

Rapid Urbanization in Malaysia: Exploring the Feasibility of De-urbanization

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Abstract

About 90% of the Malaysian population is forecasted to favour urban areas as their places of residence by year 2050. As much as urbanization is an important puzzle piece to achieve economic prosperity of a developing country; this is an alarming disclosure. Rapid urbanization rate when expanding concurrently with an immature urban social, infrastructure and administrative system; is a recipe for disaster. Anecdotally, the negative externalities from urbanization which results in the deterioration of urban quality of life will facilitate to the emergence of de-urbanization phenomenon in the near future. In order to better anticipate a smooth internal-migration reversal, the paper examines the readiness of Malaysia rural in welcoming this transition through reviewing Malaysia's annual budget speeches for the recent 5 years from 2016 to 2020. Two findings are that, i.) our rural development is still being looked at from a primitive point of view, where opportunities for advancements and modernization has been consistently denied over the years; and ii.) there are clear indications of lop-sided attentions, development plans and budget allotments between urban-urban and urban-rural areas, which results in geographically inequitable economic growth. Based on the above, three main recommendations are outlined, i.) rebranding and renaming our rural areas as 'urban outskirts' so as to not let the term 'rural' cloud our perspectives when strategizing its development, ii.) the reversal of push-pull internal migration factor should be a concerted effort from all related Ministries, government and non-government bodies, in order to create a higher impact factor, and iii.) in tandem with the theme of introducing advancements and modernization to our urban outskirts in an effort to close the development gaps between areas, we should also embrace the idea of decentralizing our government to create a sustainable, competitive, and productive administration that supports the process of de-urbanization. The issue of rapid unplanned urbanization should be taken as an opportunity that Malaysia can capitalize on in order to promote a more balanced and equitable humanitarian and economic growth.

Keywords: Urbanization, de-urbanization, rural development and decentralization

Urbanization

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) define 'urbanization' as the process by which a large number of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming cities in order to gain access to better social and economic benefits. No country has achieved high income with low urbanization rate (Fengler, 2011). As such, rapid urbanization is inevitable for any developing countries including Malaysia.

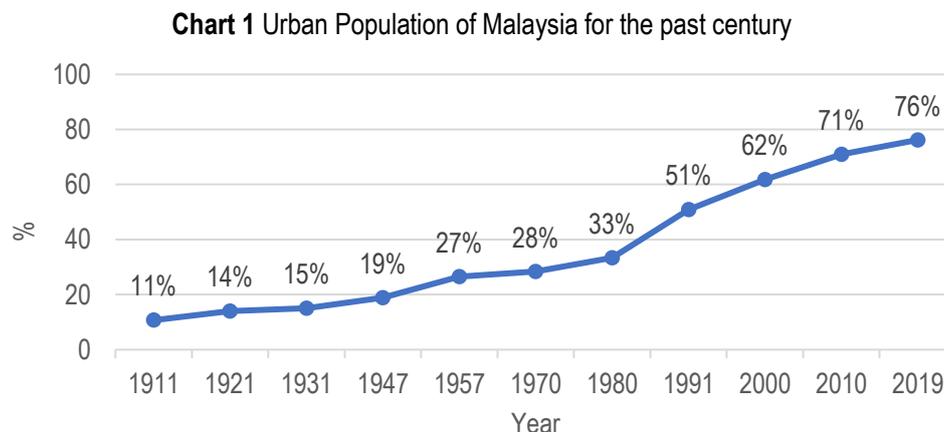
This process is crucial to supply influx of skilled and semi-skilled labours to support and develop our economic eco-system. In fact, according to The World Bank, we are one of the more urbanized country

compared to our East Asian counterparts. This creates a position where the city is dubbed the ‘work place’, while the rural area is more of a ‘home’ to urbanites, which they will return to when retired.

Malaysian urbanites, however, have been feeling the adverse impacts of urbanization in the last 30 years. While ‘urban’ for years, has been associated with nuances of positivity in every aspect possible i.e. economically, politically and socially; the negative externalities brought about by rapid unplanned urbanization and immature urban infrastructure system have been brewing.

The trend of urbanization in Malaysia

Since 1991, Malaysia has been adopting the definition of ‘urban’ as areas that are gazetted with their adjoining built-up areas with a population of 10,000 and above, and has vigorous economic activities where 60 percent of the population (above 15 years old and above) are involved in non-agricultural activities. Over the course of 30 years, our population witnessed a shift from being about 70% rural in the 1970s to roughly 70% urban in 2010 (refer **Chart 1**). This percentage of urban population has further increased to 76% in 2019, which is 20% higher than the global urbanisation rate. In other words, we now have about 8 million households, where about 76% of them are urbanites.



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020

With such high urbanization rate where more than half of the population is condensed in the urban area since 1991; statistically speaking, these 30 years of activities should be able to make Malaysia enjoy good national economic growth, achieve the status of a high-income and developed country by now. According to the latest Census and Economic Information Centre (CEIC) data, Malaysia’s average annual Nominal GDP growth rate stands at a healthy 9.3% from 1992 to 2020.

