

Urbanization and Low-Income Housing in Malaysia : Impact on the Urban Malays

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Introduction

The population of Malaysia comprises three major ethnic groups namely: the Malays, Chinese and Indians¹. Earlier studies on the urbanization process in West Malaysia had focused on the problem of urban unemployment and slow pace of industrialization that affected the Malay urbanization². The focus of the paper will be on the changing ethnic pattern of urban population in West Malaysia.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part examines the trend of uneven urban development in West Malaysia. The second part discusses the change of ethnic composition of urban population between 1970 and 1980 intercensal period. The third part analyses the impact of the urbanization process on the Malays in the context of housing problems of the lower income groups.

Urbanization in West Malaysia

During the pre-independence years there was a significant increase in the number of centers of population concentration (see Table 1). For example between 1947 and 1957 the number of urban centers increased from 20 to 36, representing an increase of 16 urban centers. During the same period (1947-1957), the percentage of urban population in West Malaysia increased from 15.9 percent in 1947 to 26.5 percent in 1957.

A number of factors have contributed to the growth of urban population during the pre-independence period. First, the pattern of settlement in the country underwent a major change with the influx of immigrant traders and tin miners from China and estate laborers from India, concentrated in urban areas, as encouraged by the British colonial administration³. Second, another historical event was the period of emergency, between 1948-1960 when about 1 million Chinese rural dwellers were compulsorily resettled into more than 600 compact new villages at the fringe of major towns in West Malaysia⁴. Many of these migrants became squatters. These squatter areas were often

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located on railway land, river banks and unused tin mines. It is not surprising to see that in 1957, 88.8 percent of the population living in the urban areas were largely non-Malays⁵.

The percentage of urban population in West Malaysia in 1970 was only 28.7 percent, representing an increase of 2.2 percent over 1957. It is suggested that natural increase rather than migration was the main source of urban growth⁶. It is also pointed out that the slow rate of urban growth in the 1957-1970 period, "was engendered as the rural (Chinese) folk returned to their farms in the former terrorist infested areas."⁷ Perhaps, the main reason for the slow growth during this period (1957-1970) may be due to the creation of new satellite towns such as Petaling Jaya, Malaysia's largest industrial areas⁸ and the movement of rural population to new urban centers in the federal and state land schemes⁹.

The opening up of new agricultural land, as undertaken by federal and state governments¹⁰ in Malaysia, inevitably led to the creations of new urban centers of smaller sizes in many undeveloped states of Pahang, Kelantan and Trengganu as compared to the established states in the west coast of West Malaysia. In terms of emergence of new housing centers, the most elaborately planned and organized programs were the massive land development undertaken by the Federal Land Development Authority or *Felda*¹¹.

It has also been suggested that the larger towns may have experience the outmovement of population from the crowded city core due to the process of "suburbanization"^{12,13}. During the intercensal period (1957-1970), the greatest population increase was witnessed in new satellite towns such as Petaling Jaya. In early 60s and 70s, Petaling Jaya played a very crucial role in accomodating Malay migrants from rural areas. However towards mid- 1970s and 1980s, more affluent families of multiethnic background started to occupy some of the prime land in Petaling Jaya and Ampang areas.

It was observed that large urban centers had grown so rapidly that by 1970, eight of the nine largest cities had a substantial proportion of their population overspilling the urban boundaries¹⁴; almost all these cities had become underbounded¹⁵. The contribution of the population in these places to the total urban growth at the end of the intercensal period was in fact attributed to reclassification of new urban areas¹⁶.

