formulation of PSDP2 began in 1999, towards the end of the SPI project cycle
- The Penang State Government endorsed SPI as an exercise in public participation leading up to the formulation of PSDP2 for the next decade 2000-2010
- SERI, the institute that conducted SPI is also the main consultant for PSDP2
- PSDP2 is financed by the Penang State Government itself, without any external funding
- Initiative 2121 to gather further public inputs for PSDP2 was launched at SPI's Penang People's Forum
- A goal of SPI was to gather inputs for PSDP2, and SPI's 'alternative indicators' have already been adopted by PSDP2
- Participatory approach and broader stakeholder consultation processes used in SPI have been adopted in PSDP2
- SPI roundtables are based on the themes Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, Economic Productivity, Cultural Vibrancy and Popular Participation whereas the five strategic thrusts of PSDP2 are economic competitiveness, ecological balance, caring and sharing, cultural vibrancy and international linkages
- PSDP1 was based on the idea of sustainable development as 'sustained growth', but as a result of SPI, PSDP2 is now based on a broader understanding of sustainable development

4.4. Links to Emergent Groups

SPI was the catalyst for the formation of new citizens' groups which took up issues for which there were no existing advocacy groups. The participatory processes at SPI roundtables stirred enough enthusiasm that participants got together to form permanent lobby groups on issues social and environmental issues.

The emergence of WWP, STEP and SILA has been among the most visible and lasting results of SPI. All these groups have:

- developed critiques on their respective issues
- built knowledge among members
- conducted field trips and surveys
- developed high public visibility through the media
- created their own identity, and produced logos, T-shirts, brochures
- put up websites for their organisations

- succeeded in engaging the government sector in sustainable development initiatives
- developed a long-term mutually-beneficial partnership with SERI, which serves as the secretariat for these groups

Water Conservation Movement

Water Watch Penang (WWP), was formed at the Ecological Sustainability roundtable, when Dr. Chan Ngai Weng, a university hydrologist threw up the challenge to the participants to form an NGO, and more than 10 people signed up there and then. Chan, who has often been quoted in the press as an expert on Penang's water shortages and floods, also became chairman of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS).

Water Watch Penang (WWP) is "a voluntary citizens' organisation set up to promote the awareness and practice of water monitoring, conservation and protection of water resources, towards the ultimate goal of a water saving society". It aims at "achieving the sustainable development of water resources in accordance with the aspirations of Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit and Malaysia's Environmental Commitment".

WWP organised the launching of a book on community water monitoring published by Water Watch Asia (WWA). This occasion in June 1999 was attended by the Chief Minister and the Penang Water Authority's general manager. The Penang Water Authority (PWA), boasting one of the best water systems in Asia, was undergoing a corporatisation programme. On this and other similar occasions, the opportunity was taken to approach politicians and public administrators about the need to raise public awareness about water issues. If the PWA did not have the personnel to organise water campaigns, they could always sponsor a citizen's organisation to do so. At the Penang People's Forum, the PWA pledged about US\$ 13,000 funding for a public awareness programme that would be organised by WWA, mainly targeted at consumers and schoolchildren.

In March 1999, the WWP activity, a river walk and introduction to water monitoring, was organised and publicised in the MNS newsletter. Since then WWP has conducted many river walks for schoolchildren. WWP and PWA celebrated World Water Day 2000 with a big event at the Penang Botanic Gardens, with activities for children by the Waterfall River. Educational brochures, awareness posters, T-shirts and merchandise were produced for the event.

Sustainable Transport Movement

Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP), grew out of a discussion group formed at the Ecological Sustainability roundtable. In response to the worsening traffic and transport situation in Penang, STEP had its inaugural public meeting on August 23, 1998 on the theme Sustainable Transport Options for Penang. Among the 80 people who attended the event were local government councillors and officers. Dr. Hilmi Yahya, the state cabinet member responsible for transportation, who has since become the Deputy Chief Minister, has also expressed support for STEP.

STEP promotes public transport, walking cycling and rational use of the car. The leadership was provided by protem chairman Dr. Choong Sim Poey, who is also the president of PHT and the husband of the Penang State tourism minister. Technical advice came from Ganesh Rasagam, DCT consultant and also Abdul Rahman Paul Barter, coordinator of the then Kuala Lumpur-based Sustainable Urban Transport Network Asia Pacific (SUSTRAN), now based in Jakarta.

STEP provided a critique on the worsening traffic and transport situation in Penang and its impact on the environment. Joining forces with a local cycling group called Pedal Power, STEP obtained seed funding from the Dutch Embassy to organise a forum on cycling and sustainable transport with a Dutch cycling expert from I-CE (Interface for Cycling Expertise). STEP also engaged a regional sustainable transport consultant to create a cycling masterplan, worked with the local government to create a suburban bicycle route as a pilot project and launched it with a cycling event.

Raphael Surin, an engineer who got his first exposure to public interest advocacy through SPI and STEP, conducted a small campaign drawing public attention to the deplorable conditions in a major bus station, and this resulted in the local government making some of the recommended improvements.

Disabled Access Movement

Of the initiatives spurred by SPI, by far the most powerful and inspiring movement was SILA, a network of organisations and people from across different disabilities, which was formed during the Social Justice roundtable. Calling themselves SILA for "Sustainable Independent Living & Access", the alliance promotes universal disabled access, as part of the agenda for people with disabilities to participate fully in society. Members of SILA use English, Bahasa Melayu (Malay), Chinese (Mandarin) and sign language.

