

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD FACILITIES AND THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AGENDA: AN OVERVIEW.

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Abstract:

Neighbourhood may influence the community sustainability in many ways. Investing in housing alone without providing for the quality of neighbourhood facilities would waste money and potentially lead to social problem. Agenda 21 recognises that communities were at the core of the sustainability. The Malaysian government also recognises the importance of the sustainability as part of its agenda in improving the well being of all Malaysians. The 9MP and the 2008 budget reports strongly emphasise on the improvement of the standard and sustainability of quality of life for the communities. This evidence puts the communities at a centre of the programme. However, the reports do not specifically address who are the stakeholders that are involved in the delivery process and how the community sustainability should be delivered. This paper focuses on the role of neighbourhood facilities within the context of supporting and sustaining the existing communities. It discusses the present understandings of the sustainable communities' practices and how far these fit within neighbourhood facilities thinking in housing developments. The most likely outcome of this approach is the deprofessionalisation of skills towards community-based approach in meeting those objectives. The paper builds on established literature and generates debate on the role of neighbourhood facilities in creating sustainable communities within the Malaysia context.

Keywords: Neighbourhood facilities, Housing, Skills, Sustainable communities

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses on the significance of neighbourhood facilities in the housing developments. It develops a comprehensive picture of the nature and role of the neighbourhood facilities in relation to the sustainable communities thinking. Defining the nature of neighbourhood facilities is outlined and the role of neighbourhood facilities in creating and sustaining the existing communities is considered. This paper then links the concept of sustainable communities to neighbourhood facilities thinking, as the role of neighbourhood facilities in creating sustainable communities are not well discussed.

2.0 THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND THE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Sustainability is mainly defined as “*people continuing to want to live in the same community, both now and in the future*” (Long and Hutchins, 2003). And it is achievable in situations where people continue to choose to live, work and carry on activities in the same common locality and community with fully occupied housing.

Community is commonly cited as to “*the place where people maintain their homes, earn their livings, rear their children and carry on most of their life activities*” (Poplin, 1979). It further supported by Long and Hutchins (2003) that view community as “*a grouping of up to several thousand households, whose occupants share common experiences and bonds derived from living in the same locality*”. In summary, the community is described as persons or people living within the same geographical area, carrying on their social interactions and activities with one or more common ties and shared values.

In the United Kingdom, the understanding of the community and sustainability has led to two most popular definitions of sustainable communities. First, Kearns and Turok (2003) define sustainable communities as the “*settlements which meet diverse needs of all existing and future residents; contribute to a high quality of life; and offer appropriate ladders of opportunity for household advancement, either locally or through external connections. They also limit the adverse external effects on the environment, society and economy*”. Second, Egan (2003) defines “*Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to the high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity*”.

By understandings the concepts of the sustainability, community and the sustainable communities, Kasim, et al. (2005) mapped three dimensions of sustainable communities that need to be integrated in any community sustainability related

programmes for ensuring a balance, mix and sustain the existing community (see figure 1).

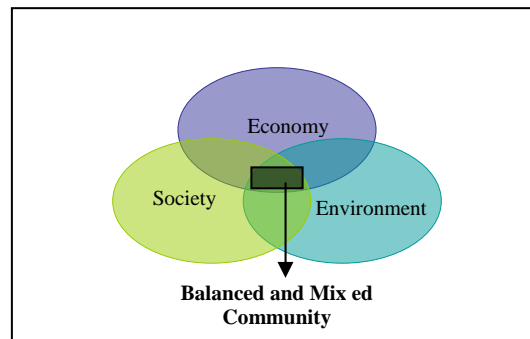


Figure 1: The three principles and values for sustainable communities (source: Kasim, et, al. 2005)

In the United Kingdom, the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) (2007) has strongly stated that sustainable communities are a balance and integrate to social, economic and environmental aspects of places to meet residents' needs today and in the future. Sustainable communities are diverse, reflecting local circumstances, but sharing common characteristics and offer people with five strands of (ASC, 2007):

- A decent home that they can afford
- A community in which they want to live and work
- The chance to develop their skills and interests
- Access to jobs and excellent services, and
- The change to get engaged in their community and to make a difference.

