A Participatory Process towards Sustainable Cities: Snapshots from Malaysia

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Think City is a Malaysian urban impact organisation committed to making cities more people-friendly, resilient, and liveable

Urban Mechanics

Think City Urban Mechanics was set up to improve the quality of citizens' lives by involving them in **participatory civic engagement** in urban issues solutions ideation and innovation. These community-based solutions promote a better sense of belonging and ownership of public spaces, and reverse the decline of cities, creating quality places where people want to live, work, play and learn.

Environment & Social

Think City Environment & Social work looks at the challenges of urban communities in terms of **liveability** and their **resilience** towards climate change impacts. Our projects span research, advocacy and designing solutions focusing on **social inclusion** in public housing, urban safety, health, as well as **climate mitigation and adaptation**.

Strategy & Analytics

Think City's Strategy & Analytics practice **generates evidence-led insights** to guide urban policy-making, providing input into **decision-making for cities** at both strategic and tactical levels. This encompasses effective discovery, interpretation, visualisation, and communication of meaningful patterns in data.


Culture-Based Economic Development

Think City's Culture-Based Economic Development includes work in **conservation** and **adaptive reuse**. This includes preparing dilapidation surveys, strategic master plans and conceptual design as the basis of reference for interventions, restoration and adapted space use.

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Our process prioritises an evidence-based, iterative approach towards developing and implementing solutions to urban issues

Iterative process:
Feedback, Codification &
Stakeholder Engagement

Discover

Design

Demonstrate

Disseminate

- Observation and investigation

- Understanding the site

- Stakeholder engagement

- Demonstrative projects

- Implementation

- Post mortem
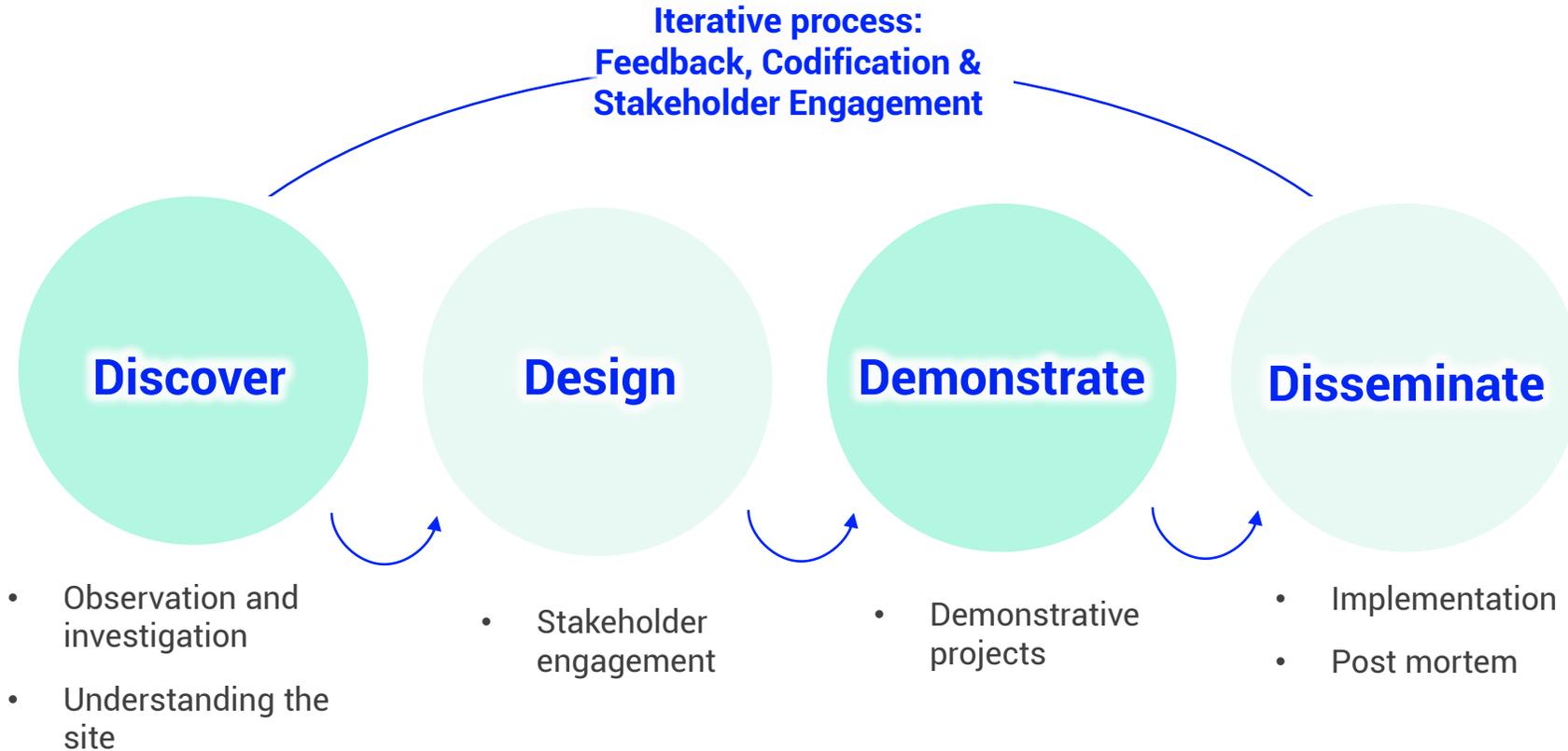
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Investing in holistic efforts that contribute to high impact accelerators towards sustainability and climate action