- Empowerment through SPI

The lack of holistic sustainable development planning has marginalized people with disabilities as much as any other group. At the Popular Participation workshop, Phillip Pong, the chairman of the hearing-impaired gave a talk entitled "People with No Voice". Soon after, they conducted a voter registration exercise among the hearing-impaired as part of a longer-term effort to gain political representation in state and federal governments. Khor, a SERI research officer who is adept in sign language, is in charge of the SILA portfolio in SERI.

The orthopaedically impaired, the visually impaired and the hearing impaired have their own leaders and movers. But the man behind the long-term vision of SILA is Tan Kuan Aw, an orthopaedically disabled manager of a shoe factory, himself a shoe designer with a university degree in visual arts. He is the president of Disabled Society of Penang, whose members are mostly Chinese-speaking grassroots. Their members range from computer programmers to street peddlers. Many are unemployed or working in the informal sector for small incomes. SILA, more than any other group, has been given extensive coverage in the Chinese press.

In 1985, Tan Kuan Aw and his visually-impaired friends submitted their recommendations for disabled access for incorporation into the MPPP's Structure Plan. The recommendations were totally rejected. Tan lost hope and turned his attention to painting for ten years before his enthusiasm was rekindled as a result of SPI and SILA. In 1998, Tan organised inputs to the Report of Survey for the new Structure Plan.

From the Social Justice roundtable onwards, the disabled people were well represented in most of the SPI events. They found themselves invited to many other forums and continued linking with other groups. Most importantly, many members of SILA have undergone training to become self-advocates, speaking directly to politicians, government officers and the media about their problems, needs and aspirations.

The country's first women's cross-disabilities self-advocacy group was started in the early part of 1999. SILA has a long-term vision to promote the access, educational and socio-economic enhancement of its members, for its members to partake fully in social, cultural, political and economic life. Tan sees the need for his members to have a well-rounded awareness, "We must educate ourselves not only on disability issues, but about issues that concern everyone as human beings".

- Working with international organisations

Soon after the Social Justice Roundtable, the SPI team provided international links to SILA. A representative of SILA was sent to Beijing for a UN-ESCAP workshop of disabled access, where contact was made with members of the Malaysian Local Government and Social Welfare Ministry.

Malaysia was a signatory of the UN-ESCAP Agenda for Action of the Asia and the Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. UN-ESCAP provided funding for a series of

training workshops for self-advocacy called "Training Workshop for the Promotion of Non-Handicapping Environments for people with disabilities. Another small supporting grant was later obtained from a Finnish foundation.

- Engaging the local government

SILA uncovered a disabled access by-law of 1993 that had never been properly implemented, and is holding fast to a pledge by the Mayor "to make George Town disabled-friendly within six months". Highly publicised physical surveys were an important strategy to educate public about disabled access, at the same time pressuring the authorities to upgrade infrastructure according to legal requirements. The orthopaedically disabled group led a community survey of the Penang Botanic Gardens and this led to physical improvements such as ramps, handrails and disabled toilet. They then surveyed the route connecting the school for the visually-impaired to the nearest shopping facility, and as a result the local government invested in a partial improvement of the footpath.

A strategic project was a detailed survey of the main government building KOMTAR, by all three groups – the visually impaired, the hearing impaired and the orthopaedically impaired. This project highlighted the lack of access resulting in the exclusion of the disabled community from Penang's commercial centre and transport hub, as well as government employment and the corridors of power. Tan had a styrofoam model of KOMTAR made so that the visually-impaired, who used KOMTAR very often, could map out their routes and propose interventions. At those meetings, the blind, the deaf and the physically disabled sat down together to correct the mistakes of the government officers, architects and planners.

In June 1999, SILA conducted a survey of Campbell Street Mall together with a group of access advocates from Kuala Lumpur. SILA then organised a delegation to the launching by the Penang Mayor of the city's first pedestrian-friendly urban renovation project in September 1999. At this appearance, they requested MPPP to relax its anti-busking rules for the disabled, providing opportunities for disabled musicians to enhance their livelihood.

SILA has continued to develop after SPI. With an ambulant disabled lawyer woman activist, SILA organised a workshop on Law and Disabled Persons in Malaysia, educating the local government and building industry on the disabled access bylaws. At the request of the Disabled Society of Penang, Ong Seng Huat, a speaker at the Chinese language roundtable, became the author of Malaysia's first book on disabled access, written in Mandarin and soon to be translated into Malay. Municipal renovations are still ad hoc and improvements often still fall short of international disabled access standards. SILA realises it will be a long struggle ahead, occasionally encouraged by small victories and surges of public sympathy.

- Working with the capital city, Kuala Lumpur

A strong synergy has developed between the Penang and Kuala Lumpur movements for universal access. The access by-law was introduced through the Local Government Ministry, which has been pushing local councils to adopt and implement them. SILA Penang became the most important community group to give inputs and impetus to a larger national campaign for disabled access fought mainly by national organisations, professionals and academics in Kuala Lumpur. They work with progressive officials from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to review national guidelines for disabled access and propose pilot projects. Many groups worked together to mount Campaign '99, a national event that was part of the UN-ESCAP Agenda for Action.

Social change is now forged by a strong alliance between UN-ESCAP, the Local Government Ministry, the movement in the Kuala Lumpur and the movement in Penang, with strong support from the media. Another group in Ipoh is also emerging. This alliance is pushing for changes at local government level.

Recruited into the movement through SILA, Naziaty Mohd. Yaacob, an architect lecturing at Malaysia's leading university in Kuala Lumpur, was sent to TRANSED, an international mobility workshop in Perth in September 1998. Upon her return, she founded ABLE, the country's first university-based research centre on disabled access. Naziaty helped to form the women with disabilities group. She represented SILA as part of the team that presented SPI at the World Conference On Governance (WorldCog) in Manila.

