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THE COST OF MOVING FORWARD: EXAMINING MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC DISILLUSIONMENT IN MALAYSIA'S URBAN SYSTEM

by Qadrina Aleana Saari and Dr Ahmad Farhan Roslan

ABSTRACT

Malaysia's rapid urbanisation has transformed its socio-economic landscape, with internal migration, encompassing both rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban movement, becoming a prominent trend. This article examines the factors influencing migration, evaluates Malaysia's urban system effectiveness in accommodating migrants, and discusses the implications for human development. Drawing on theories such as Lee's push-pull model, Zelinsky's mobility transition, and the Harris-Todaro framework, the paper contextualises migration within Malaysia's historical and contemporary realities. Although cities like Kuala Lumpur offer higher wages and better access to services, increasing living costs, informal employment, and housing insecurity contribute to economic disillusionment among migrants. Using Kuala Lumpur as a benchmark, the study evaluates three dimensions—employability, cost of living, and essential services—and highlights structural challenges that restrict migrants' capabilities despite the city's urban advantages. The paper argues for recommendations that integrate urban planning with human development principles, including skills-matching initiatives, regulation of the gig economy, and regional economic decentralisation. Ultimately, migration in Malaysia is neither a guaranteed path to advancement nor entirely futile; its success depends on systemic reforms that emphasise inclusive growth and capability.

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Malaysia has experienced a significant shift, with more people moving to cities and urban areas. Earlier in the 1970s, only 30% of the Malaysian population lived in urban areas (The World Bank, 2024). However, with industrialisation, modernisation, and development, the number of people living in urban areas has been steadily increasing, with an estimated 80% of the Malaysian population expected to reside in cities by 2030 (Economic Planning Unit, 2015).

Although urban life is often perceived as appealing due to its employment opportunities and vibrant cultural and social environment, this perception does not always reflect the lived experiences of city residents. Many individuals continue to struggle to secure stable employment and experience financial strain, as the cost of living in the city far exceeds that of rural areas. 'Disillusionment' emerges when jobs, housing, and public services fail to meet expectations. As this disillusionment deepens and expectations remain unmet, migrants are subjected to increased pressures and burdens. However, by the time this realisation emerges, it may already be too late to mitigate the consequences.

