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# Asia Pacific:

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*Asia Pacific: Perspectives* is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.\* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

\* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

# The Penang, Malaysia Experiment in People, Private, and Public Partnerships: Process, Progress, and Procedures

by Tan Pek Leng

## Abstract

Participatory democracy is not part of the natural order of things in Malaysia nor is fiscal decentralization anywhere in evidence. However, citizen participation in municipal governance is being experimented with in isolated locations. Penang can be regarded as one of the front-runners in this respect, when considered within the overall milieu of political autarchy in Malaysia, but the process is in its infancy and progress is intermittent in comparison with other global best practices. Nonetheless, the lessons that can be learned from failings and small beginnings are better than none. Penang embarked on this journey of citizen participation with the Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) which sought to engage tri-sectoral partnership in identifying and monitoring community indicators of sustainable development. Through a series of roundtable discussions, representatives of the public, private and community sectors identified and prioritized issues that needed urgent resolution. The roundtables generated a tremendous amount of energy and fervor because it was the first time that such a vast array of community groups had gathered together with public officials, political representatives and private sector delegates to address head-on the threats to Penang's sustainability.

## 1. SMALL STEPS

Participatory democracy is not part of the natural order of things in Malaysia nor is fiscal decentralization anywhere in evidence. Indeed, some might argue that greater centralization of power has been occurring, both in the political and fiscal realms. Malaysia is a federal state with three tiers of government—central (referred to as the federal government), state and local. There are 13 states in Malaysia and 144 local authorities, of which 7 are city councils, 33 town councils and 104 district councils. Only the federal and state governments are elected, local council elections having been abolished in the 1970s. Despite periodic agitation for the restoration of local elections, this option has not been entertained by the federal government. The same coalition of political parties has ruled the country since independence in 1957, with a two-thirds majority that allows amendment of the constitution at will. Hence, although representative democracy is in practice, there is little room for maneuver by the opposition. In addition, the present Prime Minister has been at the helm of the government for the past 21 years and is the last of the strongmen still ruling in Asia. His consolidation of power despite repeated challenges has meant continued diminution of the space for dissent.

Central control of fiscal planning and allocations also remains strong. The federal government has jurisdiction over all spheres except land and water resources. Hence, nearly all

taxes collected go into the federal coffers. The state governments collect their revenue from only land tax (quit rent) and water rates. Each state is also allocated a per capita grant by the federal government and can apply to the federal government for budgets for development projects. The municipal councils draw their revenue from property tax (assessment), entertainment tax, licensing, parking charges, etc. They are also entitled to development budgets from the federal government. As an indication of the centralized budget control, of the development expenditure in Penang for the period 1996-2000, 75 percent was from federal allocations, 13 percent from state funding and 12 percent from local funds.

Despite the steady shrinkage of democratic space and increasing evidence of corruption and cronyism in high places, the long-standing government appears still unshakeable. This is attributable, to a large extent, to its general ability to "deliver the goods" in material terms as illustrated by the socio-economic indicators presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Selected Socio-Economic Indicators, 2000**

Indicator	Penang State	Malaysia
Gini Coefficient	0.4131	0.443
Incidence of Poverty	2.70%	7.50%
Unemployment Rate	2.00%	3.10%
Telephones/1000 Population	320	199
Life Expectancy at Birth (Male)	69.8 ('98)	70.2 ('00)
Life Expectancy at Birth (Female)	74.8 ('98)	75.0 ('00)
Infant Mortality Rate	5.67	7.9
Pre-School Participation Rate	94.36	52.7
Secondary School Participation Rate	66.2	58.9
Housing Units with Piped Water (%)	99.4	92
Housing Units with Electricity (%)	99.7	98.3

Source: SERI, Penang Quality of Life Report, 2001

Lulled by a sense of material comfort, their thinking faculties dulled by an uncritical educational system and a muffled press, often also repelled by unsavory political intrigues, the vast majority of Malaysians have become a depoliticized lot. Their withdrawal from the political realm leaves the government a very free hand in policy formulation and implementation, with little pretence of consultation.

Nonetheless, being part of the global community and aspiring to project an image of progressiveness, the Malaysian government is not immune to the rhetoric of good governance. Therefore, citizen participation—especially in municipal governance—is being experimented with in isolated locations. A number of these experiments are even sponsored by the government, albeit jointly with international organizations, examples being the Healthy Cities and Local Agenda 21

(LA21) pilot projects. In these instances the consultative process has been set apace but has yet to become integral to the institutional structure of the municipality. But these internationally sponsored programs do produce some results. The local authorities have recently received directives from the federal ministry for local government that they are to implement LA21 by 2003. However, the majority of the municipalities have little knowledge of what this means and capacity building will be crucial for success. It will be well worth observing how the LA21 initiative plays out—whether it will institutionalize and internalize the participative process within the municipal structure and whether it will lead to the extension of participatory democracy to the higher levels of government.

Penang can be regarded as a front-runner in participative governance when considered within the overall milieu of political autarchy in Malaysia, but the process is in its infancy and progress is intermittent in comparison with other global best practices. Penang possesses certain unique assets that have made possible a greater propensity for citizen participation. A result of the historical legacy of early introduction of English education by the colonial government is the existence of a larger westernized middle-class imbued with more liberal democratic ideas and values. A direct consequence of this is the proliferation of non-government organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations, quite unmatched by any of the other cities and towns in the country with the exception of the federal capital, Kuala Lumpur, which in recent years has also become a hub of civic activities.

Civil society organizations are engaged in issues that range from consumer rights, heritage, the environment, women's concerns, and civil liberties in squatter evictions, among others. Some of the issues that have grabbed the headlines over the years are:

- In the mid-1970s, industrial waste water discharged into the Juru River affected the livelihood of fishermen as the pollution caused a reduction in the fish population and also in the market for the available fish as they were tainted with oil and industrial solvents. A massive protest movement, led by the Consumers Association of Penang, was launched and the fishermen organized a cooperative to undertake the cultivation of shellfish.
- In the early 1990s, plans to develop Penang Hill, the only extensive forested area and catchment on Penang Island, into a theme park for purposes of tourism elicited widespread protest which was galvanized into a movement named "Friends of Penang Hill," which succeeded in persuading the Penang state government to abandon the development plans.
- Over the years, there have also been protracted campaigns for the abolition of the Internal Security Act which allows detention without trial. This draconian legislation has been used repeatedly to suppress political dissent.
- A coalition of women's organizations has made significant gains in securing the promulgation of protective legislation for women such as the Domestic Violence Act and regulations against sexual harassment at the work place.

Hence, civic engagement is not new, except that in the past it has more often taken the form of NGOs lobbying the government on issues that required resolution, and sometimes having to resort to confrontation to put their views across. There was no established channel for consultation.

Fortunately, the global movement towards good governance has not fallen entirely on deaf ears in Penang, and there is now a greater acceptance of the participatory process by those in authority. To use one of the many typologies of participation that have been developed, Penang can be considered at the stage of "consultation participation" (Plummer, 2000, p.52).<sup>1</sup> The state government has established a number of forums and councils through which civil society representatives can communicate their views on pertinent development issues.<sup>2</sup> However, information and decision-making, especially budgetary allocation, is still controlled by the government although a number of programs and projects proposed by the councils have been adopted and implemented by the government in collaboration with civil society groups or individual volunteers. That the state has arrived at this junction is the result of a combination of changing mindsets from the top, civic pressure from the bottom, and catalytic external influences.

