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The environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) in Malaysia Northern Region: Their roles in protecting water resources

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Malaysia northern region has been an important space for public sphere by Malaysian environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs). The past decades have witnessed severe threats in water resources in the northern region. Charitable and voluntary organizations have been contributing significantly towards the solution of the threats. The ENGOs have equipped themselves adequately and advocated for policy change or implementation and served in a civil society role. However, many people have not realized the potential of NGOs and their considerable merit. The 3 examples of the ENGOs are water watch penang, Malaysian nature society and Kedah's Friends of Ulu Muda II. One of these ENGOs promotes water saving society, the other protects the water catchments in forest reserve and the other deals with a controversial issue of helicopter logging by Kedah state government. This overview seeks to highlight some of the key ENGOs in Malaysia northern region involved in shaping the debate on recent water related issues and outline some of their networks, out reach programmes and campaigns.

Key words: Environmental, NGOs, water issues, public awareness, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia are non-profit organisations run by volunteers and have many roles. One of the roles is to protect the environment and they are known as environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs). The development of ENGOs depicts the development of public awareness on environment. Sonnenfeld and Mol believe that the emergence of ENGOs is to engage in sustainable development.¹ Water which is one of our most precious natural resources has always been the concern of these ENGOs. This paper gives an overview of the roles of ENGOs at the northern

region of Malaysia-encompassing the states of Perak, Penang, Kedah and Perlis - in dealing with the current issues related to water resources.

The roles and activities of ENGOs in the northern region of Malaysia are not clearly known by the public. Why do we need to know their roles? By understanding the roles of ENGOs ones may aware that they contribute to the common goods that facilitate ethical life in protecting the environment and provide space for more debate in the public sphere.² It is appropriate to the democracy as agreed by Daisy:

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy'. They should become partners in the implementation of Agenda 21, that is to promote the participation, review and evaluation of NGOs for implementation of Agenda 21 and to recognise these activities in the UN

¹ David A. Sonnenfeld and Arthur P. J. Mol, "Globalization and the Transformation of Environmental Governance," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 45 (2002):1318-1842.

² Glen Lehman, "The accountability of NGOs in Civil Society and its Public

Spheres," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 8 (2007): 645-669.

² Aloysius Daisy, "The Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations

reporting system. Their 'experience, expertise and capacity' should be recognised . . .³

ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS (ENGO) IN MALAYSIA

Malaysian Environmental NGOs (MENGO)⁴ which was formed in 2001 under Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) comprises a group of 19 ENGOs.⁵ The mission of MENGO aims to be an independent platform of Malaysian NGOs that is committed towards enhancing the environmental sustainability agenda at the local, national and international levels.⁶ According to Ramakrishna, every MENGO member has its own way in dealing with environmental issues.⁷ MNS and WWF-Malaysia, for example, gave talks about the lifestyle of sustainable and had formed Environmental Clubs at schools.

In the next section of this paper the researchers will broadly give an overview of 3 members of the MENGOs which deal with water managements in the northern region of Malaysia encompassing Water Watch Penang (WWP), Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and Friends of Ulu Muda II (FoUMII).

WATER WATCH PENANG (WWP)

Water Watch Penang (WWP) is a non-profit organisation set up in November 1997 as part of the Sustainable Penang Initiative. WWP was established after concerns over Penang's water quality and availability, as well as flooding problems.⁸ Working in partnership with Penang Water Supply Corporation and various authorities, WWP's objectives are to create awareness for water conservation amongst the general public, research on water issues, water education in the schools and the practice of a water saving society towards the sustainable

(ENGOS) in Sabah: Their Contributions in Protecting the West Coast Resources," *Borneo Review* 10 (1999): 68-89.

⁴ Sundari Ramakrishna, interview with author, MENGO office, Dataran Sunway, Petaling Jaya, December 10, 2007.

⁵ 19 members of MENGO: Borneo Resources Institute (BRIMAS), Environmental Protection Society Malaysia (EPSM), Partners of Community Organisations, Sabah (PACOS), Treat Every Environment Special Sdn Bhd (TrEES), Centre For Environmental Technologies (CETEC), Centre for Environment, Technology and Development, Malaysia (CETDEM), Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), Environmental Management Research Association of Malaysia (ENSEARCH), Global Environment Centre (GEC), Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Malaysian Society of Marine Sciences, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), Sustainable Development Network Malaysia (SUSDEN), TRAFFIC- The Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network, Third World Network (TWN), Water Watch Penang (WWP), Wetlands International-Malaysia Office, World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia (WWF-Malaysia). MENGO is recognised by the Malaysian government.