However, based on the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2019 published by DOSM, it was highlighted that we still have 40% of households categorized as the ‘bottom 40’ (B40), out of which, 30.3% brings back less than RM4,000 of earnings per month. The report continued to

state that despite only having 20% households at 'top 20' (T20), about 46.8% of this cohort accounts for our national income – extrapolating the income gap inequality.

The presence of 'urban poor' is also blurred by the many generalized statistics shown across national reports such as that demonstrated by **Image 1**; where Kuala Lumpur is seen as having the highest median household income among all other states in Malaysia. However, Khazanah Research Institute highlighted that, states with a high median income can be distorted by the presence of many high-income urbanites, over-shadowing the presence of the lower income dwellers.

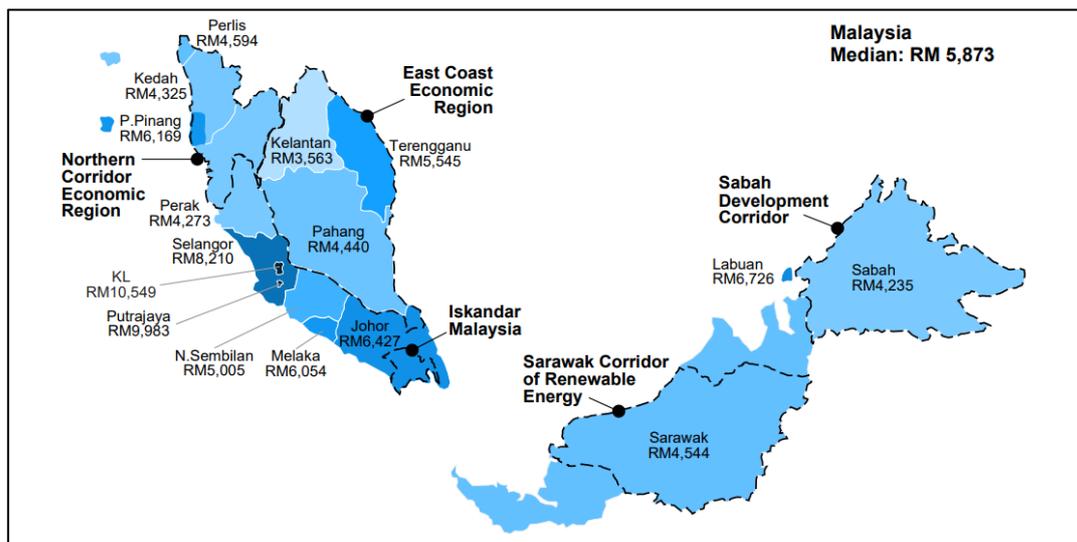


Image 1 State median household income in 2019

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020

Apart from that, the same image also showed how rapid urbanization has caused inequality in economic prosperity dispersion across all the states in Malaysia. From **Image 1**, we witness how W. P. Kuala Lumpur, W. P. Putrajaya and Selangor being among the highest migration receivers, enjoys a 30% higher median household income against the national level compared to other states in Malaysia. While the average median household income of Kelantan, Kedah, Perak, Perlis and Sabah still fall below the national level since 2013 (Khazanah Research Institute, 2014).

When there is such a mismatch between the growth of our National Nominal GDP and the high percentage of B40 households, we cannot help but wonder, how far have we benefitted from rapid urbanization at the individual or household level?

According to the World Bank's Human Capital Index 2018, against 157 countries globally, Malaysia ranked 55 for its ability to mobilize its citizen's economic and professional potential. Again, with an urbanization rate that is happening at 20% higher than the global rate, this highlights the negligence that Malaysia has induced on human capital formation for years. As such, it is understandable when Khazanah Research Institute recommended that Malaysia should invest in education, health in terms of

nutrition, and social welfare. This is so that the sustenance of our productivity growth can better complement our high-income economies, and further develop Malaysia's potential for a more holistic growth rather than a lop-sided one.

Apart from that, overpopulation from rapid urbanization can affect inhabitants' psychology, health and overall quality of life. Problems can arise from lack of privacy, sense of belonging to spaces, sense of community, increased unhealthy competitions and social pressure, to name a few. With a steady average upward trend that is climbing at the rate of about 5% per decade, Malaysia's growth is right on track with what was forecasted by the United Nations which stated that, about 80% of the world urban population will belong to developing countries by 2025. By year 2050, Malaysia is projected to register an alarming urbanisation rate of between 85% to 90%, from a projected total population of 40.7 million. Kuala Lumpur, for example, is so dense that it has an approximately 32,909 persons per square kilometre in 2020 (DOSM).

Externalities from overpopulation in Malaysia urban areas

Job market saturation

Overpopulation leads to job market saturation which gives opportunist employers the upper hand of lowering the salary of qualified and skilled employees – demeaning the negotiation power of job seekers. This has caused a disruption to the balance of the urban job market. Hunting for a placement becomes highly competitive where most will resort to accepting impractical offers just to get by. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), the number of university students trying to find a job upon graduation has greatly surpassed the number of jobs available for grabs. The source reported that on an average, there are about 174,000 graduates entering the job market annually. However, there are only about 99,000 high-skilled jobs created during the same period of time.

