CHALLENGES OF THE URBAN SQUATTERS IN SENTUL, KUALA LUMPUR: FROM THE EYES OF THE POLICYMAKERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban squatter refers to a group of people, generally from a more disadvantaged group who could not have proper access to housing and frequently living in inadequate housing structures with a lack of essential services such as poor maintenance, insufficient amenities, overcrowding, and dangerous areas (Economic Planning Unit, 2015; Aldrich, 2016; Kuek, Abdullah & Hamdan, 2016; Abdullah, Kuek, Hamdan & Zulkifli, 2017; Anindito, Maula & Akbar, 2018).

The issues of urban squatters have become a global issue including in Malaysia (Dikovic, 2019). For instance, in Kuala Lumpur, the urban squatters have existed due to the low-income group who migrated to find a job to support their family and had a problem finding an affordable house (Aldrich, 2016; Abdullah et al. 2017; Kuek et al., 2016). As such, for those who could not afford to house, it forces people to seek another alternative housing solution by settling in squatter houses (Dikovic, 2019). Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) highlighted that the authorities must take serious action in progressing towards access for adequate, safe, and affordable houses with essential services to all populations, especially the urban squatters (United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2018). If there is no significant transformation in the way of build and manage urban spaces, goal 11 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) cannot be achieved because the population in urban areas will rise to 6.5 billion people by 2050 which might affect the humans and development of the cities (UNDP, 2020).

Hence, understanding the challenges they face is vital to ensure their well-being and access to housing is safeguard and policy improvement. As such, the extended abstract will report the findings based on the perspectives of the policymakers regarding the issues concerned. This paper is organised into several parts. The first part outlines the background of the study. The second section explains the methodology employed, and the final part discusses the findings of the study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using an in-depth interview with the government officers directly related to urban squatters in Malaysia. Four government officers were involved in this study. Two participants were from the Urban Well-being Division under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, and two were from the National Housing Department. Using this approach is to explore the participant's point of view and perspectives regarding the issue.

The sample of participants in this study has been selected based on their field of expertise and roles concerning the issues. The Urban Wellbeing Division under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government is responsible for the well-being of people by planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating innovative, strategic, and inclusive urban improvement programs through socio-economic development and community participation (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2020). Their participation in this study is significant to provide the information related to the programs or projects that can improve the urban squatter dwellers' well-being. Meanwhile, the National Housing Department has also participated in this study because they are responsible for planning the housing sector's direction in Malaysia. Their roles are essential to achieve SDG 11 by ensuring all populations can access adequate, safe, and affordable houses by 2030.

Hence, to have in-depth information from the key informants, 25 interview questions were asked to them. The interview questions covered three parts: the knowledge on the urban squatter dwellers, the organisational or department roles, and suggestions for improving the urban squatter dwellers' well-being.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed based on two main aspects (i) the challenges faced by the urban squatter dwellers; and (ii) the intervention module to improve urban squatters' well-being. Based on the main aspects, the study found three main themes, each of the main aspects as the following:

3.1 The Challenges Faced by the Squatters

Three themes have described most participants' views of the challenges faced by the urban squatter dwellers: (i) "Social issues"; (ii) "Housing quality"; (iii) "Financial."

3.1.1 Social Issues

Findings indicate that social issues as challenges faced by the urban squatter dwellers as the urban squatters usually consist of low-educational level dwellers, unemployed dwellers, poor homely environment, dysfunctional families, migrated people, and poverty groups which easily be influenced to commit social issues such as crimes to get some money to survive, especially during the Covid-19 outbreak.

"*When we are looking at the current scenario during Covid-19 outbreak, it gives pressure to the urban squatter households if they are still live in the unconducive or uncomfortable house. This is because when they are at risk of getting fired from the job due to the economic crisis plus their house is in unconducive or uncomfortable condition, it will cause other problems such as social issues.*"

Participant 2

3.1.2 Housing Quality

On the other hand, findings from the interview point out that housing quality is also one of the challenges faced by urban squatter dwellers. The urban squatter houses are usually related to poor housing conditions where they are generally living in cramped homes, and their buildings are constructed with temporary or explosive material. Therefore, it can cause the

dwellers felt uncomfortable living in the house as it is built without following the specifications approved by the authority and using a low-quality material.

> "*When the house is conducive and comfortable to live in, it will give a lot of outcomes to the urban squatter dwellers. However, the urban squatters are related to a house with a lot of damage and leaked that caused the children unable to have comfortable conditions to study.*"

Participant 1

3.1.3 Financial

Finances are the challenges faced by the urban squatter dwellers, which caused them not to own a good house. Per month, their income level is only enough to feed themselves and their families, paid utilities, transportation, and other services. For that reason, the majority of the urban squatter dwellers are incapable of spending on proper and comfortable houses provided.