Table 1. Urban growth in West Malaysia, 1911-1990

| Census year | Total population | Percent of urban to total population | Number of urban centers |
|-------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1911 | 2,339,000 | 10.7 | 8 |
| 1921 | 2,907,000 | 14.0 | 14 |
| 1931 | 3,788,000 | 15.1 | 16 |
| 1947 | 4,908,000 | 15.9 | 20 |
| 1957 | 6,279,000 | 26.5 | 36 |
| 1970 | 8,810,000 | 28.7 | 49 |
| 1980 | 11,822,000 | 38.5 | 60 |
| 1990 | 14,506,200 | 41.1 | 72 |

Sources: Sendut, 1962; Saw, 1972; Ooi, 1975; Narayanan, 1975, 1975a; Malaysia, 1976:150, 1979:86; Agus, 1981:6; Malaysia, 1983 and 1986.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), 1971-1990

By the time of independence in 1957, the Malay population could be considered a "large minority" in a country where non-Malays were about 50.2 percent of the total population (see Table 2). Within the last two intercensal periods, the Malay population increased more rapidly than the Chinese and Indian populations, and by 1970 and 1980 its share had increased to slightly more than half of the total population. The Malays form the large majorities in the states of Kelantan, Pahang, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis while in the more urbanized and populous states of Penang, Perak and Selangor, the Chinese constitute a large proportion of the population (see Table 3).

Table 2. West Malaysia : Ethnic composition and average annual growth rate, 1957-1980

| YEAR | Percentage of total population | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
| 1957 | 49.8 | 37.2 | 11.1 |
| 1970 | 53.0 | 35.5 | 10.6 |
| 1980 | 56.0 | 33.4 | 10.0 |
| <u>Average annual growth rate (%)</u> | | | |
| 1957-1970 | 3.1 | 2.3 | 2.3 |
| 1970-1980 | 2.7 | 1.5 | 1.5 |

Source: Compiled from Malaysia, 1983:17.

Table 3. West Malaysia : Proportion of ethnic groups by states, 1970 and 1980 (percentage)

| State | Year | Total ('000) | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
|------------|------|--------------|--------|---------|---------|
| Johor | 1970 | 1277.2 | 53.3 | 39.5 | 6.7 |
| | 1980 | 1590.4 | 55.5 | 37.8 | 6.5 |
| Kedah | 1970 | 954.9 | 70.5 | 19.4 | 8.5 |
| | 1980 | 1077.8 | 72.4 | 18.5 | 7.5 |
| Kelantan | 1970 | 684.7 | 92.4 | 5.7 | 0.9 |
| | 1980 | 859.3 | 93.0 | 5.3 | 0.7 |
| Melaka | 1970 | 404.1 | 51.8 | 39.7 | 7.8 |
| | 1980 | 446.8 | 53.9 | 37.9 | 7.5 |
| N.Sembilan | 1970 | 481.5 | 45.3 | 38.1 | 16.2 |
| | 1980 | 551.4 | 47.1 | 35.8 | 16.8 |
| Pahang | 1970 | 504.9 | 61.0 | 31.4 | 7.3 |
| | 1980 | 768.8 | 67.6 | 25.6 | 6.6 |
| Penang | 1970 | 776.1 | 30.6 | 56.3 | 11.5 |
| | 1980 | 900.8 | 33.6 | 53.9 | 11.4 |
| Perak | 1970 | 1569.1 | 43.0 | 42.5 | 14.2 |
| | 1980 | 1743.6 | 45.3 | 40.7 | 13.8 |
| Perlis | 1970 | 121.1 | 79.0 | 16.4 | 2.1 |
| | 1980 | 144.8 | 79.5 | 15.4 | 2.4 |
| Selangor* | 1970 | 1630.4 | 34.5 | 46.4 | 18.3 |
| | 1980 | 2345.8 | 40.6 | 42.7 | 16.0 |
| Terengganu | 1970 | 405.4 | 93.4 | 5.6 | 0.7 |
| | 1980 | 525.3 | 94.2 | 5.1 | 0.5 |
| W. M'Sia | 1970 | 8809.5 | 53.03 | 35.6 | 10.6 |
| | 1980 | 10944.8 | 56.02 | 33.4 | 10.0 |

* Include Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur.

Source: Malaysia, 1983:21-22.

The new factor in the urbanization process of Peninsular Malaysia is the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) since 1971, together with the other push "factors" in the rural areas, resulted in the rapid migration of rural population to urban areas¹⁷. In the post-independence period there was a rapid growth of Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas, particularly due to the in-migration of the Malays in the process of occupational mobility¹⁸. Many of these migrants lived in the areas of government housing and in some of the squatter settlements where proximity to place of employment was preferred¹⁹.