- Working with other NGOs

Collaboration between different civil society groups is an important result of the SPI. Through SPI and its associates, two parallel alliances have emerged between the disabled access movement and the sustainable transport movement.

Working with SILA, PHT conducted the first heritage tour for people with disabilities, exploring the concept of making heritage accessible to all. The visually-disabled explored the tactile qualities of the stone lions and other sculptural element of Khoo Kongsi, Penang's most famous tourist attraction. SILA later initiated a disabled access survey for one of Penang's major walking tourist routes, participated by PHT and Badan Warisan Sumatra (BWS) members. Penang's State Executive Councillor for Tourism has since adopted the idea of promoting accessible tourism although it has yet to be translated into action.

In Kuala Lumpur, SUSTRAN and several disability organisations got together to form the Forum for Equitable and Environmentally Friendly Transport (FEET), electing Naziaty Mohd Yaacob as the spokeswoman. In Penang, SILA works in tandem with STEP. In one instance, the world's leading sustainable transport advocate Peter Newman who had a speaking engagement arranged by FEET in Kuala Lumpur was willingly diverted to make an unscheduled appearance at a public review of Penang State's transport masterplan. STEP and SILA worked together to help to highlight the deficiencies of the masterplan in terms of provision for the cyclists, other non-motorised transport and disabled users.

In conclusion, SILA more than any other group has succeeded in carrying forward the aspirations of SPI by reaching upwards to the national level, as well as downwards to the Chinese-speaking grassroots, and finally into long-term engagement with local government.

4.5. The Sustainable Penang Initiative and Urban Governance

The decline of local government power and authority since the 1970s was caused by several factors:

- The dynamic leadership of the State Government in economic development, supported by the federal government, authoritative enough to direct the local government on major policies.
- The emergence of a corporatised state economic development agency with its own control over the economic processing zones and new townships.
- The amalgamation of the George Town City Council with other districts in 1974 resulting in one Municipal Council for the whole of Penang island with existing staff and resources unable to cope with additional duties and jurisdiction
- Administrative restructuring has been constrained by the civil services department, hence even increased municipal revenues derived from development charges cannot be applied to improving the situation of the low prestige and remuneration of city council staff, resulting in chronic understaffing
- The replacement of council elections by a system of political appointments resulting in a loss of popular legitimacy for the Councillors, as well as loss of participation, responsiveness and vision.

Since the 1970s, the NGO culture has emerged in the context of a powerful state framework. The media also shifted its attention to higher levels of government, putting federal and state level politicians in a constant limelight. As a result, the public and

NGOs alike habitually targeted their lobbying at the national government and State Government and elected representatives instead of the opaque, unelected local government for accountability in terms of policies and actions. By the 1990s, these perceptions had become so entrenched that the public often appealed to their state assemblymen to solve problems like flooding and housing because they were unable to identify who was responsible for what in local government.

For these reasons, there are few NGOs directly engaged with the Local Government. There are none focussing on waste management, neighbourhood facilities for children, and until the recent formation of the tenants' group Save Our Selves (SOS), there were none dealing with urban poor, shelter or inner city communities. The Penang Heritage Trust in the course of dealing with heritage issues, had to diversify into issues of town planning, urban management and urban environment issues. In doing so, it has locked horns with pro-business groups such as the Penang Rate-Payer's Association (PRA), the Housing Developer's Association (HDA) and the professional associations, over planning and development issues.

In September 1998, the Department of Town and Country Planning was coordinating the Report of Survey for the Structure Plan of the two municipal councils of Penang State and the public exhibition was held from June to September 1998. Several groups that were involved in SPI were mobilized to provide feedback on the Report of Survey.

The local government has suddenly become a focus of much civil society discussion and advocacy. This focus has been brought about by an accumulation of urban issues and precipitated finally by the Repeal of Rent Control Act. The shift in terms of NGO focus has been accomplished partly through the SPI process and its emergent groups SILA and STEP, the longer-term work of groups like the Penang Heritage Trust in league with inner city community groups, as well as new groups like MALODI (Malaysian Local Democracy Initiative) and SOS (Save Our Selves). Established NGOs like Consumers' Association Penang and Aliran have also been at the forefront of this advocacy. Faced with an increasingly critical public, the State Government itself is exploring ways to improve the performance of the council.

The government has been coming under pressure for a host of local environmental problems such as:

- poor urban cleanliness, earning Penang the nickname "Darul-Sampah" or "House of Rubbish"
- hill slope developments leading to erosion and hill slope collapses
- lack of effective action towards flood mitigation
- allowing developers to default on open space requirement
- weak heritage conservation policy and inconsistent guidelines resulting in loss of heritage
- road-widening causing loss of old trees
- ad hoc, expensive solutions to traffic problems such as overhead bridges and flyovers
- poor pedestrian access, blocked five-footway, costly yet unintegrated paving schemes
- poor public transport and bus-stop facilities
- non-enforcement of disabled access guidelines

The State Government has changed mayors several times in its attempt to improve local government performance. Certain proposed changes have met with insurmountable resistance from its council staffing. Due to internal constraints, the MPPP has increasingly privatised infrastructure, urban renovation and beautification projects. Urban services such sewage treatment, garbage collection, disposal and recycling, have also been privatised. The council has even attempted to overcome some problems simply by outsourcing some of its urban services.

An example of innovative municipal action, which was at least successful in the short term, involved a municipally sponsored beach clean-up implemented by fishermen. The fishermen were suffering economically from declining fish catch due to coastal pollution. They approached the hotels for sponsorship to clean up the beaches. As ratepayers, the hotels felt that the Municipal Council should be responsible for this service and approached the MPPP. The local government agreed to sponsor efforts by local fishermen to clean up the beaches, benefiting both the coastal communities and the tourism business. The example was presented during the Popular Participation Roundtable by PIFWA, Penang Inshore Fishermen's Welfare Association.