Meanwhile, housing has an essential contribution to community sustainability. However, communities are more than just housing. Investing in housing alone without providing for other needs of communities such as social, economic and environmental issues (see figure 1) would waste money and potentially lead to social problems. The strong commitment by the UK government towards sustainable communities is stated in its Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003): *The way our communities develop, economically, socially and environmentally must respect the needs of future generations as well as succeeding now. This is the key to lasting, rather than temporary, solutions; to creating communities that can stand on their own feet and adapt to the changing demands of modern life. Places where people want to live and will continue to want to live.*

Agenda 21, the 'Earth Action Plan' that resulted from the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 also recognised that local people were at the core of the sustainability for the earth and its people. Any sustainability practice that failed to embrace local people aspirations, fears and needs for the future was doomed to be a failure (Fagan, 1996). The Malaysia government also recognises the important of the sustainability as part of

its agenda in improving the quality of life of all Malaysians. The ninth Malaysian Plan which is further supported by the Malaysia 2008 Budget, does emphasise on the improvement of the standard and the sustainability for ensuring the well being of all Malaysians. These can be found in the fourth strand of the Ninth Malaysian Plan and the third strand of the 2008 Budget. These evidences show that Malaysian government is committed and concerns for sustaining its existing communities and people. But, the reports do not specifically address how the community sustainability should be delivered. The reports also fail to describe the skills and capabilities necessary to deliver those sustainability programmes.

This builds on debates on the sense of community-based approach as a core of any sustainability actions and should be a top priority for those involve in delivering the sustainable communities initiatives like neighbourhood facilities programmes for housing developments

3.0 THE CONCEPT OF NEIGHBOURHOODS IN HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Neighbourhood is defined by De Chiara et al. (1984) as *“a residential area with homogenous characteristics, of a size comparable to that usually served by an elementary school”*. The authors further summarized characteristics of the neighbourhoods which include:

- The size of a residential neighbourhood should be determined by the population needed for one elementary school
- The neighborhood should be bounded by wide arterial roads that eliminate through traffic to the neighbourhood
- Within the neighbourhood there should be a hierarchy of streets each designed to minimum widths
- Streets are planned and laid out to discourage through traffic
- About 10 percent of the area would be allocated for open space and recreation
- The school is placed in the centre and a central point in the neighbourhood
- Other public facilities located near to centre
- Homes are within walking distance to the school

These characteristics of neighbourhood by De Chiara et al. (1984) suggested that good neighbourhood within housing development should, at least, provides with basic public facilities requirements for sustaining and enhancing the existing communities who live in the area. It further supported by the Urban and Rural Planning Department (JPBD) (1997) that recognised the significance of the neighbourhood facilities towards the sustainable environment. JPBD (1997) further notes that the roles of urban planning have moved from laying out basic facilities, zoning specific land uses, charting future plans for towns and cities and controlling physical development into

specific designs of urban spaces for a more sustainable environment. A good housing neighbourhood should include the elements as in Table 1 (JPBD, Doctrine, 1997).

Table 1: A Perfect Housing Setting

Elements	Characteristics
Comfort	Housing interior design and surroundings should foster family systems
Friendliness	Basic facilities should encourage a friendly neighbourhood
Beauty, quality and identity	Designs should reflect beauty and quality and allow room for growth
Affordability	Housing development should meet demand and should be affordable by people from walks of life
Cleanliness and harmony	Housing areas need to be clean, healthy and in harmony with the surroundings
Adequacy	Residential areas should have adequate public facilities and utilities (self-contained)

The six elements of good housing neighbourhood (see Table 1 above) as suggested by the JPBD's Doctrines (1997) would be a basic for aligning research focus in this paper. However, no research has been done on the extent of this JPBD's Doctrine contributes to the social and physical environment of housing neighbourhood sustainability within the housing development in Malaysia. In addition, the JPBD's Doctrine (1997) fails to clearly address elements of neighbourhood facilities that contribute to a good housing neighbourhood for community sustainability and enhancement.

4.0 ROLE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD FACILITIES IN THE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Neighbourhoods may influence the local communities in many of ways. As identified by Parkes and Kearns (2004), there are two main factors how the neighbourhoods could create and sustain the existing communities. They are *social environment* and *physical and services environment*.

