

## LOCAL AUTHORITY INITIATIVE IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY LIVELIHOOD IN URBAN AREAS

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**Abstract:** *Urban areas are often regarded as places with many economic opportunities, services, infrastructure and facilities. However, the cities also embrace many challenges and pose threats to the urban population. Urban community in big cities in Malaysia like Shah Alam faces issues like urban poverty, health problems, inequality, disability rights, crime and many others. This paper presents the outcome of a study that led to creating an action plan for the Shah Alam, Malaysia community. The study's objective is to systematically undergo a process that infuses the community's needs and aspirations, therefore enabling the formulation of an action plan that promotes sustainable community livelihood in an urban area. The method used a qualitative approach, using the case study technique. Shah Alam's communities were engaged in three Focus Group Discussion sessions involving community representatives, stakeholders, and various agencies in community development. A total of 339 were selected through Purposive Sampling. Site Observations were conducted to examine the lifestyle of Shah Alam's communities. Results demonstrated that the communities were looking forward to a strategic action plan by the local authority to improve their livelihood. The end product is an action plan that will become a primary reference for the city council in promoting sustainable community livelihood in Shah Alam.*

**Keywords:** *Urban Area, Sustainable Community, Livelihood, Local Authority Initiative, Action Plan*

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## Introduction

Malaysia's cities continue to grow. With vast changes in urban landscapes and their components, the population in cities constantly expand. However, extending city elements, including its inhabitants, potentially brings many challenges and threats. A city like Shah Alam experiences an increased population, creating demands for more economic opportunities, infrastructure, public facilities and amenities. Early investigations unveiled that Shah Alam City also faces issues like urban poverty, health problems, inequality, disability rights, crime and many others. Any city thrives to meet these demands to ensure the livelihood and resiliency of the people are taken care of. To safeguard the well-being of the Shah Alam communities, the Shah Alam City Council (SACC) has continuously put efforts into its development plans and initiatives, which deliberately engage and include its communities in development plans, especially for community development plans.

*Community development* is a long-term process focused on improving the community's life standard (Riswan & Beegom Bushra, 2021). An ideal community development brings community and government into planning by identifying the issues and drawing collective actions for the benefit of society (UNDP, 2023). A community development strategy is considered assertive and influential in social transformation (Abiddin et al., 2022). However, community development should embrace people's participation in activities, problem-solving and networking (Bhaktikul et al., 2021).

To acquire a sustainable community, a community development plan must consider integrating several critical components into the strategy, including economic viability, social equity, sustainable transportation and community engagement (Payini, et.al, 2024; Abiddin et al., 2022). Sustainable communities embrace a holistic approach whereby the environment, social well-being and the economy are considered. The concept promotes resiliency, vibrancy and a harmonious place to stay and work. The urban population can improve their livelihood, social interactions, and living standards through a strategic community development plan. Community development empowers residents and strengthens and connects communities (Abiddin et al., 2022). A structured plan can balance the urban communities and the environment, building a sustainable nation.