In a move to promote public transport, the Council offered to sponsor a free shuttle service in the city centre, but due to the private bus lobby, the Federal-level licensing authority substantially delayed giving permission to introduce the new bus route. In this case, the council was thwarted either by political rivalry or simply lack of coordination between federal and local authorities.

The council of the other half of Penang, the MPSP, has now to deal with rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of landscape which until recently was largely rural. Compared with the MPPP, the relatively younger MPSP has more room to try out new approaches. For example, it has successfully implemented sanitary landfill with technical support from the Japanese. It even launched an ambitious plan to ban the use of plastic bags but backed down after heavy opposition from the plastics industry lobby.

Perhaps the main role of SPI in this has been to clarify the role of State Government and local government in sustainable development, and to strengthen the reality of international imperatives such as Local Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda. It has helped to bring citizens and NGOs into greater contact with government, clarifying the responsibilities of different levels of government, different departments and authorities. International agencies and regional networks such as UNDP and SUSTRAN have also played a major role in fostering new ideas about sustainable development and urban governance. The public attempt to reform Local Government is now played out in SPI's follow-up programme on "People-Friendly Penang" and the newly established Local Government Consultative Forum.

It can also be reasonably anticipated that the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 (scheduled before 2002) will provide opportunities to further enhance the sustainable development initiatives and public interest partnerships begun by SPI.

4.6. Influence on Local Government Initiatives

City Councillors only began to get involved with SPI during the Popular Participation Roundtable. After this, the then Mayor Dr. Teng Hock Nam presented SPI at a Mayor's conference in Honolulu, while the City Councillor Rhina Barr presented SPI at a Mayor's conference in Colombo. The generally positive experience of government with the SPI then encouraged the MPPP to become a major player in its follow-up programme.

The Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI or 2 G's for Good Governance) was created when UNDP shifted its focus from urban management to urban governance. TUGI's senior regional advisor is Anwar Fazal. As a citizen who once served as Assistant City Secretary the City Council of George Town during the council's better days, Anwar played a key role in formulating the TUGI programmes for the MPPP.

The first TUGI regional consultation was organised in Penang in August 1999, during which the SPI experience was presented to a distinguished audience of development professionals and city managers. Symbolically, these mayors and UN representatives took part in the planting of a second Peace Pole in a public park called the Youth Park, one of the legacies of the earlier local government era.

During the TUGI regional consultation, it was announced that Penang would be the first city in Southeast Asia to be awarded "Lead City" status by UNDP. The SPI project was quoted as the main factor for this choice, based on the SPI presentation made in the Asia Pacific Cities Forum on private-public partnership for equitable cities. Other factors were the Asiaweek ranking of Penang as 6th best city, the ongoing urban conservation programme to seek World Heritage status from UNESCO, CityNet membership and status as a progressive city within the regional economic growth triangle, innovative programmes in promoting information technology and tourism, a conducive setting for community work, the development of a caring society programme, Penang serving as the base for active local and regional NGOs, the state's initiatives to become more disabled friendly, and the city's support in organising the TUGI Regional Consultation.¹⁵

The TUGI programme included an annual international 10-day workshop on capacity building and good governance, based on SPI, an organised series of study visits with modules focusing on Penang's areas of special experience (e.g. heritage conservation, water management, the caring society programme), a website on good urban governance principles based on the SPI, and a special partnership with Medan. The main "Lead City" programme would consist of roundtables to identify issues and strategies to make Penang a "People-Friendly City"¹⁶, especially for the marginalized sectors of Penang community. These roundtables would be sponsored by the MPPP and conducted by SERI.

In February 2000, the People-Friendly city programme was launched with a workshop entitled "Workshop on Promoting Good Governance & Making Penang A People-Friendly City", conducted by SERI and sponsored by MPPP. The programme also spearheaded a UN regional initiative to make Asian Cities People Friendly by promoting 8 principles of good governance (participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and strategic vision). The workshop processes are very much influenced by those used in SPI.

Just as the SPI provided people with the opportunity to point out the unsustainable elements of the city, so the PFP project drew comments from SILA, STEP and an elderly citizen's group on how "unfriendly" the city actually is, especially in terms of disabled access and transport.¹⁷

Learning from the experience of SPI, the People-Friendly Penang programme was formulated in a way that would directly develop partnerships between local government and citizen's groups as well as produce physical results and visible social impact. The roundtables are organised by MPPP and SERI for three groups of people - the disabled, the elderly and children. Many of the civil society groups that had been nurtured by SERI are expected play a key role in the program. The community stakeholders themselves will be encouraged to take ownership of issues, to set goals and to evaluate the performance of the local government. Each group would also identify specific locations for demonstration projects in terms of urban access issues, such as making a neighbourhood child-friendly. The Local Government has made a commitment to implement these action plans.

At the Good Governance Roundtable, Dr. Teng Hock Nam, in his position as the State Exco in charge of Local Government, announced the formation of a Penang Local Government Consultative Forum, for which SERI will be appointed the secretariat. Some of SERI's tasks will be to organise capacity building for the MPPP, starting with municipal councillors and heads of department, and to conduct a public sentiment survey on MPPP's performance.

¹⁵ Toh Kin Woon (Editor), SATU, September 1999, Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia Penang 1999. p. 1.

¹⁶ Brochure, People-Friendly Penang, published by SERI, 1999.

¹⁷ *The Star*, November 3, 1999.