Non-equitable public transportation development

In Malaysia, it is apparent that Kuala Lumpur has a more advanced and planned public transportation systems including commuter trains (KTM), Light Rail Transits (LRT), Monorails, buses (RapidKL and BRT) as well as the free GoKL bus service. As much as it is an applaudable move by the government in an effort to increase the mobility of Kuala Lumpur urbanites; unfortunately, this also shows how the government is less inclined to allocate budgets for the development and upgrade of public transportation infrastructure for other cities and sub-urban areas in Malaysia. The planning and allocations to increase mobility in cities other than just Kuala Lumpur are crucial to help those areas enjoy equitable growth.

Higher health risks

Furthermore, the increased in disposal income among higher earners in Kuala Lumpur encourages more private vehicle purchases. This is in tandem with the findings of Manogaran et al. (2017), which observed that Kuala Lumpur's roads are characterised by having constantly high traffic flow, heavy traffic at major intersections and heavy congestion occurs on every major road. In conjunction to that, it

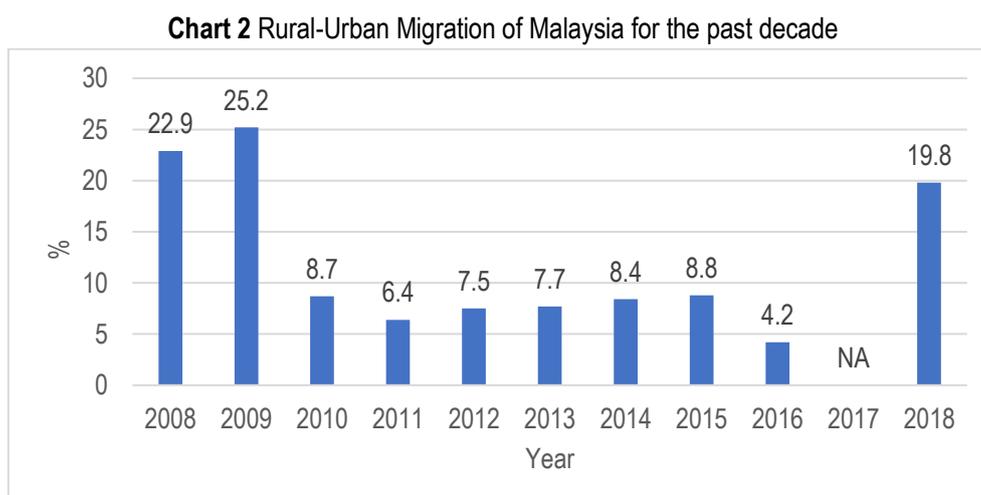
is no surprise that city dwellers are more vulnerable to developing respiratory diseases (McMichael, 2000).

Individuals with increased time consumed on the road can induce negative externalities on their mental health, social behaviours and productivity. As evident from the Covid-19 virus outbreak, inhabitants of overconcentrated areas are far more susceptible to transmission of diseases. Hence, even with better medical facilities, resources and a shorter distance to hospital than rural areas, this cohort is still at a higher health risk.

Push-pull factors of internal migration

The push and pull factors of internal migration in Malaysia is similar to that of other countries, i.e. better economic opportunities, education, and living environment. The attraction of ‘urban’ is evident in that the word itself is synonymous as the land of opportunities, echoing lavish lifestyle, job opportunities, better wages, more liberal, dynamic and creative environment. While the word “rural” reverberates being poor, backward, basic, lacking of- and everything else that rhymes along with the total opposite of the urban image or identity. While the World Health Organization claimed that generally, rural-urban migration has a significant positive relationship with rate of urbanization, **Chart 2** which demonstrates a 10-year span of rural-urban internal migration in Malaysia, indicates a different story.

Being a more urbanized country in East Asia, Malaysia’s rapid urbanization phenomenon is not solely due to rural-urban migration as we have observed an inconsistent trend throughout the years. While keeping this in mind, it does not negate the fact that rural Malaysia has been increasingly ‘hollowed out’ as the youth tend to migrate to urban areas. The externalities resulted from this will be discussed further in the following sections.



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020

Rural migrants contributing to urban poor

Also, those who migrated from rural to urban areas are not always equipped with the right skill sets and education level to thrive in city centres. Most migrated without securing a job in the first place. It is no surprise that this cohort constitutes a large number of the urban poor. With a much higher living cost in the urban areas where prices of almost everything is steep, ranging from urban housing and food to basic necessities, many are struggling to stay afloat.

Pressures of urban infrastructure system

High living density in a small area also puts intense pressure on the city infrastructure system to cope with overwhelming demands of the inhabitants. Lack of proper waste disposal and management in city areas have been resulting in drain blockages which increases flash flood cases. For example, heavy rains often reveal the weak planning and maintenance of road infrastructure and drainage system in city centres. It is evident as areas such as 'Masjid Jamek' located at the heart of Kuala Lumpur often face heavy road congestions which are usually worsened by accidents.

Bouts of water shortage faced by residents in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor nowadays exposes more basic infrastructural problems faced by immature city system in our country. Not only that, it also highlighted the lack of industrial monitoring by the respective authorities, causing a myriad of pollutions to the water and the air. Examples are abundant, from the Sungai Kim Kim, Pasir Gudang crisis which sickened almost 4,000 people with noxious fumes, right to water pollution of Sungai Selangor which causes four major water treatment plants to shut down in Selangor.

