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Creative financing has made good pledge to build kampung roads

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JOHOR's holistic approach to development has netted several conspicuous results. This is particularly evident in the kampung, where a major programme is underway to upgrade or build new roads.

Called Projek Jalan Kampung, this initiative by Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman involves the building of 2,400km of new roads over three years at a total cost of RM260 million.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad officially launched the project in Kampung Parit Betak, Pontian in June 1996.

In all, 1,325 kampung roads would be upgraded, of which 368 are in Batu Pahat, 231 in Muar, Pontian (224), Segamat (179), Johor Baru (111), Kluang (86), Kota Tinggi (73) and Mersing (53).

To date, almost three-quarters of the 2,400km target has already been met, with work progressing on schedule on the rest.

Under this programme, the existing kampung roads are being upgraded to three-metre wide tarred roads of 'Grade C' standard, capable of handling vehicles of up to five-tonne weight.

This project is unique, not just in Johor, but the whole country, on several counts. For one thing, it involves virtually no Federal or State funding, but is a product of what Ghani calls "creative financing".

The Federal Government's allocation for rural roads totals no more than RM5 million a year. With that kind of budget, it would take a staggering 20 years to make good 2,400km of new roads in the kampung.

On its part, the Johor Government allocates about RM80 million annually for rural development expenditure, but this also covers other basic infrastructure projects like bridges, and not just kampung roads.

It is for this reason that Ghani has made the upgrading and building of new kampung roads one of the priority projects of the State Government.

And he has chosen to spearhead the programme through Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor - a Johor Government-owned company incorporated exclusively to spur infrastructure development in Johor.

Under the modus operandi, KPRJ has taken on the role of the State Government's implementation arm for infrastructure projects. KPRJ not only bids for privatised projects but also ensures the projects truly benefit the people.

"KPRJ was set up to ensure the people are the direct beneficiaries of privatisation projects and that the State Government's interests in these projects are well protected," Ghani told the State Assembly recently.

"Although privatisation brings development, it cuts back on the State's earnings. However, KPRJ will undertake commercialisation of the Johor Government's assets, so that the people will directly benefit from such ventures," he added.

Ghani points out that it is virtually impossible to expect the Government to make good election promises, such as kampung roads, with the existing meagre State and Federal budget allocations.

Hence, the only way out is to opt to develop State assets like land optimally through KPRJ, which makes money from privatisation and then ploughs back the profit into basic infrastructure projects like roads, bridges, mosques, surau and public libraries in the kampung.

This development strategy has gone down well with the people, especially the rural folk, who have long complained about the deplorable condition of kampung roads. The fact that it is often an issue raised during polls

gives credence to the fact that it a matter close to their hearts.

A case in point is Bumiputera contractors in the villages who had been hit hard by the economic downturn, and who now see the Johor Government's Projek Jalan Kampung as a much-needed lifeline to remain afloat.

More than 100 Class F contractors, identified under the Johor Government's "umbrella concept", are directly involved in the implementation of the project.

To avoid accusations of "outsiders" coming in to seize business opportunities, the State Government has been careful to ensure the chosen contractors have the locus standi to undertake the projects.

Those with a proven track record have also been "groomed" with technical and management courses to boost their competence and capability to deliver the projects on time.

Projek Jalan Kampung has also opened a world of opportunities for rural folks, especially farmers, petty traders and proprietors of cottage industries.

With improved accessibility, they are now able to better market their farm and other rural products, and this inevitably means better incomes and higher standards of living for the people.

"This (the new roads) is the best manifestation of balanced development," noted Ketua Kampung Parit Betak, Maarof Sainon.

"During election time, they always pledge to upgrade kampung roads but the promises never come to pass after the votes are counted. I am glad the Johor Government has found it fit to seriously address this problem," he said.

Kampung folk like Maarof take the promises of the Government seriously and the Johor Government, to its credit, has made concerted efforts to deliver the goods it promised during the last general election.

And they have hundreds of kilometres of new roads in villages to prove it.

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