

Empowering Development Planning and Implementation at the District Level of Governance in Peninsular Malaysia

*Teo Lee Ken**

Abstract

The District Office occupies a significant position in the federal and administrative structure of the country. Yet over the decades, the roles of the District Office and Officer have seemingly taken a less visible and prominent role in the area of development, particularly for the local communities from the district level and below. This paper provides a brief background on the development of the District Office in Peninsular Malaysia and its role in the area of development for the Malaysian nation and society. It examines the challenges faced by the District Offices in Malaysia. The paper further discusses how the District Offices can play a more prominent role in the nation-building and development processes of the country, including in implementing an inclusive development agenda for local communities in Malaysia. To do so, the paper refers to the issue mapping findings of the APPGM-SDG from 2020 to 2023. It focuses on and features these findings to assess the roles and challenges, and the prospective initiatives the District Offices and the APPGM-SDG can together act on to spearhead sustainable development and the formation of inclusive communities.

Keywords: Development; SDGs; social justice; district office; multistakeholder partnerships; governance; inclusive communities

* Teo Lee Ken is Assistant Director at the *MySDG Center for Social Inclusion*, at the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on SDGs (APPGM-SDG). He obtained his PhD from the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS).

Introduction

“In the current five-year development plan, the objectives of achieving economic balance among the multiracial society has been a major concern of both central and district governments. A tremendous burden is placed on the District Office to search for strategies of rectifying economic imbalance and to attempt to restructure society.”

– Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad, *The District Office as an Institution of Development, 1977*

Development has been a primary priority in Malaysia since independence. At the macro level, the goals of development have been expressed through the five-year plans formulated by the government since independence. Beginning with the *First Malaysia Plan* (1MP, 1966-1970) in 1966, we are now midway through the *Twelfth Malaysian Plan* (12MP, 2021-2025). Development efforts have particularly focused on the populace in the rural areas or rural communities. This focus stems from the attempts to correct economic and social imbalances that exist between urban cities, and rural centres and towns.

While the discourse and programme of development have been at the center of national debates since the declaration of independence, and the journey towards building a Malaysian nation, including the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaya in 1963, the agenda and scope of development took on a renewed dimension with the inception of the sustainable development agenda by the United Nations in 2015, with the announcement of the *Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs*. Encompassing 17 goals, 169 targets and 247 indicators, from poverty to climate to gender and partnerships, the SDG agenda seeks to achieve the set targets by the year 2030. The UN SDGs agenda, which is an enhancement to the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) from 2000 to 2015, has become the principal reference for development at the global, and national levels.

In the context of Malaysia, the UN SDG agenda has been given a national and local character through the establishment of the *All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals* or APPGM-SDG. The inauguration of the APPGM-SDG in 2019 built on the prior incorporation and application of the SDGs in national planning through the *Eleventh Malaysia Plan* (11MP, 2016-2020), reflecting Malaysia’s strong commitment to global endeavours and the emphasis on development in the project of nation-building.

The APPGM-SDG is mandated with the task of undertaking the localisation of the 17 goals at the domestic and local levels. This process, consisting of the main activities of issues mapping, solution projects, capacity building, and policy advocacy, is implemented by the APPGM-SDG secretariat based in Petaling Jaya; and the regional offices in Sabah and Sarawak. The secretariat is overseen by a bipartisan parliamentary committee, which consists of Members of Parliament from the government and opposition benches, and also senators from the upper chamber of the Parliament or the *Dewan Negara*. The bipartisan nature of the SDG programme structure and agenda constitutes the hallmark of the SDGs localisation and implementation process. Thus, bypassing political ideologies, affiliations and goals, focusing on resolving issues that affect the most vulnerable communities and communities in need by concentrating on development in terms of socio-economic upliftment and empowerment, through addressing service delivery, project implementation and cross-sectional issues and multi-stakeholder engagements.¹

Further, the localisation process is applied at the parliamentary, district and local levels, which builds strong links with government agencies and offices at the state and local levels, and with various communities at the grassroots levels. Throughout this process, the APPGM-SDG has received tremendous support and endorsement from the Malaysian Parliament and the Office of the Speaker, Members of Parliament, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Economy, various other ministries and departments, and State governments and agencies, and district-level offices throughout Malaysia.

As of 2023, the APPGM-SDG Secretariat has undertaken the localisation programme in 85 parliamentary constituencies. In 2024, the secretariat has earmarked another 30 parliamentary constituencies for the localisation process, and as of December 2023, the process has started in earnest with the meeting of various Members of Parliament of the prospective constituencies and the district officers or *pegawai daerah* of those areas.

