

New villages in danger of becoming old, desolate

IN NEGLECT: Education has not improved the wellbeing of these communities

A RECENT visit to Kampung Baru Sungai Buloh in Selangor took me through narrow, congested roads where trucks battled with smaller vehicles, youngsters rode their motorcycles without helmets and cars bumped over potholes.

I passed workshops where beat-up cars were being repaired, coffee shops where elderly men in singlets and shorts sat chatting, and general stores selling dusty wares from a forgotten era.

At the wet market, I was appalled to see the conditions that traders and shoppers were faced with. The floors were filthy and dangerously slick, while the stalls lacked proper facilities for traders to set out their produce.

The rest of the new village was no better. Housing was clearly poorly organised, as the properties were small and built too close together. The playgrounds were rundown, drains were clogged and rubbish piled up in fields and empty plots of land.

In fact, the village has every appearance of being an under-developed town, despite the fact that, as one of the largest factory zones in the Klang Valley, it is teeming with industrial activity.

This picture of stagnation describes many Chinese new villages in urban areas, which were originally clustered at the perimeter of urban centres but have eventually fused into the cities.

Yet, standing in the middle of the village, I felt that I could have been miles or decades away from any city that we recognise today.

Indeed, it is completely disconnected — socially, if not in terms of physical distance — from the exclusive gated communities of Sierramas and Valencia nearby.

The ghetto-like state of new villages like Kampung Baru Sungai Buloh is worrying, not just because of its infrastructure problems but also the social implications of a community left behind.

Upward mobility in the community seems a distant dream, as most of the young people I observed



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MCA president **Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek** (second from right) checking on Sungai Hampar, which flows through **Kampung Baru Sungai Buloh** in Selangor. The river often overflows after heavy rain.

there were either idle or working in retail and factory jobs.

Even these low-level jobs may soon be out of their grasp, as more foreign workers are taking over from the locals.

This isn't a new phenomenon, as locals everywhere, including in other new villages and urban centres, are losing jobs to foreign labour.

If the local community is eventually made redundant, what will happen to them? Most of these young people are equipped only for low-skilled employment and do

not have the ability to work outside urban areas, such as in agriculture.

We need to take a long, hard look at what has gone wrong. One immediate question is why has the upkeep and development of these new villages been neglected by local government?

While local councils squabble over their internal problems and bureaucracies, villagers cannot even hope for something as simple as the upgrading of their market.

But searching deeper for the root of the problems faced by these new

villages, I kept coming back to this question: why hasn't education improved the lives of these communities and their future generations?

In any society, education is the foundation for development. Education has helped Malaysia to progress rapidly in the last 60 years and transformed the nation from a rural, agrarian society to a middle-income, rapidly developing country.

So how has education failed these new villages? Are the schools not equipped with facilities or teachers? Are there disparities in the allocation of funding?

Or have the young people failed education by abandoning their hometown, instead of coming back to contribute to its economic development?

If Malaysia's development goals for the next five years are to create a high-income economy, something seriously needs to be done to lift these new villages out of their malaise.

I have written in this column about turning these new villages into model, sustainable townships with new economic activities.

It takes only a little innovation to restore life to these new villages, instead of consigning them to the fate of becoming a ghetto, increasingly disconnected from the rest of society.