

## Scrutinizing The Rigorousness Of Government Interventions In Addressing Homelessness In Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Homelessness remains a world problem, although a majority of homeless groups survive only in modernized cultures. The occurrence of homelessness is becoming a social problem in Malaysia, especially in city areas such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Baharu. It is believed that this group of people has less received much concentration since the current social policies have no direct bearing to the homeless. Hence, this paper analyzes the rigorousness of government interventions in addressing the homelessness in Malaysia. This paper reviews relevant literatures pertaining to programs carried out by the government in helping homeless via preliminary reports, observation and interviews that have been written in previous research. It is hoped that the study will grant to the existing body of knowledge related to homelessness study.

Keyword: Homelessness, Government Intervention, Marginalized Group, Social Welfare Policy

### Introduction

Homelessness issue is a global phenomenon and inevitable as it happened everywhere (Springer, 2000) and the most cities that that has a serious problem of homelessness are Manila, Jakarta, Los Angeles, New York, Mosco, Mexico, and Mumbai (Danarsiwi and Nurfarawahidah, 2018). Although Malaysia is not being included in the list, but the number of homeless in Malaysia is startling and needs to be given serious attention by government. In Malaysia, the affairs of homelessness are under the concern of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) and matters pertaining to the enforcement are delegated to the Social Welfare Department (Ghee and Raja Norliayana, 2015). There are four policies embedded in MWFCD namely the National Social Welfare Policy, National Social Policy, National Policy for the Elderly, and National Policy on Women. However, it is implied that this group has received less concern by the government as all the policies stated before do not directly underpin the homelessness issue in Malaysia (Alhabshi and Abdul Manan, 2012).

A study carried out by MWFCD found that there are about 1 400 homeless located in Kuala Lumpur (Rusenko, 2014). Meanwhile, in 2014, Kechara Soup Kitchen found that there were about 1 500 homeless living on the streets in Kuala Lumpur (Kong, 2014). Meanwhile, in 2016, the Kuala Lumpur City Council (DBKL) found that there were about 1 500 to 2 000 homeless residing in Kuala Lumpur and the numbers show a threefold increase of homeless since 2014 (Kay Li, 2018). Based on the explanation above, it is believed that the figures of homeless in Malaysia is more than 1 500 people and keep on increasing from time to time.

Many homeless who are living in Kuala Lumpur cannot afford to rent a room or house regardless of whether they have jobs. The majority of homeless in Malaysia are local people while the remaining 10 percent of homeless belongs to Non-Malaysians (Ghee and Raja Norliayana, 2015). By looking at the seriousness of this issue, the Malaysian government has outlined several initiatives in order to

cater the homelessness issues. However, the rigorousness of the initiatives is questionable and unable to curb the problem.

## **Government Initiatives in Addressing Homelessness in Malaysia**

### **The Destitute Persons Act 1977**

The Destitute Persons Act 1977 was formulated in 1977 and it was amended in 1985. The purpose of establishing this Act is to control the vagrancy and at the same time to provide rehabilitation and care for destitute persons. This Act defined a destitute person as an individual who found begging in a public area and cause disturbance to persons or create a nuisance or any idle person found in a public area regardless of he or she is begging or not. This Act confers power to public officers to send the potential destitute persons to a welfare home without trial and the persons are allowed to stay up to three years. Section 8(1) mentioned that the admitted persons are not allowed to leave the home without getting permission and they are allowed to leave the home early if they have found eligible to work and sustain themselves or someone is willing to taking care of them.

However, it is less suitable to lump together homeless with those of beggars. Unlike beggars, the homeless do not necessarily loiter in public places and seeking money from people. The government heavily relies on the Destitute Persons Act 1977 in handling the homeless. Alarmingly, there have been reports from NGOs who claim that the raids can be dehumanizing and homeless persons are treated badly in the process (e.g. persons are dragged). Personal property is at risk of being lost whenever integrated operations occur, as persons will be displaced and occasionally disallowed to carry their personal belongings with them. These documents may include health records, identification, certificates and essential contacts. This goes against Article 13 of the Federal Constitution whereby every citizen has a right to property.

### **“Henti Memberi, Kami Prihatin” (Stop Giving, We Are Concerned) Campaign**

The Department of Social Welfare introduced the “Henti Memberi, Kami Prihatin” campaign in 2012. The purpose of establishing the campaign was to reduce the number of beggars on the streets by discouraging the public to give money to the destitute persons. The government justifies that the act of giving money to the destitute people may bring harm activities and contributes to other social problems such as drug abuse and gambling. Hence, the department encourage the citizen to donate the money the right channels such as orphanages and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

### **Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih (SBJK)**

SBJK was established in 2013 and it is aimed at providing formal education access in a conducive environment for street and marginalized children, reducing disability rates among Malaysians, providing opportunities to create career paths for street and marginalized children and to build knowledgeable, skilled and can independent (Suhaila, 2017). This school provides education to Malaysians from the aged of 5 to 19 years old (pre-school to upper secondary school). Among the categories of students of SBJK are street, marginalized children and children without identification documents (Danarsiwi and Nurfarawahidah, 2018). Children attending Sekolah Jalinan Kasih (SBJK) recorded a total of 3 415 people from 2015 to June 2017. Although these statistics showed a very small percentage (0.012%) compared to the children's population in Malaysia (49.5 million children), but the Government does care about their rights and welfare because every child is a gem and needs to be polished to develop their potential.

The main objectives of the establishment of SBJK are to provide informal educational access in the environment which is conducive to street and marginalized children, reducing the rate of dropout among the population, providing opportunities to shape the career paths to the street and marginalized children, and to build a knowledgeable, skilled, independent, and capable person (Malaysian Parliament, 2017).

