

Mayor Abang Abdul Wahap at a tree planting event.





Abang Abdul Wahap

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN KUCHING NORTH

In January 2013, the Mayor of Kuching North in Malaysia, **Datuk Haji Abang Abdul Wahap**, launched a five-year city enhancement plan. Known as CBS, which stands for Clean, Beautiful and Safe, or ‘*Cantik, Bersih dan Selamat*’ in Malay, it aims to make Kuching “the most talked about city in Asia”. Some aspects of this plan were developed when the Mayor and his colleagues attended the TEMASEK FOUNDATION LEADERS IN URBAN GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME (TFLUGP) in June 2012. Prior to his appointment as mayor in 2011, Datuk Haji Abang Abdul Wahap served in public service as a teacher, probationary inspector, Sarawak’s State Deputy Police Commissioner, and Director of Narcotics Crime Investigation Department. Centre for Liveable Cities Deputy Director Julian Goh conducted this interview with the Mayor in Kuching on 28 March.

● **Kuching North City Hall recently launched the CBS Enhancement Plan. Can you tell us what this plan is all about?**

The CBS Enhancement Plan is a road map encouraging people to make Kuching “Clean, Beautiful and Safe”. During TFLUGP, we learned about the need for an action plan to be put up, documented and understood by everyone. We were amazed to know that Singapore has got this Active, Beautiful, Clean (ABC) Waters Programme master plan, and we were thinking we should also have a plan to integrate all our initiatives. While the TFLUGP lectures were

going on, my team used to compare notes and say “Why can’t we do this?” or “We have done this.” So there are a lot of things that can be benchmarked. We came up with the CBS catchphrase during our presentation at TFLUGP. After returning to Kuching, we conducted more workshops, and then came up with the CBS documents, including the Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs. One can say that the CBS plan was “Made in Singapore, Born in Kuching”.

For example, one of the plan’s KPIs is to reduce household waste by 50% over five years. People were telling me, “This is a real challenge for you!” Well, I think it is a realistic target because according to a study, 70% of what is thrown out can be recycled and reused. People in Kuching are not yet into the 3 Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle), even though we have introduced this for some years now. But if every citizen could embrace that thinking and participate, I think it’s possible to reach our target. So I’m very excited about the prospect of this plan materialising.

Population
200,200

Land Area
369.48 square
kilometres



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● **Community engagement is a key aspect of the CBS Plan. Who are your main stakeholders, and how does the City intend to engage them?**

Basically this enhancement plan has become our bible. We need to explain it to everyone – through roadshows, for example – so that there will be ownership and cooperation. We are looking at the 3 Ps – the people, the public and private sectors. Our main stakeholder is definitely the state government. They have been responsive to our plans.

What is next is really getting the community to understand that they also have a role to play. This is not just about committees; this is about the people themselves. So if our neighbourhood schemes can gather everyone, I don’t mind going there to tell them about this plan, and how it won’t be successful unless they put their heart and soul into it. If everybody understands and does their part, I think getting Kuching to be talked about in 2017 is not impossible.

We would like to be the catalyst. Previously, the City Council would announce a *gotong-royong* (community participation) event, and everybody would come, but just for the T-shirts or the food. At the end, only the staff would be left carrying out the activities. Now, a *gotong-royong* event will mean that the local committee will initiate it while the City Council contributes logistics support, and then we recognise the committee as our partners. Getting the community involved is quite difficult, so once they are with us, we have to show our appreciation. This is important because we have to work hand in hand.

For example, we had been looking after a market at Sungai Maong. As we did not have the manpower to look after it, we outsourced it. But it was always unsatisfactory to the people of Sungai Maong who claimed that the contractor didn’t do the work. So we said to the people: “Okay, you form a company, you do it, and we’ll give the money to you.” That’s what is happening now, and there are no more complaints, and we see the job is satisfactorily done. This is how we would like to get people on to our side.





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- 01 Citizens are encouraged to recycle, to reduce Kuching's household waste by 50% in five years.
- 02 Mayor Abang Abdul Wahap officiating a partnership with a Chinese community association.

I tell partners that we can't always give money, but we can give support in other ways. If they want to go into a joint venture with us, then yes, we can. Our annual regatta, which takes place the last weekend of February, is a good example. It is going to be on our tourism calendar but it is not funded by us. What we do is forego the revenue from advertising, for instance. We issue a composite licence, just a minimal sum. And then we administer the whole thing. Through smart partnerships, strategic alliances, joint ventures, piggy-backing on each other, that's how we do it.