Think City's work includes

Nature-based solutions

- Creating **green spaces and connectors** with **high sequestration trees**
- Retention ponds, bioswales

Transit & TOD

- Supporting efficient & effective **mass public transportation**
- Enhancing **TOD** – improving walking and cycling connections

Social resilience

- Supporting **income generation** and **economic development**
- Improving **social housing programmes**

C4O CITIES — High-Impact Accelerators for Climate Action

- Towards zero waste
- **Clean air (indirect)**
- Clean construction
- Cities and unions call-to-action on jobs
- Divesting from fossil fuels, investing in a sustainable future
- Equity pledge
- Good food cities
- **Green & healthy streets**
- Net zero carbon buildings
- Renewable energy
- **Urban nature**

Towards achieving Malaysia's goals for low carbon cities

National Low Carbon Cities Masterplan

Measure - Manage - Mitigate
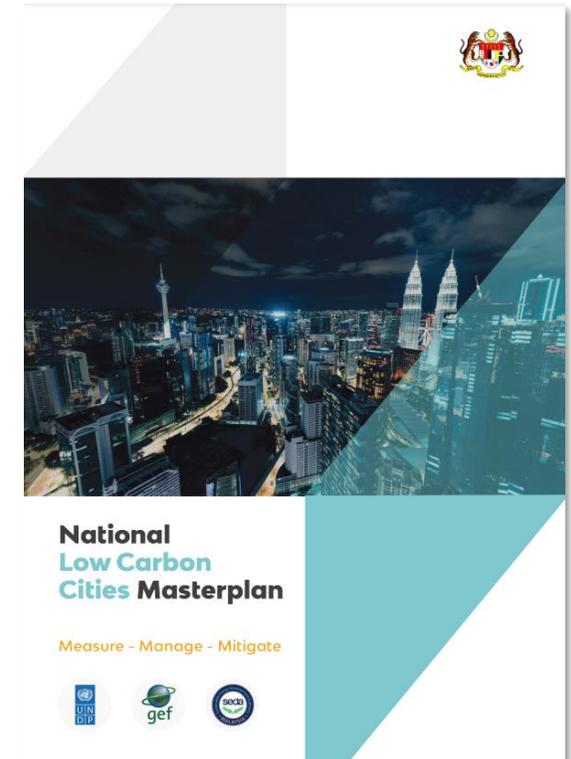
Source: Malaysia Ministry of Environment & Water (KASA), C40 Cities, UN Development Program

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The participatory process is a cornerstone of Think City's work and stakeholder engagement is a key element of the Think City process

3 snapshots from Malaysia

Armenian Park, George Town, Penang

Creating green space in a downtown heritage zone

Laneway Improvement Programme, Johor Bahru

Employing a public realm improvement programme as an engagement strategy

Penang Nature-based Climate Adaptation Programme, Penang Island

Pioneering an urban adaptation programme in Malaysia

❶ Armenian Park, George Town – Transforming a barren plot into a pocket park

BEFORE

Armenian Park was an abandoned plot within a heritage zone, used for sale of stolen goods

