

Responsibility goes beyond the law

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THERE are some pluses and some minuses as well to the revamp of environmental impact assessment rules that is being undertaken to shift the onus of responsibility for ensuring the safety of development projects from the approving authority to the development company and its consultants.

On the positive side, this measure announced by Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid on Tuesday would free the resources of the planning approval committees of local and state governments from the onerous task of ensuring compliance with the plethora of rules governing construction projects.

Instead, these panels can focus on due diligence to detect lapses and act to uphold the guiding principles of development blueprints including structure and local area plans.

But it stretches the imagination to believe that the latest measure alone will cause an about-turn in the regulation of environmentally-sensitive developments, as Azmi's initiative suggests.

The first requirement for a halt to the current spate of environmental disasters is a qualitative change in the approach to the approval of future developments.

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seeking public feedback on developments bigger than 50ha, approving authorities should be guided by the cautionary principle, where risk factors are taken seriously rather than downplayed.

A second quality is rooted in the need to balance economic priorities against the larger social and environmental impacts of a development. So instead of being overly enamoured by the potential economic spin-offs from an investment proposal, the authorities must now give more weight to quality of life issues including congestion, loss of recreational space, physical and environmental hazards, air and noise pollution and the impacts on the social environment when assessing the suitability of a project.

Admittedly, it will be painfully difficult for the planning authorities to wean themselves from the development circus that has become the preoccupation of these entities. But enough damage has been done and the time to rein in the free-for-all habits of the past decades has come.

It is expedient for the state administrations in particular to refocus on ensuring that their development decisions do not lay the groundwork for future tragedies because the avalanche of blame that will come from the people cannot be halted by a mere reassignment of responsibilities.