## 2. THE START OF THE JOURNEY

### 2.1 The Sustainable Penang Initiative

Although the participatory process had been set in motion earlier in various ways, it was the launching of the Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) in 1997 that brought the discourse of citizen participation into prominence. The project came about largely because the citizenry of Penang had become increasingly concerned that their relatively good quality of life was being threatened by rapid growth and development trends. Penang had enjoyed relative prosperity and experienced high annual growth rates in the years preceding the economic crisis from 1997-1999. However, consequent rapid urbanization and intense development had also caused the state to be plagued by problems like hill collapse, floods, traffic jams, sacrificed heritage, social ills and many other "side effects" and tensions of development.

It had become widely recognized that the planning mechanism in Penang was largely bureaucratic and strongly biased towards the government and business sectors. The link with civil society was significantly weaker. The citizenry felt that they were disempowered by a top-down development planning process that did not allow for their direct input. This also led to a model of development that was overly inclined towards economic advancement to the exclusion of other considerations. The SPI was conceived as a means to put some balance back into the development process and to ensure that it was ecologically, socially and culturally sound and achieved through a process of popular participation involving civil society, government and the private sector.

The SPI was initiated at a very opportune time because the state government was making preparations to formulate its Strategic Development Plan for the years 2001-2010. The alternative indicators and more holistic approach developed by the SPI could be adopted by the formulators of the new

plan to make it more comprehensive, integrated and broad ranging.

Moreover, the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI) had just been established to undertake policy research for the state and had also been appointed to undertake the preparation of the Strategic Development Plan. Hence, SERI was uniquely well placed to integrate the results of the SPI with the formulation of the new development plan for Penang. SERI regarded SPI as an opportunity for it to pioneer the development of the first systematic and popular approach to planning and monitoring of sustainable development in a Malaysian state.

It was in pursuit of this aim that SERI sought the financial support of the Institute of Governance (IOG) to implement the SPI under the auspices of the Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovation Network Program (CAGIN).

The objectives of the SPI were to:

- Develop a 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
- Educate the public about sustainable development and how to achieve it.

The above objectives were to be achieved through roundtables convened to seek the views of a wide spectrum of Penang society on the five themes of the SPI:

- Ecological Balance
- Social Justice
- Economic Productivity
- Cultural Vibrancy
- Popular Participation

## 2.2 Process

As noted above, roundtables were held on each of the five thrusts of the SPI. "The generic program for most roundtables began with three plenary speakers addressing the roundtable theme and introducing pertinent issues at the international, national and local levels respectively. A panel discussion further helped to crystallize the key concerns before the gathered participants dispersed into small groups for more interactive sessions." (Gonzalez et.al., 2000, p.134). In these facilitated interactive sessions, participants enunciated their visions and identified "burning issues" related to the roundtable theme. A participatory approach was fostered and "workshop techniques such as mental mapping, voting through green dots, planting power trees and envisioning through fish-bone diagrams were used to better articulate and share ideas, build consensus, team spirit and common vision" (SERI, 1999, p.7). The process was fairly informal and, on the whole, succeeded in eliciting vibrant and free-flowing

participation with no evident gender bias or consciousness of hierarchy.

At the first roundtable, that on Ecological Balance, the participants formed break-out groups to discuss issues pertaining to Air Pollution, Coastal Resources, Hill Forests and Ecosystem, Transport, Urban Development, Waste and Water. The break-out groups brainstormed over issues and prioritized them in addition to identifying indicators and sources of data. The results of the discussions were then presented at the plenary session where comments were invited. "The participants were asked to discuss approaches and solutions, and identify champions who would adopt the indicators for further monitoring and campaigning" (Khoo<sup>3</sup>, 2001, p.15). This roundtable "stirred up much enthusiasm partly due to the fact that it was the first time people in Penang were introduced to participatory-type workshops. Academics, scientists and engineers, were initially skeptical 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" (Khoo, 2001, p.15). As a testimony to the enthusiasm generated at this inaugural roundtable, two action groups, Water Watch Penang (WWP) and Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP) emerged spontaneously.<sup>4</sup>

The roundtable which followed focused on Social Justice concerns such as equity, caring and sharing. "The participants discussed issues clustered around the themes of Healthcare, Workers, the Socially Challenged, 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 of disabled organizations 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 and Capital, Research & Development, Human Resource Development, Environment, Infrastructure & Amenities, Employment, Land & Natural Resources and Governance. The facilitator took the participants through a five-stage exercise using the fish-bone diagram. For the first stage, termed "Fishing For The Future," participants who had gathered in groups were asked to come up with one vision and five strategies. In the second stage, "Marketing Your Fish," group leaders presented their visions and strategies to the plenary. In the third part of the exercise, "Sustaining Your Catch," each group was asked to come up with ten indicators for their five strategies. The fourth stage, called "Flesh Your Fish," involved the groups pinning up their 10 indicators on a fish-bone diagram. In the fifth stage of the exercise, "Dress Your Fish," the facilitator went through each of the indicators to check if they were SMART.<sup>5</sup> He gave the floor the opportunity to add more indicators to make sure that the final fish was not only SMART but also well-dressed. Members of the floor were called upon to volunteer as champions for various sets of indicators. The final result was a list of fish-bone headings for indicators of economic productivity and sustainability, and their champions.

The fourth roundtable focused on the theme of Cultural Vibrancy. "In view of the dearth of cultural dialogue previously, two days were 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" (Khoo, 2001, p.16).

In the Popular Participation Roundtable, discussions centered on the topics of Voter Participation, the draconian Internal Security Act which allows detention without trial, participation in Structure & Local Plans, and Environmental Complaints.

Each of these five roundtables brought together 50-80 people and, altogether, about 500 participants from diverse backgrounds spent over 4000 people-hours at the roundtables, follow-up meetings and workshops (SERI, 1999, p.7). "After each roundtable, a Roundtable Report was produced. This report documented the proceedings of the roundtable in sufficient enough detail that it could be used as minutes for follow-up action, or as a guide for anyone who wanted to replicate the processes" (Gonzalez, et. al., 2000, p.130).

Given the social and linguistic milieu of development concerns and NGO activism in Penang, the representation at roundtables was not unexpected, i.e., it was largely middle-class and English language-educated. In particular, it was heavily weighted towards academics, policy researchers and analysts, and NGO representatives.

To redress this situation, one roundtable each was organized in the Malay and Chinese languages. The Malay language roundtable saw a larger turnout of junior level government employees. Invitations for the Chinese roundtable went out to a broad cross-section of Chinese civil society: clan associations, guilds, business associations, religious associations, etc. For both the Malay and Chinese roundtables, the response rate to the invitations was very low (13% and 17% respectively) (Chan, et. al, 1999, p. 7). This points to the need to engage them more frequently and regularly in discussions of this nature.

Noticeably absent also from most of the roundtables were senior members of the state government. With the exceptions of the inaugural roundtable (Ecological Sustainability) and the roundtable on Economic Productivity, government departments and the business sector had a minimal, low-key presence. It was obvious from their limited attendance at the roundtables that the government and business sectors do not accord priority to consultations with the general citizenry. Continued effort to promote tri-partite dialogue is necessary for it to become accepted as a norm of governance.

The roundtables culminated in the Penang People's Forum—a one-day forum to communicate the principal results of the roundtables to senior leaders of the state government, the business sector, NGOs and the general

public. "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 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 (comprising journalism cadets attached to the English-language newspaper, *The Star*) which had earlier been involved<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup> and BOLD.<sup>8</sup>

"The Penang People's Forum gave space and time for 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 Corporation, 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<sup>9</sup> would support disabled access and sustainable transport initiatives" (Khoo, 2001, p.18).