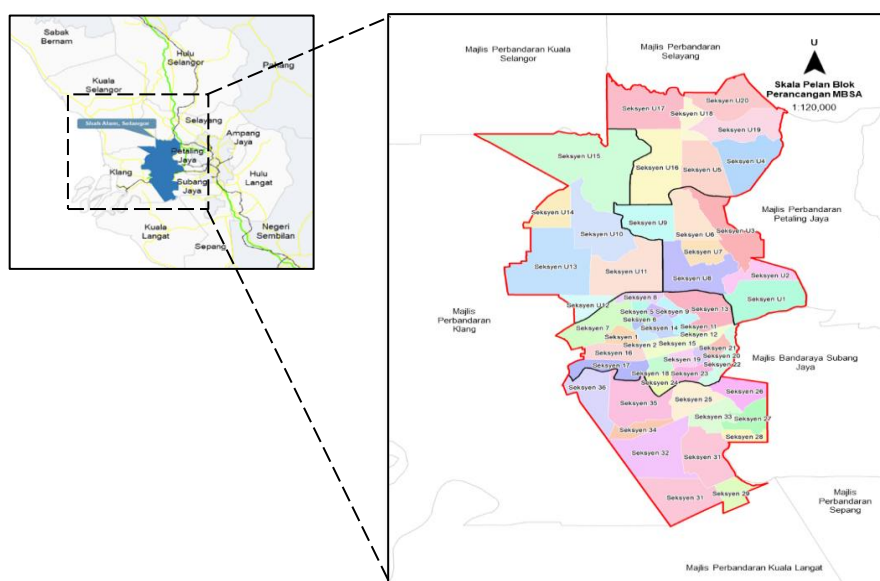
In Malaysia, urban community development often focuses on sustainability and improving the community's well-being. The authorities have developed comprehensive strategies and policies to ensure that the development of the community can achieve the ultimate goal. The Malaysian Urban Rural National Indicators Network for Sustainable Development (MURNInets) act as a significant policy framework to assess urban sustainability with multiple indicators to improve the living quality of the urban population. MURNInets is an approach used by PLANMalaysia to measure and evaluate the sustainability of a city and its affiliates through city indicators. MURNInets act as a tool to measure and evaluate the sustainability level of a local authority's area through a set of predetermined indicators. (PlanMalaysia, 2022). This programme can monitor the city's sustainability level, including community development in the local authority's jurisdiction area. Sustainable community initiatives are characterised by

collaborative programmes that focus on the environment, social and economic resilience, and the inclusion of the marginalised community in urban areas. The programmes initiated by the urban population vary according to the community's interest, and the most common programme is community gardening. Community gardening initiatives are gaining traction in urban areas, allowing residents to cultivate green spaces, improve food security and foster social cohesion within communities (Mokhtar et al., 2021). The local authorities usually assist the community by providing the tools and support needed by the community to ensure a successful programme.

## Methodology

This study was designed using a systematic approach, employing the Case Study method focused on Shah Alam City (Figure 1). Community development study also fits qualitative approach (Al Fajar et.al, 2024). The aim was to develop a strategic Action Plan to promote sustainability within the Shah Alam community. To create this action plan, the study was divided into two phases: (i) Community Profiling and (ii) Formulation of the Shah Alam Sustainable Community Action Plan. The first phase involved two Focus Group Discussions (FGD), an Expert Engagement session and a validation process with the City Council's Management conducted in 2023. The second phase included one (1) FGD and a validation process with the City Council members in 2024. A qualitative technique was utilised, incorporating both secondary and primary data.

The strategic process for community profiling comprised a series of discussions between SACC and the researchers. These activities aimed to establish the study framework, develop methodologies, and validate each process stage. After receiving guidance and requirements from SACC, particularly from the Department of Community Development, the study began with an extensive and thorough literature review as part of the secondary data collection. This review focused on relevant policies and strategies, including international community development strategies, national blueprints, and local policies. The preliminary literature review offered insights into current issues within the community development sector, although specific community concerns had yet to be identified.



**Figure 1: The Targeted Study Area**

Source: Majlis Bandaraya Shah Alam, 2024

The initial analysis aimed to identify principles for creating a sustainable community and to connect these principles with existing relevant policies and strategies. A comprehensive review evaluated SACC's initiatives for the Shah Alam community over the past five years. The study highlighted aligning existing policies with community programs, revealing strengths and weaknesses in those efforts. Following this content analysis, two (2) series of FGD were organised. The questions for these discussions were derived from an extensive examination of community programs conducted from 2018 to 2022 in Shah Alam, encompassing various activities, including educational, recreational, religious, festive, health, environmental, and more. The FGD sessions utilised Purposive Sampling to select specific community representatives and stakeholders. The first FGD took place on July 17, 2023, with 58 participants from various backgrounds, including the SACC Council Members, community representatives, representatives from the technical departments of the City Council, stakeholders, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Figure 2).

In addition to the FGD sessions, the study included site observations across all 56 sections of Shah Alam. These observations assessed the existing infrastructure, public facilities, surroundings, and the atmosphere and functionality of community spaces. This exercise provided valuable insights that complemented the feedback from FGD participants regarding their neighbourhoods. All data collected from primary and secondary sources were analysed and synthesised using Thematic and Content Analyses, respectively. The findings were then presented to the Shah Alam City Council (SACC) before the validation process conducted by SACC's Expert Engagement and Management in November 2023. This step marked the finalisation of the study's outcomes and deliverables for the first phase.