In view of the centrality of the development agenda in Malaysia and its relation to the SDGs programme, the mandate of the APPGM-SDG in localisation of SDGs processes, and the position of the government machinery and delivery mechanisms in this context, this paper focuses

1 Please see Denison Jayasooria, Role of Parliamentarians in Localizing SDGs in Malaysia, *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament*, Vol. 1, 2021: pp. 137-158

on the role of the District Office in the development planning and implementation within the SDGs framework, and in the ground work of the APPGM-SDG, in Peninsular Malaysia. The paper begins by providing a brief background on the establishment of the District Office, and the pivotal role of its leading figure, the District Officer, in the country's development agendas and programmes. It then highlights key areas of focus and challenges faced by the District Offices in Malaysia. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing how the District Offices can enhance their roles in implementing an inclusive development agenda for local communities at the grassroots level. This approach aligns with the Malaysia's national development vision and programmes, contributing significantly to country's growth and progress, and of nation-building efforts.

Development in Malaysia and its implementation at the local level

Early emergence and expansion of the District Office

The district level administration and rule have historically held a pivotal role in Malaysia's political structure. The modern iteration of the District Office emerged relatively recently. District-level governance was formalised with the signing of the *Pangkor Treaty* in 1874. This treaty between the British colonial officers and the Malay rulers of Perak is a significant moment, representing the emphasis on direct intervention by the British in politics and the economy of then Malaya, and the start of the institutionalisation of British administration in Malaya through the Malay States.² Under this treaty, a British resident would advise the Sultan on all spheres of the State and governance. Following this, a State Council was also established to deliberate on issues of legislation and administration. This same process occurred in the States of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, and in 1895 culminated in the formation of the Federated Malay States or *Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu*.

The process of systematising the ruling and governance structure extended to the district and village levels. In each state, district level governance was established in the form of District Offices, led by a District Officer. Under a district, smaller fields of administration in the form of *Mukims* existed, and after which a field of several *kampungs* or villages would then in turn make up a *mukim*.

2 Khoo Kay Kim, *The Origin of British Administration in Malaya*, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (209), July (1966), pp. 52-91: 52-53, and 84

The role of the District Officer was to overlook the “collection of revenue, the administration of justice, land settlement, and the supervision of headmen.”³ After Malaya’s independence in 1957, the District Officer also took on the role of “development planner, implementor and a change agent.”⁴

The structure and form of the district offices and governance though modern and recent, however, was not something entirely novel and which only emerged with the political and economic domination of Malaya by the British. In the traditional Malay political structure, previously existed divisions and hierarchy facilitated the royal and feudal rule. In this structure, the Malay *Raja* or *Sultan* occupied the pinnacle of the political hierarchy. The *daerah* or *jajahan* (district), was the next political unit. Each was led by a local chief with close relations and ties to the area and its people, and who helped the *Sultan* in governing the State.⁵ The difference between pre-colonial and during the colonial period was that the figures in charge of the district, who were the *penghulus* during the pre-colonial period, were replaced by European and British officers when colonialism took place in Malaya.

This systematisation of governance was implemented throughout the Federated Malay States, and similarly occurred in the non-Federated Malay States, consisting of Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis, as well as the state of Johor, and the Straits Settlement States comprising Penang and Malacca. However, variations existed due to the specific context and historical and political trajectory of each state.⁶ The non-Federated Malay States, for instance, not only have a federal civil service, but also a state civil service under the authority of the Sultan and state government.⁷

3 Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad, *The District Office as an Institution of Development*, Theses: University of Southern California, 1977, p. 98; See also Yeo Kim Wah, *The Grooming of an Elite: Malay Administrators in the Federated Malay States, 1903-1941*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1980, pp. 287-319: 307

4 *Ibid*, p. 9

5 *Ibid*; Please see also Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1982); Mohd. Shariff bin Abu Samah, *Modernisasi Pentadbiran Negeri Kedah: Ke Arah Penubuhan Perkhidmatan Tadbir Negeri (Kedah Civil Service) 1895-1957*, *Doctoral Thesis*, Universiti Utara Malaysia (2010), p. 34 and 36

6 Please see Yeo Kim Wah, *The Grooming of an Elite*; Mohd. Shariff bin Abu Samah, *Modernisasi Pentadbiran Negeri Kedah*, p. 41

7 *Ibid*, p. 181

The District Office after Independence to the Late 1960s

Following the Federation of Malaya's attainment of independence in 1957, the administrative structure remained intact and constituted a central component of the state bureaucracy. Whereas during the colonial period the district office served as an entity to streamline colonial rule and ensure "law and order", in the post-independent period, it evolved into a focal point for "grassroots development."⁸ At the state level, the District Officer has a close relationship with the State Secretary, and the State Development Officer. Serving as a focal point, the District Office coordinates the projects and development work of all departments or offices at the district level. For instance, it collaborates closely with the District Education Office (*Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah*) and District Health Office (*Pejabat Kesihatan Daerah*), among others.

