

## MALAYSIA

### SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVE IN PENANG

*The Sustainable Penang Initiative aims to incorporate popular consultation into a more holistic and sustainable type of development in the State of Penang, Malaysia. It is an example of a process that draws together many stakeholders to shape a common vision for the future of the community and to monitor achievements and progress over time.*

In Penang, rapid economic growth was affecting the socio-cultural and environmental quality of life for citizens and widening the gap between rich and poor. The economic crises in 1997-1999, which beset the region, was an opportune time for civil society groups to assert their concerns that a top-down development planning process, without citizen participation or co-operation from the business sector, was producing development that was increasingly unsustainable.

The property boom (especially with luxury hotel and resort construction) produced irreversible damage to the fragile hill and water ecosystem (eg land slides, flash floods, traffic jams, loss of vegetation cover and destruction of built heritage). Other chronic and recurrent problems, (eg power and water supply disruptions, poor waste management, seasonal smog, coastal pollution and labour shortages) were proving detrimental to public health and welfare (eg outbreaks of infectious diseases). There was little constructive dialogue between the largely profit driven business sector and community based organisations. A highly centralised system of governance meant little delegation of power from the federal to the state authorities. The Penang Development Corporation, a state government department provided a grant of over US\$ 500,000 to launch the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), a think-tank agency that would undertake research in sustainable development. At the time, the government was also preparing a Strategic Development Plan for 2001-2010. Subsequently, the Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) was launched in October 1997 to devise a model of sustainable development monitored by a series of alternative indicators, which would consider the social, cultural and environmental, as well as economic dimensions.

The SPI involved a series of roundtables, which brought together on an equal footing, representatives from Penang's government, business, academic and

civil society sectors to openly discuss, collaborate and formulate strategies on key areas of sustainable development. There were seven roundtables-ecological sustainability (November 1997), social justice (February 1998), economic productivity, (April 1998), cultural vibrancy (June 1998), popular participation (September 1998), Malay community (October 1998) and Chinese community (January 1999). Participants produced reports, which identified indicators through which they could monitor the long-term development of Penang over time. The subsequent reviews and follow-up actions culminated in the presentation of a Report Card at the People's Forum in 1999.

A number of obstacles were highlighted by the SPI experience. In terms of participation, the representation was mixed and reflected the difficulties of building tripartite partnerships as an accepted norm of governance. The participation from business and government (particularly senior level) representatives were limited with the exception of the roundtables on ecological sustainability and economic productivity. The response rates from both the Chinese and Malay language speaking roundtables were also relatively low despite invitations to a broad cross-section of these communities. This points to the continuing English-based dominance of the civil society sector. Nevertheless, the SPI proved to be generally effective in mobilising a large contingent of stakeholder groups with an overall attendance rate of 50% of invitees. The most responsive sector was civil society with the attendance of over 500 persons from NGOs, academic and research institutions, the media as well as individual citizens. This reflects the strong sense of *gotong royong* (community self help) that exists among the NGOs. This combined with a highly receptive state ministry has contributed to a unique political landscape in Penang compared to the rest of Malaysia.

The NGO community in Malaysia is still relatively weak by comparison to its overseas counterparts. This may be due to inherent religious, cultural and



ethnic cleavages, which characterise Malaysian society as well as the professional and academic dominance of the sector. Despite the continuing dominance of federal over state government in most aspects of public policy and resource allocation the potential for replication of the SPI model to other parts of the country is growing. Subang Jaya Municipality Council for instance has launched a similar initiative and the SPI experience has been included in a number of forums across the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

By facilitating a dialogue between like-minded interest groups, SPI has also generated the subsequent formation of a number of NGO networks and ideas have been incorporated into local action. A number of organisations, such as the Sustainable Independent Living and Access (SILA), the Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP) and the Water Watch Penang (WWP) have emerged to address specific issues, including disabled access, sustainable transport and water conservation. As part of the commitment to follow-up action from the SPI, the People-Friendly Penang Initiative was launched in February 2000, involving a partnership between SERI, UNDP and the Penang Municipal Council. Penang has been chosen by UNDP to be a model city for good governance for the Southeast Asian Region, as part of its 'Healthy Cities' programme. This is a pilot project, which involves extensive public consultation with the elderly, the disabled and children to make Penang a 'people-friendly city' which is barrier-free and accessible for such groups.

Overall, the SPI process demonstrated the effectiveness of a roundtable exchange as an informal, non-bureaucratic, neutral venue on which to build constructive dialogue and partnerships between groups from government, the private and non-government sectors. The forums have made a significant impact on the planning and policy-making agenda increasing the level of public participation and accountability. The SPI model now forms the framework of Penang's Strategic Development Plan and the systematic formulation of a set of alternative indicators is now a mechanism whereby the long-term sustainable development of Penang can be monitored and assessed.



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