



EPIC Homes: Extraordinary People Impacting Community

by Nadhira Halim

Illustration by Ben Leon

Can the EPIC model be adapted to other crises?

IN 2011 THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME ESTIMATED that 34% of the Orang Asli, Malaysia's native population, live in poverty and 82% are in need of housing aid. As in other parts of the world, the Malaysian housing crisis is making it challenging for people to own their home. While land values are rising, the difficulty of borrowing, unemployment, and the depreciation of the Ringgit currency all provide barriers to prospective homeowners.

The current economic climate is only one of many complications, and the housing crisis is even more challenging for the Orang Asli. For this marginalised tribe, access to adequate housing is often linked to questions of land ownership, forestry, industrial appropriation – 'development' – and the loss of local skills. For the Orang Asli, their homes are deeply linked to their identity, as families and tribes who live and depend on the natural resources of forests and rural areas. But with urbanisation, and the 'gazetting' of forests for palm oil plantation, their indigenous villages have been demolished and their displaced residents face an uncertain future.

Extraordinary People Impacting Community (EPIC) is a new organisation that empowers local people, facilitates development, and enables community-based housing solutions. Established in 2010, EPIC Homes was founded by four young Malaysians from Kuala Lumpur, inspired after a weekend volunteering experience to visit and repair an elderly man's unsafe house. To their shock, the house – one of an estimated 12,000 such houses in the region – was in need of much more than minor repairs. He needed a new house.

Without any previous experience in housebuilding, engineering, architecture, or construction, these four young people designed and created a system simple enough so that individuals without any specialised knowledge could be involved in building homes. Using their modular system and accompanying illustrated guidebook, a simple house can now be constructed onsite by volunteer builders in three to five days.

Even though the basic design of EPIC Homes are suited to a tropical climate, their growth and success could be a model to inspire organisations worldwide.

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SKILLS: Gaining life skills while volunteering

As part of pre-build preparation volunteers are required to take part in a one-day Builder Basics training programme to learn how to operate the tools and machines they'll use onsite. Volunteers are also familiarised with the village's cultural history, the recipient family, and their construction team. Following the Builder Basics course, they are trained to build an EPIC Home with a team of 24 volunteers. Within this larger group there are four groups of six people who are led by a specialist, each team responsible for either the roof, floor, walls, and structure.

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Following this experience, there is then the opportunity to participate in further education courses, such as the Advance Builder course, which prepares volunteers to become specialists and lead their own team of builders. From there they can progress to become a Master Builder and take charge of an entire build project. With the skills and experience gained from EPIC workshops and builds, several volunteers have gone on to set up their own businesses. Learning new and useful skills is essential to rewarding voluntary work, as it draws people in above and beyond their passion for the cause, and has the potential to create new livelihoods.

PROCESS: Systematic and fair community-led assessment

Who “deserves” a house? And in what order? Very often a need assessment is a major challenge that NGOs and organisations encounter when providing services to affected communities. The EPIC process, though, engages the community from the outset, allowing them to determine their own criteria for housing assessment and fairly establishing their own priority list. An asset-mapping process is also undertaken, ensuring that potential homeowners will have access and legal rights to their construction plot. The land selected by local families can either be where their existing house sits, or on a new site. Most often, families either own the land, or are granted building permission from the landlord. Official agreements must always be in writing and documented before a house is built to ensure legality. Due to the informality of Malaysian villages, no planning permission is required for each home, but the local authorities are notified prior to construction.

Once funding for a house and build is secured, either through grants or Corporate Social Responsibility funds, EPIC Homes will refer to each village’s priority list. To ensure the homeowners commitment to, and the sustainability of, the programme, they have to offer ‘sweat equity’ towards a Pay-It-Forward system. In addition, at least one member of each family has to be involved in their own house build and the construction of two other houses in the village, where they will work alongside EPIC volunteers and their neighbours.