Though debates on development and national progress today in Malaysia are centred on economic indicators and material achievements, the nature and scope of development in its tradition builds on the idea of social justice and pursuance of national unity.⁹ Such an orientation is significantly shaped by the racial riots of 1969, and the economic disparities and imbalances that political leaders point to as the cause of the event. In response, the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) prioritised two pivotal objectives deemed essential for Malaysia's development which are: 1) to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty, by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians, irrespective of race; and 2) accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic functions.¹⁰

Coinciding with the rule of Tun Abdul Razak as the second prime minister, he identified and marked the District Office as a central institution to coordinate and implement development at the local level, especially with the rural populace. The development agenda under his leadership also prioritised addressing rural poverty, as agriculture was a cornerstone of Malaysia's economy and farmers constituted one of the economically disadvantaged groups. It was during the time of Tun Abdul Razak, who was a key figure in the government, that saw the

8 Ibid, p. 197

9 Ibid, p. xx; Ahmad Sarji, *My Recollections of Tun Abdul Razak* (Petaling Jaya: MPH Publishing, 2016), p. 32

10 The Second Malaysia Plan, 1971-1975

elevation and expansion of the role and powers of the District Offices, and Officers. As Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National and Rural Development from 1957 to 1970, Tun Abdul Razak emphasised the importance of the district office to provide services to the public, and to facilitate development programmes. It was also during his time in the 1960s that the “operations room technique” to promote development was implemented. The approach involved establishing development committee and also operations room at federal, state and district levels.¹¹

The District Office, and development after 1970

The significance of Tun Abdul Razak’s role and vision for development, and the centrality of the District Office in enabling development at the district and local levels is recounted by Tun Ahmad Sarji in the ruminations of his time in public service under the former. Tun Ahmad Sarji was a former Deputy Assistant District Officer of Klang, Assistant District Officer of Seremban and Mantin, and District Officer of Rembau and later, Port Dickson. He later became the Under Secretary to the Cabinet and Constitution Division in the Prime Minister’s Department in December 1972, and Chief Secretary to the government from 1990 to 1996.

Tun Ahmad Sarji noted how the need and implementation of projects for development with ease and speed was insisted on by Tun Abdul Razak through the execution of the *Red Book* agenda and programme.¹² These projects were located primarily for the rural areas and consisted of projects such as roads and bridges, water supplies, rural industries, schools, health centres and public facilities, and electricity and telecommunication services.¹³ For Tun Abdul Razak, development programmes and projects should be implemented in a “purposeful” and “speedy manner.”¹⁴

At the District Rural Development Committee level, practices such as weekly “morning prayers”, involving the addressing and resolving of issues inhibiting the execution of projects, weekly updates and briefings on the development agendas, and the exercise of good leadership in the form of understanding the needs of government and the capacity to divide and delegate tasks and power were observed.¹⁵ The scope of

11 Sanusi, *The District Office*, p. 302

12 Ahmad Sarji, *My Recollections*, p. 5

13 Sanusi, *The District Office*, p. 308

14 Ahmad Sarji, *My Recollections*, p. 6

15 *Ibid*, p. 8-10

power and role of the district office envisioned by Tun Abdul Razak during his leadership as deputy prime minister (1957-1970) and later prime minister (1970-1976), the *Red Book* that outlining rural development programmes and subsequently formulated the *Green Book* aimed at increasing food production, boosting income, and promoting multi-stakeholder participation in development initiatives at the district level,¹⁶ have served as the gold standard for formulating and implementing development projects at the local community level in Malaysia, even to this day.¹⁷

The position of the District Office as a centre or institution for grassroots development, as Abdullah Sanusi terms it, however seemed to have become less prominent in the 1980s. While the institution continued thereafter, and still remains to this day, a principal point for coordination and implementation of government programmes and projects at the local level, the role of the District Office in the context of development planning at the community level is somewhat limited. Its scope of powers and decision-making are narrower. It also faces constraints such as funding limitations, and the need to adopt and adapt new governance and social approaches. Several factors may explain this reduced visibility of the district office in the realm of national-to-local development. Firstly, at the macro level, beginning in the 1980s, the government made a shift from agriculture to the building of industries and manufacturing. It also began a process of privatisation of government and national institutions and businesses, thus converting and placing them in the private sector and market. Secondly, since the 1980s and after, power and jurisdiction in governance and planning have increasingly been centralised at the federal level and among key government agencies and State institutions, and political and government leaders.

