



# LET THE RIVER RUN CLEAN

The success of the River Of Life project depends heavily on the mindset of our community, writes Kerry-Ann Augustin

**Above:** An artist's impression of what the Klang River will look like after the ROL project is completed in 2020.

**Right:** Gross pollutant traps (GTP) are employed to filter and isolate physical particles from water flowing out of residential areas.

PICTURE BY VIGNES BALASINGAM



**“M**Y mum told me that in her younger days she used to go dating by the Klang river,” says Ziad Hafiz Razak, director of Pemandu’s Greater KL Key Economic Area. “They used to sit by the riverbanks and there were lots of restaurants there. Now, no one wants to sit by the river!” he adds with a chuckle.

For the past seven years, Ziad and his team have been working with over 47 government-linked agencies for the River Of Life project (ROL). Owned by the Ministry of Federal Territories, the project is estimated to cost a whopping RM4.4 billion. But the mammoth-sized project has an even bigger goal: to clean, develop and beautify the river that gave birth to the capital city, Kuala Lumpur.

In the list of stakeholders, however, there’s an unnamed 48th party whose role is probably, the most vital — the community.

#### EBB AND FLOW OF TIME

Early civilisations built their empires along rivers which were a bountiful hunting ground for fish, and more importantly, an endless supply of water needed for agriculture. In Malaya, the richness of its rivers lay

in tin. Way before we had super highways and even before the first railway lines were laid in British Malaya, rivers were the sole mode of transport, connecting one end of the Peninsular to the other.

By the 1820s, early settlers along the Klang River from Sumatra, and later, Chinese labourers brought in by Raja Abdullah, became the backbone of a booming tin mining industry. The muddy confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers was the furthest any large boat could traverse, making it the point where boats would offload their cargo. Said to have been described by Frank Swettenham in 1874 as “the best tin mining village” he’d ever seen, Kuala Lumpur soon replaced Klang as Selangor’s capital.

As the decades passed, Kuala Lumpur grew as a city, but the river that conceived it started to fade into the background of glitzy skyscrapers. By the 1980s, the river turned a murky shade of brown, earning the local nickname “Sungai Milo”, where industrial waste, piles of plastic, and human waste flowed through the city.

The ROL project, as Ziad explains, is part of the 12 initiatives of the Economic Transformation Programme, one aspect of which was urban development.

“We’ve seen many instances where cities dilapidated in the past have been



**Clockwise from left: All along the river, people still rely on it for various resources including food, water, washing, bathing**  
 PICTURE BY VIGNES BALASINGAM  
**Around 15,000 tonnes of rubbish are cleared from the Klang River on a weekly basis. PHOTOGRAPH BY MAHEN BALA**

brought back to life," he says, citing projects like the Highlines in New York City and the massive river beautifying project of the Cheonggyecheon Stream in Korea. "Very much inspired by these projects, we wanted to attract tourists to come to the city and to improve the quality of life for the city dwellers and citizens. The question was: how do we rejuvenate the city?"

**FROM RIVER TO SEWER**

Last year Pemandu ran an online survey of what KL residents thought of the Klang River in preparation for the completion of the first stage of the ROL.

"A significant percentage thought the Klang River running through the city was a drain or storm drain," Ziad shares, shaking his head. But being KL-born and bred himself, Ziad understands why anyone would think that.

The Klang River, especially in urban areas, is filled with trash. "When Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) cleans the river, you'll be amazed at the things they'd find," Ziad warns, revealing that plastic bottles to large pieces of furniture and even human corpses have been found along the river.

He adds that during the course of the ROL project, 15,000 tonnes of rubbish are removed every week. The river has already



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**Ziad Hafiz Razak**

been classified as "water that is not suitable for human contact."

Many people think of the Klang River as a drain because of its physical structure, shares Ziad. If you look at old photos of Kuala Lumpur, he adds, it's obvious how the river was framed by grassy banks. Calling it an engineering necessity, he explains that due to the river's grassy banks and floods in the city centre, concrete riverbanks were built to strengthen the walls so land would not collapse or erode. "It was necessary for the quality of life in the city, but let's just say it doesn't look great."

**CHALLENGING CLEAN**

The project has been rolled out in three stages: River cleaning, river master planning and beautification and river development. "Overall, the project is 64 per cent completed," says Ziad. Yet, with three years to go before the project is completed, there's still a lot of work to be done, especially for river cleaning.

"We are 71 per cent complete in the river cleaning stage which also means there has

been a lot of capital expenditure committed in terms of water treatment plants, installing grease traps, and a lot of equipment that has been installed along the river to improve its cleanliness."

He compares the cleaning of a river to cleaning the engine of an aircraft while still in flight. "You're trying to clean the river but it's alive and in the midst of people's lives, schools, homes and restaurants."

The agencies involved in the ROL project are working with schools, property developers, and communities living by the river, heavy industries and food and restaurant owners, who, according to Ziad, are some of the biggest polluters. "We've advised restaurants to install grease traps but at the same time, it comes at a cost to maintain, so we have to see it from their point of view as well, and try to find that balance."

Over the past three years, their Public Outreach Programme has been working with restaurants and local communities to raise awareness about the importance of maintaining these grease traps. "We get experts in river cleaning and environmental

protection to go down to the communities and pull all the families together and say "hey, you guys are living near the river and the river is important to your quality of life, so how can you contribute towards this?"

He cites the active communities in places like Melawati and Keramat as great examples. The communities there have kick-started a movement called Dapur Hijau (Green Kitchen) where people living in the area get businesses to pledge greener ways of disposing their waste.

Other than the regular gotong royong, the communities there have started turning trash into cash. "One of the initiatives involves collecting cooking oil from all these F&B outlets and making candles from it," says Ziad, beaming.

**RIVER OF LIFE**

Over 100 parcels of land over the 10.7km stretch of the river or within the vicinity have been identified to be developed, with the hope of turning things around for the much-neglected river.

By 2020, the river should be a central part of the lives of KL-ites, with restaurants, waterfront shops, pedestrian walkways, bicycle lanes and sprawling gardens. "While the Malacca River is smaller and more manageable, it didn't change the fact that the cleaning project there worked in everyone's favour," says Ziad, who cites examples of how old buildings in the historic town are now renovating their entrances to be placed at the back, facing the river as opposed to the streets.

The capital city gleams in the eyes of its Southeast Asian neighbours for its fast-paced development, yet in reality, we have a long, long way to go. "We can't just talk about being a First World country," Ziad says. "Being a First would mean the country is having all the benefits of a developed nation — better amenities, better incomes, better quality of life... but it comes with a cost associated with a developed country."

"Same thing with river cleanliness. It will come at a cost but it is about how we come together to bear that cost in a way that is most practical."

As KL-ites and even as citizens, he confides, we all have a share in the river. "The burden of pollution in the river is a burden imposed by the population that lives by the river. This means each and every one of us."