**Figure 2: First session of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2023.**

The second FGD occurred on August 24, 2023, and aimed to engage community members from various backgrounds, including representatives from organisations dedicated to community development, residents, planning authorities, non-governmental agencies, and community associations. This session attracted a significant turnout of 153 participants (Figure 3). The strategic process continued into 2024 as part of the second phase. The third FGD took place on May 7, 2024, with 128 participants from diverse backgrounds, including the SACC Council Members, community representatives, technical departments of the City Council, stakeholders, and NGOs (Figure 4). The session was carried out to include more inputs from the locals and verify the results discovered from the 2023 study. The researchers believed that participants from diverse public backgrounds would enrich the foundation for the formulation of the action plan, as suggested by UNDP (2023).





**Figure 3: Second session of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2023.**



**Figure 4: Third series of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2024.**

During the process of preparing the action plan in 2024, there was a series of discussions between the researchers and SACC to present the findings and verify the results. A specific validation session by the SACC City Council Members was then organised on September 6, 2024 (Figure 5). The purpose of this final validation process was to present the framework of the action plan.



**Figure 5: Validation Session with City Council Members and research team held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2024.**

Figure 6 demonstrates a summary of the study methodology, which involved two (2) phases and was conducted in 2023 and 2024.

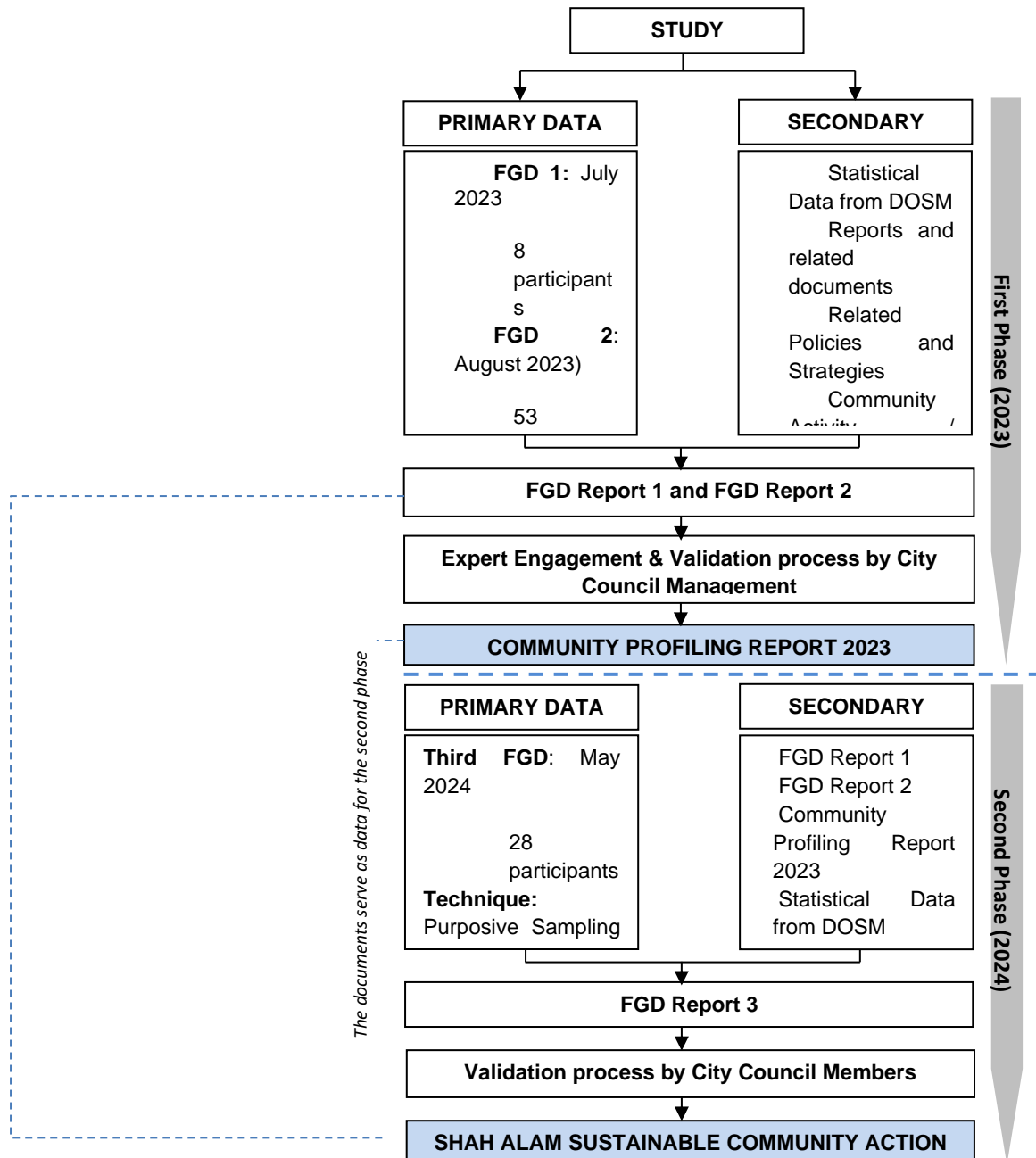


Figure 6: Methodology of the Study

## Result and Discussion

Community development is a long-term process with clear objectives and integrated actions (UNDP, 2023). The Shah Alam City Council's initiative to formulate a strategic action plan for the Shah Alam Community was a systematic approach taking a two-year process from preparation to establishing the Shah Alam Sustainable Community Action Plan 2025-2030. A five-year plan was considered viable, considering the city's ever-changing social lifestyle and socioeconomic changes. The Bottom-Up Approach was employed in making the action plan following the recent guideline by UNDP (2023), which suggests a participatory approach whereby facilitators assisted in examining and analyzing the community's needs and aspirations. Shah Alam City Council managed to outline the strategies based on the initiatives originated by the communities, and the focus concentrated on the needs and priorities of the communities. These criteria were vital for a community development plan (UNDP, 2023).