Urban heat island

Looking at a larger scaled problem of rapid urbanization, urbanites are experiencing the effects of urban heat island where the environmental temperature is much higher than rural areas. Putrajaya, even when planned utilizing garden city concept where 37% of its development is dedicated for green open spaces, still experiences high air temperatures (Ossen et al., 2018). Concurring with the above findings, Elsayed (2012) reported that the temperature of Greater Kuala Lumpur has increased 1.5 Celsius within the span of 20 years.

These, according to Ghazanfari et al. (2009), are the direct effects of urban micro-climate change which is a direct result of urban expansion, pollution and development of industrial activities in small areas. Uncontrolled human activities promote changes of original land zonings and land covers, which alters the relative heat capacity, properties and conductivity of land surfaces.

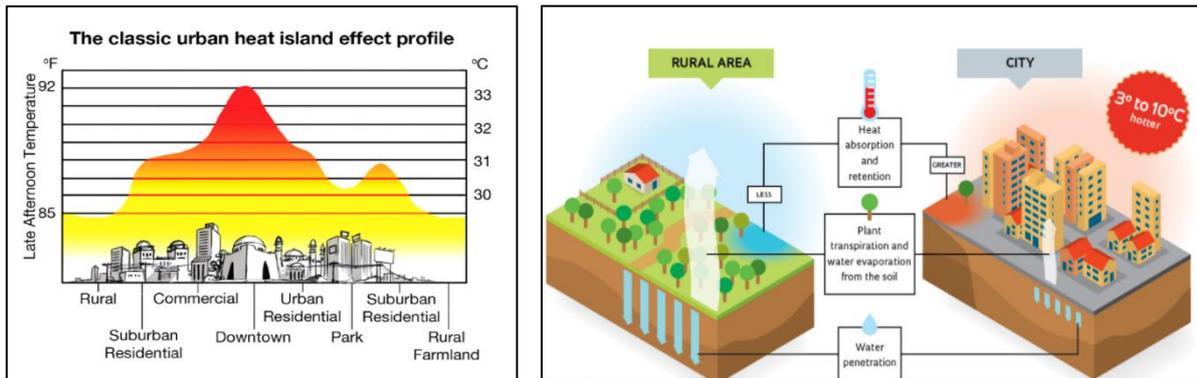


Image 2 Infographics of Urban Heat Island depicting the temperature difference between urban and rural areas due to different spatial characteristics

From the discussions above, it is clear that our city centres do face immaturity in anticipating the externalities that came about with rapid urbanization. As reported by the World Bank’s Malaysia Economic Monitor, our country sees stable economic outlook, but the downsides of socio-related risks are very much elevated. We have since passed the point of asking ourselves how did we get here. Rather, it is time to invest in viable solutions to contain this impending problem before it becomes worse in the future.

De-urbanization: Evidence from other parts of the world

For centuries, the pattern of settlement has seen an organic shift of demographic turnaround from rural-urban and reverse back to urban-rural. The demographic turnaround is called de-urbanization or counter-urbanization. This process is coined as a movement away from cities or a movement to rural areas (Berry, 1980). It is noted that throughout history, the upper- and middle-class urban dwellers are the most common cohorts that facilitates the phenomenon of de-urbanization. They do this to get away from city pressures, while still maintaining the quality of life they desire from the sub-urban areas.

It can be traced back to the Indus Civilization (ca. 2600–1600 B.C.) for example, which shifted from numerous small-scale urban centres to a de-nucleated pattern of settlement (Green & Petrie, 2018). Mass de-urbanization also started as early as the mid-1970s for the Global North countries including Australia and Canada, as well as the United Kingdom in between 1970 and 1973 (Halfacree, 2009). Rural France in between 1975 and 1982, grew much faster than urban France (Ogden, 1985) denoting nuances of urban depopulation. While Kenya in the 1980s, showed notions of urbanization slowing down due to reversal of internal migration (Potts, 1995).

In the 1990s, the United States of America experienced exurbanization; a process which refers to the movement of upper-class urbanites out of the city and into the sub-urbans in order to live in high-end housings at a lower expense where they still remain functionally linked to the city. Over at Australia, many would work in Sydney and travel back home to the furthest extent of commuting in peri-metropolitan regions such as Galston, Richmond and Windsor (refer **Image 3**).