- **Armenian Park** is located in downtown George Town, right in the heart of a UNESCO World Heritage site

- An underutilised barren plot

- Singular use: Informal flea market selling stolen goods in a heritage enclave

Armenian Park – Creating green space in a downtown heritage zone

AFTER

Today, Armenian Park is a popular pocket park, frequented by tourists and locals alike

- Think City worked with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the state government, local council, and especially the local community to redesign the plot

- Transformation from a to a **multi-purpose community hub, pocket park**
  - Green, public space
  - Public seating
  - Flexible, multiple uses
  - Intergenerational space
  - Porosity for better connections, walkable links
  - Rejuvenation of surrounding areas followed suit

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A participatory process was necessary to incorporate voices from the entire community in order to create a space that is inclusive for all

- Armenian Park's rejuvenation was executed with **all stakeholders** in mind, with the aim to **strengthen communities**

- Many **skeptics** questioned every aspect of proposal, requiring **extensive dialogue**
  - Numerous **engagement sessions with various interest groups** were held to ensure the final design would meet needs and address concerns across groups

- **Strong objections** from unlicensed traders unwilling to give up their space
  - **Negotiations** were mediated between with traders and local council for **amicable relocation**

Regular, face-to-face engagement with local community and council ensured involvement from various segments of the community

A public exhibition presented draft plans, with visitors voting their preferences using stickers

Armenian Park is now a multi-purpose, intergenerational green space

Key Learnings

1. Regular and continuous **dialogue** from the **beginning**
   - Ensures stakeholders are bought-in from the start

2. Use a '**pop-up**' as a teaser/ sneak peek to final plans

3. Include the most **contentious objectors** and address concerns

AFTER

A flexible space that can be used for festivals and gatherings, as well as for everyday recreation

AFTER

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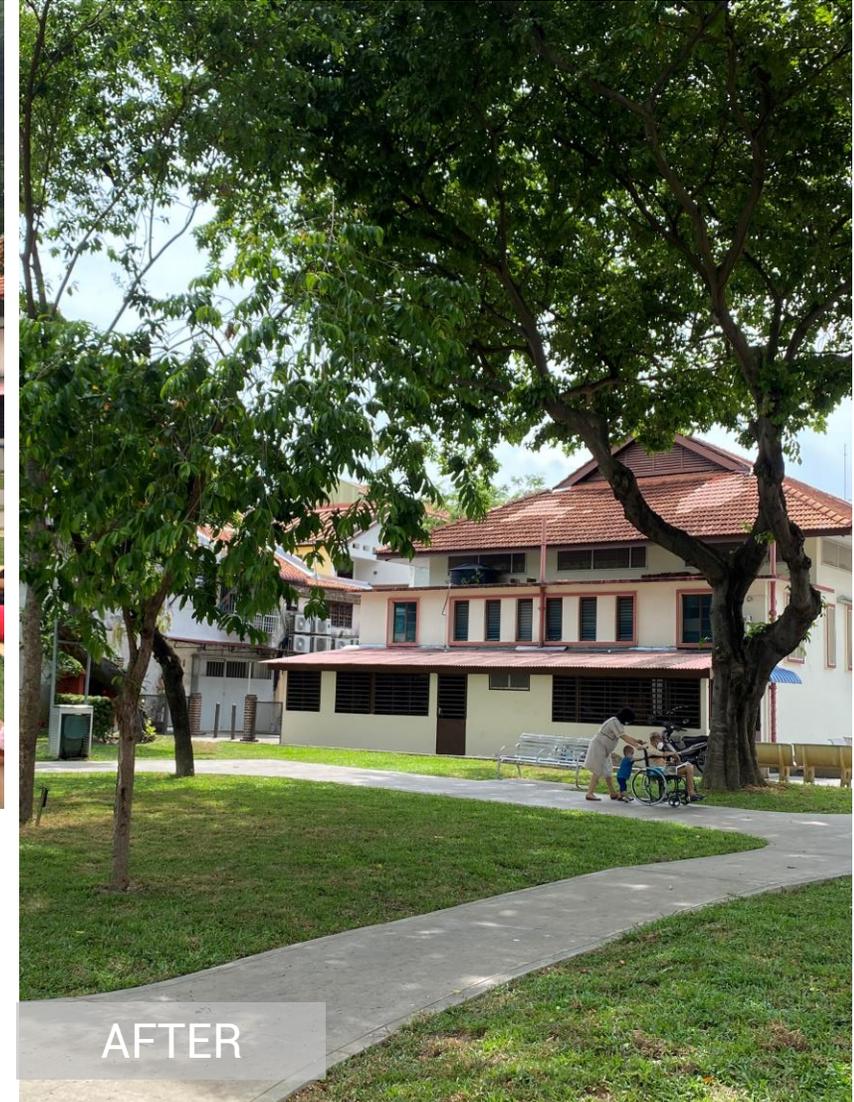
❷ Downtown Johor Bahru Laneway Improvement Programme – Employing a public realm project as an engagement strategy

