

02/08/1998

## Getting at the root of delays in implementing simple projects

Rashid Yusof

MORE intimate details on how bureaucratic procedures are slowing down simple government projects like repairing schools, surau and road-building works came out into the open this week, as the delays are dissected ever more closely due to the economic downturn.

Datuk Annuar Musa - the Rural Development Minister, whose Ministry oversees about half the estimated RM1 billion worth of these small- and medium-scale projects a year - disclosed some startling facts on Thursday.

"Repairing a kampung bridge, a project which at times cost as little as RM5,000, needs 10 steps, spreading over months," said Annuar, exasperated by the red tape.

At a time when the small projects are urgently needed - they provide jobs to contractors who have to hire workers and, overall, improves livelihood - the project document still goes through the labyrinth, beginning at the approving body, such as the wakil rakyat.

It makes stopovers at the District Office and the State Development Office, before descending on the Implementation and Co-ordination Unit at the Prime Minister's Department, which will issue the warrant, only if there is nothing wrong with project.

Its return journey takes the same route. "But the DO is required to call for quotations, a process which can take a month. Yet, the job can be just about replacing some pieces of wood," said Annuar, after chairing a monthly meeting to assess infrastructure projects under the Ministry.

At the meeting, Annuar was none too pleased to learn about the slow implementation of rural electricity and water supply schemes and of work involving 2,700 road projects covering 3,000km, worth RM185 million this year.

When told that the final project paper was still being drafted for a number of rural electricity projects for which funds have already been given, Annuar retorted: "That should have been done before the project was approved."

The exasperation comes at a time when most people have come to expect work to be accomplished at great speed.

Make no mistake about it. The Malaysian civil service is seen as the best among the developing nations and is now striving to achieve the international standards for management and product/service excellence - ISO 9000 - by the year 2000.

The argument is that the current situation demands innovation so that the downturn is not severely felt by the people, especially the poor.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had already issued a directive for red tape to be minimised in projects that can spur economic growth, saying government employees could no longer operate at the current pace given the economic situation.

In this context, a comment on the need to effectively implement the National Economic Recovery Plan, by MP for Tambun, Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah, who is an economist, may be relevant.

He said last week: "The culture of working from 8am to 4pm, with routine coffee breaks must go ... we are moving into the 21st century."

Then, last Sunday, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, dissatisfied by the implementation of small projects Annuar was referring to, slapped an Aug 31 deadline for the projects to get off the ground. As a follow-up, Anwar accompanied by Annuar, then inspected some of these

projects in central Perak, to push for speedy implementation.

It is a relief, therefore, that efforts are being made to simplify procedures. Already, the Entrepreneur Development Ministry headed by Datuk Mustapa Mohamed has been able to disburse a lot more money to small-scale entrepreneurs since it asked applicants to deal with it directly from this month.

"When banks were disbursing it, only loans of between RM60,000 and RM70,000 were given out weekly. Now we are releasing RM600,000 to RM700,000 a week," said an official, who nonetheless understood the need for procedures as a form of safeguard. "But the current situation requires us to be innovative."

For, too stringent procedures leave little room for flexibility. "The civil service has a command structure. Thus, people down the line wait for orders, afraid of doing the wrong things," reasoned Chua Tian Chang, director of Labour Research Centre, a company which, among others, conducts labour-related studies.

Which probably explains an unofficial term reportedly called tawakuff in some sections of the bureaucracy which means a project has neither been approved nor rejected.

Annuar, on his part, said the influential Village Development and Security Committees should take over the small projects to circumvent the red tape.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, too, raised the need for the State Education Departments, instead of the Public Works Department, to carry out some simple projects, like building functional classrooms.

We are probably witnessing the Malaysian civil service's version of "do-it-yourself" taking shape here. One poser may still crop up, though. "Why the urgency was not apparent before?"

Annuar, of Pas-ruled Kelantan, described the reporter's question as Pas-style, saying:

"Why should you look at it from that angle? It is better now than never, especially when there is an urgent need to ensure the livelihood of the poor is not affected by the downturn."

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