In the next section, building on this background and developments, the paper discusses the work of the APPGM-SDG at the local parliamentary level, its identification of social, environmental and economic issues faced by local communities, and its relation with the District Office and District Officers in this process.

16 Ibid, p. 306-311

17 Please see Denison Jayasooria, Taking a Red and Green Path to Post-COVID Success, *Free Malaysia Today*, 13 December 2020; Denison Jayasooria, Towards 2030: Malaysia's Development Agenda, *Siri Kertas Kajian Etnik UKM* (UKM Ethnic Studies Paper Series), Institut Kajian Etnik (Bangi, 2016)

APPGM-SDG's Issue Mapping Process and Collaborations with the District Office at the Parliamentary Constituency Level

APPGM-SDG and the localisation of SDGs through grounded research

As of 2023, the APPGM-SDG has conducted issue mapping visits utilising fieldwork and grounded research in 85 parliamentary constituencies. In carrying out the localisation process, and the issue mapping fieldwork in particular, the APPGM-SDG adopts the SDGs framework. This consists of several key elements: 1) the use of the tripartite dimensions of the social, economic, and environmental in identifying issues; 2) the interrelatedness of the 17 sustainable development goals where each goal is affected and shaped by the other; 3) embracing the mantra of *leaving no one behind* and *building inclusive communities*; and 4) the gathering and amplifying of the voices and concerns of local communities, and in particular vulnerable communities.

It is in this sense, that the SDGs and the APPGM-SDG give renewed meaning and urgency to the discourse and field of development in Malaysia. The APPGM-SDG has through its fieldwork identified over 300 issues that can be divided into 6 main categories covering: infrastructure and basic amenities; environmental preservation and management; land and housing ownership; border security; living conditions, waste management and sanitation; and welfare assistance, financial support and poverty. These issues fall within the sphere of development, and it is in this domain that the *sustainable development goals* or *SDGs* give prominence to problems and challenges faced by the local communities at the grassroots level.

In 2020, fieldwork in 10 parliamentary constituencies were undertaken. They consisted of Pendang, Jeli, Bentong, Selayang, Petaling Jaya, Tanjung Piai, Papar, Pensiangan, Batang Sadong, and Bandar Kuching. In these constituencies, the APPGM-SDG identified issues pertaining to the themes of poverty and imbalance development, social protection and welfare, land tenure and settlements, youth development and employment, food security and supply chain in the agriculture and food industry, digital connectivity, health, welfare and rights of single mothers, environmental governance, disaster management, affordable housing and urban poverty, sustainable tourism, refugees and migrants, and social cohesion and unity.¹⁸ *Table 1* below illustrates the number

18 Please see *Annual Report 2020*, APPGM-SDG, p. 19-23; Alizan Mahadi, Zainal Abidin Sanusi (eds), *Localising SDGs and Local Issues: Ten Parliamentary Constituencies in Malaysia* (PJ: Persatuan Promosi Matlamat Pembangunan Lestari, 2021), p. 107

and parliamentary constituencies that were covered by the APPGM-SDG in 2020.

Table 1: Parliamentary Constituencies Mapped by APPGM-SDG in 2020

No.	Parliament Constituencies
1.	Pendang
2.	Jeli
3.	Bentong
4.	Selayang
5.	Petaling Jaya
6.	Tanjung Piai
7.	Papar
8.	Pensiangan
9.	Batang Sadong
10.	Bandar Kuching

The work carried out on the *SDGs* by the APPGM-SDG is distinguished from the work done by, for instance, the Department of Statistics or *DOSM*, and other agencies as their work focuses on statistical data and quantitative methods. The APPGM-SDG on the other hand, employs a qualitative approach that utilises interviews and data gathering, and issues identification through focus group discussions. The methodology of the APPGM-SDG is therefore targeted in nature, and problem posing in orientation.¹⁹ In line with its localisation efforts and pursuance of targeted vulnerable groups for issue identification and solution projects, the APPGM-SDG builds local connections and interactive rapport with local communities, NGOs, government agencies and offices, and social collectives that are present in the parliamentary locality. The APPGM-SDG places great emphasis on these local connections in accordance with the call to create and empower partnerships as per *SDG 17*, and