The study started with the Community Profiling Study, which took place in 2023. Site observations were conducted to understand the Shah Alam community's background and lifestyle, and two (2) FGD sessions were held to analyze the government's policies and statistical reports. These techniques fit community development (Silverman & Patterson, 2021). Analysis from the statistical reports revealed that Shah Alam has a population of 821,379 people recorded in 2020 (Department of Statistics, 2020). In 2020, the population breakdown saw 174,402 people below the age of 15, while the range between 15-64 years old was 579,782 people, and those 65 years old and above 58,143 people (OpenDOSM, 2020). This information informs that attention should be paid to the increasing number of elderly and working people. The other crucial aspect was the multi-racial people living in Shah Alam, which offers diverse beauty in culture, arts, and lifestyles.

The Focus Group Discussions (FGD 1 and FGD 2) revealed vital issues affecting the Shah Alam community, categorized into four thematic clusters: social, economic, environmental, and management/services. Social challenges include the lack of youth and community involvement, low community awareness, and social issues such as crime and unemployment, particularly among youth and men. The influx of foreign workers further complicates social dynamics as residents face challenges integrating with these new populations. Additionally, individualistic tendencies among younger residents, driven by overwork and a lack of time for social interaction, have reduced community cohesion, highlighting the crucial need for more decisive social infrastructure and improved community interaction.

Despite the economic challenges, the local economy in Shah Alam holds significant potential for growth. The Focus Group Discussions (FGD 1 and FGD 2) revealed that the economy is currently monopolized by foreign workers, limiting business opportunities for residents. However, with strategic planning and community involvement, these challenges can be overcome. Low purchasing power, non-strategic business locations, and financial constraints hinder economic growth, but these are not insurmountable. Additionally, many abandoned buildings post-COVID-19 and unregulated industries exacerbate economic stagnation, but with the right interventions, these can be turned into opportunities. The environmental concerns centre on impractical green practices, frequent pollution incidents, and flooding due to inadequate drainage systems and excessive solid waste disposal. Deforestation in Shah Alam's community forest for housing development disrupts local ecosystems, contributing to these environmental issues.