The SPI process and an assessment based on the monitoring of the 40 issues and indicators were documented in the Penang People's Report 1999, which has been widely disseminated. The Penang People's Report was compiled with the objectives of:

- Creating public awareness and providing a focal point for discussions about sustainable development and raising these issues to a higher level of public debate;
- Providing an educational tool that could be used by teachers, private and public decision-makers, and community organizations;
- Serving as a handy reference to help journalists keep tabs on important issues;
- Monitoring issues, actions and policies that impact on sustainability and quality of life in Penang as well as providing some benchmarks as a basis for future monitoring;
- Demonstrating links between the five areas of concern—environment, community, economy, culture and participation; and
- Soliciting ideas, recommendations and feedback that could become an important input into the Penang Strategic Development Plan for the next decade.

### 2.3 Results

One of the most notable achievements of the SPI was the increasing conceptual acceptance of popular participation in governance as a keystone of democracy—by the community and the Penang state government alike. The SPI has been able to tap public concern over some of the development trends

that have resulted in environmental deterioration and channeled such concerns through the roundtable process into positive dialogue with various levels of government. The SPI has provided a forum for the discussion of diverse issues faced by various groups in the community, for which there were no opportunities before. It has facilitated the meeting of like-minded people and groups and resulted in the formation of networks where joint activities are taking place.

The SPI generated considerable interest within Penang, and created awareness regarding the issues of sustainability in the public and also among the authorities. Hence, issues of sustainable development are now part of the development planning agenda of the state. Unfortunately such policy pronouncements have not often made the transition from rhetoric to reality.

Nonetheless, the SPI project management has made noteworthy progress in reaching out to key policy makers in the state. On December 10, 1998, members of the SPI Steering Committee made a presentation to top leadership of the state government including the Chief Minister, the State Secretary and the State Financial Officer. This was followed up with a second briefing to the state cabinet and key heads of departments in January 1999.

In April 1999, during a two-day "visioning session," SPI Steering Committee Member Dr Leong Yueh Kwong and other SPI/SERI staff made effective presentations to the assembled state cabinet members on the urgency of mapping out a sustainable development strategy for the state of Penang. This was the first systematic exposure to issues of sustainable development for many of the policy makers, and it generated lively discussion and acknowledgement of the urgency of these matters.

A very tangible result of these dialogues with the government leadership is the incorporation of sustainable development, as the overarching framework, into the Second Penang Strategic Plan. Ecological Balance, Economic Competitiveness, Cultural Vibrancy and Caring and Sharing (derived from the Social Justice roundtable) are among its five main points—the last being Good Governance which includes the element of popular participation. Roundtables were held to solicit views and suggestions for the strategies to promote Ecological Balance, Economic Competitiveness, Cultural Vibrancy and the findings of the Social Justice roundtable were incorporated into the drafting of the Caring and Sharing chapter of the plan.

An additional participatory mechanism has been incorporated into the state government machinery in the form of the Penang Local Government Consultative Forum (PLGCF), which seeks to engender exchange between civil society, the private sector and the local authorities. SERI has been appointed the secretariat of the PLGCF based on its successful facilitation of public participation in the SPI.<sup>10</sup>

The Penang state government has also committed itself to form a State Council for Sustainable Development and to create a Center for Sustainable Development. The results of SPI would provide valuable inputs into the Council and the Center. A quality of life index was formulated and documented for Penang for the first time in 2001 and a number of

the SPI indicators have been included in the index. A roundtable was also held to gather feedback on the indicators to be included. The Penang Quality of Life Report, which will be published every two years can be regarded as the sequel to the Penang People's Report.

As mentioned earlier, another very significant impact of SPI is that it sparked the creation of a number of new networks. Growing out of SPI, these groups have now formed their own identities and undertaken their own activities.

### **SILA**

The disabled persons community was well represented at most of the roundtables. It was among the first clusters to emerge, specifically to campaign for disabled access to public facilities. This coalition of pre-existing groups and disabled individuals adopted the acronym *SILA* (Sustainable Independent Living & Access) and took on as its first task the improvement of disabled access to public areas such as the Penang Botanic Gardens, KOMTAR (which houses most of the government departments and is also a major shopping center) and the vicinity of the St. Nicholas Home for the Blind.

Among *SILA*'s early successes was the MPPP's decision to retrofit the drain covers at the Botanical Gardens to facilitate wheelchair access within the grounds, and a commitment from the president of the MPPP for improved disabled access to priority public areas within the city.

*SILA* and *SERI* were selected by UN-ESCAP to conduct a Training Workshop to Promote Non-Handicapping Environments in Malaysia. This was followed by workshops covering topics such as:

- Capacity building for people with disabilities
- Training for the blind
- Women with disabilities
- Training for physically disabled persons
- Disabled persons and the law
- Access surveys

*SILA* has initiated the process of greater communication and cooperation across disabilities and availed member organizations with more training opportunities. It continues to work in close collaboration with the MPPP to improve disabled access on the island.

### **STEP**

*STEP*, which was formed in response to the worsening traffic and transport situation in Penang, held its inaugural public meeting on August 23, 1998, on the theme *Sustainable Transport Options for Penang*. This has been followed by other activities of *STEP* such as:

- The Ideal Bus-stop Project in which a group of student volunteers from Australia worked with the Penang Heritage Trust and *STEP* to come up with a conceptual design for an ideal bus-stop for Penang;
- A Cycling Day held on 24 October, 1999, with about 100 cycling enthusiasts, which included hearing, speech and physically impaired individuals, taking part in the event. The event was held in conjunction with the launching of

the first bicycle path in Penang and was aimed at promoting cycling as an environment-friendly, socially equitable and affordable means of transport.

- The Pro-tem Chairman of STEP co-chairs the State Transport Management Committee.

### **Water Watch Penang**

Water Watch Penang is a voluntary citizens' organization set up to promote the awareness of water monitoring, conservation and protection of water resources, towards the ultimate goal of a water-saving society.

One of its first activities was a "River Walk" on 13 March, 1999, as part of an educational program to instill awareness and highlight the importance of water conservation. The event attracted about 20 participants, ranging in age from 3 to 60, who were taught to and performed basic water monitoring.

An "Adopt a River Campaign" was launched on 15 May, 1999, to encourage schools to adopt a river and monitor it. The campaign was aimed at educating the young to love and monitor the health of rivers. Thirty students from a secondary school adopted Sungei Air Terjun (Waterfall River), a tributary of Sungei Pinang (Penang River) as part of this project. They were briefed on the importance of water conservation and then taught the technique of testing water quality.

Water Watch Penang lays great stress on education and awareness-raising through the publication of press articles, pamphlets and books; the organizing of field trips, educational camps and seminars; and liaising with other societies dedicated to similar aims and objectives.

