

The homeless in Malaysia: I am born with a name, too!

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The nation watched, gaping mouth, at both the Malaysian ministers of the Federal Territory and Women, Family and Community Development' sprint to out rightly round up the homeless in KL City and to deter soup kitchens from assisting the homeless; with a view to present Malaysia's capital city with a better and cleaner view. Someone once said that the longest journey of the human experience is the 18 inches from the mind to the heart. I believe this is true. What the quotation serves to illustrate is that for unless we understand and feel something of what it means to be homeless, abandoned, neglected and hungry, any proposed strategy to eliminate homelessness will be incomprehensive.

Commentators, social activists and faith based organisations remain hard at work to resolve the homeless issue whilst great disagreements remain that the Destitute Person's Act 1977 that allows the lawmakers to arrest and detain the homeless in rehabilitation centres without trial is unjust. There can be little doubt that often times, we view the poor, the destitute and the homeless as one who is lacking in something and who awaits it from another; the wretched one driven into begging and one who desires. Such pattern of stereotyping can easily morph the society into viewing them as the frail ones; the bent over one; one who labours under a weight; the one who is not in possession of his/ and her whole strength and vigour; and the humiliated one. Indigent, weak, bent over, wretched are terms which well-expressed a degrading human situation. These terms already insinuate a protest. A protest to be reminded again that as duty-bearers, we are elected to protect our citizens, including those who are vulnerable to speak and to stand for themselves.

This sometimes proves too overwhelming, as we, the duty-bearers, would on occasions be called to sort out issues and problems amongst them. We must be careful not to fall into intellectual self-satisfaction, into the kind of triumphalism of the cultured ones and advanced our new visions of development without a human face. Homelessness is a complex problem. As attested by researchers, homelessness is caused by a complex interplay between personal circumstances and adverse structural factors outside a person's control.

For any intervention to work for the homeless that is acceptable to them there is a real need to make our approaches "work" for them while maintaining the value of dignity and respect, in the best interest of the homeless. A purely institutionalised and a legal approach will almost certainly prove insufficient to change the outlook and deeply rooted behaviour of the homeless. While a necessary factor in social change, law alone if is not sufficient as an agent of social

change. Being tied up in a set of inferiority beliefs, community approach, with a human touch, such as the Soup Kitchen is fulfilling a purpose that an institutional approach cannot simply replace for the homeless. The use of institutional care approach to respond to those living on streets, does not mean that we should sacrifice the depth of analysis; the point is not to be simplistic but rather insist on getting at the deepest cause of the situation, for this is what it means to be truly radical. The problem exists but the solution can only come from the very roots of the problem. We must go to the very causes of the situation; why have people become homeless? We should not be content with pointing out and attending to certain of its consequences.

At this point challenging questions arise: How can we reconcile the vision of a caring society as embedded in Vision 2020 and our current response to the issue of homelessness? Improving the well-being of the homeless requires a more nuanced and circumspect approach, combining concern and respect for them. A formalisation of a community and institutional approach is therefore crucial in addressing this issue. If we are to face these challenges in a right way, we must first see that behind each of the numbers of homeless, hides a face, a name, a life and a sacred soul whose creator is God. They are just like you and me! Let us be the good news to them and confer them the dignity they are born with.