BEFORE

AFTER
- LIP JB -

- The Downtown Johor Bahru **Laneway Improvement Programme** is a partnership with the local municipal council

- **Objective 1: Improved laneways**
  - Enhancing urban quality
  - Increasing functionality of back lanes
    - Improving waste management system
    - Removing illegal parking lots
    - Creating a dedicated bike lane
    - Transforming underutilised spaces into pocket parks
  - Increasing walkability – laneways as secondary connectors in downtown area

- **Objective 2: Stakeholder engagement**, using urban design to shape behaviour
  - **Deepening relationship** with local council
  - **Engaging** with local community, **create buy-in** from business owners, locals, surrounding community to work together to enhance liveability in Downtown JB
  - **Identifying community partners** to implement landscape and programming

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The Laneway Improvement Programme engaged local business owners, the general public and the local council within a participatory design process to build buy-in and ensure long-term success

Community participation in the design brief

Why engage with the community?

- To **understand** how the community utilises the laneways, their issues and challenges, their needs and aspirations

- **Explain** the process, timeline, and proposed plan for improvement of laneways

- Allow the community to **ask questions** regarding the plan

- Give the community a **platform** to **share their grievances and ideas**

Key Learnings

1. Urban design programmes themselves can be used as **engagement method**

2. **Stakeholder mapping is a key process** to determine modes of engagement with stakeholders – group discussions, one-to-one sessions

3. **Face-to-face interactions** and creating **neutral ground for gathering and** is beneficial. Think City set up an office at the heart of Downtown JB as a show of commitment to the community.

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As a result, laneway improvements were made to increase functionality, safety, and connectivity as well as to reduce risk of flooding (1/3)

BEFORE

AFTER

Black water management

Permeable pavers installed to increase water catchment area

Upgraded **drainage**

Street lights upgraded to **LED lighting**

13

As a result, laneway improvements were made to increase functionality, safety, and connectivity as well as to reduce risk of flooding (2/3)

BEFORE

AFTER

Street lights upgraded to **LED lighting**

Permeable pavers installed to increase water catchment area

Upgraded **drainage**

As a result, laneway improvements were made to increase functionality, safety, and connectivity as well as to reduce risk of flooding (3/3)

BEFORE

AFTER

Black water management

Permeable pavers installed to increase water catchment area

Improved **pedestrian connectivity**

Street lights upgraded to **LED lighting**

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③ Penang Nature-Based Climate Adaptation Programme (PNBCAP), Penang Island – Pioneering an urban adaptation programme in Malaysia