19 Denison Jayasooria and Nur Rahman Othman, *Parliamentarians and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Implementing SDGs: In 57 Parliamentary Constituencies (Between 2020 and 2022) During the 14th Parliamentary Session*, *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament*, Vol. 3, 2023: pp. 130-154: 137-142; See also Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Cass, 1977)

guided by the value of *leaving no one behind*, hence encouraging grassroots participation and democracy in development efforts. An institution that has stood out, among others, in this grounded and collaborative process is the District Office.

APPGM-SDG and Partnerships with the District Office in the Localisation Process

The APPGM-SDG had less visibility and was not so well known in the early years of its localisation work. Two factors, however, contributed to highlighting its profile among government agencies and officials. Firstly, in 2021, the then Minister for Economy in the Prime Minister's Department, Dato' Mustapha Mohamed, issued letters of introduction of the APPGM-SDG to the secretaries of government of each state. Hence, from 2021, the APPGM-SDG was able to build closer linkages with District Offices at the State and local levels.

Secondly, a change in methodology to the issue mapping process in early 2023 further enhanced the relationship between members of the APPGM-SDG, including researchers, and officers of the District Offices in the various states. An additional step, consisting of a pre-visit to the District Office to meet the district officer of the parliamentary constituency that was being covered, was included to the fieldwork process. Prior to 2023, the members of the issue mapping team had only met the District Officer and officers of the District Office in the form of an inter-agency dialogue chaired by the District Officer on the last day of the fieldwork that spanned around 3 to 4 days. With an earlier meeting with the District Officer, members could directly introduce the APPGM-SDG to the district staff and local community leaders, such as the *penghulus* (headmen) and *ketua kampungs* (village chiefs) and provide an in-depth briefing of the mandate and groundwork of the APPGM-SDG. It also allowed members of the research and issue mapping team to understand the profile of the locality better, and the needs of and challenges faced by the government officers, and the local communities.

In the issue mapping process in 2021, covering 20 parliamentary constituencies between February to November, the APPGM-SDG documented issues in the categorised themes of youth development and employment; food security and the supply chain in agriculture; welfare and rights of single mothers; poverty and imbalanced development; environmental governance; social protection and welfare; land security and settlements; disaster management and climate change; refugees and

migrants; sustainable tourism; affordable housing and urban poverty; border security; and digital connectivity. The issues documented are also placed and assessed in accordance with the dimensions of the economic, social and environment.

Under the theme of youth development and employment, for instance, a critical and widespread issue is that of unemployment. There is a lack of available and dignified jobs for youths. These have led to many youths moving to the bigger cities and urban centres to search for better paying jobs and financial security. In addition, there is also a mismatch between the knowledge gained by youths and young workers in institutions of learning and the skills required in the industry and markets by employers. In 2021, these issues of employment and development were documented in the parliamentary constituencies of Kubang Pasu, Ipoh Barat, Kuala Selangor, Lembah Pantai, Muar, Simpang Renggam, Pasir Mas, Kota Belud and Libaran. Many of the categories of themes found in 2021 were similar to those identified in 2020. Two additional themes formulated in 2021 were related to waste management, and local governance and delivery.²⁰

In 2022, the APPGM-SDG team undertook fieldwork in 27 parliamentary constituencies from February to October. Some of the issues that were prevalent in the preceding years, similarly emerged in the reports of the constituencies covered throughout 2022. These issues could be generalised in the themes of, among others, environmental degradation and climate change, lack of employment and economic opportunities, lack of social mobility and social displacement, absence of welfare protection and social safety net, land security and ownership, and poor infrastructure and basic amenities. However, in 2022, not only were thematic areas generated and documented, but vulnerable groups were also identified and categorised in line with the findings from the ground. These groups consisted of farmers, fishers, the youths, single parents, people with disabilities, senior citizens, the *Orang Asal* and *Orang Asli*, and B40 community.²¹ This is not to say that in the preceding years such groups were not highlighted or documented, but they were formed through the focus of the APPGM-SDG's work since its inception. Nevertheless, these groups were also highlighted

20 Please see *Annual Report 2021*, APPGM-SDG, p. 33-36

21 Please see *Annual Report 2022*, APPGM-SDG, p. 35-37; See also *Compilation of Issues from Mapping Reports (2022)*, compiled and edited by Teo Sue Ann, unpublished

in addition to the issues and thematic areas to provide more visibility to the affected communities and to bring to the fore those who are left behind in Malaysia's development agenda and programme implementation.