The experience of SPI has also been shared in a number of different forums, most significantly three of the four pilot cities in Malaysia which are undertaking the Local Agenda 21 program. SERI has formed a network with these cities to support each other in the implementation of Local Agenda 21 and in promoting public participation. The SPI/SERI team has been invited to numerous forums to share their experiences and methodology with similar interest groups.<sup>11</sup> These achievements have won SPI the honor of being selected as one of the Ambassador Projects for the Stockholm Partnership for Sustainable Cities, created in 2002 by the City of Stockholm to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm in 1972 and, of course, happily also in conjunction with the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

It has not been all bouquets and kudos, of course. Undeniably, SPI suffered limitations and failings, not least being the inability to sustain, over the long haul, the high level of enthusiasm and eagerness generated during the roundtables. While participants were willing, indeed often keen, to attend the roundtables, engage in the discussions, formulate visions and identify indicators, not many would commit themselves to long-term monitoring of the indicators. Many factors contributed to this and, here, it is worthwhile quoting quite fully the assessment of the project coordinator, in the following four sections:

### **Resonance**

SPI was designed to promote concepts like sustainable development planning and community indicators, concepts appealing to state policy makers<sup>12</sup>, international funders and professionals, but less resonant for other sectors. In spite of the attractive promotional materials, the slogan was perhaps too culturally alien to find its 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 U.S. 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... On the whole, participants tended to mistake sustainability, ecological sustainability and sustainable development to mean livability, 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.<sup>13</sup> While enthusiasm was usually high after the roundtables, some participants later cooled off because their 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 and multicultural context, SPI had difficulty getting equitable representation in one go. Due to the size of the roundtables and the fact that they were conducted in English, there was greater participation of English-speaking experts and activists, mainly from middle-class backgrounds, than from 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 round table, industry professionals and policy researchers and analysts predominated, and business leaders and petty traders were visibly underrepresented. Language

and cultural limitations were 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 organized, again due to the small size of the 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 these biases were caused by

- Orientation and cultural background of the project team itself
- The tendency to select representatives from organized groups, when many important low-income constituencies remained unorganized (for example, the tenants affected by the Repeal of Rent Control<sup>14</sup> were not sufficiently organized 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"<sup>15</sup>

"Although we tried to overcome the initial bias by organizing 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" (Khoo, 2001, p.22).

The key point here is that the SPI was the beginning of a process. Whilst the state began to make proclamations about adopting sustainable development as a framework to guide policy formulation, there remains a quantum leap that has to be taken before pronouncements become practice and before participation can be institutionalized as part of procedure. And, whilst elite acceptance of the premises of sustainability was more easily attainable, the permeation of such concepts and principles through the many layers of Penang society will invariably be a protracted process. All said and done, though, the SPI was a good start and gave Penang a head start on the journey to participatory democracy.

### 3. THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The process begun by SPI has been sustained, though not necessarily through continuation in its original form. SILA, STEP and WWP have developed into independent, self-sustaining entities with their own agenda and programs. In these cases SPI acted as a catalyst for community-based initiatives that answered to well-founded needs. The participatory process and the roundtable methodology developed and popularized through SPI have been used for various other programs, some of which are described below.

#### 3.1 The People-Friendly Penang Initiative

In a rather direct manner, SPI has continued in the form of a new initiative to make Penang a people-friendly city. Partly due to the recognition gained through the SPI, Penang was chosen as a "Lead City" by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in order to promote good governance

in the Southeast Asian Region. This initiative was intended to take state-society partnership to a higher level because the MPPP was involved as a full partner from the start. This project would not only share Penang's experience as an example of good governance through the SPI, but would also initiate a pilot project to make Penang a people-friendly city, which is barrier-free and accessible for children, disabled people and the elderly by practicing good governance principles.

Through consultation with the stakeholder groups—children, the disabled and elderly—demonstration projects would be implemented to showcase how physical environments could be made barrier-free and accessible to the three groups concerned. The contribution of the MPPP, in cash and kind, to this effort would demonstrate its readiness to engage with the people. It would also demonstrate that popular participation had become accepted as a facet of governance in Penang. The rest of the funding came from The Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI) of UNDP.

Beginning in February 2000, after the launch of the People-Friendly Penang Initiative (PFP), workshops and consultations were organized with the target groups, local communities, representatives from citizens organizations, relevant government agencies, industry and businesses as well as individuals with long standing involvement in the issues concerned. Roundtables on good governance for each of the target groups were organized. The roundtables were aimed at deciding on a demonstration project to make Penang people-friendly for the respective target groups.

#### The Roundtables

A total of 118 participants attended the first roundtable, which focused on Promoting Good Governance. The participants comprised heads of departments of the Penang Island and Seberang Perai Municipal Councils, local government councilors and civil society representatives. NGOs, businesses and private citizens were also invited to participate in the roundtable. These included organizations of women's groups, disabled people, child welfare groups and businesses such as the various ethnic chambers of commerce. An expert on urban governance, Dr Clarence Shubert, delivered the keynote address and also talked on the "Elements of a People Friendly City." The participants were then divided into groups for a participatory session on burning issues of good governance in Penang. Discussions centered on the nine core characteristics of good governance. A similar exercise to gather ideas for action on how to make Penang people-friendly was conducted in the afternoon. Significantly, it was at this roundtable that the state cabinet member (known as State Executive Councilor) for local government announced the establishment of the Penang Local Government Consultative Forum, with the expressed purpose of promoting discussion and exchange between civil society and the municipalities in order to seek more effective solutions to urban management issues.

The roundtable for disabled persons was held next, with a total of 33 participants attending. The participants consisted of representatives of member organizations of SILA, various



departments of the MPPP; the management of the KOMTAR<sup>16</sup>, the public building that is to be the demonstration site; and the Social Welfare Department. The President of the MPPP was also present at the roundtable. The representatives from the different disability groups presented their proposals for improved access in KOMTAR and its surroundings to the MPPP. These included the need for clear signage at bus stations, service counters and directions around KOMTAR; ramps and railings in appropriate places; safe road crossings from the KOMTAR building to the adjoining bus station and disabled-friendly counter services.

The roundtable on Making Penang a Friendly City for Senior Citizens brought together 54 participants representing different senior citizens groups, private sector, local authorities, NGOs and interested individuals. The roundtable started off with a brief introduction of its objectives, followed by a discussion on the key issues. The participants were divided into groups, and active discussions were held on how to turn the identified issues into action plans. The different groups presented their proposals in the afternoon. There was consensus that a one-stop community center should be set up to service senior citizens, particularly those from the lower income group. As a result of this workshop, a core group of senior citizens was formed to look, in greater depth, into the implementing of the demonstration project.

The children's roundtable was easily the most vibrant and innovative, with 88 children and youths and 43 adults involved. The children and youths were from primary and secondary schools, orphanages and youth groups. The program for the roundtable was divided into two sessions: a session for the children to brainstorm for ideas on a suitable demonstration project and another for the adults. Through a process of mind mapping, the children came up with five proposals: a youth center, a library, a sports complex, improvements to the physical environment of the schools and improvements to the Penang Youth Park. Ms. Saira Shameen of UNDP, Kuala Lumpur, based on her experience in making cities children-friendly, gave the adults who accompanied the children a separate briefing. They were also shown a video of UN-ESCAP's "Pilot project in Beijing for the Promotion of Non-handicapping Environments." A number of the adults were so impressed by the ideas and presentations of the children that they volunteered to form the core group to see to implementing the children's demonstration project.

As a separate component of the PFP, a regional workshop on participatory urban governance was also held in September 2001, bringing together more than 40 participants from South and Southeast Asia as well as UNDP, CityNet, International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), Local Government Training and Research Institute in Asia and Pacific (LOGOTRI) and number of other institutions to exchange experiences and strategies for promoting more participative forms of urban governance. This workshop also benefited from the support of the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS).