Urban greening | Stormwater management | Social resilience | Institutional capacity
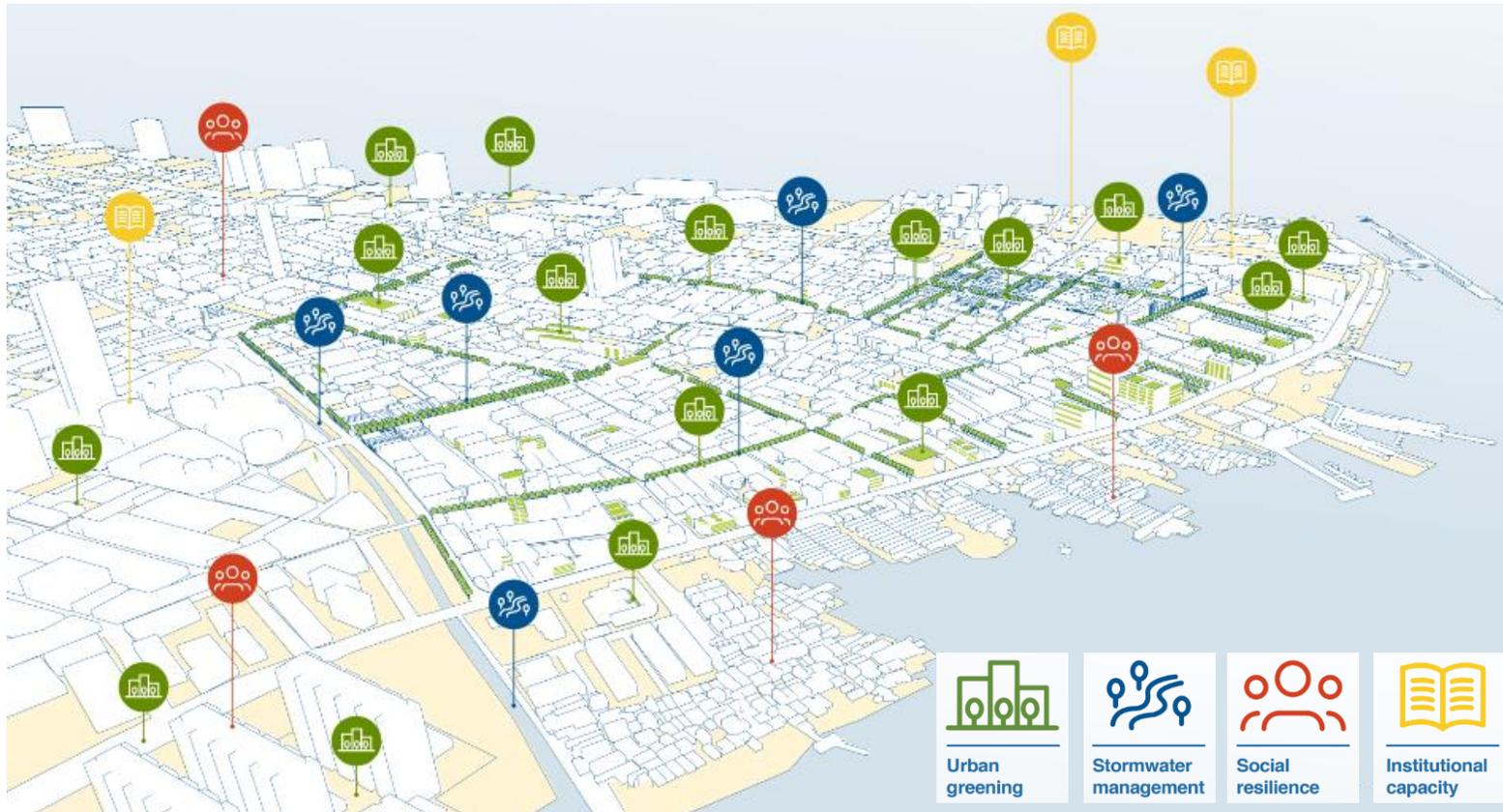
- **The Penang Nature-based Climate Adaptation Programme (PNBCAP)** seeks to reduce human and ecosystem health vulnerability to climate change impacts and enhance urban resilience
  - Addressing **heat stress** and **flooding**
  - Strengthening **social resilience**
  - Building **institutional capacity**

- Objective: To use nature-based solutions to reduce climate change impacts in Penang, reducing threats to human life, infrastructure and property

- Focus area: George Town & Bayan Lepas, Penang

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The focus areas of the programme were developed to address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of the local community

HEAT STRESS

Reduce temperatures and UHI effect by **strategic planting of trees** and introduction of **green spaces**

FLOODING

Reduce the number of flooding events by using **upstream retention** and **blue-green corridors**