The Local Government Consultative Forum had its first meeting in July 2000, attracting about 50 civic leaders, NGOs, elected state representatives, city councillors and officers from both councils of MPPP and MPSP. This Forum is notable for its strong representation from captains of business and industry captains, who are as concerned about the performance of Local Government as anyone else, and are giving their precious time to try influence local government. The focus areas identified were Governance, Sensitisation & Public Awareness, Environment, Housing, and Public Services.

4.7. Influence on Initiatives for Low-Income Groups

Examples can be quoted showing how SPI has to some extent continued to devolve into initiatives that encourage low-income communities to engage local and State Government in the provision of housing and amenities. Unlike the case of SILA, it cannot be said here that SERI or SPI itself is directly involved in the new movements but only that it have played some role in catalysing ideas, inspiring processes or strengthening networks.

Towards the end of the SPI pilot phase, my husband and I were appointed site managers in a UNESCO-funded Penang Heritage Trust project to foster community participation in the revitalization of historic religious charity trust (waqf) properties around the city's two principal mosques. We used many of the participatory approaches tried out in SPI. The project has helped to foster the longer-term mobilization of the mosque women's and youth groups among the largely low-income inner city Muslim community. The project also identified the plight of more than a hundred poor, elderly Tamil-speaking stevedores who are facing eviction due to rent control repeal.

The women's group has expressed concern for urban environment issues such as waste management, public safety, conditions in the local market and facilities for children. The youth group now meets very regularly and organise their own cultural and recreational activities. The youth have undertaken the clean-up of a historic cemetery and another one of a mosque compound. They have also undertaken an audit of facilities for youth in the inner city to bring to the government's attention the inadequacy and poor state of community facilities and public amenities in their inner city quarter.

During the SPI period, the most important issue facing Penang -- the Repeal of Rent Control was not being prominently raised at most of the roundtables. This glaring omission and indifference reflected two factors -- the locus of SPI activity in the suburban Caring Society Complex and the middle-class representation at the roundtables.

Although rent control was repealed in September 1997, with a phasing out period ending on 1st January 2000, tenants did not start waking up to their situation until the first evictions were issued in 1999. The Penang Heritage Trust had gradually built up a case on the Rent Control Repeal issue and the need for social housing, highlighting the threats to heritage and historic communities in the media and in government committees. In December 1999, PHT managed to convince CAP into opening up a service centre advising rent control tenants pressured into eviction on their practical and legal options.

Ong Boon Keong, one of Penang's committed and self-directed activists took part in several SPI roundtables. Ong was the founder of the Penang Organic Farm. He is an Australian-trained architect turned organic farmer and a cycling vegetarian. During the Popular Participation Roundtable, Ong joined the group that pledged to form a Local Governance Initiative.

Ong has been critical of what he felt was the exclusive nature of SPI, and that funds were not used to organise larger public hearings more broadly participatory in nature. Being fluently bilingual, he was invited to be a speaker at the Chinese Roundtable, where he led the discussion group on Housing, Society and Environment which involved tenants affected by Rent Control and hill slope collapse. A member of this group put forward the question of housing affordability before the Chief Minister during the SPI People's Forum in June 1999; perhaps the first time the issue was voiced by tenants in a mainstream English-speaking forum.

Shortly after the 1999 elections, Ong led the formation of a group called MALODI or Malaysian Local Democracy Initiative. In a meeting in January 2000, the younger generation activists teamed up with the veteran socialists who had formerly served in George Town's city council during the Labour Government days. This fledgling group quickly rode into action after a spate of evictions and demolitions ravaged an inner city neighbourhood. They galvanised rent control tenants into forming a group called SOS (Save Our Selves).

SOS succeeded in bringing together several small local groups and mobilizing the working-class and poor groups over the Rent Control issue. It took the leading role in the Rent Control issue, where the Penang Heritage Trust, socially bound by its own middle-class membership, could not. In spite of pronouncements about holistic sustainable planning, SERI continued to stay away from the rent control issue even up till mid-2000, reflecting its own limitations as a state think-tank which could only get involved in issues under instruction from the government.

Even while a storm was brewing over the Repeal of Rent Control issue, the Good Governance Roundtable held on 18 February failed to involve the affected groups. At the close of the roundtable, I voiced out strongly before the predominantly middle-class audience that discussions about Good Governance should have been held in the inner city where hundreds of people were being threatened with eviction. In contrast with the tame dialogue at the Good Governance Roundtable, the next day, at the first large event organised by SOS, elected representatives who came to address the rally of more than 1,000 tenants were stunned at the public indignation over what they alleged was the government's failure to deal with the repeal of rent control repeal and even unwillingness to recognize it as a social crisis.¹⁸

To some extent the three groups – SOS, PHT and CAP – worked together to generate public and also international media coverage for the Repeal of Rent Control issue, such as through Asiaweek, BBC and CNN. SOS has adopted a highly confrontational approach to government, different in style from the other two groups. They staged impromptu protests which culminated in the arrest and several day detention of Ong Boon Keong in March 2000. However, this was also a turning point which led to the initiation of dialogues between the Penang State Government and SOS, the first which took place ironically on 1 April 2000, the day after a widely-publicised "Homeless Night" organised by SOS. The dialogues are chaired by the Chief Minister and also included NGOs like the Penang Heritage Trust and the Consumers' Association Penang, as public interests groups.

The Chief Minister has also innovated his own stakeholder consultation by inviting a few landlords to sit in on the discussions with tenants, and inviting developers' association to sit together with the PHT to discuss incentives for social housing. The general slow response of government to addressing the Repeal of Rent Control and checking inner city decay has led to accusations of "closing the barn door after the horse has bolted". Notwithstanding, the Chief Minister has repeatedly expressed his own commitment to popular participation, the state's assistance for the hardcore poor and the state's willingness to intervene for economic revitalization. The state's efforts in this direction have led them to look seriously at the past performance of local government and their responsibilities in inner city revitalization.