The racial composition of the urban population has changed with the increased involvement of the Malays in the urban economy. While in 1957, 11.2 percent of Malays were estimated to have lived in the urban areas²⁰, by 1980, the percentage was estimated to increase to 25.2 percent (see Table 4). However, despite this increase, the majority of the Malays was still living in rural areas in 1980. On the other hand, the percentage of non-Malays population living in urban areas continued to increase. For example, the urban Chinese population increased from 44.7 percent in 1957 to 56.1 percent in 1980 and the urban Indian population increased from 30.7 percent in 1957 to 41 percent in 1980.

The tempo of urbanization for all ethnic groups from 1970 to 1980 was faster than in the period between 1957 and 1970²¹. Since the Malays had the fastest tempo of urbanization (5.2 percent in 1970-1980 period), they had made some improvements in their share of urban population from 27.6 percent in 1970 to 37.9 percent in 1980. It is expected that the percentage will reach 45.0 percent in 1990²². Thus, the increase in the Malay share of total urban population resulted in the Chinese share to drop from 58.4 percent in 1970 to 50.3 percent in 1980, and the Indian share dropped only slightly over the years (see Table 4).

Table 4. West Malaysia: Ethnic composition of urban areas, proportion of each ethnic group living in urban areas, average of annual growth rates and tempo of urbanization by ethnic group, 1957-1980

| Census year | Total urban population | Percentage of total urban population | | |
|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
| 1957 | 1,666,969 | 21.0 | 62.6 | 12.8 |
| 1970 | 2,530,433 | 27.6 | 58.4 | 12.7 |
| 1980 | 4,073,100 | 37.9 | 50.3 | 11.0 |

| Percentage of total each ethnic group living in urban areas | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
|--|--------|---------|---------|
| 1957 | 11.2 | 44.7 | 30.7 |
| 1970 | 14.9 | 47.4 | 34.7 |
| 1980 | 25.2 | 56.1 | 41.0 |

| Average annual growth rate (%) | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1957-1980 | 5.3 | 2.7 | 3.2 |
| 1970-1980 | 7.9 | 3.3 | 3.3 |

| Tempo of urbanization (%) | Malays | Chinese | Indians |
|---------------------------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1957-1970 | 2.2 | 0.4 | 0.9 |
| 1970-1980 | 5.2 | 1.8 | 1.8 |

Sources: Malaysia, 1983:21; ESCAP, 1982:37; Narayanan, 1975:124.

The increase in the share of Malay urban population during the 1970's was primarily caused by the opportunities promoted by the Malaysian government to encourage the Malays to participate in urban activities. It was not surprising that about 68.2 percent of the total rural-urban migrants during the 70's were Malays (see Table 5). However, rural-rural and urban-rural migration among Malays were still very large because of the increasing number of government's land development and resettlement programs.

Table 5. Composition of migrants by ethnic groups (percentage of total), 1970-1980

| Area of origin and ethnic groups | Area of destination | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| | <u>Urban</u> | <u>Rural</u> |
| Urban | | |
| Malays | 44.5 | 58.5 |
| Chinese | 43.4 | 29.6 |
| Indians | 11.3 | 24.3 |
| Rural | | |
| Malays | 68.2 | 77.4 |
| Chinese | 24.0 | 13.2 |
| Indians | 7.4 | 0.4 |

Source: Malaysia, 1983:79.

The creation of new towns along big metropolitan areas such as Shah Alam, Bangi and Selayang Baru in the state of Selangor, Senawang in Negeri Sembilan, Senai and Skudai in Johor and Bayan Baru in Penang had all contributed in strengthening the urban development strategy of increasing the number of urban Malays in new areas as part of the promotion to upgrade the intermediate cities near large metropolitan areas²³. Thus, promotion of new township in West Malaysia is part of the crucial strategy to improve the standard of the Malays and change the character of old towns, which were dominated by the non-Malays.