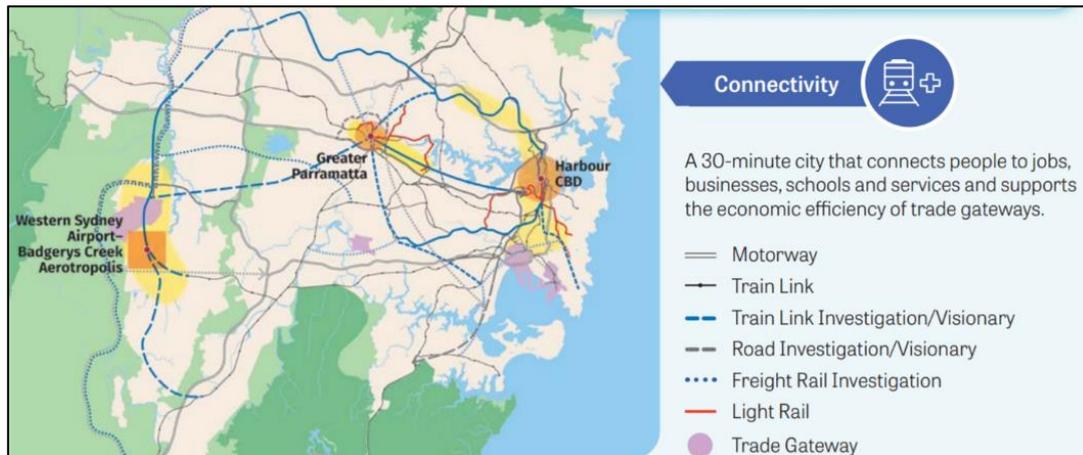


Image 3 Connectivity Plan of Greater Sydney Region Plan 2018 - A Metropolis of Three Cities: connecting people

Perhaps one of the more well-known work-home commute arrangement in Asia is Japan. According to a survey done in 2015 by the NHK Culture Research Institute, on an average, a commuter would spend about 1 hour 19 minutes a day commuting for work, or about 39.5 minutes each way. **Image 4** presents the commute journey based on location and travelling time needed from the sub-urbans such as Chiba to the city of Tokyo.

Apart from having good transportation infrastructure to create efficient urban-sub-urban connection; the Japanese government, in collaboration with their local non-profit organizations, introduced the vacant home bank program in their outskirts such as Mitsugi and Onomichi. The program has proven to be a good channel to encourage urban depopulation as since its inception in 2009, it has seen more families moving into the said areas. Efforts to renovate the commercial streets to revive local shopping scene and hotels in the outskirts have also attracted youths to visit the area, generating a healthy and sustainable economic growth.

It is important to note that all these work-home commute arrangements can only be made possible by having advanced transportation as well as tele-communications infrastructural development in place. Apart from that, it needs administrative and management support, especially in the form of government decentralization. For example, government initiatives in decentralization for Bathurst, New South Wales has significantly impacted the area's population as well as manufacturing growth.

So why do people do it? And how do the respective countries benefit from this movement called de-urbanization?

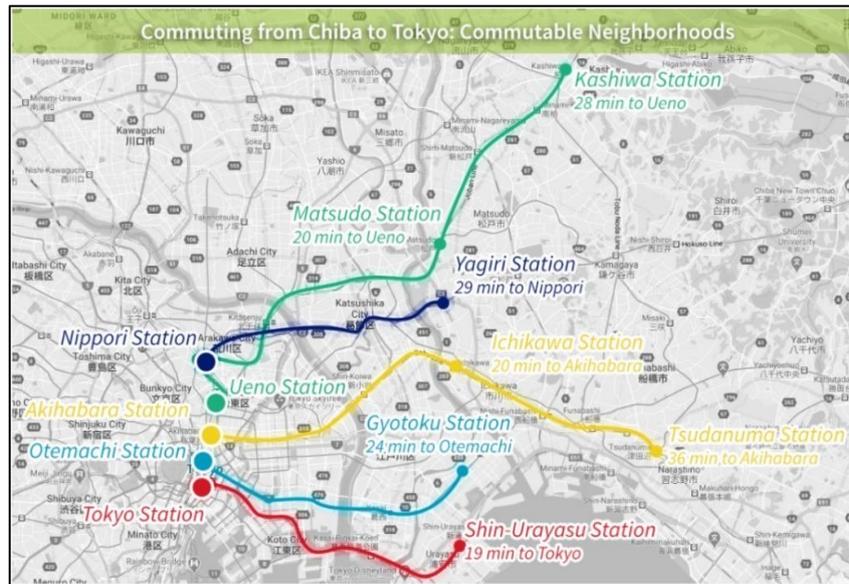


Image 4 Locations and travelling time needed by Japanese workers living in the sub-urban of Chiba commuting into the city of Tokyo

Berry (1976) which defined de-urbanization as a diffusion of metropolitan population to remote high-quality environments, says it all. Urbanites who finds city life too much to handle tend to opt for a simple and peaceful life in the sub-urbans. Moving away from the Central Business District (CBD), they are able to get a bigger house at a more affordable price, enjoy fresher and less polluted air, joins a closer knitted community, and most of all, increasing their disposal incomes by having significantly lower cost of living.

At a national level, countries with working class supporting the de-urbanization movement, enjoys a more balanced demographic distribution. With influx of residents with a considerable amount of disposable income, it helps the growth of local economy e.g. housing market, grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants and etc. In return, this provides a more vibrant job landscape and job opportunities for the youth who prefers to stay in the outskirts.

Subsequently, having these people here also puts pressure to the government to provide better public transportation infrastructure so as to guarantee better mobility and telecommunication infrastructure so as to improve virtual connectivity. Apart from that, amenities such as education and healthcare will also get government’s attention so as to support the welfare of the growing community. All these opens up room for equitable growth across the nation, rather than just focused on the city centres.

On this note, the shift in population from urban to the outskirts is able to take pressures off the city infrastructure and administrative systems. With more people using public transportation to travel from the outskirts into CBD area, less private motorized vehicle will be on the urban streets – not only decreasing traffic congestion and road accidents, but also improves urban air quality.