¹⁸ *The Sun*, 21 February 2000.

A fund of RM 20 million state grant and RM 80 million federal loan had been set up for social housing, and the Chief Minister wished all groups to play a role in ensuring the transparency of its implementation. The fact that politicians, civil servants, the private sector, NGOs and tenants sat down together to discuss the issue was itself highly significant, more so, that solutions proposed involved partnerships between all sectors. However, party politics continued to rear its ugly head, SOS remained dissatisfied with most of the proposals, and the dialogues were far from smooth sailing, usually exploding into arguments and diatribes, unusual for polite Malaysian society. Despite a promising beginning, the project fizzled out due to poor implementation.

5. Conclusions on the Sustainable Penang Initiative and the State

As the country's stability and well-being has been strongly predicated on continued economic growth, the financial crisis of 1997 triggered a far-reaching political and social crisis. The arrest and detention of the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, the Reformasi movement, the ground swell in Islamic politics, the shift in allegiance of the formerly conservative Malay middle-class, and similar trends created deep cleavages in Malaysian, and especially Malay, society. Above all, the growing use of the internet allowing unprecedented debate and access to information generated the widespread questioning of traditional values and the political establishment.

The Malaysian general elections took place in November 1999, three months after the Penang People's Forum. The ruling party retained power. In spite of a dramatic swing to the opposition, the 1999 general elections confirmed that the majority of Malaysians still wished to maintain the status quo. In Penang, results were extremely conservative. The Penang Chief Minister and the top state Gerakan party politician was re-elected. Dr. Toh Kin Woon was retained as State Executive Councillor in his original portfolio, in spite of his controversial forthrightness, open relationship with NGOs and opposition parties. The President of the MPPP, Dr. Teng Hock Nam, was promoted to State Executive Councillor in charge of Local Government, Environment and Traffic Management.

Although the changes in Malaysia were less comprehensive than those seen in neighbouring countries like Thailand and Indonesia, the veils have been lifted and the gates pushed open to usher in a new political climate. Political patronage along ethnic lines is less rigid. The issues of local elections are again being discussed. All parties see governance innovations and reforms as necessary. The changing language of the contest has forced the ruling party to wake up to the demands of the younger generation

Through these two years, SPI sometimes had to tread a thin line between encouraging popular voice and maintaining government responsiveness. There was a constant tension between the opposition and pro-government elements in civil society. The SPI team made a conscious attempt to keep discussions at local and state-level, where we had a better chance of resolving issues, rather than fanning the national-level debate.

In spite of generally positive feedback, SPI had many limitations, drawbacks and detractors: The first group of detractors are the government planners and bureaucrats who react defensively to the idea of NGO criticism of government performance. In contrast, the politicians were much more welcoming of the SPI process.

The second group of detractors were the human rights, social and political activists, including many university activists, who were riding high on the wave of widespread political protest. They saw SPI as a means for the government to co-opt middle-of-the-road NGOs and to carry out "greenwash" propaganda. Many of them, such as Aliran and even SPI's own Local Action Researcher, have often expressed scepticism about the whole process.

5.1. Alliance to Progressive Political Elite

The promoters of sustainable development ideology within the Penang State Government are mainly found within Gerakan, the leading component party within the state ruling coalition. The progressive politicians within Gerakan largely hold the top positions within the party and also in the Penang State Government. These include the key figures, the Chief Minister of Penang, Dr. Toh Kin Woon (State EXCO in charge of Education), and Dr. Teng Hock Nam (formerly Mayor and presently the State EXCO in charge of local government, environment and traffic management). Supporting figures such as Dato' Kee Phaik Cheen (State EXCO in charge of

Tourism), her husband Dr. Choong Sim Poey (chairman of the Penang Heritage Trust and the STEP protem committee chairman) and Chia Kwang Chye (Member of Parliament who together with Dr. Koh and Dr. Toh are closely associated with environmental organisations) have also pushed the party towards pro-conservation policies.

Gerakan, to which SERI is closely associated, has cultivated a long term relationship with Penang's environmental and heritage NGOs, controlling key positions in some of these NGOs, but at the same time being relatively tolerant of constructive criticism in the media. This relationship has also been one of the determining factors behind the creation of "state-society partnerships".

Gerakan party leadership is now identifying itself very strongly with the sustainable development agenda and this was visible in:

- the party newsletter SATU, September 1999 issue, in which Penang's Lead City status and "What is SPI?" appeared as leading stories.
- the Gerakan advertisement before the November 1999 general elections

Gerakan's strategy of commitment to the sustainable development agenda has been strengthened for three reasons:

- Gerakan's relationship with the NGOs has helped to broaden Gerakan's support among Penang's expanding educated and professional middle-class
- it performed well in the 1999 general elections because of (or in spite of!) its sustainable development platform
- it survived a serious split in the party in early 2000 during which the pro-development old guard of the party resigned en masse

However, this alliance with the political elite has its downside. Gerakan itself holds a tenuous leadership position within the broad ruling coalition of Barisan Nasional, walking a constant tightrope. Gerakan leadership is still struggling to broaden the acceptance of sustainable development within its own party. The fact that SERI and the SPI process was closely identified with Gerakan leadership also means that other component parties of the ruling coalition as well as opposition parties, mostly kept their distance or adopted a "wait and see" attitude.

What does the state leadership mean by sustainable development? In February 2000, the Penang State Government put a full-page 'advertorial' in the newspaper announcing its "Vision for a Sustainable Future", on the occasion of the PDC being the first Penang government agency to receive ISO 19001 certification for property design and development. In this 'advertorial', the Chief Minister made the carefully worded statement that "Sustainable development is balanced development which will ultimately improve the quality of life for all in the long run, without destroying or jeopardising our natural environment and cultural heritage".