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01 Mayor Abang Abdul Wahap at the demolition of a city market.

02 Residents at Sungai Maong were encouraged to form a company to clean their market, which resulted in better work.

03 Sarawak state Chief Minister at the launch of the CBS enhancement plan.

● **Now that the CBS Plan has been launched, what is the next milestone for the project?**

Having everybody understand this plan will take some time. This remains our main task for now. We're going to schools; we're going to talk with the neighbourhoods, and with the private sector. And we will tell them that they can always knock on our door if they have any plans or ideas to improve Kuching.

We want people to adopt our roundabouts. The first roundabout is all lit up at night, which is what we want for every roundabout. But the cost will not be borne by City Hall, but by the private sector instead. That's why we want to get everyone to understand, you are involved now, what is your contribution? We want people to stop pointing fingers and to give us the necessary support.

For example, at our newly launched Orchid Park, we're encouraging schools to attend workshops to learn how to start their own orchid gardens instead of just admiring the orchids at the Park or writing to us to ask for flowers whenever they have a function. Why not get the schools to take it upon themselves to grow them? Having flowers at school creates a good ambience and lets the children gain a love for nature.



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Now we are seriously thinking of having our own swimming pool. This is a project I will try to launch before my term is over. Why? Because we want to make the place beautiful and vibrant. Because there will be spin-offs: with people learning to swim, we can encourage competitions among schools, and perhaps we can have festivities with other water sports, like water polo.

Pandelela Rinong is the first female Malaysian Olympic medallist (Bronze medal for 2012 Olympics 10m diving event), and she comes from Sarawak. So perhaps we will, with the swimming pool, have more Pandeledes. But as we may not have the funds, we have got in touch with various companies, to see if they can come up with the funding on a Build, Lease and Transfer basis. This has not been done before by the council, but I am confident. This is where we want to involve the private sector, in smart partnerships.



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● **What are Kuching North’s strengths, and what are the main challenges you face as the Mayor?**

I want to say that I’ve got a very good team. They are forward-looking; they don’t only give me support, but also ideas for the betterment of the city. That’s how the CBS Plan came about. The other strength is that in Kuching, generally people are friendly. Also, we have a very supportive state government that insists that we do things for the people, such as facilitating economic development.

The main challenges? When I first came to City Hall, I found it’s about trying to change mindsets. Some people are so in their comfort zone that when you do

something new, there may be resistance initially. But eventually they do it, when they understand it’s for the betterment of everybody.

The other challenge is that, along the way, there may be some fine-tuning to be done. That’s because we specifically mentioned in our plan that where targets are concerned, they remain as figures subject to quarterly reviews, to ensure that we are realistic in our approach and to get feedback from the community on whether we’re doing the right thing.

But I can sense that with the way we’re going forward now, with our zone officers reaching out to the community and with the community coming onboard through Facebook, for example, we will be able to get there – to make Kuching the most talked about Asian city by 2017.

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01 Mayor Abang Abdul Wahap with a cat, the symbol of Kuching city.

02 The Mayor with participants at Kuching's annual regatta.



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● **What is one unique thing about your city that most people will be surprised to know about, and why?**

I'd say the thing about Kuching, to me, is the name itself. Because *kucing* means "cat". That's why Kuching is referred to as Cat City. People even say if you don't take a photograph with the statue of the *kucing* when you are in Kuching, then you have not been to Kuching! That's also why we have the cat museum. How did Kuching get its name? There is no actual documentation on that. I used to joke that when James Brooke [the British colonial "Rajah of Sarawak"] came, he saw many stray cats and when he asked about the place, he was simply told "*kucing*". So he said, "This town is Kuching."

● **URBAN SOLUTIONS** is aimed at urban leaders and experts. If there is one message you can give to aspiring city leaders, what would it be?

Come up with a plan that can work, that everybody will accept. Do not be afraid that it has not been done elsewhere. Try new things. And one must also bear in mind that something can be good for some other places, but can't always be wholly adopted; there must be customisation and flexibility. But you cannot just think of a plan. You've got to have the facts and figures too. But then again, do not be afraid about having all these things, just move ahead.

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