

Felda's lost opportunity for Indians
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There is plenty of blame to go around with regard to the marginalization of rural Indians.

A momentous opportunity to put this right was lost between the 60's and 80's when the Felda schemes selected settlers almost entirely from one ethnic group.

Note that the original Land (Group Settlement Areas) Act of 1960 governing the development of scheme areas does not specify any ethnic preference in settler recruitment, merely requiring settlers to be Malaysian citizens.

Also, Felda's own policy guidelines permit it to recruit 30 percent of any scheme population from non-Malays for schemes that are located outside Malay reservation areas.

Yet, despite sizable numbers of needy and deserving non-Malay rural poor, especially Indians, little effort has been given by the government to recruit non-Malay settlers in its land development schemes.

In 1980, the World Bank lent its voice to concerns over the ethnic bias in settler selection by pointing out that if the government was serious "about increasing the non-Malay share in agriculture, some increase in the non-Malay share of settlers was warranted."

It was especially concerned about Indian estate workers who faced increasing under-employment following the estates' conversion from rubber to oil palm and who in normal circumstances "would be good candidates for land development schemes." (see Lim Teck Ghee and Richard Dorall, "Contract Farming in Malaysia" in D. Glover and Lim Teck Ghee, eds. *Contract Farming in Southeast Asia: Three Country Studies*, Kuala Lumpur, 1992).

The World Bank's concerns (and that of numerous other Malaysian organizations and individuals) went unheeded. No change whatsoever was permitted to the policy emphasizing Malay participation and restricting non-Malay participation in rural development programs.

The Felda schemes have been lauded for their outstanding success in poverty alleviation but as with many other success stories in the country, it is one tainted by the discriminatory policies embedded in them.

Today, some twenty odd years later, the damage has been done. Many rural Indians and their children remain deeply mired in hopeless and never-ending poverty. But it is not too late to correct this historical and ongoing injustice.

The 9th Malaysia Plan has allocated RM11.5 billion for distributional programs or over RM2 billion a year between 2006 and 2010. Let us all good Malaysians (including MIC President S Samy Vellu) exercise vigilance over this expenditure to ensure that all poor and marginalized Malaysians - including poor Indians - get their fair share of the allocation.

Let us use our democratic right to pressure agencies and state and federal level governments to provide the details of land alienation and settlement programs, and account for who have benefited and who have been excluded.

Many years ago, the British colonial government in Malaya was accused of treating the Indians like oranges, sucked up and spat out as pips; today, our own government must be asked to explain why there seems to be little change in policy towards rural Indians.

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