This statement was greeted with scepticism from the Penang-based Aliran, one of Malaysia's most established political reform groups, quoting the unsatisfactory handling of the repeal of rent control, the worsening traffic situation, a federal proposal for a billion-dollar tunnel mega-project, perennial landslides, floods and overflowing rubbish bins, polluted seas as well as social problems, and a recent announcement that Penang State leads with 14% of the country's drug addicts.¹⁹

Dr. Toh Kin Woon, the former academic switched careers mid-life to become a professional politician and one of the party think-tank, has the reputation of being not necessarily the most practical of politicians, but the most candid, pro-people and least beholden to vested interests. Influenced by his good friend, the ecologist Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, Dr. Toh holds that "sustainable development also recognizes that there

¹⁹ "Warped notion of Sustainable development", *Aliran*, Feb/March 2000.

are limits to development in a world with limits; and that there is a need to share the benefits of development more equally."

The extent of state consultation with civil society has been considerably enhanced during and after the SPI period. The government has also innovatively co-opted the middle ground in the sustainable development agenda. It is now routinely opening the doors to civil society activists and inviting them to "work within the system" -- on the other hand, they could also be seen as "working within the system without changing the system". The State Government has set up the Penang Local Government Consultative Council as a way to reform the local government without however changing its basic structure. The government has to some extent adopted sustainable development rhetoric and is willing to carry out small symbolic projects but there is yet no significant change to the major direction of mainstream development policies.

5.2. A Divided Penang

During the State's visioning exercise for the PSDP2, the need to improve ethnic relations in Penang was voiced as one of the most important issues facing Penang. During SPI roundtables, it was also clear that one of the main obstacles to sustainable development was the lack of consensus and common vision among various ethnic groups and their political leadership over environmental, social and economic priorities. Due to communal "ownership" of issues, it has been difficult to get political support across the board for general environmental issues, which are mainly seen as English-speaking middle-class concerns whereas specific environmental issues such as hill-collapse or conversion of agricultural land are seen as affecting non-English language groups mainly. Opinions of cultural heritage issues are similarly split according to different communal ownership of the heritage, rather than seen as the common heritage of all Malaysians. Equity, economic and participation issues are likewise affected.

Future formulation of any continuation of the Sustainable Penang Initiative or related programmes addressing holistic development planning would do well to understand the context of a "divided Penang", and its complex social and political affiliations. Basically Penang, could be described as made up of the following communities and their interest groups, which are further fragmented along ethnic, language and class lines.

a) The urban elite of George Town and its suburbs, who were very well represented at SPI roundtables and in state-level committees. This elite consists of a majority of English-speakers, who may well have command of other languages. They are highly vocal about its own self-interests, which sometimes include quality of environment and quality of life issues. They highly educated, articulate and equipped to engage the MPPP on public policy and urban management issues. They perceive sustainability options in terms of lifestyle choice, although ironically they are probably the biggest consumers and polluters.

b) The poor communities of George Town and its peri-urban areas, who are involved in the local urban economy, the traditional sector and the informal sector as well as "backyard" industries. They include a majority of Chinese-speakers as well as important Malay and Tamil-speaking minorities. Many are rent control tenants, tenants and squatters of trust properties, who are likely to face housing insecurity. These communities and their issues were poorly represented at the Sustainable Penang Initiative Roundtables. Their priorities in sustainable development tend to be issues like livelihood, housing security and educational opportunities for their children rather than environmental quality.

c) The rural communities of Penang and Seberang Perai, many who are typically involved in agriculture, fishing, local economy, cottage industries, "backyard" industries or find employment in the factories. They include a majority of Malay-

speakers, some of whom are intensely involved in local and national politics. They were poorly represented at the SPI roundtables except at the Malay roundtable. Their sustainable development priorities are quite possibly linked to the transformation of the rural landscape, and upheavals in the social and political landscape. So far they have been guided by traditionally strong religious values, but due to media propaganda and pressure to compete in modern terms, the rural community is now well on the road to materialistic lifestyles.

d) Penang's Silicon Valley, export processing zones and manufacturing sector which employ 50% of the Penang population. The industrial sector is being held up as the engine of economic growth, and its development is largely under the jurisdiction of the Penang Development Corporation. The corporate industrial estate is populated by expatriate and Malaysian professionals and workers of various skills levels, including a high population of urban migrants and foreign workers, in a stratified, multilingual working environment. Women workers are predominant at the lower skills levels.

Corporate industrial Penang is world that is socially segregated and virtually apolitical. Penangites describe this as the "factory culture", a culture in which the factory becomes the social world and surrogate family of the workers. Male-dominated trade unions have been more interested in conventional issues like wages, hours and work safety and have not taken up larger issues of the industrial environment. The regulation of the industrial environment is almost totally left to the Department of Environment, which enforces certain acts against environmental violations but does not oversee the overall health of the industrial estates. The government expects factories to be "self-regulating" so industrial environment quality issues are left to internal management choices.

The whole discourse about Malaysian industry has been shaped to inspire the confidence of foreign investors and to boost economic growth. For example, the computer industry is perceived by most Penangites as a "clean" industry and thus its impact on environment is considered a non-issue. While there have been some academic studies, there has been little public discussion, among Penang society, about the larger questions of the industrial environment, including pollution of air, land and water, toxic and radioactive waste, or about the living conditions, psychological well-being and reproductive health of workers and their families and the rights of migrant workers.