### Results and Evaluation

From the start, the PFP ran into bureaucratic red tape. The

central government agency charged with vetting external aid programs did not approve the application from MPPP to be involved in the project because "proper procedures had not been followed." In addition the mayor who had originally signed the memorandum of understanding to undertake the project was no longer in office. Fortunately, though, he had actually taken up a higher office as the State Executive Councilor for Local Government and could still exert his influence to keep the project going. However, much momentum was lost in trying to disentangle this bureaucratic mire. Although the new mayor pledged to continue supporting the project, the sense of ownership by MPPP had been lost. Much depended then on the commitment of the individual officers concerned with specific aspects of the project.

The disabled group got off to a very good start immediately and has been able to maintain a steady pace of progress because of the commitment of SILA and the leadership of the Director of the Buildings Department of MPPP who, having attended a sensitization course, was very sympathetic to the needs of the disabled. The management corporation of KOMTAR has constructed ramps and railings at various crucial locations in the building. Disabled parking lots and signs have been provided and toilets have also been renovated for disabled access. The MPPP has provided safe pedestrian crossings along two major roads in the vicinity of KOMTAR. It has also provided disabled-friendly facilities along Gurney Drive, a popular promenade. A technical training workshop for the promotion of non-handicapping environments was jointly organized by MPPP and SERI to help the participants understand the need to design for the disabled and elderly persons. The training tools included disability simulation exercises and access surveys to sensitize the participants to the difficulties faced by people with different disabilities. The participants were mainly from MPPP, consisting of planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, surveyors, building inspectors, legal advisers, technical and administrative personnel. Other participants were from the hotel sector, organizations of and for disabled persons, building managers, academics and the hospital. MPPP has also started strict enforcement of the Uniform Building By-Laws, which make it mandatory for new buildings to include disabled access in their design. SERI has published a guidebook for people with disabilities, which provides a directory of services available in the state. Although frustrations still abound and facilities are still limited, the progress made has been encouraging and disability issues gained greater recognition in Penang.

Immediately after the roundtable, the core group for the senior citizens began meeting fortnightly to plan the establishment of the Senior Citizens' Helpline, which was aimed at assisting senior citizens from the lower income group who do not have anyone to care for them in an emergency by providing:

- Referral for health, emergency and community services
- Transport for emergency and health needs
- Home visits and home care

The major obstacle faced was obtaining a premise to house the Helpline office as the MPPP was not able to provide any suitable building for the purpose. The committee finally decided to rent a room from the Senior Citizens Association, although the clubhouse is located in an affluent area. The building, however, belongs to MPPP and the council chipped in with renovation costs, albeit after much lobbying.

The Helpline began operation about nine months after the roundtable, amidst much enthusiasm as measured by press coverage and the members of the public who volunteered to help run the service. Training sessions were conducted for the volunteers and a part-time coordinator employed. To supplement the services of the Helpline, public talks on health issues related to aging were held and proved to be very popular. After the initial period, though, it was obvious that the Helpline was not going to become a hotline. Calls were infrequent—to put it mildly. During its review, about a year after the launching of the Helpline, the core group decided that in view of its limited resources the activities of the Helpline should be refocused. It will now concentrate on providing health checks and health talks for older persons at various low-cost housing schemes. The program will be conducted in collaboration with the Penang State Health Department.

The earnestness and zeal demonstrated by the children and youths at their roundtable compelled the core group to work hard at realizing at least some of their aspirations. In contrast to the roundtable, though, this was the core group that found it most difficult to get things going. One proposal after another had to be abandoned due to the inability or unwillingness of municipal officers to think outside the box or deviate from their “tried and tested” but often unimaginative way of doing things. Fortunately the coordinator of the roundtable had launched a program, *Anak-anak Kota* (Children of the Inner City), “to empower young people to explore their cultural and historical identities and understand how their identities are rooted in a living and changing heritage” (AAK project proposal, 2001). The core group decided that they would adopt *Anak-anak Kota* (AAK) as its demonstration project and provide it with financial and other forms of support.

More than 200 children, aged 10–16, from diverse communities and schools within the inner city of George Town took part each time the program was conducted, the program being in its second year of implementation. The children participated in action projects in the arts, led by professionals in the fields of creative writing, restoration, puppetry, storytelling, dance and music, video documentation, photography, painting, etc. The program seeks to “specifically promote the empowerment of young people by employing an experiential approach” and “create a synergy among educators, artists and heritage conservation experts in order to bring heritage awareness to children in the community and incorporate heritage education into existing school curricula or extra curricular activities specifically in the areas of history, geography, art and language” (AAK project proposal, 2001).

AAK held its first showcase at the end of 2001 and all who attended were suitably impressed by the high quality

and creativity of the dances, skits, shadow play and exhibition—especially since most of these children had no previous training in such creative arts. The 2002 exhibition has been taken on a road show around the schools in Penang. The national heritage board was so impressed that it has sought to replicate the program in Malaysia’s other heritage city, Malacca. This program also reflects the tri-partite partnership, with the State Government—through the Penang Educational Consultative Council—and the private sector providing financial support, the Penang Heritage Trust rendering time and expertise, and the many artists giving much time and energy “to help children understand who they are and their role in the development of culture and heritage” (AAK project proposal, 2001).

With the exception of the disabled group, MPPP’s contribution to the PFP has fallen far short of its original commitment. Once again, the vibrant civil society of Penang came to the rescue and the projects are still alive, if not all thriving. Nonetheless, it is obvious that there is now a greater consciousness of disability and elderly issues among policy makers and the public at large. Recommendations of PFP roundtables have also been incorporated as strategies and action plans of the Second Penang Strategic Development Plan.

### 3.2 Penang Local Government Consultative Forum

The Penang Local Government Consultative Forum was set up in recognition of the potential benefits of community feedback and participation in urban governance. Its terms of reference were to:

- Develop a framework of good governance for the local authorities in Penang;
- Identify, deliberate on and prioritize issues related to local government which require attention;
- Provide expert input which can form the basis for policy formulation on local government;
- Recommend actions, programs and projects that can be undertaken by the local authorities to resolve problems associated with urban management and governance; and
- Be the focal point of community-based action for dealing with issues confronting particular localities.

Members of the Forum were drawn from representatives of relevant non-governmental organizations and professional bodies as well as prominent residents of Penang with experience and expertise in local government and related issues. Participation in the Forum is on a voluntary, non-remunerative basis. SERI was appointed as the secretariat of the Forum on account of it having successfully played the role of a bridge between civil society and the government in previous programs, especially the SPI.

The establishment of the Forum was very well received by the citizenry, judging from the full attendance and active participation by civil society representatives at the first Forum meeting. Roundtable discussions were held to identify the most pressing issues of urban governance and based on the priorities established, five working groups were formed, in the areas of governance, awareness and public education,

housing, environment and urban services. The brief for each of the working groups was to develop an action plan for dealing with the most urgent concerns in their respective areas. SERI was commissioned by the State Local Government Committee to undertake a "Citizens' Survey on Local Government" as part of the consultative and participatory process. The survey was conducted to determine what the Penang populace perceives as the most critical service issues that need to be addressed by the local authorities. A mass questionnaire campaign was conducted in four languages and in total 6,000 residents of Penang were interviewed and their responses analyzed. The findings of the survey also served as input for the working groups in drafting their action plans.

After a series of brainstorming meetings, the working groups presented their proposals and recommendations to the Forum. Unfortunately, the chairman and local authority representatives were not very receptive to the ideas and suggestions, often perceiving them as criticisms and thus taking on a rather defensive stance. Where the ideas were acceptable, the response was "we will look into it." Understandably, many members were disappointed with such responses and regarded them as being against the spirit in which the Forum was established. Undeniably, the more vocal members of the Forum were often critical. However, they also repeatedly stressed their willingness to assist in all programs that were to be implemented. The Forum sessions became increasingly confrontational as the members pressed for progress reports on, and responses to, their proposals. Under pressure, the local authorities produced their reports for presentation to the Forum. It seemed to have come a little too late, though, as attendance by members of civil society at this meeting was exceptionally low. The Forum appeared to have reached an impasse, either it had to reinvent itself, die a slow death or be dissolved.

