

I have fallen a little behind with my blog. People have been asking me what I think of the so-called Second Stimulus Package. What I have to say about it can wait a little while longer. My comments would do little to lift the dismay of our citizens and business people with a package as puzzlingly weak, and directionless, as it is large.

Last Thursday I visited Rumah Nur Salam, a centre for homeless children in KL's Jalan Chow Kit area. Rumah Nur Salam is founded and led by the indefatigable Dr Hartini Zainudin, the daughter of a dear departed friend of mine. I spent some time with the children and toured the centre, which is, as its name implies, a haven of peace in a very troubled area.

Here, in Chow Kit, in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, less than a kilometre from the Twin Towers and a stone's throw from PWTC, life is cheap, drug users shoot up in the back alleys and children wander the streets hungry. Infants are bought and sold by syndicates, young children are supplied for prostitution and child-pornography. Hundreds of children are on the streets or homeless. They beg and hustle and sell themselves for sex. They are runaways or abandoned or neglected children, vulnerable to STD and HIV, to drug addiction and to rape and murder. Many among them have no registration papers. Although they may have been born to Malaysian parents they are "stateless" and therefore ineligible for free inoculation, medical education or education. They are abused and traded with impunity by criminals and corrupt officials because when they disappear it is without trace. They are nobody's constituency.

Homeless children and street children in Malaysia number in the tens of thousands. They are in Chow Kit, but also in Dengkil, Jinjang, Pantai Dalam, Kepong, Selayang, Subang Jaya, Petaling Street and Pudu and in the bigger towns across the country. In Sabah and Sarawak, the problem of stateless children is acute.

I sat down to listen to a small circle of community leaders, social workers and volunteers. Some worked with these children. Others worked with other "at risk" groups such as prostitutes, drug users and transsexuals. What these groups have in common is that they are rejected by society. Many of the leaders come from the very groups they now serve. Having picked themselves up, they immediately felt called to give back to others. The work they do is more than a job. It is a full-time commitment around which they have shaped their lives. Some have served here for decades, walking daily up and down streets that the police recently considered "too unsafe" to keep a beat base open in.

Chow Kit

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah
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They told me of a set of linked issues: poverty, bigotry, crime, social breakdown and bureaucratic indifference. They spoke about government that could not join the dots between ministries to help people, and of announcements of assistance that amounted to nothing.

Having served a constituency in the depths of Kelantan for forty years, I have seen my share of poverty, but urban poverty is brutal. The family unit is broken. Women and children are left to fend for themselves. The weak are prey to the strong. People are bought and sold like things.

Chow Kit holds up a mirror to our society. It is an image we would rather not see. The way we treat the weakest among us places the worth of our entire society in the balance. In God's sight this weighs more than all the wealth we could accumulate.

There is another sense in which urban poverty test us. It is the weathervane of our social and economic ills. Since December, the number of abandoned children has risen dramatically. For the children freshly abandoned to the street, and for their parents, the recession occurred more quickly, and undeniably, than for our leaders.

Behind the evasive and woolly talk we have had about growth figures and fiscal stimuli are the absolutely tangible consequences of our policy decisions in the lives of ordinary people. Economic management, or the lack of it, has disproportionate consequences on the life-prospects of the most vulnerable members of our society.

I came away humbled by the visit. The quiet, day by day heroism of the community leaders and volunteers working to make a difference in Chow Kit was a lesson in leadership as service. I am grateful for all that they and the children shared with me with such open hearts.