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On track to curing urban ills

KUCHING: Although much has been said about the ills brought about by rapid urbanisation, health issues linked to living in major population centres are really the result of many factors, Chief Minister Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud said yesterday.

Urbanisation is not inherently positive and negative, he said, although the factors that determine social health tend to converge on urban settings.

These determinants, he said, include physical infrastructure, access to social and health services, local governance, and the distribution of income and educational opportunities.

"Communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, chronic diseases such as heart diseases and diabetes, mental disorders, and deaths due to violence and road traffic injuries are all driven by these underlying social determinants," the Chief Minister said in his speech at the official launch of the state-level World Health Day 2010 Celebration at Kuching Waterfront here yesterday.

His speech was read by Minister of Housing and Urban Development, Datuk Amar Abang Haji Johari Tun Openg.

The theme of the World Health Day celebration this year is 'Urban Health Matters: 1,000 Cities - 1,000 Lives.'

According to the Chief Minister, solutions exist to tackle the root causes of urban health challenges. These include proper urban planning, improving urban living conditions and urban governance, moving towards inclusive cities, and building partnership with multiple sectors of society to make cities healthier.

"As far as urban planning is concerned, it is very important for us to promote healthy behaviours and safety through investment in active transport, designing areas to promote physical activities; encouraging healthy eating by managing availability and access to

fresh food; and reducing violence and crime through good environmental design and regulatory controls, including managing the number of alcohol outlets.

"We also have to apply healthy urban design principles, with easy access to basic amenities and services, designated commercial and non-commercial land use, with land set aside for protection of natural resources and recreation," he said.

"The quality housing and services such as water and sanitation are vital contributors to health."

The World Health Organisation estimated that people with disabilities made up at least 10 per cent of the general population, Taib said, so barriers which hindered their access to education, employment and public life must be dismantled.

Globally, populations are rapidly ageing, resulting in proportionately more older people, many of whom will experience mobility and sensory impairments.

Measures such as accessible public transits, kerb cuts, safe pedestrian crossings (eg tactile paving, signal-controlled crossings) all improve safety and enhance participation among disabled and older persons.

"Health is a human right for all citizens. It is the role and responsibility of individuals, civil society, and governments to uphold this principle" he said.

More than half of Sarawak's population now live in urban areas, Taib said, and even though the state's urbanisation-related health and social problems were not as severe as in bigger cities elsewhere, they do exist here as well.

Also, as part of the globalised world, Sarawakians are also affected by the rapid spread of communicable disease such as the current pandemic of Influenza A (H1N1).

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JOHARI (centre), flanked by Sarawak Health Department director Dr Haji Zulkifli Jantan (third left) and Deputy State Secretary Datu Ose Murang and other dignitaries signing the banner to mark the official launching of the state-level World Health Day.
PHOTO: RAMIDI SUBARI

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Importance of global Healthy Cities movement

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One important concept for improving urban planning and the quality of life in cities, Taib said, was the global Healthy Cities movement, which Kuching joined in 1994 at the invitation of WHO, and Healthy City Kuching was launched in early 1995.

Since then, Kuching Healthy City has made a name for itself, both regionally and globally and the city had won the World Health Organisation Western Pacific Regional Director's award for outstanding Healthy City in 2004, the Alliance for Healthy Cities award for Progress in Healthy Cities with Good Governance, and the Alliance for Healthy Cities award for Pioneers in Healthy Cities Creative Organisational Development, both in 2006.

In addition to Kuching City, he said, Healthy Cities concept had also been extended to Serian and Betong while Miri is involved in the Local Agenda 21 movement.

The state government will continue to support and nurture the growth of the Healthy Cities movement in the state, he said.

According to Taib, DBKU's and MBKS's environmental health efforts or programmes in creating Kuching Healthy City Status include the Sarawak river management

programme which was started in 1994 by DBKU with RM1 million launching grant. To date 856,196 tons of floating waste had been removed from the Sarawak River. The programme is ongoing at a cost of RM500,000 a year.

The other activities include the Integrated Waste Management project; Kuching as a Garden City which was declared on 21 July 2003, under which all roads were to be lined with trees (5,000 trees a year have been planted by individuals, community and NGOs, with a total of 61,767 trees planted since 1990); creating 3R conscious communities; healthy schools, involving 20 secondary and 42 primary schools; healthy Bako and Salak Village, and Healthy Street.

In addition, numerous healthy lifestyle programmes were also organised to promote healthy living.

The Chief Minister said there had been tremendous development and progress in Kuching City. In the past citizens in the city were unhappy about the limited opportunities for tertiary education and vocational training, and with the lack of modern shopping complex, and other social amenities in the City.

"Now we have new modern

shopping complexes such as The Spring, Boulevard, and the Hill, and so on."

"As far as tertiary education is concerned, we have Swinburne University, Lim Kok Wing University, UNIMAS, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Masterskill College, SEGi College, INTI College and others, which draw even people from overseas to study here," he said.

Traffic congestion and traffic jam, while not completely eliminated, have been contained with the completion of various flyovers and road improvement projects, he said, adding that the state government is looking at establishing rural development centres as an initiative to bring the urban development concept to secondary towns in the state.

This is part of the new township planning and will focus on potential areas such as Sarikei, Serian, Mukah and Betong, he said.

Another development in the pipeline is the promotion of riverine public transport in Kuching, which will see water taxis operating up to Batu Kawa and Sungai Kuap.

This is in line with our strategies to adopt Environmentally Sustainable and Healthy Urban Transport (ES-HUT) for healthy urbanisation, he said.