In 2022, strong links were also established with the District Officers in the process of conducting the fieldwork, and undertaking the subsequent micro solution and capacity building projects. However, in 2023, these strong relations with the District Offices were reinforced. As highlighted in the preceding section, the change in the process of methodology that involved a pre-visit to the District Office before the undertaking of the fieldwork enabled the researchers from the APPGM-SDG to build closer relations with the District Officer. The pre-visit session facilitated discussions that allowed the research team a better understanding of the locality, including the issues and limitations of both the local level agencies and communities. Such interactions were impactful in two ways.

Firstly, a more personalised and collaborative relationship was shaped between the District Officer and his office and members of the APPGM-SDG research team. Secondly, and resulting from the first point, was that the District Office and its coordinating district level agencies and offices of ministries were better able to address the issues raised by the APPGM-SDG team as they understood the SDG framework, and provide concrete solutions to those community issues. Another distinguishing factor between the years 2022 and 2023 is that while inter-agency dialogues were present in the fieldwork process, in 2022 they were not necessarily held on the last day of the visit. In 2023, however, all the inter-agency dialogues were arranged on the last day. Thus, allowing better feedback gathering by the APPGM-SDG team from the respective district level agencies in the dialogue chaired by the District Officer. In this way, better solutions and strategies to address issues identified by the researchers could be strategised and implemented. The nature of relationship between the APPGM-SDG and the District Office as it developed from 2022 to 2023 is illustrated in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Parliamentary Constituencies Visited by APPGM-SDG and the Nature of Relationship with the District Office in 2022 and 2023

Year	Parliament Constituencies	Intersecting Themes	Pre-Visit to District Office	Nature of Inter-Agency Dialogue with District Office and Government Agencies
2022	27	16	N/A	During the duration of the issue mapping site visit
2023	28	26	23	On the last day of the issue mapping site visit

In the 28 parliamentary constituencies visited by the APPGM-SDG team in 2023, 26 of the constituencies conducted inter-agency dialogues that were chaired by the District Officer. This support on behalf of the institution of the district and the District Officers signalled a breakthrough in the localisation work and the local level multi-stakeholder initiatives of the APPGM-SDG. Throughout the 28 constituencies, some of the thematic areas generated included socio-economic implications of border security, environmental pollution, under recognition of heritage, imbalanced development, drugs abuse, indeterminate support for people with disabilities, poor social conditions of low-cost flats, well-being of island communities, food security, citizenship, gender and poverty, and the social dislocation of youths.

Through the strong links cultivated with the District Offices, those local and community issues under those themes were brought to the attention of the District Officers and their staff. Additionally, due to the support given by the District Office to the localisation work of the APPGM-SDG in these parliamentary constituencies, participation from various agencies and institutions at the district level in the inter-agency dialogues was also forthcoming and strong. It was from the District Officer's desk that coordination and deliberations on the implementation of projects, and any gaps on government outreach and programmes, and service delivery, were monitored.

The development agenda and challenges of the District Office

As such, the district office has played a pivotal role in the groundwork of the APPGM-SDG,²² in addition to the other support also given by the different groups including the Member of Parliament's office, local NGOs and community activists, and local leaders both from the formal and informal side. These partnerships and efforts established by the District Office-APPGM-SDG are pertinent as they allow critical issues faced by vulnerable and local communities that are identified through the SDGs framework, to be brought to the centre of district level government planning, implementation and troubleshooting of development programmes. They form part of the policy and service delivery advocacy chain that the APPGM-SDG has built and continues to build, connecting and flowing from the uppermost level of government, federal ministries and leadership, to the grassroots level of local agencies and offices, and leadership. Members of Parliament also participate and facilitate throughout this interactional process.

There have been many achievements and successes in ensuring development projects are implemented at the local level that contribute to the improvement of the lives of local communities. The work of the APPGM-SDG with the District Office and local partners on the ground in the past 4 years have also contributed to these positive changes. Nevertheless, while these interventions are significant, there remain several challenges that limit the progress and successful execution of social programmes and public delivery that addresses community-based issues.