SOCIAL

Strengthen social resilience among **vulnerable communities, women and girls**
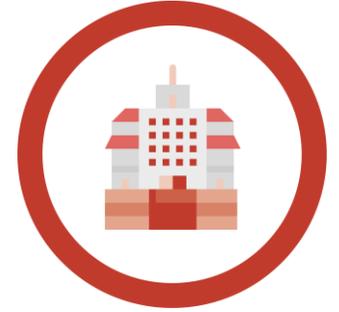
INSTITUTIONAL

Institutional capacity in **public health sector** reinforced

Knowledge management platform created for municipal adaptation

Penang **disaster risk unit** created

Climate-resilient street tree species study developed

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Engaging with the community was key in the process of developing the Penang Nature-Based Climate Adaptation Programme
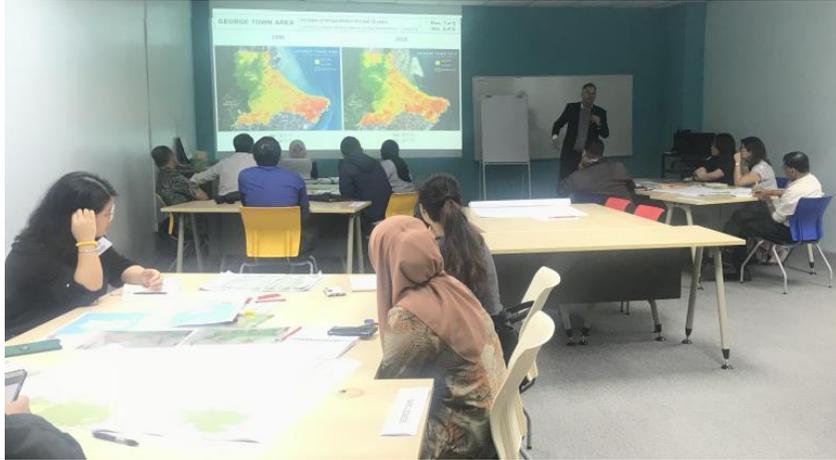
Climate Adaptation Workshop, 2019

A climate adaptation workshop was held in collaboration with the Penang State government in November 2019 as part of the Penang2030 initiative.

Penang Climate Action Week, 2019

Think City alongside several local partners hosted the inaugural Penang Climate Action Week held between 16 – 24 November with the aims of creating public awareness on climate change as well as promoting sustainable production and consumption.

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Special attention was paid to reach out to vulnerable groups – underprivileged groups, women and girls – to include their views and needs within the programme

B40 outreach, June - August 2020

B40 outreach was carried out in 4 locations within the programme's two study areas – George Town and Bayan Lepas mukim. Two were conducted in George Town and two in Bayan Lepas. In total, 290 surveys were conducted.

Focus group discussions, June - August 2020

FGDs were conducted to obtain views on climate change awareness among **women and girls**. In total, 30 women were engaged through interviews and FGDs

A month-long PNBCAP exhibition was held to engage potential partners and the general public

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PNBCAP Exhibition, October 2020

A **month-long exhibition** on the Penang Nature-Based Climate Adaptation programme was organised to **engage with potential partners, stakeholders and the general public**. The main aim of the curated exhibition was to **raise awareness** on the climate change impacts in Penang and the use of nature-based solutions as an adaptation strategy.

Over the past decade, Think City has gathered learnings and best practices that have developed into the Think City Process

The participatory process is a part of Think City's DNA. While each intervention is different, several key steps are crucial for engaging with stakeholders and drawing them into the process:

1. Identifying and mapping stakeholders

2. Determining strategy and methods of engagement

3. Planning each engagement

4. Closing the loop

Identifying and mapping stakeholders

High Level of Interest

COLLABORATORS
Keep informed and communicate regularly

PARTNERS
Manage closely and keep engaged

Low Level of Influence

High Level of Influence

CONFORMERS
Keep informed and monitor

INFLUENCERS
Keep involved and satisfied

Low Level of Interest

Identifying and mapping stakeholders

High Level of Interest

COLLABORATORS
Keep informed and communicate regularly

- Separate collaborators into groups of the same interest
- Organise FGDs
- Could possibly organise workshops or townhalls to gather cross-collaboration ideas

PARTNERS
Manage closely and keep engaged

- High level engagement
- Frequent communication
- Have interviews or one-to-one meetings
- Gather parties within this group of stakeholders for a workshop