To the credit of all, the parties involved have decided to change the modus operandi of the Forum and give it another try. Key members of the working groups met and decided to focus their efforts on a common and cross-cutting issue, that of urban blight in the inner city of George Town. A presentation was made at the first Forum meeting for 2002 and the proposal made that each of the working groups will collaborate directly with the parallel standing committee in the MPPP to deal with the relevant aspects related to the issue of urban blight. This was a particularly congenial meeting and the Chairman of the Forum as well as the municipal representatives were very receptive to the idea of collaboration. A pilot area for carrying out the "urban blight project" was agreed upon.

The underlying problem that ailed the Forum was that the municipalities lacked both the understanding of and capacity for citizen participation. As Plummer aptly puts it, it is "essential that municipalities develop a more informed understanding of the objectives of participation, the potential of community participation...and what makes participation more sustainable" (Plummer, 2000, p.25). She also pointed out that the introduction of participatory processes would require time and capacity building. This could not be truer. After two

years of trial and error, some sort of equilibrium seems to have been established and the dialogue between the municipalities and civil society has become more open and constructive. Hopefully, given more time for the building of relationships and understanding between the parties involved, the kinks will be worked out and a more consultative forum fashioned.

### **3.3 The Second Penang Strategic Development Plan**

The Second Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDP2), 2001-2010, was formulated with the aim of taking the development of Penang to a higher plane by combining the quantitative economic gains of the past decade with the qualitative attributes of growth that include human, social, environmental, institutional and cultural progress. According to the plan, Penang would strive to strike a balance between economic prosperity, sustainable development and the promotion of a just and equitable society through the realization of its five thrusts: economic competitiveness, ecological balance, caring and sharing, cultural vibrancy and good governance.

The vision of the PSDP2 is enunciated as below:

"Penang strives to achieve a fully-developed state by the year 2010, with a competitive economy, a high quality of life and environment, a vibrant culture and a united, harmonious and caring society, based upon the principles of sustainability, social justice and good governance." (PSDP2, 2001, p.1-2)

As mentioned earlier, many of the ideas generated through the SPI and the PFP have been incorporated into the PSDP2 to make of it a blueprint for more holistic development. Roundtables were also held to solicit ideas and suggestions for formulating the strategies and action plans. Significantly, the thrusts of the PSDP2 have been adopted from the SPI. The obvious link was, of course, that SERI was charged with the responsibility of formulating the PSDP2 and was thus able to include many of these elements in the plan.

Although formulating the plan and getting it accepted by the State Government was by no means an easy task, successful implementation of the plan would probably be many times more arduous. The next step is to ensure that both government functionaries and Penang society take ownership of the plan and work together to make it a living document that actually guides policy and practice. As expressed in the plan itself, "The successful implementation of the PSDP2 is dependent on effective partnership between the State Government and the people of Penang. This partnership has been nurtured through the consultative approach in the drafting of the plan and is consistent with the principle of empowerment as enshrined in the Vision. The focus on both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of growth will promote more sustainable development, equitable distribution of public goods, a more vibrant civil society and better governance" (PSDP2, 2001, p.1-13). As one government officer remarked at a briefing session for the plan, "If we can achieve all these we would really be a developed state." Hence, it is well worth the effort.

### **3.4 The Strategic Plan and Pre-Budget Dialogues of the Seberang Perai Municipal Council (MPSP)**

The Seberang Perai Municipal Council (MPSP) can be considered one of the most progressive municipalities in the country, with a forward-looking mayor who is the president of the Malaysian Association of Local Authorities. In line with the formulation of the PSDP2, MPSP drafted its own strategic plan, with the emphasis on community engagement. The consultants commissioned to formulate the plan were required to adopt a participative approach in seeking input for the plan. Focus group discussions were held with representative groups both from within the municipality and from the community. From within the municipality, brainstorming sessions were held with all levels of staff, from top management to the manual workers to obtain feedback on issues like internal management of the municipality, staff development programs, financial strength, human resource management, leadership, support from stakeholders, efficiency of service delivery, transparency, etc. A questionnaire survey was also conducted to seek recommendations for the strategic plan.

In order to seek community input, a brainstorming workshop was held. A total of 52 NGOs attended the workshop and presented their candid views on the level of service delivery in their respective areas. An interesting finding from the questionnaire administered at this workshop was that 50 percent of the respondents saw themselves as clients of MPSP and 41.3 percent perceived themselves as “stakeholders” of MPSP (MPSP, 2002, p.43). Hence, the foundations for partnership between MPSP and the community can be considered to have been laid, but a full half of the residents have still to be won over. The participants at the workshop were also asked to rate MPSP on 29 performance indicators. The satisfaction levels ranged from 14 percent to 78 percent depending on the type of services (MPSP, 2002, p.47). Such feedback was used to formulate the strategies for service improvement within MPSP.

In keeping with the principle of community engagement, MPSP initiated pre-budget dialogues in 2001 to obtain feedback from the community on budget allocations. All the village development committees, residents’ associations, neighborhood watch committees, mosque committees and NGOs in the Seberang Perai area—totaling about 800 in all—were invited to send in their respective memorandums and attend the pre-budget hearing to put forward their views. Sixty-two organizations attended the pre-budget dialogue in 2001 and 74 attended the dialogue in 2002. The increase in number is considered by the council as a reflection of greater awareness by the community and its recognition that the dialogue is a useful means of communication. A total of 190 memorandums were received in 2002.

According to the mayor of MPSP<sup>17</sup> the dialogues alerted the council to the priority areas of service delivery that required attention. Although the budget allocations for the different types of services were not substantially changed as a result of the dialogues, the localities where the spending was allocated were fine-tuned based on the feedback from the community. For instance, the proportion of the budget

allocated for drainage and flood mitigation remained about the same but on account of the feedback from community representatives, the municipality became better attuned to which localities faced more severe problems of drainage and floods and these localities were therefore accorded priority in budget allocation. The mayor was of the opinion that these dialogues have been very useful in building better relations between the municipality and the community. Having had this experience in seeking citizen participation in both the formulation of the strategic plan and the pre-budget dialogue, the MPSP is quite confident that it can successfully carry out the LA21 program.

### **3.5 Collaboration between SERI and MPPP**

Relationship building and a conjuncture of interests have laid the foundation for greater collaboration between SERI and MPPP to engage in participatory activities at the community level. Through this partnership, SERI has successfully obtained funding from the UNDP to conduct a project on Public Private Partnership in Community Waste Recycling. The purpose of this project is to develop workable processes and strategies to better manage waste and promote recycling practices in a way that can benefit the urban poor. Three target groups, each representing a segment of the urban poor, will be the key champions of the project. The project has identified the Coordinating Committee of the North East District Neighborhood Association to represent civil society since it has a proven track record in running recycling activities and has the capability of generating grassroots support and cooperation. A recycling agent with many years of involvement in the business will represent the private sector partners, together with other recycling agents and manufacturers. The MPPP in turn, would provide the infrastructure and other basic supports. The project hopes to upgrade hygienic conditions and improve the practice of waste disposal by inculcating recycling practices as a way of life and, at the same time, to train suitable personnel from the participating communities as catalysts for future recycling programs.