Just like any EPIC participant, homeowners are offered the opportunity to progress towards leading a team of builders in another village. Some opt to take contractual employment for concrete foundation casting undertaken before the three-day build. Through the EPIC network, members of the Orang Asli community have also been hired to run traditional craft workshops, performance, storytelling, and other projects.

EPIC has successfully created a process that is both embedded in community and sustainable – not only for its participants and volunteers, but also for the villagers. Community engagement, together with the Pay-It-Forward programme, supports a collaborative attitude and gives everyone a clear and transparent understanding of the need assessment system.

PEOPLE: Breaking down social and economic boundaries

Throughout the three days, builders go through the meaningful experience of constructing a home together with local families. In Malaysia, especially around Kuala Lumpur, there are extreme wealth inequalities between rural communities and urban areas.

These inequalities have specific impacts on the Orang Asli as their basic lifestyle involves an interrelationship with nature, which is disturbed by urban and industrial development. EPIC Homes creates an equal platform where individuals from different backgrounds can meet, work together, and build positive relationships. Volunteers from different social groups work with villagers and recipient families to complete the house, often learning from the villagers who may have more building skills to share. This challenges the traditional charitable approach that may be adopted by volunteers, and with which volunteer initiatives usually struggle.

After a build volunteers are encouraged to continue their connection and relationship with the families, providing a support system that further identifies needs and raises awareness of projects and communities. Often they build relationships with local families and find other ways they can assist them. In one case, after getting to know a family whose child suffered from cerebral palsy, volunteers took the initiative to fundraise for a suitable wheelchair and adapted their house to make it accessible.

With more than 5,000 builders and volunteers exploring how they could be more involved and stay connected, EPIC established a new community platform. This growing platform offers skill shares, workshops, project news, and initiatives.

DESIGN: Adaptable to different situations

So how can one design be fit for all? An EPIC Home is designed to be modular and adaptable, allowing for flexibility for the family's needs, the land, and the local environment. The modular system currently offers two, three or four bedrooms and are selected on a strict needs assessment. The EPIC design team is engaged in modifying and adjusting the design, in response to local resources and materials, the positioning of each house, the placement of bathrooms (many Orang Asli houses have a separate bathroom unit that is not attached to the main house), accessibility requirements, and the condition of the land. The combination of a simple design, with a step-by-step guidebook, and the right supervision, means that volunteers of any skill level are able to be as hands on as possible in building the house.

In theory, EPIC Homes' system of approach, and process of design and build should be replicable in other developing countries, especially in rural areas of Southeast Asia. The tropical climate is forgiving and makes the house design easily adaptable to accommodate the availability of local materials. But, of course, each country would have their own specific needs, social structure, and local issues that would require some adaptation to the system.

So how about the UK? What can the UK take from the EPIC model? With the current housing crisis, where houses are becoming more unaffordable, land prices increasing, and those with immediate housing needs are forced into homelessness as a result of budget cuts, there is still much to learn from EPIC Homes. Currently, UK housing ranks as one of the worst in Europe for its state of disrepair. So the process of improving and building homes in the UK will be more effective if communities can work together to find creative solutions, viewing the housing crisis as an interconnected system of activities and relationships between people and place.

Through working together, the EPIC community model can also begin to explore other facets of development and further address the poverty cycle. Providing safe homes may be their aim, but their biggest success is their engagement and management of volunteers, building a community of enthusiastic individuals who are willing to do more for their local communities. Before solving any problem, even the housing crisis, a community must understand that each person plays a role in the network of relationships that contribute to the problem, but also that each person has the power to affect change. NGOs and other community organisations worldwide could create sustainable programmes that not only serve beneficiaries, but also attract volunteers through the offer of meaningful work.

With an emphasis on reducing the gap between beneficiaries and volunteers, and by encouraging a co-working environment to solve problems together, this project is blurring the lines between the act of giving and receiving. As Johnson Oei, CEO of EPIC Homes, says, "Only by working together and learning from each other can we begin to understand how things came to be, and how to do things differently."

For more information:
epichome.org