One such challenge is the lack of financial resources at the disposal of the District Office. The absence and unavailability of funds impede the district office from implementing new projects or programs that are much needed by the community. Thereby, failing to ensure the sustainability and long-term running of specific programmes that could benefit the people and vulnerable groups in a longer duration of time. Financial support is also needed to support and boost social and infrastructural projects that may have encountered problems or face high risks, particularly in an era of uncertainty that has seen the

22 Please see Denison Jayasooria and Nur Rahman Othman, *Parliamentarians and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Implementing SDGs*; See also Malaysia Voluntary National Review (VNR), p. 120

occurrence of a severe global pandemic, and geopolitical conflicts that have consequences on the local life of communities. These interventions are needed, for instance, in the sectors of the food industry and agriculture, environment and biodiversity, and health and medical services.

The second challenge, which is related to and builds on the first, is the limited powers and jurisdiction of the District Office. This is particularly so in the context of the pooling and collection of financial resources, and the planning of development programmes and policies specifically in and for the district level governance and administration. The former, as discussed earlier, is crucial for the running and implementation of social programmes by the District Office, and its committees. In relation to the latter case, the District Office and its personnel led by the District Officer are the focal point for manifestations of government policies and agendas, ensuring development projects serve to elevate the community's quality of life are properly implemented. Yet, the District Officer may not necessarily be involved in the process of policy formulation and decision-making.

This returns to a previous discussion above, where many of the powers and decision-making authority is centralised at the federal level and among the elite leadership.²³ The role of the District Officer, therefore, is primarily to implement executive orders and policy blueprints. As the District Office is placed at the intersection between federal and state agendas, the need and role for the District Officer to be a key decision maker in the process of development planning and policy formulation is even more central.

Further to the two key challenges faced by the District Office, there is also the challenge of the one-dimensional approach and perspective to policy making and implementation. One-dimensional refers to the

23 Lee Hwok Aun, *Insufficient States: Revisiting the Roles and Resources of Malaysia's Subnational Governments*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak, *Perspective*, Issue No. 97, 14 December 2023, p. 3-5

Please see also Kai Ostwald, *Power Distribution and Decentralization in New Malaysia*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak, *Perspective*, Issue No. 66, 29 August 2019; Tricia Yeoh, *Reviving the Spirit of Federalism: Decentralization Policy Options for a New Malaysia*, *Policy Ideas*, IDEAS, No. 59, April 2019; Francis Loh, *Centralized Federalism in Malaysia: Urgent Need to Decentralize*, *Aliran*, 20 June 2018, accessed at <https://m.aliran.com/aliran-csi/centralised-federalism-in-malaysia-urgent-need-to-decentralise>; Kai Ostwald, *Federalism without Decentralization: Power Consolidation in Malaysia*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2017), pp. 488-506

understanding of social issues and solving of public problems only through a singular domain or discipline. For instance, the phenomena of lack of employment opportunities are approached only through the economic perspective and involving only government ministries and agencies related to the subject matter of the economy. Another notable case is attempting to understand the phenomena of flooding and landslides from the environmental perspective only.

In the former case, health and environmental perspectives and policy areas are also related and crucial for job creation. For the latter, economic and governance perspectives, among others, are necessary to address rising water levels that affect urban and rural localities. Thus, what is needed is a multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholder approach²⁴ to development planning, policy formulation, programme implementation and impact monitoring and assessment.²⁵ This approach should extend from the federal echelons to the local levels of governance including the district office.

Fourth and finally, there is the challenge of political instability. In the absence of a stable political order and leadership, the governmental structure and administrative composition at different levels of government will be affected. When this occurs, administrative certainty and consistency at the district level are also disrupted and rendered inefficient. The composition and members of the *penghulus* and *ketua kampungs*, for instance, come under the purview of and are appointed by the State governments. They assist the district office in information dissemination and project implementation at the district level and below, involving the *mukims* and *kampungs*. Hence, when there is instability in the political structure and uncertainty in the chain of command, development work is ultimately disrupted.