⁶ "Malaysian Environmental NGO," <http://www.mengo.org/vision.htm>.

⁷ Sundari Ramakrishna, interview.

⁸ "Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute," <http://www.seri.com.my/ap/environment-activities.html>

development of water resources.⁹ Chan who is the President of WWP states that:

Currently, water watch penang (WWP) is probably the only water NGO in Malaysia, although other NGOs such as the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), the environmental protection society Malaysia (EPSM), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) and to a lesser extent consumers associations such as the consumers association of Penang (CAP) and the consumers association of Selangor (CAS) have from time to time dealt with water issues.¹⁰

MAJOR WATER ISSUES

The major issue faced by Malaysia is the impression that Malaysia has no shortage of water supply. This opinion is based on the yearly heavy rains of more than 2,000 mm and frequent flooding. However, this myth has not been proven true because Malaysia had water crises in Melaka in 1991 and in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor in 1998. Furthermore, the domestic use of water in Malaysia had increased. According to Chan:

If we consider the fact that the International Standard for water use recommended by the United Nations is 200 LPD, then Malaysians now are guilty of wasting 100 LPD. Malaysians living in the urban areas waste more than 300 LPD, that is, an amount that can be used to sustain six persons in Sudan. As a comparison, an average Indian (in India) uses only 100 LPD and a Sudanese uses even less, about 50 LPD.¹¹

The next major issue is the total water catchment has reduced due to uncontrolled loggings and deforestations. Deforestations can cause serious irreversible consequences on both their immediate environments as well as the downstream environment, often with a cumulative effect; glaring disasters related to deforestation in Malaysia include the collapsed of Highland Towers in 1993, the landslides of the Karak Highway in 1995, and the mudslide in Pos Dipang in 1996.¹²

Regarding these issues WWP has taken some initiatives in protecting the water catchments in Penang such as writing articles in newspapers, educating people and school children about the importance of water conservation, contributing its expertise in national forums and workshops on water and helping the government draw up plans and programmes for water conservation. Examples of its projects are "River Walk – caring for our Rivers

⁹ "Water Watch Penang," <http://www.waterwatchpenang.org/forest-and-water.html>

¹⁰ Chan Ngai Weng, "Water Resources Management in Malaysia: NGO Perspectives" (paper presented during MENGO's Sustainable Development Conference, PWTC, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 6-8, 2005), 9.

¹¹ Chan Ngai Weng, "Water Resources Management," 3.

¹² "Tragic Disasters in Malaysia." <http://www.mvfra.org/Tragic.htm>

campaign,” “Clinic for Penangites on the Importance of Looking after Rivers”; “Adopt a river project” and “water conservation and educational programme” with the Penang water supply corporation.¹³

MALAYSIAN NATURE SOCIETY (MNS)

Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) is the oldest NGO in Malaysia which was inception in 1940. The objectives of MNS are to promote the study, appreciation, conservation and protection of Malaysia's natural heritage focusing on the sustainable development and biological diversity.¹⁴ Although it has various activities related to the environment, water conservation is one of its concerns. Amongst its many activities related to water is a water forum in 2000¹⁵ which focused on raising awareness among local communities, targeting resident associations and other grass root organizations.¹⁶

MAJOR ISSUE

Another programme related to water is a vigorous campaign to save the Belum and Temenggor forest reserves in Perak in 2006 from the onslaught of logging activities. Situated at the border of Thailand and Peninsular Malaysia, these 130million-year old forests are said to be older than the Amazon and the Congo. They cover 300,000 ha area and are catchments for major rivers. They are also irreplaceable haven to numerous plant species that supports over 270 species of birds and 100 species of mammals, including the endangered Malayan tiger, Sun-bear, Seladang (Gaur), Sumatran rhinoceros, Malayan Tapir and the globally threatened Plain-pouched Hornbill.¹⁷ In the campaign, MNS strongly encouraged the Perak State Government to preserve the integrity of the Belum-Temenggor forest. MNS sought the participation of people in the Belum-Temengor campaign for 6 months and the campaign obtained more than 80,000 signatures. To continue the initiative for the campaign, general programmes for education and awareness initiatives have been carried out.¹⁸ Eventually, after a year of initiatives, Perak State government gazetted Belum as a state park on 3rd May 2007 with no further logging activities.¹⁹

¹³ “Water Watch Penang,” <http://www.waterwatchpenang.org>.

