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Introduction

White flags line the streets — silent but desperate pleas for help. Amidst months of indefinite lockdown extensions, surging levels of unemployment and forcefully reduced working hours have left thousands struggling to put food on the table.

The #BenderaPutih movement is a physical manifestation of the public's support for those in need. Its widespread success however, would not have been so prominent without the help of Sambal SOS, an application which helps donors locate those requiring aid and vice versa. Recently, FLY journalists Umar Zulkefli, Nazif Helmi, Yeo Xiao Xuan and Emeline Yong had the opportunity to speak to two of the three founders of the app — Shaun Mak and Sidharrth Nagappan, who shared insights into their current operations and the challenges faced throughout the program's launch.

A Concoction of Growth and Hurdles

Sambal SOS came from humble beginnings. The idea itself was sparked when the trio of university students saw Members of Parliament facing difficulties in identifying and accessing the people that needed help on Twitter. Recognising the severity of the issue, they were driven to help the local community with their technical skills, with the aim to provide a platform that decentralises data by collating user reported white flags on a map for better visibility.

Armed with their knowledge and previous experience from participating in hackathons, the trio kick-started their journey into the development of their project. Their initial plan was to launch the app within two weeks. However, as pleas for help and support gradually became more desperate, they decided to expedite the entire project. They started on a Wednesday and spent two days working back-to-back on executing their ideas and “concepts”. As soon as a prototype was ready, they introduced their app within a smaller developer group. They then developed the beta version and conducted functionality tests with several test users to improve features based on the constructive feedback. By Sunday, the full-fledged version of Sambal SOS was released to the general public of Malaysia.

To their surprise, their creation rapidly gained traction and saw a huge increase in registrations and active users after receiving media exposure from a Malaysian journalist. Sidharrth attributes the accelerated momentum of the app to its high demand and well-timed release, emphasising that it was launched at the peak of the white flag movement. To their dismay, this situation became a growing source of concern as the server of the app was not built to support applications of this scale.

“It was pretty scary at that time. Many people were commenting on our Facebook page reporting that they were unable to log in or that they only saw a blank page after refreshing their

browser tab. We almost had a heart attack and had to spend many sleepless nights observing the backends of the app and working on removing bugs.”

- Sidharrth

One of the biggest challenges they faced during the development of Sambal SOS was the synchronisation of location services.

“Our app is available on both IOS and Android. But there are many models running on the Android set-up and location services on each model have different regulations and functions, which makes everything quite a mess.”

- Shaun

According to Shaun and Sidharrth, the initial version of the app did not have a failsafe route for location services, which they identified as a serious problem as the ability to access the users' location was entirely dependent on location services. They later on worked on correcting this issue by developing and introducing a failsafe route to provide more security and stability to the app.

Another feature that the app originally lacked was Google Maps, which posed several problems for users in terms of accessibility and exposure. To implement the feature, they sought out monetary aid and received some voluntary help from the local community to fund the subscription for Google Maps. However, due to the massive number of sign-ups on the app, the hosting costs and subscription fees for Sambal SOS steadily increased to a level beyond what they could afford. To their relief, a generous sponsor volunteered to help them cover the hosting costs and mitigate their entire cloud architecture onto his own server to sustain the app. Their plight also gained the attention of the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) and Google Malaysia, which extended their support towards Sambal SOS's clauses by granting them special credits to fund and sustain the Google Maps feature on the app and scale its operations towards the national level with less complications.

What's Next for Sambal SOS?

The Sambal SOS app has gathered positive impressions and is highly lauded by the public for its noble cause. It is a platform crafted to unite people as it encourages acts of kindness within communities. In these trying times, the app serves as a bridge between members of the community who are facing livelihood struggles and those who are seeking to provide a helping hand. But the question remains, what's next for Sambal SOS?

In the interview, the Sambal SOS creators spotlighted their conscious decision to exclude image recognition when screening personal information. Although there are many services that provide this feature, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is evidently costly. Therefore, this feature did not appear as a viable option to venture into, especially at the start of their app development journey when funding was thin. Nonetheless, creators Shaun and Sidarrth have not discounted

the possibility of this feature in the future, as they have expressed interest to further experiment potential features.

At the time of interview, the app was unable to identify if support has been provided to the people seeking help. Fortunately, Shaun and Sidharrth have expressed interest in administering a feature to tackle this issue.

“We don’t actually coordinate with them [food-banks], we point it [their location] out on a map and update the list [of food-banks] regularly.”

- Sidharrth

To maintain a clean in-app coordination that is free of ‘trollers’, the Sambal SOS creators have imposed a one-week expiry for requested support. However, in the event that aid has not been received, a request for support can be reapplied through another application once the previous one expires. According to the duo, this is the most foolproof way of ensuring people’s data does not stay in the app for too long.

When asked about the future of the app, creators Shaun and Sidarrth highlighted that their “primary goal is to sustain until the end of the pandemic.” A contributing factor to this statement stems from the fact that the credits for their in-app Google Map feature will only last until the end of year. On a more promising note, the local duo are in talks of paving the direction of the application towards food-bank centricity.

From Passion to Reality: If they can do it, You can too!

Although the journey of Sambal SOS has definitely been a challenging one, it has also been a heartwarming and fulfilling journey. Sidharrth recounted that as soon as promotion started, people came flooding with aid and aspirations to assist them in any way possible to make Sambal SOS a success.

Help came in many ways, some aided them financially by sponsoring costly infrastructure needed to maintain Sambal SOS. Others crucially offered them their expertise in programming such as the many senior engineers from the developer community who came forward to help solve various bugs in the program. Many have also greatly contributed to Sambal SOS’s publicity through their skills in marketing. The attention and support that Sambal SOS received also provided them the opportunity to gain connections with valuable contacts which obtained them credits and access to use Google Maps. All in all, Malaysia’s “kita jaga kita” slogan was greatly exemplified by the droves of support for Sambal SOS.

“Sambal SOS truly wouldn’t be at this stage it is at right now without the community in Malaysia and their heartwarming support.”

- Shaun

For young programmers on a path to build your passion project, Sidharth advises that trying it on a daily basis and responding to comments are crucial in developing a sustainable project. Really keep an ear on the ground and listen to the feedback from the communities around you.

Planning and generating ideas is half of a success story, while really materialising it could sometimes be a daunting task. Nevertheless as Sidharth stated, “The process of building the app is always the most beautiful part of the journey. Just enjoy the journey.” So be creative and enjoy the process of building your passion. Things might just start out as a hobby project but you never know what could be in store. Even if people bombard you with negative comments, acknowledge their issues and find ways to solve them. Still, Shaun reminds that, you shouldn't listen to haters too much. If it's something you fervently believe in, power through it with all your passion.

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