When the outskirts are equipped with advanced mobility, connectivity, accessibility, vibrant local economy and local scene; in the long run, it can better position itself to attract foreign direct investment in these areas. This accelerates further economic growth, more employment opportunities, career advancements and thus guarantees economic sustainability. It opens up avenues to close the income gap between urbanites and those living in the outskirts, promoting a more equitable growth.

The need to have de-urbanization in Malaysia

The situation is slowly emerging for Malaysia as well, though it is happening at a more subtle scale. Since 2015 according to DOSM, Selangor has been consistently the most popular inter-state migrant receiver, particularly from Kuala Lumpur. This phenomenon of population and economic spill-over happens due to the states' close proximity to each other. The migration trend is rather predictable as for example, the average housing price in Kuala Lumpur is the highest in Malaysia i.e. about RM770,000. While Selangor's average housing price is about 36% lower than that of Kuala Lumpur's. It indicates that there is potential in de-urbanization where resettlement is slowly happening from urban to sub-urban areas in Malaysia.

From here, perhaps de-urbanization is something we should anticipate and even plan for, where we are finally able to fully appreciate, develop and utilize our large rural land reserves. Evidently from other countries, this process is able to solve the issues of rural abandonment and rural decay (Eskew & Olival, 2018). It takes pressures off of the urban infrastructure and social system – creating a win-win situation. At this time, there are still large uncultivated agricultural land in Malaysia.

As such, the process of de-urbanization or resettlement needs to be properly articulated before a full fledged encouragement and promotion can be carried out. But how ready is our rural areas in supporting the idea of deurbanization and what are the possible challenges for its implementation?

The urban-rural gap that needs to be addressed to make de-urbanization a possibility

Quoting from the Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia and supported by Bank Negara Malaysia, our country has been relying on the private sector spending and trade activities as the core engine to accelerate economic growth since the 1980s. In order to provide a conducive business environment for the private sector to thrive, the country has been investing much of its budget allocations in developing physical infrastructures based on the said sector's preference in mind. As such, most of the attention tend to be on developing urban areas. Whereas rural development allocations are pushed as a secondary capacity or as a complementary entity to the urban area, an after-thought.

Examining the Malaysia government's budget speeches from 2016 to 2020, these 5 years' planned allocations are quite sufficient to justify the above statement. The budget allocation is a viable tell-tale report with indications of what is lacking in the rural areas. Apart from that, we are also able to delve into the mindset of the government in determining its direction for rural development over the years. By using systematic review method, the word 'rural', 'village', 'farmers', 'fishermen' are used as keywords

to locate rural-related budget allocations throughout the speech scripts. **Table 1** demonstrates the gist of budget allocations for rural areas in the past 5 years.

Table 1 Key summary of budget allocations for rural development from year 2016 to 2020

Year	Infrastructure, Amenities & Social Budget Allocation	Economic-centric Budget Allocation
2016	<p>Improve the telecommunication infrastructure for rural broadband projects</p> <p>Build and upgrade 700 km of rural roads nationwide</p> <p>Rural Electrification Project and Rural Water Supply Project to in housing areas</p> <p>Social Amenities Programme for drainage projects to mitigate floods</p> <p>MARA Bus Transport Project for bus operations on uneconomic routes in rural areas</p> <p>Exemption of GST for domestic air transportation economy class passengers on Rural Air Services (RAS) routes</p> <p>Build and repair dilapidated houses in rural areas</p> <p>Build and upgrade rural clinics, health clinics, dental clinics as well as quarters nationwide</p>	<p>Rural Business Challenge (RBC) and Sustainable Rural programmes to promote entrepreneurship for rural communities</p> <p>Career and Skills Training Programme and Income Increment Programme</p> <p>Flat Rate Scheme to help small-scale farmers</p> <p>Matching research grants for herbal products and fish cage farming</p> <p>Price Reduction Programme to increase farmers' markets and Agro-bazaar Rakyat 1Malaysia</p> <p>Subsidy for hill paddy fertiliser</p> <p>Allocation for paddy farmers, smallholders and rubber tappers in terms of income and productivity enhancement programmes</p> <p>Paddy grading and improve paddy price subsidy scheme</p>
2017	<p>Upgrading street lights and LED lights</p> <p>Upgrade rural roads and bridges</p> <p>Renovate, build and refurbish dilapidated houses in remote rural areas</p> <p>Provide electricity supply</p> <p>Build Rural Transformation Centres (RTC)</p> <p>Allocations for operations of existing rural clinics</p> <p>Upgrade rural public transport in terms of implementation of a new 600-km East Coast Rail Line project connecting Klang Valley to the East Coast in phases</p> <p>Increase the allowance of village heads, Chairman of Village Development and Security Committee</p> <p>Lump sum allocation for water treatment project, economic, entrepreneurship development programmes and village resettlement</p>	<p>Subsidy for paddy price, seeds and fertilisers</p> <p>Monthly allowance for fishermen</p>
2018	<p>Rural Economic Financing Scheme (SPED) through Bank Rakyat and SME Bank to provide financing facilities to rural 'bumiputera' entrepreneurs</p> <p>Construction of East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) Project</p> <p>Subsidise train services in rural areas</p> <p>Construct Pan-Borneo Highway</p> <p>Building and upgrading of bridges, village street lights, 'musolla', and markets</p> <p>Develop communication infrastructures and broadband facilities</p> <p>Construct rural roads</p> <p>Provide electricity supply</p> <p>Public Infrastructure Maintenance Programme and Basic Infrastructure Project</p> <p>One-off special payment for village heads and 'tok batins'</p>	<p>Incentive for fertilisers and allocations for paddy farmers, rubber smallholders and fishermen</p> <p>Monthly (3 months) allowance for paddy farmers</p> <p>Rubber replanting programme</p> <p>Replanting oil palm and enhance marketing programme</p> <p>Agricultural programme for new sources of income</p>
2019	<p>Build and upgrade roads, rural roads, and bridges</p> <p>Broaden the electricity and water supply to rural areas</p>	n/a

