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SORIYA YIN: Hello. My name is Soriya Yin. I am a visiting scholar in MIT-UTM Sustainable Cities Program. In this video, I will be reviewing the Segget River Restoration Project as a good example of sustainable city tourism development in Malaysia. For centuries, people have lived along rivers. Rivers are a source of life. They provide water, food, transportation, places for recreation, and much more.

For these reasons, cities around the world are connected to rivers. As more and more people seek to live in cities, driving up land prices, many urban rivers have been filled in to make space for growing populations.

Unfortunately, filling in rivers can worsen flooding and water pollution problems. Some countries regret having filled in their rivers and are trying to restore them. Malaysia is one such example.

The Segget River flows through the center of Johor Bahru, the capital of Johor State in Malaysia. The Segget River used to be the primary waterway and a source of life for many people. When Johor Bahru was a small town, people sold their products from their boats. For many, the Segget River was a source of their cultural identity. Johor Bahru has become the second largest city in Malaysia. It was also seriously polluted. Many people avoided going near the river.

Because of its strong odor, tourists had no interest in coming to the city. They use it only as a layover on their way to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or Malacca. In 2005, the city decided to cover up the river to use it as a sewage system and amend road. When the cover was added, flooding wasn't. Now Johor Bahru wants to become a world-class city. It seeks to expand tourism.

To achieve this goal, the city wants to restore the Segget River. To do this, it will take the cover off, build water treatment plants, introduce flood mitigation systems, and beautify the river, making it attractive for recreation and business. Mr. Abd Halim, a project management officer from the Iskandar Regional Development Authority, explained the rationale.

ABD HALIM: We added the [INAUDIBLE] Johor Bahru. So first what we call it a [INAUDIBLE] syndrome, where there's no population, declining businesses, then no activities. The River Sungai Segget is heavily polluted, and they say that Johor is smelly because of untreated [INAUDIBLE] of pollution. Again, no pollution, no business and all that.

So with that issue, or what we call it [INAUDIBLE] syndrome, we initiated this Johor Bahru transformation program, and then we seek government funding, federal government funding. This initiative started 2010 in detail. We do all the design calculation, design detailing. So [NON-ENGLISH] we successfully secured government funding, a ceiling cost of about 240 million for this project.

SORIYA YIN: At first, digging up the river in the middle of the city sounded like a crazy idea. The cost would be substantial, and a lot of people would be affected. My recent study of Johor's effort to promote sustainable city tourism found that the Segget River Restoration Project is a valuable and noteworthy idea. Mrs. Norbaizura Binti, a city planner, explained how Johor Bahru is seeking to promote environmental and cultural conservation, foster economic development, and ensure physical connectivity and walkability.

NORBAIZURA BINTI: So the lesson learned, by covering the river, is only the upper-- the short-term solution. For the long-term solution, this is what we did on this side. We tried to settle the environment issue, the flood issue. We tried to make the river as the heart of the city. To make a vibrant city, we have to do that. There's a lot of history for Johor Bahru's center, so it's so important for [INAUDIBLE] sanitation.

We want to increase the economic value, the environment, and the identity of Johor Bahru. And now we are trying to rebranding the image and identity of Johor Bahru. We want the new brand for Johor Bahru city center. So we benchmark [INAUDIBLE], just [INAUDIBLE] like that. We want to promote Sungai Segget as a new product in [INAUDIBLE] center, the must-visit place.

It's good for environment. It's good for the image of the city. It's good for the public, the tourists. If you can see the future image for Sungai Segget, I think all the Johor area will be part, yes.

SORIYA YIN: The Segget River Restoration Projects also illustrate importance of democratic governance as a part of sustainable city tourism development. Johor Bahru has been able to make great strides by consulting with stakeholders, minimizing social impacts, providing fair compensation, and building strong partnerships. Mr. Abd Halim explained how democratic governance has been used to win the public support.

ABD HALIM: We do a lot of engagement with stakeholders. We call it a focus group discussion, meetings and workshops and one-to-one discussion. The first one, we started with all the building owners, the big, big players like [INAUDIBLE], City Square Public Bank, and all the big, big business owners in this area. So we want to know, what is their acceptance towards this project, including what kind of environment that they want to see within this area?

The first proposal design for this area, we want to make it as fully pedestrianized. There's no motor vehicle to be at Jalan Wong Ah Fook. So we want to make it pedestrianized. So after we engage with all the stakeholders, they not agree. They say that the Jalan Wong Ah Fook is a main thoroughfare of Johor Bahru. There's no benefit of doing this. So we come back to a combination of river rejuvenation and some sort of public transport.

SORIYA YIN: Though his shop was badly affected by the construction, Mr. Chan Lim was happy with the project.

CHAN LIM: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

SORIYA YIN: Minimizing social impact is important for public project management, but having a long-term plan, such as a city master plan, is a major asset for the project. The plan provides an overall framework and attracts resources. Mr. [INAUDIBLE], a board member of Johor Area Rehabilitation Organization, a local social service NGO, has a great hope for the city plan.

SORIYA YIN: This river restoration Project in Johor Bahru offers six lessons for other cities in developing world seeking to promote sustainable city tourism. First, conserving and beautifying urban environment is a key to promoting sustainable city tourism. This may involve restoring ecological features for use by both city residents and tourists. Second, sustainable city tourism needs to conserve urban cultural heritage. This is what makes each city unique. Cultural heritage attracts tourists.

Third, physical connectivity, particularly walkability, is at the heart of sustainable city tourism. Tourists must be able to walk around a city to enjoy it. Fourth, sustainable city tourism can and should expand the economy of the city. The goal is to enhance the well-being of both locals and tourists.

Fifth, democratic governance is crucial to building public support for sustainable city tourism. Public investment in infrastructure, for example, are more likely to serve the general public when the public is consulted on design and finance strategies. Last and most important, never mess up your river. The river will take good care of us, if we take good care of it.

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