> "*The level of affordability to own a house depends on the commitment that the urban squatter dwellers have. With less income, they tend to focus more on surviving in the urban areas rather than owning a house.*"

Participant 4

This study purposely to understand the challenges faced by the urban squatters and their well-being. The results show that the social issues, housing quality, and financial are the challenges faced by the urban squatter dwellers, which cause the dwellers to have difficulty improving their well-being.

As the urban squatter areas are commonly inhabited by migrated people, unemployed dwellers, poor groups, and low-educational people, it will create negative behavioural patterns where people tend to commit both crimes and abuse because of their desire and desperation to have money for their survival (Khanam, 2016). Thus, the social issues in the urban squatter areas can cause conflict and bring difficulties to the society, such as living in fear and insecurity (Marvasti, 2017).

According to the UN-Habitat (2020) report entitled "*Proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing*", the urban squatter houses are usually related to a poor housing quality where the house is overcrowding and congested. Based on the report by UN-Habitat (2020), this scenario would affect the well-being of the squatter dwellers as they are unable to have comfortable and safe housing.

Although the urban squatter dwellers know that the condition of their house will affect their well-being, they have no better options rather than continue living in their home due to a lack of finances (Aldrich, 2016; Kuek et al., 2016; Abdullah et al., 2017). According to Olanrewaju, Aziz, Seong, Lee, and Mine (2016); Wahi, Zin, Munikanan, Mohamad, and Junaini (2018), the majority of the urban squatter dwellers are incapable of access to proper housing available because of the high housing price which is beyond their affordability.

3.2 The Intervention Module for the Improvement of Urban Squatter Dwellers' Well-Being

Two themes described participants' views on the intervention module for the improvement of urban squatter dwellers' well-being as follows: (i) "Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program" and (ii) "*Rumah Sejahtera* Program".

3.2.1 Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program

The findings from the interview revealed that the Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program could reduce the urban poverty issues among the group of B40, including the urban squatter dwellers. The program helps improve their finances as it offers an opportunity to generate income through entrepreneurship to spend their lives surviving in urban areas and renting or owning a suitable house.

"*...this program is to help the urban poor people including the urban squatter dwellers from the B40 group by providing them an assistance for starting their own business to ensure they can improve their well-being.*"

Participant 2

3.2.2 Rumah Sejahtera Program

Other findings stated that the implementation of the *Rumah Sejahtera* Program aims to develop more houses for helping the B40 group, including the urban squatter dwellers, own homes to improve their happiness, comfortable and healthy well-being by having a better life.

"*This program helps the people to own a house without imposing them to make any loan to build a house or paying for house rent because it is offering them a house with low-interest rates. If they need to pay for house rent or making a loan to build a house, it will cause difficulty for them in future because and will increase their debt burden.*"

Participant 1

Based on the results, the government has provided a variety of intervention modules such as providing Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program, *Rumah Sejahtera* program, and People's Housing Program (PHP). These programs ensure that the urban squatter dwellers can afford a place to improve their well-being. According to Dass, S.Gill, and Kunasekaran (2019), the Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program can help the participants from the B40 groups, including the urban squatter dwellers manage their own business. The program can help them generate their income and raise their finances by starting their business rather than only being employed, unemployed, or waiting for government assistance (Dass et al., 2019). With the income that they have generated, they can spend on their life survival or purchasing an affordable house to improve their well-being (Dass et al., 2019).

An article reported in Malaysia Gazatte (2019) entitled "*Program Rumah Sejahtera bantu miliki kediaman*", the program is one of the government interventions to helps the low-income people who are facing financial constraints to afford a house due to difficulties in making loans with banks and meeting the economic conditions (Amin, 2019). As stated by Ismail, Jabar, Janipha, and Razali (2015); Abdullah et al. (2017); Ministry of Housing and

Local Government (2018), the objective of this program is to resolve the urban squatter issue, especially in Kuala Lumpur and other major cities. Therefore, this People's Housing Program (PHP) can upgrade the squatter dwellers' well-being as it provides affordable and comfortable houses for them to live in.

4. CONCLUSION

Although it is vital to investigate the challenges from the settlers' perspectives, it is also imperative to know points of view from administrators and policymakers directly connected to urban development. Their views revealed that those urban squatters often met social issues, housing quality, and financial aspects. Even though the government has provided many initiatives and interventions through programs such as the Urban Community Economic Empowerment Program, *Rumah Sejahtera* program, and People's Housing Program (PHP) to help the urban squatter dwellers own a good house, the urban squatters still exist until today. Perhaps, lack of understanding of their needs caused this group of people to access formal housing.

Therefore, a bottom-up approach where the people can voice the difficulties they faced and their needs provides insights for future urban development that is more inclusive and responds to their needs and challenges. The policymakers, such as the local authorities, must understand the challenges faced by this group of people so that the policy and suitable intervention program can be adequately designed to help further the urban squatter dwellers to improve their well-being and have equal rights to adequate housing.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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