Under the management and services cluster, there are significant constraints in governance and service delivery. Weak law enforcement, inadequate access to user-friendly facilities, and ineffective solid waste management limit the quality of public services. Moreover, the use of technology remains underdeveloped, and community programs face difficulties due to space constraints, lack of targeted group participation, and insufficient funding. These management issues and infrastructural disparities, particularly between central and southern Shah Alam, impede progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering a resilient urban environment. Both FGDs emphasized addressing these issues through improved community interaction, infrastructure, and management systems.

The communities highlighted their aspirations for the community's expected action plan. They stressed the need for an atmosphere that is community-friendly, inspires teamwork and access, and is more proactive in terms of environmental care that matches the needs of sustainability and resilience. Programmes that involve marginalized communities or develop a community space are recommended to build social cohesion and ensure accessibility for all residents regardless of their status, including low-income households, women and the elderly. Implementing environmentally sustainable practices among the residents was addressed as one of the essential aspirations for achievement. Besides that, the Shah Alam community aspire for the urban community to be more inclusiveness, resource availability and environmental care. Residents dream of a city where safe public spaces are accessible to develop social relations among different community groups.

The community-based atmosphere is where the sense of belonging is robust and allows the community to be committed to developing a better quality of life. It is also envisioned that urban spaces will be attractively sustainable in the future, and the community will pride themselves on reflecting the values and needs of its manifold population. In terms of safety and security, the participants agreed that the level of security in Shah Alam is still moderate and not comprehensive. This is because there are areas that are identified as safe, and there are also areas that need to be given serious attention by the local authorities because they are less safe. Among the areas that were found to need more emphasis in improving security are Sri Muda, Pusat Bandar, Kota Kemuning, Section 27, and Section 30.

Phase 1 of the study resulted in two (2) FGD reports and the Community Profiling Report (Figure 7). The Community Profiling Report was then used as the primary reference for the second phase of the study in the year 2024. However, to ensure a robust approach to formulating the action plan, the 2024 work included another FGD session to verify the findings presented in the Community Profiling Report from 2023. Again, participants were allowed to share their ideas and recommendations to be included in the action plan.





**Figure 7: Outcome of the two FGD sessions and the Community Profiling Report**

Following the 2023 study, the investigations continued in 2024, and results exhibited similar issues expressed by the community. FGD 3 reinforced these concerns, particularly highlighting the lack of user-friendly facilities, financial constraints, and the challenges of engaging target groups in community programs. It also highlighted gaps in spiritual and educational programs, which could foster a more holistic community development approach. Additionally, the Association of Single Mothers was identified as a group that needs more attention, revealing a need for more inclusive community initiatives that address specific marginalized groups. Addressing these gaps, alongside enhancing solid waste management, remains crucial to ensuring sustainable urban growth in Shah Alam. The findings were then compiled and presented in a report that systematically addressed the background of the participants, the issues and problems shared by the community, and suggestions to be included in the future action plan (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: The Report from the Third FGD Session in 2024**

