

Call of the city

The rural-urban drift has been an integral part of Malaysia's development over the years. HAMISAH HAMID looks at the factors promoting urban migration and the challenges ahead.

FOR over 50 years, Malaysia's rural folk have been uprooting themselves and flocking to the city in search of employment, business opportunities and a better life.

They are attracted to the urban centre's superior infrastructure and amenities, health, education and other services.

In return, they have contributed to the labour force, helped generate consumer demand and allowed businesses to thrive and grow.

There were 144 urban settlements identified in 2000, and the number is increasing. Under the National Urbanisation Policy (NUP), by the time Malaysia becomes a developed nation in 2020, the country will have 241 urban settlements.

Rural-urban migration became more visible after the country gained independence in 1957.

The urbanisation growth rate was

quite slow initially due to the implementation of land development schemes, which redirected some rural migrants to other rural areas.

Between 1970 and 1980, however, the proportion of Malaysians living in the urban areas soared from 26.7 per cent in 1970 to 34.2 per cent in 1980.

During that period, urbanisation grew 5.3 per cent annually, which was 2.2 times faster than the national population growth rate.

The upsurge was attributed mainly to growth in the construction, manufacturing, utilities and service sectors, which offered increasing job opportunities.

Implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1970 onwards also had a significant effect on the urbanisation rate as the policy specifically encourages Bumiputeras, who are largely rural-based, to be involved in the industrial and commercial sectors.

In Peninsular Malaysia, people from the less developed states like Terengganu, Pahang and Kelantan migrated to Kuala Lumpur where many large companies are headquartered and jobs are aplenty.

Those from Kedah, Perlis and north Perak moved to Penang where foreign manufacturing giants set up their facilities in the free trade zone on the island.

After 1980, the urbanisation rate slowed from 5.3 per cent a year to 4.3 per cent, and this was attributed to the



economic slowdown in the 1980s.

The urban population continued to grow in the 1990s in line with the country's rapid economic growth which required more skilled manpower.

According to the Statistics Department, urban population rose to 62 per cent in the 2000 Census from 50.7 per cent in 1991.

Areas with very high proportions of urban population in the census were the states of Selangor (87.6 per cent) and Penang (80.1 per cent), and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (100 per cent).

It is projected that the rate of urbanisation will rise to 75 per cent

The quality and service provision needs to be upgraded to stem the flow of people to town

Yeah

don't get the quality of life that they expected due to the high cost," RAM Consultancy chief economist Dr Yeah Kim Leng said.

During periods of high economic growth, urban centres have the capacity to absorb job-seekers into various sectors. But in an economic downturn, some workers are displaced or become jobless.

When the economy regains its momentum, only those with adequate, relevant skills are employed by companies as the business environment changes in line with market liberalisation and globalisation, another economist added.

And, while those in the lower-income bracket are working harder to improve their standard of living in the costly city, some resort to short cuts and a life of crime, including muggings, robbery, break-ins and snatch thefts.

Meanwhile, inadequate housing in the city or the inability of newcomers to afford their own homes has resulted in the sprouting up of squatter settlements.

Some analysts attribute social problems in the city, such as crime, drug addiction and morality issues facing the youth, to the pressure of living in the city.

Environmental degradation is another negative impact from rapid and imbalanced urbanisation, especially when residential buildings and roads are built on environmentally sensitive areas.

More people in the city also means more vehicles on the road, which contribute to worsening air pollution. Stress levels also rise when motorists are caught in traffic jams day-in and day-out.

Despite these apparent setbacks and negative impact, rural-urban migration will continue unabated as long as urban centres offer better opportunities, facilities and services than the rural areas, Yeah said.

The rate of growth, however, will slow down once equilibrium is reached, i.e. when development spreads to suburban and rural areas as they become better connected by roads and services.

"Rural-urban migration will slow down as businesses and employment opportunities are more available in the rural areas, making living there more attractive," Yeah said.

He added that given better facilities and amenities, environmental preservation and accessibility, more people would prefer to live in rural areas, or more attractively termed as "country living".

"But before that can happen, the quality and service provision needs to be upgraded to stem the flow of people to town," he said.

The priority should be to create employment opportunities in rural areas. If income levels can be raised and the status of the agriculture sector is upgraded, this could contribute to reverse migration, Yeah added.



Urban and Rural Population in Malaysia

	Year	Number
■ Total population	1991	18,379,700
	1996	21,169,000
	1997	21,665,500
■ Total urban population	1991	9,367,200
	1997	12,232,900
■ Total rural population	1991	9,012,500
	1997	9,432,600

■ Rate of growth of urban population 1980-1995: 4.3 per cent (average annual growth rate)

■ Population with access to safe drinking water facility in urban area 1988-1991: 96 per cent

■ Population with sanitary facilities in urban areas 1988-1991: 94 per cent

Sources: Asian Development Bank, Department of Statistics, World Bank's World Development Report

Planning for a balanced development

FOR developing countries like Malaysia, urbanisation has been instrumental in pushing forward the national development process.

As the country reaches an advanced stage as a developing nation, the debate has shifted from the earlier preoccupation of bringing development to that of sustainable development.

The main concern is to sustain urbanisation and urban development, so that by 2020 Malaysia will be a developed nation with economic sustainability.

Malaysia has to prevent the urbanisation process from creating more unsettling problems, such as when more resources have to be used to maintain the process.

Increasing wastes, for example, will make it difficult for urban managers to propel the urban centres for national development.

Recognising the importance of sustainable urban development, the Government launched the National Urbanisation Policy (NUP), which will be the main thrust for all urban policies and development in Peninsular Malaysia.

The NUP, launched in November last year, is working towards a balanced social, economic and physical development of urban areas by 2020.

The document is aimed at creating a visionary city with a peaceful community and living environment through sustainable urban development.

It will address, among other things, the high crime index, poor air quality, massive traffic problems, interruptions in water supply, increase in the volume of solid wastes, poor public transport and ineffective urban governance.

The NUP has six thrusts:

□ Creation of an efficient and sustainable urbanisation;

□ Development of a resilient, dynamic and competitive urban economy;

□ Establishment of an integrated and efficient urban transportation system;

□ Provision of quality urban services, infrastructure and utility;

□ Creation of a conducive urban living environment with a distinct identity; and

□ Establishing effective urban governance.

The NUP, which was approved by the National Physical Planning Council chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will be reviewed in tandem with the five-year Malaysia Plan and the National Physical Plan.