The neighbourhood as a social context could be viewed as any particular local communities consists of a variety of social networks such as social support and community engagement activities. Whilst, the neighbourhood as a physical and services environment could be seen as facilities and infrastructures that are essential services such as shopping centre, parks and leisure centres, post offices, police stations, traffic, provision of sidewalks, connectivity of paths safety and aesthetic pleasure may promote or discourage the physical activity and social interaction of the local communities (Ross, 2000; 2001; Saelens et al, 2003). As pointed by Ross (2000), the neighbourhoods that provide good social networks and physical facilities have a direct influence on the density of housing. As such, to sustain the existing local communities, there is a need to

consider both environmental and social factors in designing the neighbourhood facilities for housing development.

But, the role of neighbourhood facilities for housing development is changing over time. It is vital that the improvement of a range of neighbourhood facilities activity is taken care off. This is to ensure that neighbourhood facilities continue to meet the needs of the local communities. Therefore, it is proposed that a review of the role of neighbourhood facilities for housing development is to be undertaken to establish future delivery approach. This may involve refocusing the role of neighbourhood facilities from the conventional thinking towards more community-based interests to ensure their viability.

5.0 FUTURES IN MANAGING NEIGHBOURHOOD FACILITIES

The provision of neighbourhood facilities for housing development is one of the mechanisms to increase a sense of community and enhance the social and economic sustainability of the neighbourhoods (DOE, 2001). It is essential that any housing development schemes shall provide necessary community infrastructure and services to enable new growth to a quality of life for local communities. Otherwise, they would seek opportunities to move out off the area and look for new areas with full facilities and services.

In Malaysia, the need for neighbourhood facilities within housing development should be part of proposals for new housing development. The JPBD will oversee and assess the proposals as part of the development plan process for planning approval exercises. However, the extent of the property developers comply with the planning requirements for providing neighbourhood facilities within housing development is not clearly addressed and widely discussed. Moreover, guidelines and procedures for neighbourhood facilities provisions and requirements by the JPBD are very little or some cases are not in place. As an integral part of the development, it is suggested that the requirements for providing neighbourhood facilities are imposed to all property practitioners such as property developers.

The provision of neighbourhood facilities for sustaining local communities may also impose additional costs on property developers. But, considering of neighbourhood facilities' roles and contributions towards creating sustainable communities, it is reasonable to expect that property developers contribute to the additional cost of neighbourhood facilities provision for housing development projects.

Neighbourhood facilities which are mainly for social and community uses such as schools, crèches, surgeries, local shops and play facilities (PPST 7, 2001), should be incorporated into the overall design and layout of housing developments to provide focal points and landmark features for the neighbourhood areas. The location and design of

such facilities should also respect the amenities of proposed and existing housing. In doing so, the property practitioners such as property developers and planners need to engage with local communities and get them participate and involve in the process of delivering neighbourhood facilities in their local areas. Only local communities know what the best are for their local areas. Local communities should be given opportunities to express their opinions and interests in respect to all neighbourhood facilities that are developed for them in their local areas. This new approach of delivering neighbourhood facilities requires the property practitioners and planners to move away from their conventional thinking of designing and building for local communities and towards more supporting local communities' needs and expectations from neighbourhood facilities in their local areas. Fundamental issues need to be addressed including:

- *Future directions in managing neighbourhood facilities*: Exploring the changing priorities, potentials, scopes and future functions of neighbourhood facilities in supporting local communities' needs and expectations
- *Future skills and capabilities*: highlighting the broad range of potential skills and expertise from technical skills to community-based skills that are required to support neighbourhood facilities futures.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Neighbourhood facilities play an importance role for creating and sustaining the existing community by providing residents' needs for continuing live and work in their local areas. And it is no doubt that to sustain the existing communities, the sustainable community concept and thinking have to be integrated in designing and developing neighbourhood facilities within the housing developments in Malaysia. The local community knows types of facilities that they want from their neighbourhood. Engaging local communities and having them involve in designing and developing the neighbourhood facilities would be likely an approach towards the betterment and improvement of the facilities within the housing developments in Malaysia.

However, an implication of this new thinking is a need to improve skills and capabilities of those involve in developing and managing neighbourhood facilities necessary to meet with new service challenges. If the property development professionals are willing to take up this challenge, they have to move away from their conventional practices of designing and building facilities without the involvement of the local communities and towards more facilitating and accommodating facilities that are decided and agreed by the local communities. In the sustainable communities' context, the conventional thinking and approach of delivering neighbourhood facilities is not sufficient if the objective of sustaining the existing communities are to be met.

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