Although these issues have huge implications for the sustainable development of Penang, the urban elite of George Town was unable to transcend the divide to ask these questions. The industrial professionals who took part in the SPI roundtables, talked about increasing the efficiency and improving the infrastructure of the industrial sector, but avoided debate about the social and environmental costs or limits to industrial growth.

5.3. What is Planned or Hoped for in the Future

"Thinking globally and acting locally, the Sustainable Penang Initiative hopes to promote a state-wide movement for holistic development and sustainability. A movement comprising progressive partnerships between citizen's groups, business and government, starting with educational outreach and small local initiatives on issues of ecology, equity and economy, building on our cultural strengths through popular participation."²⁰

The SPI project provided a model of consultative, participatory process that can be used to the advantage of both progressive actors in government, private sector and civil society to create Public Interest Partnerships (PIPs). SPI has completed its pilot project phase, but the work towards sustainable development needs to be continued. The next stage of the Sustainable Penang Initiative might wish to look at the following

²⁰ Brochure announcing the Penang People's Forum, March 1999.

strategies to further consolidate gains, legitimise the process and expand its constituency.

Recommendations for the state, which could be made through the PSDP2:

- Efforts by national, state and local governments to promote sustainable development needs to be vertically and horizontally integrated. The first step is for the government to improve its information culture. Lack of access to government information makes it difficult for the public to participate or support even progressive government actions and programmes. Even different government departments and different levels of government are not aware of each other's programmes and this problem is related to lack of leadership and coordination.
- Sustainable development indicators should be institutionalised by local government, public sector bodies and state development agencies such as the Penang Development Corporation:
 - as managerial and technical measurement tools of long-term performance
 - to enhance public accountability for policies, plans and statutory responsibilities
 - to support multi-sectoral planning processes
 - to ensure continuity in view of the short-term office of elected representatives and government officers (the latter because they are frequently transferred or their scope of duties redefined)
 - policies, programmes and targets for areas such as environment and public education, and special groups such as women, children, single parents, elderly, youth, people with disabilities, cultural minorities and migrant workers, need to be adopted by the same government bodies.

Recommendations for SERI in following up on the SPI are:

- Hold dialogues with the private sector and mobilize these stakeholders towards green business and industry.
- Continue with public campaign on sustainable development. Get all existing groups such as educational, traditional or religious groups to examine the idea of sustainable development in the context of their own teachings and values and vie with each other to be as environmentally equitable and socially-minded as possible.
- Conduct roundtables according to themes in vernacular languages, and explore ways to express concepts of sustainable development in culturally resonant terms. This process would also involve mapping out civil society, especially NGOs, service and welfare organisations among the non-English speaking groups who can be mobilized in new directions.
- Develop a project on inter-ethnic dialogue and inter-religious dialogue to specifically deal with the obstacles to sustainable development caused by ethnic, religious and cultural differences.
- Translate SPI into community-level initiatives by organising neighbourhood meetings. Catalyse the formation of neighbourhood committees and mobilize them to conduct neighbourhood surveys of their urban environment. Community indicators are easier to prioritise and compile at the neighbourhood level, than at the state level. They should also be directly related to proposals for improvements.
- Develop women's and youth initiatives for environment and sustainable development.
- Organise a bi-annual Penang People's Forum with events, exhibition and fair to showcase sustainable development initiatives, and to promote sustainability as a "green" culture in Penang.

5.4. Recommendations for Similar Projects

General lessons that Sustainable Penang Initiative might hold for other similar projects, and some recommendations are:

- Any initiative that strives to create partnership between government, civil society and private sector needs to start by "mapping out" government hierarchy and

departments, their policies and their programmes, as well as mapping out civil society and private sector interests.

- Different approaches and processes may be required to move government, civil society and the private sector. It might be useful to hold discussions with these sectors separately as well as together.
- The modern language of sustainable development is rather technocratic for most Asian societies and there should be attempts to re-conceptualise the project for different societies. This could begin from the bottom by articulating critiques of conventional development in locally resonant ways and trying to form a holistic paradigm from the cultural group's point of view, possibly harking to each groups' own religious, philosophical or cultural tradition.
- On the whole, approaches to Local Agenda 21 sustainable development projects need to be more culturally sensitive and socially inclusive rather than acultural, technocratic and top-down. In order to be pro-poor, pro-women, pro-jobs and pro-environment, the whole team must be sensitised to local communities and their issues, cultural lifestyles, livelihood patterns and urban ecology. In the Malaysian context, there is a need to build in knowledge and sensitivity about the rights and needs of the marginalized groups and the aboriginal peoples.
- Indicators are needed at various levels and reflect different "ownership". National-level indicators are inadequate to inform state development policies. State level and local government indicators are needed to give a better picture of government performance and help to determine priorities. Community indicators give a close-up on local inequities and what needs to be done at a local level. Efforts at community indicators are often inspired by public dissatisfaction towards the performance of the government in a particular area.
- SPI roundtables using facilitated, participatory processes can be highly successful in getting the audience excited and draw out 'inputs', as well as for catalysing issue-based partnerships and neighbourhood committees (if held at a more local level). However, in order to sustain enthusiasm, link between inputs and government response or municipal actions should be made clear and immediate. Funding for citizen's engagement and follow-up activities should be budgeted for.
- Politicians can be easily convinced to carry out multi-stakeholder consultation and to work in partnership with other groups because it maximises political gains and reduces political risks especially for innovations. More formal programmes are needed to influence bureaucratic culture.
- Human champions are just as, if not more, important than perfect indicators, to facilitate change and carry the process forward.
- Participatory processes must go beyond inputs collection and report writing by the team of experts. It needs to be carried through to community empowerment and creating permanent forums for collective decision-making.

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