Low Level of Influence

High Level of Influence

CONFORMERS
Keep informed and monitor

- Managing crowd expectation through media releases and exhibitions
- Run public survey to gather comments and feedback

INFLUENCERS
Keep involved and satisfied

- Frequent communication
- Get buy-in
- Sharing facts and details
- Have workshops or townhall with influencers to gather feedback and comments

Low Level of Interest

Determining strategy & methods of engagement

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Non-exhaustive

Engagement Tools

Interviews	Polls/ surveys
Focus group discussions	Drop-in events/ Exhibitions/ Open days
Workshops	Walking tours
One-to-ones	Pop-ups

Engagement strategy

Engagement Tools	Stakeholder Profile
Communication	All
Surveys	All
Large group	All
One-to-one session	Collaborators, Influencers, Conformers
Small group discussion	Partners, Collaborators
Session: Inform	Collaborators, Influencers, Conformers
Session: Participate	Partners, Collaborators, Influencers
Session: Endorse	All
Pop-up	All

Planning each engagement...

Define purpose and goals of engagement. Identify resources and budget

Determine the level of engagement and choose suitable methods

Executing the engagement

Gather and synthesise engagement results

Assess and evaluate the engagement, measure outcomes
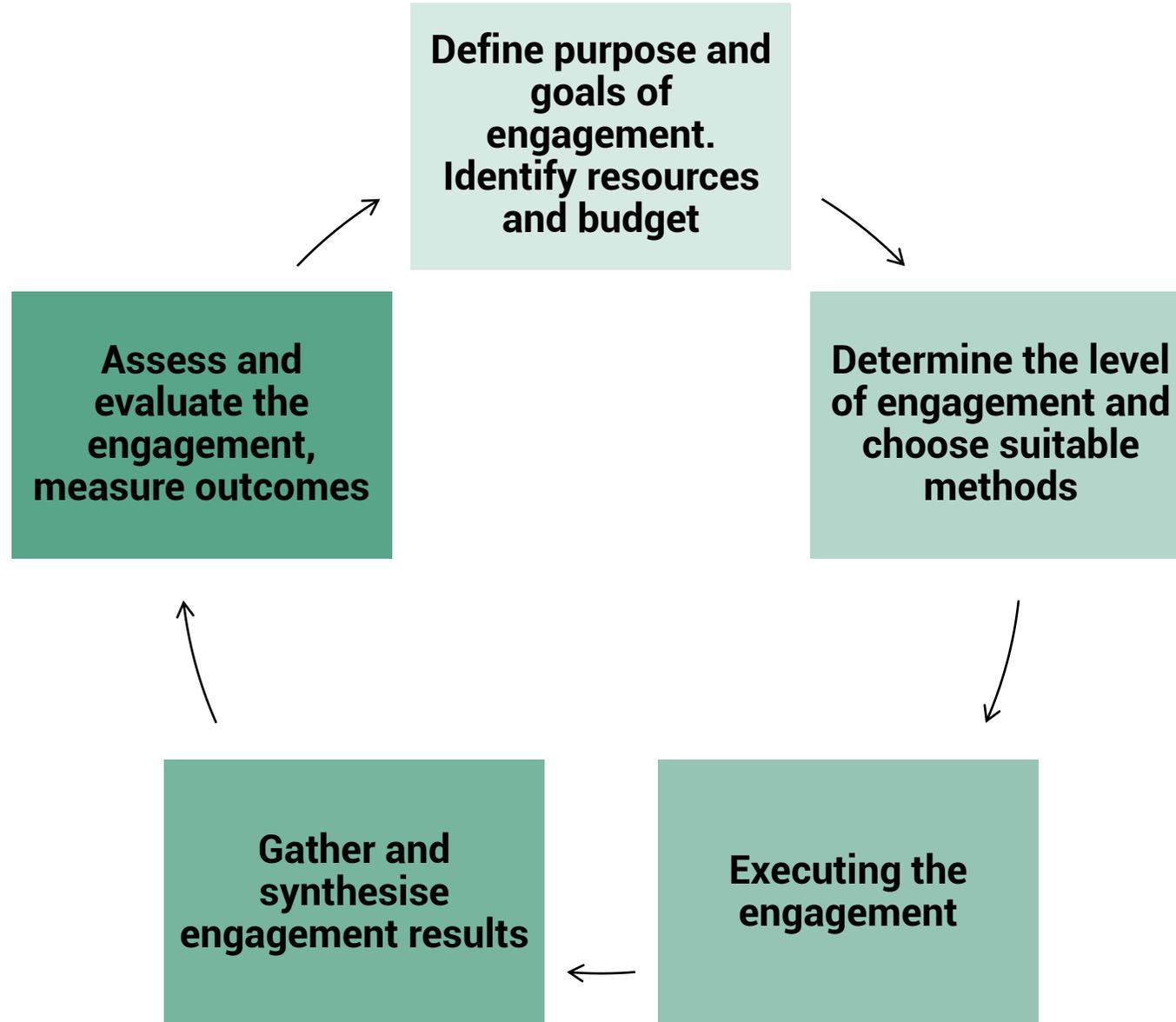
... and Closing the loop