	Allocation for residents' associations registered with the Registrar of Societies to carry out community, security, cleaning and community activities	
	Installation of street lights	
	Continue to implement the Pan Borneo Highway Project	
2020	Construct a Digital Malaysia by implementing the National Fiberisation & Connectivity Plan to provide high speed and digital connectivity	Monthly allowance for fishermen
	Provide learning opportunities for low income and rural 'bumiputeras' under MARA and 'Yayasan Peneraju Pendidikan Bumiputera'	Facilitate crop integration
	Provide clean water and electricity supply	Enable contribution of Social Security Scheme (SOCSO) by self-employed groups
	Construct and maintain rural roads, slopes, bridges and drains	
	Continue to implement the Pan Borneo Highway Project and Trans-Borneo Highway	
	Subsidy for transportation and distribution cost of basic goods to rural areas	
	Provide mobile clinics in rural areas	
	Subsidy for bus operators to support last-mile connectivity in rural areas	

At a glance from **Table 1**, we can see that rural budget allocations are slanted and skewed where since 2017, economic-centric allotment has been receiving far lesser attention than the provision for basic infrastructure, amenities and social welfare.

Judging from the purposes of allocation, we found that the economic-centric allocations for rural development are more towards the notion of extending support to get farmers, fishermen and small rubber holders to stay afloat. It is evident that allocations such as Flat Rate Scheme, crop subsidy, monthly allowance and replanting programmes are helping them to get by and let their activities stay status quo. There were only subtle attempts to modernize the economic landscape of rural areas, including entrepreneurship and training programme, matching research grants, programme to diversify income, and crop integration. Hence, this creates an absence of conducive business environment and investment-friendly infrastructures.

Consequently, even though we have an abundant of rural land reserves, the infrastructure conditions of those areas are unable to attract foreign direct investment and induce growth. As such, the most profitable and dynamic economic activities will always be urban-centric. All these combined, results in lack of job prospects and career advancement opportunities for rural residents. It also makes it difficult for them to raise their household incomes and have more disposal income to achieve a better quality of life.

We are also able to observe that the recurring theme for rural budget allocations always come from a more primitive sense where the word 'basic' are used throughout the budget speeches to describe allocation purposes. Sentences such as the following are always linked to explaining rural development allocations;

"to provide basic infrastructure in the rural areas" (Budget 2018)

"the government will continue to improve and upgrade basic infrastructure" (Budget 2019)

"expanding coverage of basic infrastructure for rural areas" (Budget 2020)

From this, a few more inferences can be made. Firstly, it is evident that our mindset towards rural development is still stuck as an after-thought where the first thing that came to mind when planning for the said area is nothing more than to provide basic needs. Words such as 'more advanced, more modern and more developed' are far-fetched ideas. This in turn, indicates that a large chunk of our national policies, resources, efforts and allocations are urban-centric. In a sense, it explains why we experience such rapid urbanization; where our urban areas are becoming more urban, and our rural areas are becoming more rural.

Secondly, when rural areas are lacking of basic infrastructures and amenities where the government is still at the phases of construction, provision and maintenance rather than investing in upgrades, further advancements, and modernization; it is no wonder that urban areas are seen as a more desirable place to work and reside in. This partly explains why rural areas are 'hollowed out' which results in an imbalanced demographic distribution, where the majority of rural folks are made up of the ageing population.

When the rural areas are deprived of young and abled workforce, it lowers rural productivity especially the agricultural yields. Other than, it also stunted rural human capital growth where it is harder to introduce innovation and modernization for the agricultural sector in rural areas to an ageing population. Having a demographic distribution where the majority are made up of older folks, this creates a vicious cycle where the government will not only deny chances for technology transfer to induce economic advancements, but also neglect social amenities development for the said areas e.g. education and healthcare.

Evidently, it was found that on an average, rural folks have to travel further for health care facilities than urbanites (Falcon, 2019). This is supported by data retrieved from the Ministry of Health which stated that on an average, a person living in rural area needs to travel at least 15 minutes more or 19 km more than a person living in an urban area or to reach a hospital. In 2012, Khazanah Research Institute also reported that rural households have less accessibility to water and sanitation than urbanites. In Kelantan for example, more than half of its population do not even have flush toilets.