The Impact of Urbanization on the Urban Malays

The earlier section showed that the Malay population had the fastest tempo of urbanization during the 1970-1980 period. The factors contributed to their rapid urbanization include the construction of new towns creating new jobs and homes. Various federal agencies and the state economic development corporations (SEDCs) have promoted active participation of the Malays in urban economic activities²⁴. It was in mid-1970s that more Malays moved from rural to large urban centers.

By 1980, about 20 percent of the total urban Malays were in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, the national capital, constituting 33.2 percent of the total population (see Table 6). It is expected that the number of Malays living in Kuala

Lumpur city to reach 48.3 percent (1.1 million) by the year 2,000²⁵. Besides Klang Valley, the Malays were also attracted to regional towns due to the availability of jobs. Almost all population of the new town of Bandar Tun Razak was composed of Malays²⁶. Bangi and Pasir Gudang, which were supposed to have a balanced ethnic composition, had a tiny non- Malay population²⁷.

Table 6. Kuala Lumpur: Ethnic composition, 1970 and 1980

(Percentage)

| Ethnic groups | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 |
|------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Malays | 24.5 | 33.2 | 46.5 |
| Chinese | 57.7 | 51.9 | 45.0 |
| Indians | 16.6 | 13.9 | 8.0 |
| Others | 1.2 | 1.0 | 0.5 |
| Total Population | 451,810 | 927,817 | 1,500,000 |

Sources: Calculated from Malaysia, 1983:21; Berita Harian, 12 March 1990 : 12.

The continuing migration of the rural poor has literally transformed rural poverty into urban poverty. They remain poor because of the low labor absorptive capacity of some of urban industries²⁸. Some end up working in low-income jobs or in the informal sector²⁹. Recently, the potential of the informal sector has been identified and new programs has been implemented at the municipality level³⁰.

Given the high cost of living in urban areas, some of the migrants live in squatter settlements in large metropolitan areas such as Kuala Lumpur city, Ipoh City and Johor Bahru³¹. In Kuala Lumpur city, there were about 37,740 Malay squatters in 1968, increased to 67,042 in 1975³². Kuala Lumpur City Hall indicated that in 1980 the number of Malay squatters was approximately 80,000 which represented about 32.8 percent of the total Malay population in that city³³. The recent data indicates that the number of Malay squatters has reduced to 68,000. New resettlement programs greatly reduced the number of squatters to 243,000³⁴.

Progress in providing housing for the lower income groups such as the squatters was very poor despite concerted public sector efforts³⁵. In many housing

development programs, the public sector played a very crucial role in planning and implementation of low-income houses. Although there appears to be adequate housing for all the people within the country measured in terms of mere shelter, the 1980 census of population and housing has shown that while there appears to be sufficient number of dwelling units to cater to the needs of the people, there is considerably disparity in the quality of housing. The largest area of concern are among the lower income groups which occupy urban squatter settlements.

Because the bulk of urban Malay population is concentrated in Kuala Lumpur city and its surrounding areas, acute problems of urban housing began to emerge not only in many squatter areas but also in the slums of the Malay Reservation areas³⁶. The Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH) has continuously strive to house these squatters and slum dwellers in the Malay Reservation areas and other lower income groups of the city population irrespective of race in new high-rise and low-cost flats.

During the Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980, a sum of MR 103 million was allocated for the construction of 7,017 houses by the City Hall. However, only 28 percent of the houses were completed³⁷. Most of the low- cost projects undertaken by the public sector had run into several difficulties, mainly the lack of suitable land, shortage of construction materials and limited capacity of contractors³⁸ and weaknesses of the public agencies³⁹. Intervention by a political party at local and state levels continued to aggravate the housing problem of the lower income groups in some West Malaysian states⁴⁰.

In the Fourth Malaysia Plan, 1981-1985, only 4,698 families of squatters were relocated in new housing areas out of the total 44,011 squatter families in Kuala Lumpur city⁴¹. At the same time, the construction of medium and high-cost housing exceeded the Plan target⁴². More importantly, the *Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan*⁴³ neglected the housing need of the lower income groups, especially squatters. The only clear policy stated in the Plan was the need to build 58 percent low cost housing and the rest on medium and high cost housing⁴⁴.

