

## NUCC Report Forum

Report of discussions on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2018 at Akademi Sains Malaysia, MATRADE, Kuala Lumpur



The Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance organised a forum to discuss the National Unity Consultative Council's (NUCC) National Unity Blueprint which was completely on June 2015, but was only released on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2018. The Malaysian government sought public feedback on Blueprint.

The following is a summary of comments from the forum:

### 1. Emphasise equal opportunity

A source of disunity comes from the issue of access in terms of opportunities (such as equal access to education and employment). The formulation and implementation of government economic policies must be justified based on needs rather than ethnicity without political expediency. This is to send the correct signals and reduce long-term perceptions of entitled privileges overtime towards a single group.

To promote harmony, basic needs have to be met and the quality of life needs to be improved through economic development for full employment. This requires good and responsible governance.

There are issues of targeted poverty. As one is required to be registered with eKasih<sup>1</sup> to receive aid, many from the indigenous community lack access due to having little awareness of these facilities. This has caused them to be left out as they are not in the system.

### 2. Address Opposing Narratives and Sense of National Identity

Different groups see national unity in different ways as it is a concept formed in the mind, causing individuals to act based on their understanding of the matter. There is need to bridge major social cleavages between opposing national views before reconciliation can occur, between (i) ethnicities (the Malay-versus-non-Malay divide), and (ii) East and West Malaysia; issue of the "Majoritarian Perspective" with Malay and Islam as dominant feature of national identity and the Equality vs Right-based perspective.

There are also differences in understanding or view of independence, social history, governance, position of Islam, role of women, and minorities in society. Yet, both groups are committed to the Constitution and Rukunegara. But there is a difference in perspective and its interpretation. Crucially, there will be no be unity if there is no consensus on what this foundation piece to the nation means.

Malays are imposing in-group ethnic identity on what national identity should be. Post-Independence, the concept of Ketuanan Melayu was introduced which shifted mindsets considerably. There is a

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<sup>1</sup> eKasih is a national poverty databank to provide welfare aid to the poor

need to revert to a time before this concept was amplified. A national identity based on Ketuanan Melayu has a narrative justifying why Malays should be the privileged ethnic group among Malaysian citizens. This propagates a hierarchical sense of national belonging. Such a narrative does not fit well with demographic realities and historical trajectories of East Malaysia, as many indigenous people are not Muslim nor Malay. It is also not compatible with the alternative nation-view, with one group saying they should have a privileged position while the other demand for more equality. This is a major obstacle to national unity. Issues also arise when a single group denies the rights of others and consider others to be immigrants that have no say, making minority groups feel that they are not part of the overall national identity.

There are ethnocentric – ethnorelative issues. Malaysia is a heterogenous society that wants to be homogenous. Yet, it is unclear if this is the direction it should strive towards. It could also accept that it is a heterogenous society that must recognise that it cannot be ethnocentric.

Current history is imbalanced with much dedication towards the Malays while other ethnicities and East Malaysians are given far less emphasis. Until there is a more balanced perspective, it will be difficult to reach national unity. New content for Form 4 and 5 textbooks need to be monitored, particularly the parts on the Constitution and ensure that it is correctly presented. New Form 1 and 2 textbooks are still too Malay-centric. Previous revamps have been a disappointment as they introduced the concept of Ketuanan Melayu (year 2000 version which is still in use).

Learning about the Federal Constitution should not be confined to schools, but also through other channels, such as the rukun tetangga<sup>2</sup> (RTs) and youth programmes.

### **3. Address Institutionalised Preferential Treatment Without Just Cause**

Leakages from such allocation programmes are also a major concern, where some government officials have become part of the problem due corruption practices which happens often in Sabah and Sarawak.

There is a lack of desegregated data, which is limited to Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This has caused indigenous ethnic groups to be left out from the development process.

There has also been dissatisfaction over development using a “rights-based” approach rather than a needs-based approach, which has affected the true recipients of these developments, leading to patronage.

There are existing issues with how promotions are carried out in the civil service, some of whom are selected to be students in university for career advancement, but some have poor attitudes towards learning/education. Many expect promotion as though it is their right rather than seeing the need for merit. This requires a change of mindset that is accompanied with political maturity.

### **4. Develop Indicators to Address Potential Sources of Disunity**

Address issues at an early stage before they escalate by developing an “early warning system” with indicators to warn policy makers on what needs to be done. There is a need to know the root cause for these failures, how it changed, and what it should be. Issues of exclusion must be discussed and confronted to address unconscious biasness and to promote inclusion.

