

Third time lucky?

TAKING ANOTHER SHOT: The first public awareness campaign about the importance of keeping rivers clean, the 'Love Our Rivers' campaign, started in 1993. A similar effort was launched in 2007, with the '1 State, 1 River' campaign. By next year, it'll mean two decades have passed, together with millions of ringgit under the bridge, yet our rivers are no cleaner. In this final part of an interview, Department of Irrigation and Drainage director-general Datuk Ahmad Husaini Sulaiman tells Tan Choe Choe of plans to rebrand and relaunch the clean river campaign, again, soon

Question: The "Love Our Rivers" campaign was introduced almost two decades ago but appeared to have fizzled out until it was re-branded in 2007. Yet few of our waterways have improved. Between 2007 and 2009, correct me if I'm wrong, the number of clean river basins had dropped from 91 to 70. There are as many as 64 polluted rivers, up from 45. What really is the problem here?

Answer: "Love Our Rivers" was more of an awareness campaign looking at addressing the issue of why the water has been polluted and to promote this awareness about clean rivers to the public. There was some success to this, people became aware of the need for the river to be clean.

Question: So, the fact that the public is interested in clean rivers means that the campaign enjoyed some success?

Answer: Yes. But what is more important is to also spread this awareness to all people living by rivers, and all industries placed near rivers. That has not been as successful as I would want, but we're still going through various strategies to see how we can get them to understand and work with us to address the issues of river pollution. That was why we came up with the "1 State, 1 River" concept (in 2007). There was a bit of confusion as people were asking why we were just looking at one river. It's really because we

needed a structured approach to deal with how to clean rivers and when we chose a river, we took the challenge of choosing the dirtiest river in the state.

Question: It means that if you can clean up the dirtiest river in your state, you can do it with the others?

Answer: Exactly.

Question: In the "1 State, 1 River" campaign, there are 15 participants: 13 states and two federal territories. How many of them achieved the clean river target?

Answer: I can't say that because they might get offended. (Laughs).

Question: You don't have to name them. Just a ballpark figure will do.

Answer: Well, there have been successes, like Sungai Galing in Pahang, which achieved Class 2 cleanliness (Class 1 being the best). At the moment it has gone to Class 3 so we're telling Pahang to do more to make sure they get back to Class 2. And they've done it. They have a structured committee to look at Galing and to ensure it stays at Class 2.

Question: How about Johor? There are many dead rivers there, I understand, like Sungai Segget, Sungai Skudai and Sungai Tebrau. Any success stories there?

Answer: Not really. We are address-

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ing those rivers also. But we're now embarking on the rebranding of the "1State, 1River" campaign. We're now introducing a new river campaign, almost similar to the River of Life for Sungai Klang. We're going to present (the proposal) to the Ministry (of Natural Resources and Environment).

Question: Why the need to re-brand again when you've re-branded it in 2007?

Answer: Actually, we don't call that a true rebranding in 2007 because it was just a different approach from the "Love Our Rivers" campaign.

But here, for the "1 State, 1 River", we are going to rebrand with a different name and hope we can introduce a better approach than the one we have now. In this case, we won't just be looking at only one river. If it means we need to address

two or three rivers, then why not?

Question: So, the "1 State, 1 River" campaign didn't exactly succeed? Is it because of the different powers accorded to local authorities in different states to manage the rivers? For example, the jurisdiction over land matters lies with the state, so if the state has no political will, then the rivers will not be cleaned up.

Answer: Yes, we do need a lot of support and cooperation from them and we need them to see why this programme is important and so far, in so far as support is concerned, they're there because each state has got its own structured committee in dealing with the "1 State, 1 River".

It's only a matter of trying to get them to move aggressively in getting things done.

Question: What then is the definitive reason the campaign failed? You can't possibly re-brand and use a new approach when you are not sure why it previously failed. You said the people in the state have been there at the meetings with you, so political will doesn't seem to be a problem, or is it?

Answer: Political will is there because some of these committees formed at the state level are chaired by the menteris besar themselves or exco members.

Maybe the allocations — to DID and also to the states — were not sufficient because whatever suggestions or decisions that we make to them will involve some costs and so, you need allocation to relocate people, eateries or wet markets and other businesses along the river. That's the difficult part.

It's much more than just taking rubbish out of the river. It's also about introducing a water-treatment system. All these incur costs. DID doesn't have that allocation. The state government must come in and provide that.

Question: Then what new approach are you suggesting to make it work this time?

Answer: I can't tell you yet because we're still ironing out a good concept to be presented to the ministry. If this goes through and they can see success coming from it, then this will be the approach that we can apply.