Conclusion

The present-day urban system and complex society of West Malaysia is a product of both the colonial administration and the deliberate NEP to urbanize the Malays. The expansion of the pre-independence economy and the activities of the non-Malay immigrants created distinct spatial distribution both of urban centers and also

ethnic groups. In the decades after the war, there were differential rates of urbanization influenced by various economic, social and political factors. Rural to urban migration made a major contribution to the process of urbanization and it tended to be associated with the Malay rural population.

The empirical evidence in 1970 presented a clear picture of the differences in the level of urbanization between states and ethnic groups. The 1980 data indicated the significant changes that had taken place in the patterns of urbanization over the ten years period. More importantly, rapid urbanization process had affected the Malay migrants, who had to compete for living space.

Numerous attempts have been made to alleviate housing conditions of the lower income groups such as the squatters, yet many of them have resulted in worsening the situation. First, lower income groups could hardly get into the housing market because intense speculative investment activity by both the public and private sectors. In addition, credit facilities meant for lower income groups had been diverted to middle and high income groups. Second, the misconception that squatter settlements is a crime area. This led the City Hall to demolish many squatter houses, thus, aggravating the problem of housing shortage. There is a total disregard for the social and functional aspects of housing.

The imposition of middle income and alien housing standards upon the urban poor groups do not do any justice. The majority of the Malay squatters cannot afford even the minimum standard housing and such ill-conceived approach to the squatter settlement problem has only resulted in further deprivation of housing opportunities for the lower income groups. A comprehensive policy of financial assistance to the lower income groups needs to be formulated by the state, housing developers and the credit and financial institutions to overcome the lack of concern of the housing problem of the lower income groups. Lastly a comprehensive urban and housing policy that take into account the ethnic and socioeconomic factors should be formulated by the Malaysian government with active participation from all sectors⁴⁵.

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Notes

- 1 In the 1980 population and housing census, the proportion of Malays to the total population was 58.7 percent, Chinese 32.1 percent and Indians 9.2 percent. See Malaysia (1983).
- 2 For examples, see Salih (1975 and 1979).
- 3 See Sendut (1962) ; Narayanan (1975).
- 4 This strategy was part of the British administration policy to weaken the support for communist insurgencies. For a detailed study see Sandhu (1964 : 143-177).
- 5 See Ooi (1975 : 43).
- 6 See Malaysia (1976 : 149).
- 7 See Saw (1972 : 115). However, the number of the Chinese squatters and migrants who returned to their former settlements was smaller compared to those who continued to stay permanently in urban areas.
- 8 See Narayanan (1975).
- 9 See Sendut (1962).
- 10 Other land development schemes include the group settlement scheme launched in 1960, the fringe land development scheme and the green revolution agricultural scheme. For a more detailed discussion on these schemes see Malaya (1961); Malaysia (1966).
- 11 An earlier writings on Felda can be found in Sendut (1962 : 116-117). However, at the beginning of this period (1957-1970), priority attention was given to the development of intermediate towns such as Kota Bharu, Alor Star and Kuantan which possessed strong potential for growth. In addition, 37 new townships, involving 104,400 persons were established in the four major regional development authorities of DARA, KEJORA, KETENGAH and KESEDAR. See Malaysia (1976 and 1981).
- 12 For a more elaborated explanation on this issue see McGee (1971:0).
- 13 See Narayanan (1975 : 60-62 and 1975a).
- 14 See Pryor (1973).
- 15 Censuses in the post-independence years in West Malaysia have defined an urban areas as a gazetted administrative district having a population of at least 10,000 people. It must be noted that United Nations (1952) used the figure 1,000 for Malaya (now, West Malaysia). On the other hand, Sendut (1962) adopted a statistical criterion of 2,000 persons to include some farming population in the rural areas. Problems of definition of an urban area in West Malaysia are discussed in Yeoh and Hirschman (1980:4).