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Recommendations for shifting engagement to participation

1. Involve stakeholders **early** and **consistently** for long-term support

2. Conduct a survey/ census to **understand stakeholder perceptions** and affected parties

3. Use **clear**, **continuous 2-way** communication

4. Anchor decision in **data** that represents community sentiment

5. Present **clear** options, timeline and processes to **reduce uncertainty**

6. Be **transparent**

7. Engage local community groups through **various formats** and via **multiple channels** to reach diverse groups

8. Identify **project champions** who are established in the community

9. Be **reachable**
   - On-ground team to present a human face
   - Accessible feedback /complaints mechanism

10. Use **visual language** and **personal narratives**
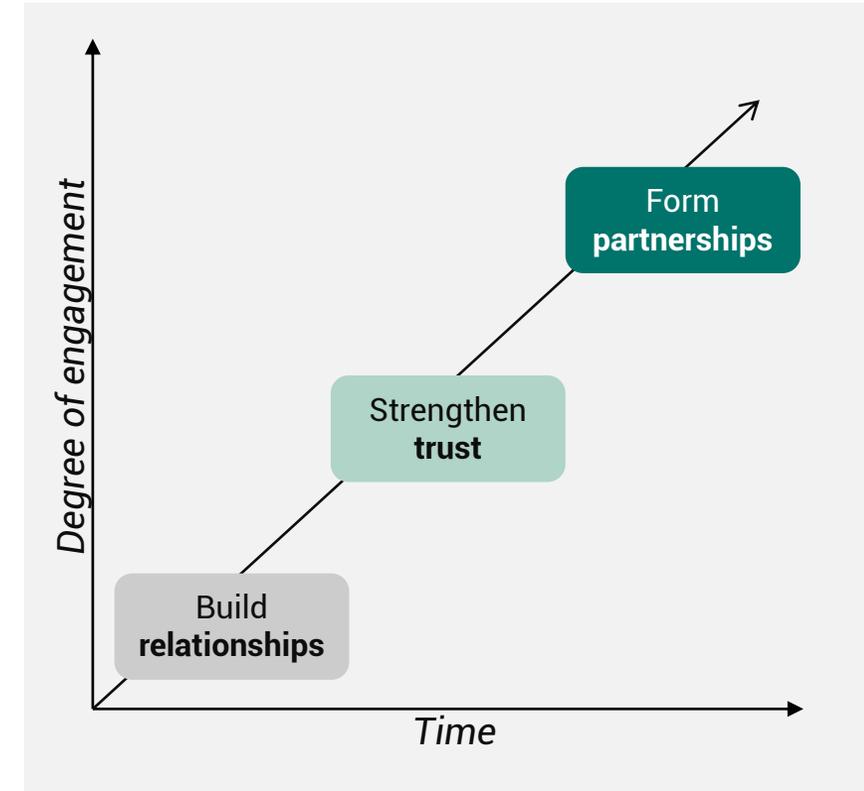
Key elements for achieving shared vision through engagement

Degree of engagement (y-axis) / *Time* (x-axis)

- Build **relationships**
- Strengthen **trust**
- Form **partnerships**

THANK YOU.

Reach out today!

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