Even when assessing the National Rural Physical Planning Plan 2030 (National Rural PPP 2030), which is proclaimed as the first spatial rural development policy in Malaysia; the description of its formation already tells the audience that rural development in Malaysia will always play a 'complementary' part to the urban area. It is evident as the Malaysia Federal Department of Town and

Country Planning website described the National Rural PPP 2030 as '*a policy to serve the National Urbanisation Policy by providing a holistic planning for rural development and to complement the National Urban Policy for urban areas in Malaysia*'.

Recommendations: Where do we go from here?

Analysing the externalities that came about from rapid urbanization in Malaysia, it is deemed that we are very close to approaching the tolerable ceiling of socio-economic well-being. While it is important for a country to achieve economic prosperity, the welfare of its inhabitants need to be prioritized as well. It is highly suggestive that de-urbanization is a phenomenon that is bound to happen and in certain cases, is a desirable process to have. As such, it should be strategically anticipated and planned for. Upon scrutinizing the condition of our rural areas, there is a clear indication that we need to fill a large gap in order to facilitate the process of de-urbanization to happen with minimal roadblocks.

First and foremost, Malaysia need to wake up and acknowledge that we have been 'sleeping' on our rural areas for far too long. In fact, the habit of calling our outskirts as 'rural' should be refrained, so as to not let the term cloud our minds and box us up when planning for its development. In conjunction to this, we also need to acknowledge that we have been favouring selected cities, such as Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Georgetown and cities in Selangor; throughout the years while neglecting other impoverished cities such as Kota Kinabalu, Kota Bharu, Kangar and Alor Setar. We should stop denying these cities the opportunities to enjoy equitable economic growth.

On this note, strategies to reverse the push-pull factors of internal migration need to be looked into. Elements that are appealing to urban dwellers should be thoughtfully planned and shifted to our outskirts, including job opportunities, closing income gaps, proper housing provision, good education institutes, vibrant commercial activities and so on. These of course, need to be supported by upgrading the basic infrastructures of our urban outskirts. The most effective way to achieve the above is perhaps the shift of mindset from 'primitive' and 'basic' to 'advancements' and 'modernization' when it comes to the planning of our urban outskirts. This mentality should be planted at every governmental level where policy-making and management should be more sustainable, more inclusive and equitable.

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been introduced to new ways of working, learning and socializing. Basically, we are forced to forgo parts of what was then, and do things the new way, accepting the new normal. We never thought the 'working from home' arrangement could work, but it did. This opens up to a whole lot of opportunities for remote working arrangements and system digitization. However, it to note that this new way of life could not have worked well if not for the infrastructures in place, especially the telecommunications. The pandemic has shown us that forward-looking strategies such as the creation of hi-tech satellite towns in the urban outskirts is a viable idea and is achievable.

With our urban outskirts being recommended to be upgraded, re-branded and re-invented; this process must be supported by the reform of our public service sector. We need to acknowledge that we have seen what a centralized government can and cannot do for our national development. As such, perhaps, decentralization of government in terms of political, administrative and revenue allocation is able to facilitate better growth moving forward.

The functions of public sector thus should be upgraded and empowered to enhance the check and balance of urban outskirts' conditions. As explained by Sellers and Lidström (2007), decentralization of authority where the dispersion of power to make decisions makes the management at lower levels responsible for the area under their governance. Thus, having the pressure to ensure that the area under their governances are doing well and remain relatively competitive, it develops sustainable collective leadership among local governments and increases productivity. Apart from that, when each local government is to formulate their own of policies specific to the needs of their governed areas, this can result in having better impact factor and efficacy.

Apart from that, it is high time for related ministries to work together hand in hand and create an inter-sectoral plan which takes into consideration the multi-faceted elements of urbanization and deurbanization. When each ministry commits to the objective, a more holistic plan can be produced. The main ministries that should be playing a more pro-active role are Rural Development, Federal Territories, Housing and Local Government, Communication and Multimedia, Women, Family and Community Development, Science, Technology and Innovation as well as Agriculture and Food Industries.

In order to better support the process of de-urbanization, we also need to take into consideration the many unique legislation tied to the rural land reserves in Malaysia, e.g. the conditions of Malay reserve land and customary land tenure system. For example, the unattended lands in Negeri Sembilan are protected under the Malay Reserves Land and Customary Land Act (Kassim, 1989). This means that the said lands are legally protected and cannot be cultivated or sold. This situation has led to the agricultural decline in Negeri Sembilan in early 1980s. Kassim (1989) also highlighted that this has resulted in the decline of agricultural mass production into domestic use.

As a conclusion, as much as urbanization is very much needed to ensure our country's prosperity and continuous growth, it should not be at the expense of its inhabitants' well-being. To simply put it, urbanization should be synonymous with the quality of growth, which encompasses both the economic and human capital gains. As the country is at the edge of surpassing the tolerable quality of living, the intolerance will motivate and initiate the phenomenon of de-urbanization. This is where we will witness mass reversal internal migration trend, as have been experienced by many countries in the past.

Hence, we should anticipate for it and carefully plan it out, while taking into consideration the conditions of our current urban outskirts, government functions, political structure, legislatives and systems in order to ensure a smooth transition in the future.

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