The four challenges of lack of financial resources, limited powers and jurisdiction, the one-dimensional approach in policy making and development implementation, and political instability, are critical issues

24 Please see Denison Jayasooria and Nur Rahmah Othman, *Parliamentarians and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Implementing SDGs: In 57 Parliamentary Constituencies (Between 2020 and 2022) during the 14th Parliamentary Session*, *Parliament Journal Article*, March 2023

25 Please see: *Work together to provide safety nets for children – commissioner*, *Malaysiakini*, 13 April 2023, quoted from *Bernama*, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/662015>; *Sekolah komuniti di Semporna: perlu perbincangan rentas kementerian – KPM*, 26 Disember 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/691256>

that affect the project of nation-building, and the *SDGs* in particular.²⁶ By addressing these challenges, through the *SDGs* and in pursuance of the *SDGs*, we are better equipped to create a society and nation that is inclusive and developed.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, and the complexity of the remedies that are needed to address and resolve them, the institution of the District Office is a vital institution in the administrative structure of the State and government. The District Office ensures that government policies materialise and that programmes are implemented, contributing to the country's development agenda. This ensures that developments in the form of infrastructure and facilities, public services, social programmes, and assistance, among others, reach the most vulnerable and needy of society. The District Office is a centre of diffusion and balance, ensuring that development and its outcomes are not accumulated and concentrated in the urban cities and among the elites and those privileged in society. Instead, it reaches widely to the further regions of Malaysia, the rural areas and those on the margins.

The elevation and empowerment of the district office is not a recent phenomenon in Malaysia. It originates from a development paradigm established in the late 1960s and thereafter, guided by the principles of social justice and aimed at improving the quality of life for the poorest and most disadvantaged in society. Under Tun Abdul Razak's leadership, significant emphasis was given to rural development to address poverty in the rural areas. Today, social conditions may have changed, but the principles of justice and need for development remain unchanged.

Moving forward, the *SDGs* agenda can be situated and contextualised within this developmental tradition that has shaped Malaysia. This approach imbues development with a contemporary and global dimension, aimed at improving the well-being of all Malaysians. Bridging Malaysian development planning with the *SDGs*, the *Malaysia Voluntary*

26 See Teo Lee Ken and Debbie Loh (eds), *SDG Policies and Practices in Malaysia* (PJ: Society for the Promotion of *SDGs*, 2023); Teo Sue Ann (ed), *SDGs and Grassroots Realities: Seven Community Case Studies in Malaysia* (PJ: Society for the Promotion of *SDGs*, 2023); Teo Sue Ann (ed), *Localizing SDGs and Grassroots Concerns of Six Vulnerable Groups in Malaysia* (PJ: Society for the Promotion of *SDGs*, 2023); Alizan Mahadi and Nazran Zhafri (eds), *Sustainable Development, Making SDGs Matter: Leaving No One Behind* (Kuala Lumpur: ISIS Malaysia, 2021)

National Review of 2021 on the United Nations 2030 SDG Agenda has also highlighted and emphasised the importance of the role of the District Office in realising the SDGs. Citing the empowering of the District Office as one of the opportunities and way forward, the report noted that:

In localising SDGs, in addition to working with local authorities, efforts are being made to engage with the district offices. This is to ensure an inter-agency SDG delivery taskforce is organised at the district level to enhance the role of all agencies including a multi-stakeholder group (civil society, private sector and academic networks) in addressing economic, social and environmental concerns at the grassroots level.²⁷

The District Office unquestionably plays a central role in the Malaysian SDGs Agenda and localisation efforts. The APPGM-SDG, guided by this note and through its own initiatives, has initiated partnerships with District Offices and local agencies in several selected parliamentary constituencies for the purpose of resolving longstanding local issues. For instance, multi-stakeholder taskforces in the constituencies of Ipoh Barat and Petaling Jaya. In 2023, the *MySDG Center for Social Inclusion*, under the APPGM-SDG, began engagements with the district offices in Kubang Pasu, and Seberang Perai Selatan in one of its initiatives to undertake the pilot project of establishing a multi-stakeholder platform involving the *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* (Department of Social Welfare), focusing on welfare services delivery, training, and policy for local communities at the district level. The *Center* also seeks to establish several more multi-stakeholder platforms at the district level of designated constituencies, focusing on selected thematic and policy areas in the coming year.

The groundwork, documentation and activities of the APPGM-SDG in previous years, alongside the ongoing work of the *MySDG Center for Social Inclusion* this year, have provided valuable insights and lessons for moving forward. As the APPGM-SDG seeks to strengthen its policy advocacy component and consolidate its presence and work at the grassroots level, these experiences are crucial. As the UN 2030 Agenda is approaching the midpoint, all enablers that can accelerate the attainment of the SDGs and in building inclusive communities should be expanded and reinforced. The District Office and the APPGM-SDG serves as a pivotal vehicle and foundation for positive progress.

27 Malaysia Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021, p. 120

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