¹⁴ “Conservation of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex, Perak,” http://www.mns.org.my/file_dir/7338712444f2a64123f65.pdf

¹⁵ “List of MNS Initiatives and Achievements,” http://www.mns.org.my/file_dir/61966678846599d0bd01f1.pdf

¹⁶ Chan Ngai Weng, “Water Resources Management,” 10.

¹⁷ “Conservation of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex, Perak,” http://www.mns.org.my/file_dir/7338712444f2a64123f65.pdf

¹⁸ “Malaysian Nature Society,” <http://www.mns.org.my/article.php?aid=44>.

¹⁹ “Conservation of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex, Perak,” http://www.mns.org.my/file_dir/7338712444f2a64123f65.pdf

KEDAH'S FRIENDS OF ULU MUDA II (FOUMII)

Kedah's Friends of ULU Muda II (FoUMII) is a movement comprising 17 green groups which are listed under MNGO.²⁰ This movement was formed in response to a controversial issue of helicopter logging by the Kedah State Government in Kedah.

MAJOR ISSUE

In 2002 the Kedah State Government proposed the helicopter logging of the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve in the north-eastern corner of Kedah which covers 162,931 ha.²¹ In order to take the log out of the forest, they may need to build an extensive road network totalling 404 km and 10 - 24 m wide which would result in the clearing of more than 4 million trees. Such a damaging activity would no doubt seriously threaten the economic values of the Ulu Muda water catchments areas, may cause soil erosions, flash floods and sedimentations of dams.²² Cutting the tree within the watershed of Sungai Muda will seriously affect the water supply for the people of the northern region. According to Mohd Nizam, the Forest Reserve supplies 80% water resources for the domestic and industrial use in Penang, Kedah and Perlis.²³

In dealing with the issue, FoUMII organised a media conference in Alor Star, Kedah on 10 July 2008, urging the Kedah State Government to halt the logging activities. The media conference stressed that logging will not only destroy the forest ecosystem, but also destroy the life of 63,000 rice farmers in the Muda Agriculture Development Authority (MADA) which covers the area of Perlis, Kedah and Penang, so aptly known as the Rice Bowl of Malaysia. Mohd Nizam recommended that the Kedah Government gazetted the Ulu Muda forest reserve as a state or national park, set up an Ulu Muda trust fund to protect the catchment areas and urged the federal government to compensate the Kedah government for not logging in the area. FoUMII also plans to collaborate

²⁰ FoUMII members are Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Malaysian Karst Society (MKS), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), WWF-Malaysia, Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM), Water Watch Penang (WWP), Partners of Community Organisations (PACOS Trust), Treat Every Environmental Special (TrEES), Environmental Management and Research Organisation of Malaysia (Ensearch), Muafakat Warga Desa Negeri Kedah (Rural Citizens), Kumpulan Bertindak Petani MADA, Pergerakan Penyelidikan dan Pembangunan Komuniti (KOMUNITI), Campus Environmentalist Network (CARE), Gabungan Angkatan Sahabat Alam Sekitar Nasional (GAGASAN), Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), Teras Pengupayaan Melayu (TERAS), Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM Penang), Jaringan Bertindak Nelayan Pantai Semenanjung (JARING), Pertubuhan Prihatin Kesihatan dan Sosial Malaysia (PRIHATIN Malaysia).

²¹ Statement by Mohd Nizam Mahshar, Coordinator of Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), in a media conference on 10 July 2008 at Taman Rekreasi Ampang Jaya, Alor Star, Kedah. The conference is held to urge the Kedah State Government to halt the heli-logging.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

with Penang water supply corporation and enlist the support of the local people through public forums, press Conferences, petitions and demonstrations against the logging proposal. The information of these campaigns are conveyed through You Tube, a blog (saveulumuda.wordpress.com), Facebook, brochures, pamphlets, streamers, logo design campaigns and t-shirts.

CONCLUSION

The research explores environmental issues related to water which has been one of the major concerns of the NGOs in Malaysia. An overview of the activities and roles played by the NGOs in dealing with issues in the northern region may suggest that the NGOs do not act on their own but in a public sphere and they can form the missing link between government and the people. Although NGOs do not offer comprehensive solutions to some of the problems, they may increase public awareness about the state of their environment and advocate improvements in policies related to the issues.

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