MPPP is highly interested in this project as it coincides with a major campaign by the Ministry of Local Government to promote recycling and all local authorities are expected to develop programs to boost the campaign. SERI has consciously designed the project such that it will be conducted at the community level to overcome its previous limitation of having engaged mostly with the English language-educated middle class. The project has yet to commence and will be a test case of whether the participatory process can be successfully extended to grassroots communities.

### **4. New Trails, Crossroads and Dead Ends**

The discussion in the previous section focused primarily on participative initiatives in which SERI has been involved purely because the author is more familiar with these processes and by no means implies that other initiatives are non-existent or less effective. Indeed, organizations like the Penang Heritage Trust and the Consumers Association of

Penang have long advocated and engaged in the participative process, and the new but prominent organization, Save Our Selves (SOS),<sup>18</sup> has championed an even more direct and inclusive form of engagement. There have been successes and failures, with battles big and small along the way. This is a good opportunity to take stock of what has been done, how it has been done, and how it can be done better.

The good news first. The consistent participation of so many members of the Penang citizenry in all these initiatives indicates their concern over significant issues currently affecting the state. They appreciate the opportunities to meet with like-minded people in a supportive environment to network and to exchange experiences, and to voice their concerns, in particular to state authorities and agencies. While they had previously tended to work as separate entities, there are now more opportunities and channels to join forces and act more effectively on a common platform. The lacuna is participation by grassroots and marginalized communities, and more effective ways have to be found to include them.

SERI has been able to play a fairly effective role as the “honest broker” between civil society and the government—to the extent that it has developed a rather ambivalent image. Some see it as a “government set-up” since it is incorporated as a “think tank” for the state government. Others have perceived it as an NGO due to its strong links with these groups. A particularly innovative misnomer that has been used to describe SERI is that it is a “government NGO”—but the label is telling. SERI has had to tread a thin line between “encouraging popular voice and maintaining government responsiveness” (Khuo, 2001, p.54)<sup>19</sup>.

Penang has always been a very open society, where the free flow of ideas from the outside is not alien. Its people are often among the first to latch on to new influences, and not necessarily uncritically. Hence the global proliferation of concepts like good governance, citizen participation and sustainable development has not left Penang untouched. Due credit must be given to members of the top leadership of the Penang state government for their receptiveness to SPI and subsequent participatory processes. It has been very encouraging and demonstrates the potential for greater synergy between government and civil society. However, this acceptance of participatory democracy has yet to permeate the many layers of the bureaucracy, and actual practice of it even less evident. The situation is succinctly described by Warburton: “(t)he rhetoric of community participation has been rehearsed many times, but it remains the exception rather than the norm on the ground” (Warburton, 1998, p. 5). Often, the state is more than happy to allow “some form of donor-funded pilots of participatory approaches but...falters at the suggestion of radical change to the status quo” (Plummer, 2000, p. 11).

This inability to make a paradigm shift to participative governance has to do with the lack of visionary individuals, creative organizations or a political culture of sharing a clarity of purpose (Landry, 2000, p. 3) within the governing structure. There is definitely a richer repository of these qualities in the civil society than in the public sector of Penang. The government machinery of Penang certainly still suffers from

the many ills that typically plague the conventional political structure and bureaucracy as enunciated by Landry, such as:

- Power concentration and lack of political will
- Accountability seen as liability
- Bureaucratic proceduralism
- Reactive not proactive
- Short-termism and the need for glamour
- Power and patronage
- Inadequate training
- Lack of integration
- Cooperation in word not in deed (Landry, 2000, pp. 45-49)

However, while pointing out these deficiencies, the intention is to seek redress rather than to apportion blame. Among the steps that need to be taken are:

- Developing staff capacity for participatory processes;
  - Establishing effective municipal structures for participatory service delivery;
  - Reforming systems and procedures to incorporate participation; and
  - Fomenting attitudinal change to ensure the practice of participatory democracy. (Plummer, 2000, p.132)
- These measures have been included in the strategies for promoting good governance in the PSDP2. Once again the test will be in the implementation.

As pointed out repeatedly, grassroots communities are a missing link in the participatory process. One of the problems is that the milieu and medium in which the consultation are conducted are unfamiliar, if not intimidating, for these communities. But the bigger problem is that the public sector still tends to adopt a discriminatory attitude towards the poorer communities. A good case in point is the experience of SOS. While the government tends to be more benign when faced with opposition from the elite communities, the reaction to dissent from the poorer communities is not as magnanimous. The SOS leader has been arrested numerous times for campaigning on an issue that the government itself admits is a legitimate concern, and his tactics were not always confrontational either. In contrast, on the same issue of repeal of the Rent Control Act, the Chief Minister met repeatedly with the landowners to try to seek a solution but did not hold similar meetings with the tenants facing evictions—despite many appeals from them.

In sum, the track record of the public sector of Penang with regards to citizen participation is a checkered one. Some encouraging progress has been made but there does not seem to be consistency in practice. Community based organizations, however, have been steadfast and it is their commitment that has contributed most towards enabling Penang to blaze some new trails, navigate the crossroads and, thankfully, avoid any dead ends thus far.

Is it going to be more of the same in the years ahead? One would hope not but the answer is probably yes. Citizen participation cannot be nurtured overnight and the road to participatory democracy has to be paved one block at a time. To borrow liberally from Robert Frost, Penang is still very

much in the woods when it comes to practicing, not to mention institutionalizing, citizen participation. But promises have been made and many more miles have to be traveled before we can sleep. However, signs are that enough of the citizens and public officials are prepared to take the road less traveled by and they will, hopefully, make a difference.<sup>20</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Appendix 1 for a fuller representation of Plummer's typology.
2. See Appendix 2 for a list of the councils.
3. Khoo Salma Nasution was the coordinator of the SPI.
4. These two emergent groups will be discussed in fuller detail later in the paper.
5. SMART indicators are characterized by being Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely
6. During the Cultural Vibrancy roundtable.
7. PACE is the acronym for Penang Association for Continuing Education. Aimed at enhancing the intellectual environment in the state, this association organizes public talks on a variety of topics of general interests.
8. BOLD is the acronym for Bureau on Learning Difficulties which has the objective of raising awareness on the "invisible" disabilities like dyslexia and attention deficit disorder.
9. MPPP is the acronym for Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (Penang Island Municipal Council), the Seberang Perai Municipal Council has jurisdiction over the portion of the state that is situated on the mainland of Peninsular Malaysia. See Appendix 3 for map of Penang.
10. The PLGCF will be discussed in greater detail in the section 3.2 of this paper.
11. See Appendix 4 for a list of the forums at which the SPI experience has been shared.
12. It is necessary to point out that even for the majority of the policy makers, understanding regarding the concepts of sustainability is at best rudimentary. The greater challenge of translating the sustainable development concept into development policies, plans and programs has yet to be tackled in a concerted manner.
13. It might be added that SPI could not avoid a common pitfall of externally funded pilot projects, which is that it could not be sustained fully after the funding period ended. Fortunately SERI, having initiated the process, felt compelled to continue it, albeit in various other forms and under various other auspices. Many other parties have contributed their part to supporting this endeavor and these new initiatives are discussed in section 3.
14. About 12,000 units of shop houses in the inner city of George Town had been placed under rent control due to the housing crisis immediately after World War II, in effect offering a large stock of cheap housing for the residents. The Repeal of the Rent Control Act in 2000 caused significant rent hikes, evictions and tremendous dislocation for the residents. The inner city itself has suffered a hollowing out as a result.
15. Khoo categorized the society of Penang into the urban elite, the poor communities, the rural communities and the corporate industrial community to underline the different orientations and interests that each of these groups represented. This broad categorization, however, does not reflect the multiple identities and overlapping alignments that different communities often exhibit.
16. KOMTAR is the acronym for Kompleks Tunku Abdul Rahman, a 65-story block that houses practically all the state government departments and the Penang Island Municipal Council besides being a major shopping center.
17. In an interview conducted on 2 August 2002.
18. Save Our Selves (SOS) is a coalition of local groups formed with the objective of mobilizing the lower-income groups that were adversely affected by the Repeal of the Rent Control Act. The organizer of SOS also formed a group called Malaysian Local Democracy Initiative (MALODI) that champions community consultation and participa-

tion as well as the re-introduction of local council elections.