### **Anjung Singgah**

In 2011, the National Welfare Foundation was funded by the Ministry to establish Anjung Singgah. The Anjung Singgah is a temporary shelter that provides food as other services such as counseling, job matching and so on. The homeless have been given for about 2 weeks to stay in the shelter although a majority of them stay longer than that. To date, there are four centers similar like Anjung Singgah operating in Malaysia such as in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baharu, Kuching and Penang.

Anjung Singgah is linked with other institutions such as NGOs, corporate companies, and government bodies such as Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), Labour Department and National Welfare Department. This shelter is provided for the homeless with the hope that the homeless will get their life back in order. Although this shelter brings benefits for the homeless, but it is less robust approach to cater the needs of homeless in the long run. Longer time frames must be looked at, such as the restoration of one's dignity, self-esteem and confidence, which may take months or years.

The ex-Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Azizah Mohd Dun said they provided temporary shelters for 14 to 30 days. They were also given counseling by the Malaysian Counselor's Board of Counselors and up to now, 5,706 sessions were individually, in groups, in families and in career, successfully implemented. As of today, a total of 1,490 homeless people who live in Anjung Singgah get their jobs according to their educational background. A total of 367 people returned to their family circle, while 157 were referred to the relevant departments and agencies (Mohd Anwar, Nadia Hamid and Faris Fuad, 2017).

### **Jejak Gelandangan**

'Jejak Gelandangan' is a collaborative program among Kolej Universiti Agrosains Malaysia (UCAM), RISDA and Yayasan Kebajikan Negara which aim to help homeless people (perpaduan.gov.my, 2017). The program is very beneficial for the homeless in order to give an unconditional help to them. The assistance includes food, personal care items and the needs of the job. In terms of the job aspect, the program provides an adequate training to polish their skills and to prepare them to start their career and at the same time give them a chance of being selected by the employer (Sinar Harian, 2017).

Besides that, UCAM agreed to offer qualified homeless to continue their study at the University (Syazwan Msar, 2017). RISDA also has donated RM10,000 to five homeless shelter homes. Besides that, RISDA also will offer various job opportunities to the homeless to work on their plantation. The chairman of RISDA, Datuk Zahidi Zainal Abidin said RISDA offers to change their life by offering them to work in the plantation sector, such as cutting and collecting the palm oil (Meor Ahmad, 2017). To date, the total of 200 homeless has been helped under the program.

### **Operasi Pengemis Inter Agensi**

Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) will spearhead efforts to address homelessness related issues holistically with involvement and cooperation from various ministries / agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGO) through the approach of the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS). KPWKM took immediate action to hold an Operation among Inter Agency, which involved the Ministry of Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur City Hall, Malaysian Royal Police, Immigration Department, Regional Islamic Religious Council Federal and other related agencies around Kuala Lumpur. The operation has saved 26 beggars consisting of citizens and non-Malaysians. Citizens beggars have been placed in Departmental Institutions Community Welfare in accordance with the provisions of the Destitute Act 1977. Meanwhile, beggars are not citizens placed at the Immigration Detention Center in Bukit Jalil and Semenyih by the Immigration Department of Malaysia (KPWKM, 2016).

### **An Evaluation on the Rigorousness of Government Initiatives in Addressing Homelessness Problem**

The MWFCDD has classified homeless as destitute persons such as beggars and vagrants. Beggars can be defined as persons who always asking for money or food from other people while vagrants refer to persons without a settled home or regular work and wandering from one place to another and involved in begging activities. The government believed that the Destitute Persons Act 1977 could be utilized

in managing homelessness in Malaysia. However, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), a department under the ambit of the MWFCDD disagrees. According to Ghee and Raja Norliayana (2015), it is quite difficult to craft policy in addressing homelessness since there are different perspectives with regards to definition and causes of homeless in Malaysia.

On top of that, the efforts carried out by government and other parties such as NGOs, associations, students and individuals are more towards short term measures. For instance, Anjung Singgah provides only 2 weeks shelter for homeless. Some homeless will go back to their normal lives, which is being homeless after getting services from Anjung Singgah. In addition, the homeless in Malaysia do not receive sufficient attention as there is no specific public policy that anchoring homeless (Alhabshi & Manan, 2012).

Kay Li (2018) suggested that an adequate housing programs need to be offered to the citizens in addressing homelessness issue in Malaysia. Besides, securing fair employment and wages is more sustainable in the long run. He further argued that the government needs to fix and elevate minimum wages in order to reduce the number of homeless because income is the cheapest solution when compared to housing.

## Conclusion

Upon scrutinizing the processes involved in the 'rescue operations' allowed by the Destitute Persons Act, it is clear that the repeal of the Act is the only reasonable solution towards developing a more humanitarian approach to tackling homelessness. On top of that, it is suggested that the KPWKMM needs to formulate a specific policy to address the homelessness problem in Malaysia. In steads of enforcing Destitute Act 1977 which deemed less appropriate to solve the homelessness problem, the government need to come out with a comprehensive National Policy on Homeless and equipped with the objectives, the strategies, programs, activities and the financial incurred. The policy cannot be formulated solely as the KPWKMM needs to discuss this matter with other ministries and government agencies. The government needs to hand in hand with NGOs and other interested individuals to provide short and long term measures to ameliorate the problem of homelessness.

Owing to the fact that our country is still lagging behind in tackling the issue of homelessness, it is appropriate to have countries like the United States (U.S.) and Canada as an example in the management of homelessness (Nurul Mahfuzah et al., 2016). In the United States, as part of the state government's mandate on social welfare, city councilors are directed to provide accommodation purely for the homeless. They have taken the initiative to provide housing subsidies as they believed this has the strongest effect on lowering homelessness rates compared to several other interventions tested (Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano, Schumacher, 2009).

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