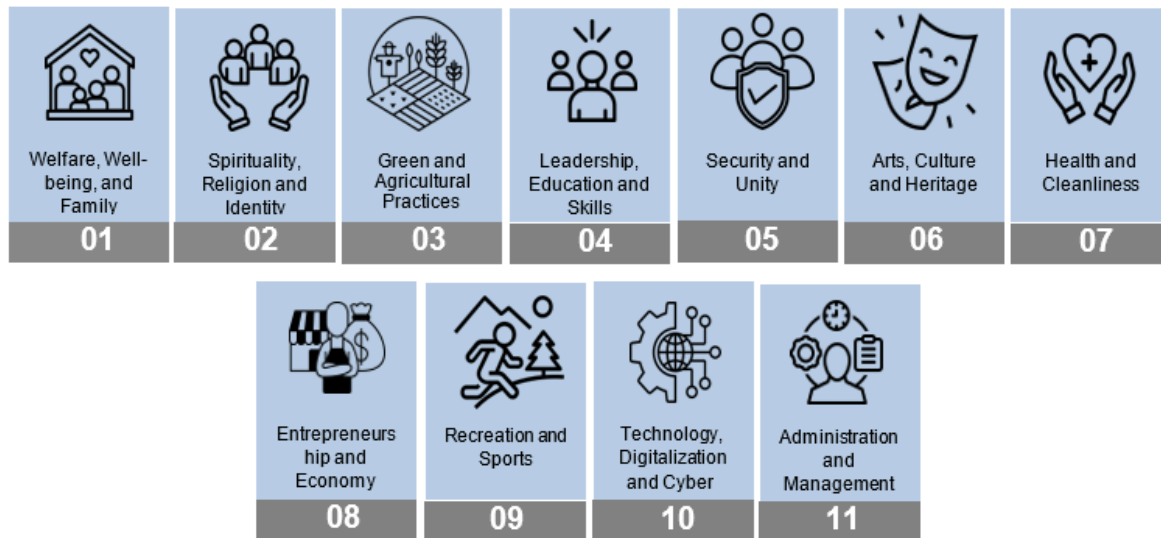
The third FGD session captured several critical ideas from the public. The community and stakeholders in Shah Alam decided that an action plan is much needed. However, the focus was outstretched from the findings gained in 2023. The participants encouraged that besides having strategic actions for specific aspects like environment, spiritual and religion, education, recreation and sports, entrepreneurship, technology and digitalization, and many other aspects, the community also recommended designated actions for specific categories of the community, i.e. the elderly, children, women, disabled and youths. The researchers valued the proposition put forward by the community and realized that the residents of Shah Alam were directly to the City Council's initiative.

The construction of the Shah Alam Sustainable Community Action Plan 2025-2030 was then framed into distinct subject matters. The action plan started with the background of the action plan, the process, and SACC's aspirations and targets (Figure 9). Subsequently, the background of Shah Alam city and its community was presented. The report also showcased the lifestyle and everyday activities of the community. The gist of the action plan was then outlined, containing strategies with specific objectives, the actions, activities or programmes, type of participants, stakeholders and strategic partners, targets and approach to monitoring. These tactical approaches were designed based on lessons from UNDP (2023).

The components of strategies and actions were also aligned with SDGs and New Urban Agenda and other government blueprints like the National Community Policy, Shared Prosperity Vision 2023, National Urbanisation Policy, National Physical Plan (4<sup>th</sup> Edition) and many other related policies. Most importantly, the strategies were comprehensive, involving 11 themes of focused areas (Figure 10). Apart from those specific areas of concern, the action plan also strategized for specific groups like the women, elderly, youths, children and disabled as proposed by the community. Hence, the action plan can be accepted as an inclusive community development plan.



**Figure 9: Shah Alam Sustainable Community Action Plan 2025-2030**



**Figure 10: The 11 Focused Areas for Strategic Actions**

## Conclusion

The drive to formulate a systematic action plan for the city dwellers of Shah Alam was triggered by the continuous transformation of urban land use and increased population in the city, which inevitably brought issues and challenges to the communities of Shah Alam. The city council, therefore, intends to create a sustainable community as part of its many efforts in sustainable initiatives for the city. The city council aspires to create a city that promotes a sustainable living lifestyle and environment and ensures the well-being of its communities. The Shah Alam Sustainable Community Action Plan 2025-2030 is a Bottom-Up approach and was created through a two-year process involving Phase 1 for Community Profiling and Phase 2 for designing the action plan. Many work stages were involved throughout the process, and participatory approaches were the main tasks that saw three (3) Focus Group Discussion Sessions along the way and several technical verifications with the Engagement Experts.

The action plan is considered a holistic community development plan as it infuses the ideas and recommendations of the community and sets forth to meet the demands and needs of the residents for five years. The strategies aligned with international and local policies and concentrated on specific groups, such as women, people with disabilities, youths, children, and the elderly. The actions outlined were comprehensive, covering 11 key aspects that promote the well-being and resiliency of the community as well as protect the environment. Overall, the Shah Alam City Council has made a groundbreaking effort by pioneering a strategic action plan for its community.

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