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COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATION AND SUSTAINABLE LOCAL GOVERNANCE: ASSESSING IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY & PERFORMANCE

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This study examines the organisational structures of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) and Penang Island City Council (MBPP) and their implications for sustainable and accountable local governance in Malaysia. The findings show that both councils have introduced innovative initiatives, including DBKL's AI-powered smart city implementation and MBPP's vertical planting programme, but continue to face challenges related to coordination, data, resources, and maintenance. DBKL primarily emphasises urban growth and efficiency, while MBPP focuses more on community equity and environmental sustainability. The study highlights the important role of councillors in translating policies and development plans into accountable actions and recommends stronger policy research, financial support, and community engagement to improve local governance and advance Sustainable Development Goal 11.

Introduction

Local governance is important for national development, particularly in managing rapid urbanisation. In Malaysia, effective local governance depends on two key principles: sustainability and accountability. Sustainability focuses on managing social, economic, and environmental resources for future generations, while accountability ensures that local leaders are transparent, responsive, and responsible in managing public resources. This study compares Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) and Penang Island City Council (MBPP) by examining initiatives such as DBKL's "K2K *Kita untuk Kita*" programme and MBPP's Batu Ferringhi Market redevelopment, considering how these structures influence the implementation of SDG 11. Despite their achievements, both authorities face challenges related to data, coordination, and limited resources. The study highlights the importance of effective councillor structures in connecting urban planning with community needs and promoting sustainable, transparent, and accountable local governance.



Figure 1: DBKL initiatives (AI-Powered Smart City, Urban Neighbourhood Farming & K2K

Discussion

DBKL uses AI-powered smart city implementation and real-time data to improve urban management. The system helps predict traffic congestion and flash floods, allowing the council to respond quickly, manage resources efficiently, and improve service delivery. This initiative supports sustainable and data-driven urban governance. DBKL also supports Urban Neighbourhood Farming by providing suitable land for community gardens. The initiative promotes environmental sustainability while helping low-income residents reduce food costs and generate additional income by selling produce. At the same time, the K2K programme empowers public housing residents to participate in managing and improving their communities. With DBKL's support, residents contribute to better cleanliness, reduced vandalism, and stronger community responsibility, supporting long-term social sustainability.

MBPP aims to transform the underutilised Batu Ferringhi Market into a sustainable community and commercial centre. Through a Request for Proposal (RFP), the council seeks innovative solutions that can generate economic value while providing facilities that benefit the local community (Akmal, 2025). MBPP also introduced Vertical Planting at Batu Lancang Market, with approximately 400 ferns to increase urban greenery in areas with limited land. The RM18,000 pilot project supports climate mitigation, reduces the urban heat island effect, and encourages residents to adopt similar planting practices (Akmal, 2024). The "Pass It Forward" initiative involved eight MBPP councillors voluntarily contributing their *Sumbangan Asas Rahmah* (SARA) assistance to individuals in greater need (Zulkifli, 2025). The initiative demonstrates social responsibility, community-oriented leadership, and the importance of public trust in local governance.



Figure 2: Initiatives of MBPP (Redevelopment of Batu Ferringhi Market, Vertical Planting at Batu Lanchang Market & Pass it Forward

Challenges

DBKL faces three main challenges: weak coordination between infrastructure development and community participation, fragmented data systems, and insecure land tenure for urban farming. Limited community involvement can lead to poor maintenance and vandalism, while separate data systems reduce the effectiveness of AI-based planning and decision-making. In addition, uncertain land access discourages urban farmers from making long-term investments. These challenges highlight the need for better coordination, integrated data management, and more secure land arrangements to ensure sustainable outcomes.

MBPP faces challenges related to the long-term sustainability and scalability of its initiatives. The redevelopment of Batu Ferringhi Market is affected by its poor location and limited commercial potential, making it difficult to attract investors and users. Similarly, expanding vertical planting across Penang requires sufficient resources, specialised equipment, and affordable access for residents. The "Pass It Forward" SARA initiative also depends mainly on the personal contributions of councillors rather than a formal welfare framework, limiting its transparency, continuity, and ability to address wider social needs. Overall, MBPP needs stronger planning, resources, and institutional frameworks to sustain its initiatives.

Recommendations

DBKL should strengthen urban farming by integrating it into city planning and providing financial support, such as subsidies or loans, to help farmers adopt hydroponic and vertical farming technologies. DBKL should also develop a formal urban farming policy that provides secure land tenure and supports the

long-term development of urban agriculture. These measures can improve food security, create income opportunities, and strengthen sustainable urban communities.

MBPP should expand vertical planting by establishing council-supported "Green Hubs" to provide affordable plants, equipment, and irrigation materials to residents, together with subsidies or incentives to encourage wider adoption. For the "Pass It Forward" initiative, MBPP should establish a formal and transparent platform with clear eligibility criteria to ensure assistance reaches vulnerable groups. These measures would improve environmental sustainability, strengthen social equity, and promote greater community participation in local governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, sustainable local governance should be people-centred, with technology and infrastructure serving as supporting tools. Effective leadership, accountability, secure land tenure, fair resource distribution, and community participation are essential to achieving sustainable cities. The comparison shows that DBKL needs to strengthen community engagement, particularly with public housing residents, while MBPP benefits from zone-based councillors who provide closer links to local communities. Overall, both authorities need stronger coordination and cooperation to ensure that urban development is sustainable, inclusive, and responsive to community needs.

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