19. Khoo identified this dilemma in the implementation of SPI but it is equally applicable to the functioning of SERI.
20. Robert Frost is by no means my favorite poet but his poems, *The Road Not Taken* and *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening* lend a very fitting metaphor to this paper. See Appendix 5 for full versions of the poems.

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#### APPENDIX 1: (Please see p 42)

#### APPENDIX 2: List of Consultative Councils of the Penang State Government

##### Economic

- Penang Economic Council
- Penang Human Resources Development Council
- Penang Industrial Council
- Penang Trade Council
- Penang Consumer Affairs Council
- Penang K-ICT Council
- Penang Tourism Council
- Entrepreneurship Development Council
- Penang Construction Consultative Council

##### Social

- Penang Cultural Council
- Penang Sports Council
- Penang Youth Council
- Penang Welfare Council
- Penang Educational Consultative Council

##### Environment and Others

- Penang Environmental Council
- Penang Local Government Consultative Forum

**APPENDIX 1: Forms of Participation in the Delivery of Urban Services and Infrastructure**

Form	Characteristics	Objectives
<b>Manipulation</b>	<p><b>The participation of the community is included for exploitative reasons.</b></p> <p>Communities are included in the service delivery process without positive intention or meaningful end.</p> <p>There is no participatory decision-making.</p> <p>Initiatives manipulate communities to obtain agreement to interventions or human and financial resources.</p>	<p>free labor</p> <p>cost recovery</p> <p>meeting donor conditionality</p> <p>political gain</p>
<b>Information participation</b>	<p><b>Many projects masquerade as being participatory but municipalities only impart or communities provide information.</b></p> <p>Communities are given information about municipal intentions. This information is controlled by the governing body and decision-making is unlikely to be open to change. The process is not transparent, and the municipality is not accountable.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>Communities share information with the municipality. There is no control over the way information is used and there is no feedback process.</p>	<p>services in place and in use</p> <p>minimizing community resistance to proposed interventions (e.g. communities surrendering land to widen roads)</p> <p>cost recovery</p>
<b>Consultation participation</b>	<p><b>Form of participatory service delivery found in municipalities with positive intentions towards participation, some limited capacity building, but little institutionalization of processes.</b></p> <p>Forums are established through which communities can communicate their views on intended proposals.</p> <p>Information and decision-making controlled by government but may be adapted to suit local requirements.</p> <p>Group formation promoted.</p> <p>Greater accountability.</p>	<p>services in place and in use</p> <p>minimizing community resistance to proposed interventions</p> <p>ownership</p> <p>sustainability</p> <p>efficiency</p> <p>target vulnerable groups</p> <p>cost sharing</p> <p>possible objective is the empowerment of the community</p>
<b>Co-operation participation</b>	<p><b>Stronger form of community decision-making normally promoted by municipalities after some capacity building or policy change (or may be facilitated by NGOs).</b></p> <p>The municipality and the community cooperate in an alliance towards improved and demand-responsive service delivery.</p> <p>Communities are included in the process from an early stage.</p> <p>Generally more cognizant of the needs of women and other vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>community capacity building</p> <p>ownership</p> <p>sustainability</p> <p>efficiency</p> <p>target vulnerable groups</p> <p>cost sharing</p> <p>possible objective is the empowerment of the community</p>
<b>Mobilization participation</b>	<p><b>Communities are in control of decision making processes and municipalities enter into initiatives as required by the community.</b></p>	<p>community empowerment</p>

**APPENDIX 3: List of Forums at which the SPI Experience has been Shared**

- Symposium on the Changing Environment: A Multi-Faceted Approach Towards Sustainable Development (9 December 1997, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang)
- Asia Pacific Cities Forum, Second Regional Interchange (19-27 March 1998, Cebu City, Philippines)
- International Conference on Civic Education and Processes for Civil Society (10-12 August, 1998, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- Women in Penang: Towards Gender-Sensitive Governance (25-26 September 1998, Penang)

- Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum: Asia Pacific Insight Visit (19-23 October 1998, Manila, Philippines)
- A Voice for All: Engaging Canadians for Change (27-28 October 1998, Quebec, Canada)
- 2nd Yokohama Design Conference: Vitalization of Cities Towards Creation of Attractive Urban Spaces (20-23 November 1998, Yokohama, Japan)
- Mayors' Asia Pacific Environmental Summit (31 January - 3 February, 1999, Honolulu)
- Humaniora/Badan Warisan Sumatra seminar on Medan Bagus (27 February, 1999, Medan, Indonesia)

- Mobilizing State-Society Partnerships for Effective Governance: Lessons from six ASEAN Pilot Projects (22 May, 1999, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- Asia Mayors' Forum (28-30 June 1999, Colombo, Sri Lanka)
- Regional Consultation on Good Urban Governance (9-11 August, 1999, Penang, Malaysia)
- National Roundtable Discussion on Emerging Issues on Sustainable Development: Challenges for Malaysia in the First Decade of the New Millennium (24-25 January 2000, Selangor, Malaysia)
- Regional Conference on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (2-4 May 2000, Kuching, Malaysia)
- INTAN/JICA/WHO course on The Promotion of a Healthy Environment in Urban Areas (8 July 2000, Penang, Malaysia)
- Kerian Local Agenda 21 Workshop (15 September 2000, Kerian, Perak, Malaysia)
- Miri Local Agenda 21 Action Planning Workshop (7 December 2000, Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia)
- International Workshop on "Voice and Choices at a Macro Level: Participation in Country Owned Poverty Reduction Strategies" (3-5 April, 2001, World Bank, Washington D.C.)
- Workshop on Policy Making for Policy Makers (29-30 April 2002, Penang)
- Stockholm Partnership for Sustainable Cities Thematic Dialogues (4-7 June 2002, Stockholm)
- Conference on Service Excellence for Government (26-27 June, 2002, Singapore)

**APPENDIX 4***THE ROAD NOT TAKEN*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
 And sorry I could not travel both,  
 And be one traveler, long I stood  
 And looked down as far as I could,  
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
 Then took the other, as just as fair,  
 And having perhaps the better claim,  
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
 Though as for that the passing there  
 Had worn them really about the same,  
 And both that morning equally lay,  
 In leaves no step trodden black.  
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.  
 I shall be telling this with a sigh  
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-  
 I took the one less traveled by,  
 And that has made all the difference.

*STOPPING BY THE WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING*

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
 His house is in the village though;  
 He will not see me stopping here  
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
 To stop without a farmhouse near  
 Between the woods and frozen lake  
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
 To ask if there is some mistake  
 The only other sound's the sweep  
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
 But I have promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

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