- 16 This is noted by Kok (1985 : 16-39). A specific example is the declaration of Kuala Lumpur city as a Federal Territory on February 1, 1974. Its boundary was expanded to 99 square miles to include some parts of the state of Selangor.
- 17 See Saw (1972 : 119); Evers (1979 : 7); Agus (1981 : 4-10).
- 18 See McGee (1971 and 1977).
- 19 Elsewhere I have discussed the government housing which was known as, "the institutional quarters." See Agus (1983, 1986 and 1988:4). Discussion on problem of squatter settlements can be found in McGee (1971 : 149-159); Agus (1981).
- 20 See Ooi (1975 : 43).
- 21 For a detailed discussion on the tempo of urbanization for the 1980-1990 period see Chan (1987 : 2-31).
- 22 See Malaysia (1984 : 136).
- 23 A more detailed discussion on the extent of Malay dominance in new towns see Mohamad (1983); Lee (1987). Chan (1987 : 9) discussed briefly this new trend of facilitating Malays to live in new towns but he also included new towns in regional growth areas of DARA and KEJORA. A general perspective on the urban and regional development strategy can be found in Malaysia (1976, 1981 and 1986).
- 24 See Salih (1975).
- 25 See Dewan Bandaraya (1984 : 19-20); Malaysia (1984) estimated that by year 2,000, 50 percent of the total urban population in West Malaysia will be Malays. Projection for Kuala Lumpur city's population in year 2,000 (48.3 percent) falls slightly lower than the national figure.
- 26 For a detailed discussion on the development of new towns in West Malaysia see Lee (1987).
- 27 See Mohamad (1983); Rostam and Mohamad (1984).
- 28 See a detailed discussion on this issue in Ismail (1987 : 120).
- 29 See Agus (1987a and 1987c) for the discussion on some of the implications on the new policy of integrating low-income housing and the urban informal sector.
- 30 See a proposal on new approach to support the informal sector at the national level in Salih (1975 : 18-25). Also my proposal to integrate the informal sector in planning new housing areas for the lower income groups. See Agus (1987a).
- 31 For a detailed discussion on Kuala Lumpur squatters see Agus (1981, 1984 and 1984a); Dewan Bandaraya (1984).
- 32 See a detailed study done by Johnstone (1981 : 378).
- 33 See Dewan Bandaraya (1984 : 116).

- 34 See Agus (1981 : 17 and 1984). If all the squatters living on the fringe of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and surrounding areas are included, it is estimated that the total number of all squatters in these areas may reach 0.5 million people. Due to a more liberal policy by various local authorities in the state of Selangor, the control and monitoring of new squatter areas had been very flexible and liberal as compared to the actions taken by the Enforcement Directorate of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH), a unit in charge of controlling and demolition of new squatter houses.
- 35 Elsewhere I have thoroughly examined various issues regarding the problems of public low-cost housing in Malaysia. See Agus (1983, 1984b, 1986, 1987b and 1988).
- 36 It is estimated that about 80 percent of a total 70,320 people living in the Malay Reservation areas are classified as lower income groups. See Dewan Bandaraya (1984 : 171-178). A comment on the potential of the Malay Reservation Areas see Agus (1986 : 97-110).
- 37 See Malaysia (1979 : 212); Mingguan Malaysia (February 1, 1981).
- 38 See New Straits Times (November 17, 1979).
- 39 See a general comment by Lim (1982); Tan (1983) and Agus (1988).
- 40 For a more detailed analysis on this issue see Agus (1984b and 1986).
- 41 See Dewan Bandaraya (1982 : 78) on data of squatter families and those relocated. In 1982, there were 34,600 squatter houses with 44,011 families in 204 settlements with a total population of 220,055. Only 28.2 percent of these squatters had been rehoused in new housing areas in Kuala Lumpur since 1970.
- 42 Discussion on this issue can be found in Agus (1987d and 1988).
- 43 See general discussion on the housing need in Kuala Lumpur city in Dewan Bandaraya (1984 : 51).
- 44 See Dewan Bandaraya (1984 : 39).
- 45 Jones (1988) did not take into account the ethnic factor in discussing various urban policy option for Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia.

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