A Commission, rather than a Council for racial discrimination, should be formed.

### **5. Define National Unity**

There is no definition of National Unity in the Blueprint. One is needed to enable evaluation and the setting of KPIs.

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<sup>2</sup> Rukun Tetangga's or Neighbourhood Watch is a voluntary programme aimed to assist in community development in Malaysia

## 6. Enhance the Mediation Process

The importance of mediation has been recognised by the NUCC and has been included as one of its recommendations (Recommendation 7). However, current mediation channels have not proven to be effective.

Malaysia can take the example of community mediation in Singapore which is working very well. Each housing estate has a community mediation centre with mediators trained by the Singapore Mediation Centre.

### Case Study : Mediation as Win-win Solution

Mediation has proven effective on a global level. It was used in the Southern Philippines when Abu Sayyaf radicals kidnapped Indonesian fishermen and demanded ransom. The Philippine and Indonesian governments refused to pay ransom. Desperate families then approached individuals in Aceh for assistance, who then went to mediate the matter in the Philippines, offering the kidnappers children education in Aceh and thus a brighter future. The kidnappers agreed, leading to the release of the captives.

*Sharing from a speaker during the 5<sup>th</sup> Asian Mediation Association Conference 2018*



## 7. Create Greater Awareness of the Importance of National Unity

There has been too much emphasis on negative news. Instead, there is a need for more appreciative inquiry through the promotion of good stories of unity.

### Case Study : Independent Community Engagement

The Dialog Rakyat movement formulated a Code of Ethical Conduct and Actionable Practices focusing on national unity, integration, and sustained harmony as a means of how individuals carry themselves and behave with one another through social, cultural, and spiritual components on their own accord rather than being told by the authorities on how to behave. This brings national unity to a socio-rational level, which it hoped will eventually lead to the rational-emotional level adoption.



## 8. Improve Education

### 8.1: An avenue for the development of the right mindset

The development of democratic literacy and political maturity takes time. Genuine reactions towards unity can only be achieved through education. This requires stronger collaboration between Department of National Unity and the Ministry of Education.

There is a need to focus on three issues; (i) developing a sense of urgency, (ii) broaden the mind, and (iii) inculcating the mindset that success happens with struggle. Open mindedness can be encouraged through education, not just in terms of curriculum, but also through good teacher training as it begins with teachers through the various stages of education.

### 8.2: Improve teacher training and selection

The process of how teachers are employed needs to be reviewed and improved. Teachers are not trained to teach culture, sensitivities, and differences, only the surface issues are taught (symbols and rituals). There is a need to go deeper to examine cultural dimensions and assumptions.

### 8.3: Remove institutionalised religion in school

The institutionalisation of religion should be removed from national schools.

### 8.4: Review position on vernacular school

Vernacular schools remain a sensitive issue as suggestions of their closure will be opposed by Chinese and Tamil educationalist as it would imply the end of ethnic institutions funded by Federal or State governments, and that all institutions must be open to everyone who wants to enrol in them. This also affects residential colleges and MARA. Vernacular schools affect involve the Chinese at the primary level, as most still go to national schools for secondary education, but many Malays go to special provision schools, which is also a form of separation. This causes Malaysiana to be divided along ethnic lines at an early age, which needs to be addressed.

At the same time, there is evidence that vernacular schools cater to diversity and benefit other ethnic groups. The issue is not the schools in itself, but how one thinks about how these schools are different. As teachers have not been trained to have an open mind, bridging this gap cannot be achieved merely by getting rid of vernacular schools to bring about unity, but by spreading the idea that being different does not bring about disunity. It is about teaching people to accept differences and being politically correct. Diversity should be viewed as an asset. Some countries have multiple official languages and yet are doing well.

### 8.5: Strengthen Use of Bahasa Malaysia and Other Languages to Preserve Culture

The Malay language must be strengthened as a platform for unity. At the same time, other languages need to be preserved as it is important to the culture and identities of the various ethnicities. Singapore does well in retaining the language of the mother tongue which can be a system that can be adopted in Malaysia. When stronger language components are introduced in national schools for other ethnic languages (eg. making the learning of the Iban language available for Ibans), national schools can become the school of choice.

## **Other Matters**

There were concerns of different versions of the Blueprint as Tan Sri Joseph Kurup and the previous AG reworked the Blueprint substantially. It is important to be clear which version is the one being presented to Parliament, as the official version on the JPNIN website was removed.

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*The views presented in this report may not necessarily represent that of the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance, the Kingsley Advisory & Strategic Initiatives Institute or its partners.*

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