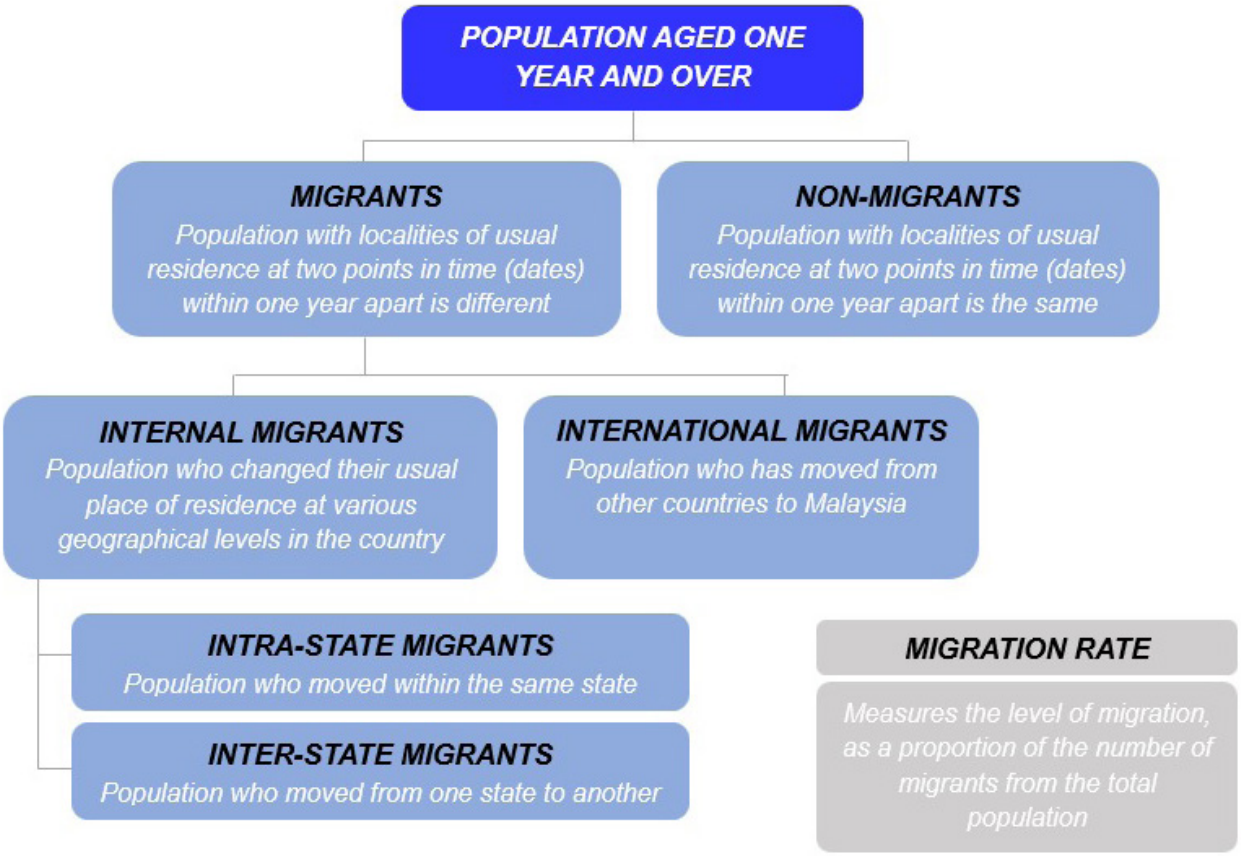
Thus, this article aims to identify the factors driving urban migration in Malaysia, examine the performance of Malaysia's urban system in accommodating rural migrants, and assess its impact on enhancing migrants' capabilities, particularly in terms of employability, the cost of living, and access to essential services. This article also highlights the critical need for policies that better align urban design and economic planning with everyday realities faced by Malaysians.

As cities continue to expand and undergo rapid socio-economic development, their role in economic activity and social progress becomes more significant. People migrate to cities seeking better employment, higher living standards, and improved access to various services and amenities. Migration has been viewed as a catalyst for human development, enabling people to seize economic opportunities and reap the benefits of communal life. While migration becomes the central feature of human societies, the definition of 'migrant' varies widely across international organisations, national governments and academic research.

The International Organization for Migrants (IOM) emphasises the term migrant as "a person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, the causes for the movement, or what the length of the stay is" *(Who Is a Migrant? | IOM Blog, n.d.).* In contrast, the International Labour Organization (ILO) narrows the definition to international migrant workers, i.e., migrants of working age who were part of the labour force in their usual place of residence, either employed or unemployed, during a specified reference period (The World Bank, 2024).

In Malaysia, public discourse and policy debates often equate 'migrants' with foreign workers, particularly those employed in low-wage sectors such as construction and plantations. This focus, however, has overshadowed the significance of internal migration, which involves populations that alter their usual residence across different geographical levels within the country. The Malaysian government has adopted the term "internal migration" to describe both inter-state and intra-state migrants. As Malaysia continues to urbanise, internal migration has become a defining feature of its socio-economic landscape, shaping patterns of urban growth, labour markets, and social integration.

Figure 1: Concept and definition of migration and its categories in Malaysia



Source: (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) Manpower & Social Statistics Division, 2018)

This article takes an internal perspective, henceforth characterising migrants as Malaysian citizens who move within the country for work, education, or to enhance their living conditions. Unlike previous studies that focus predominantly on rural-to-urban migration, this article will include both rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migration. Internal migration to and between cities is crucial for understanding the role of cities as magnets and key drivers of population, creating a dynamic and complex inter-city network in rapidly urbanising Malaysia. Understanding these flows is essential to assess how effectively the urban system meets, or fails to meet, the needs of internal migrants pursuing livelihoods in Malaysian cities.

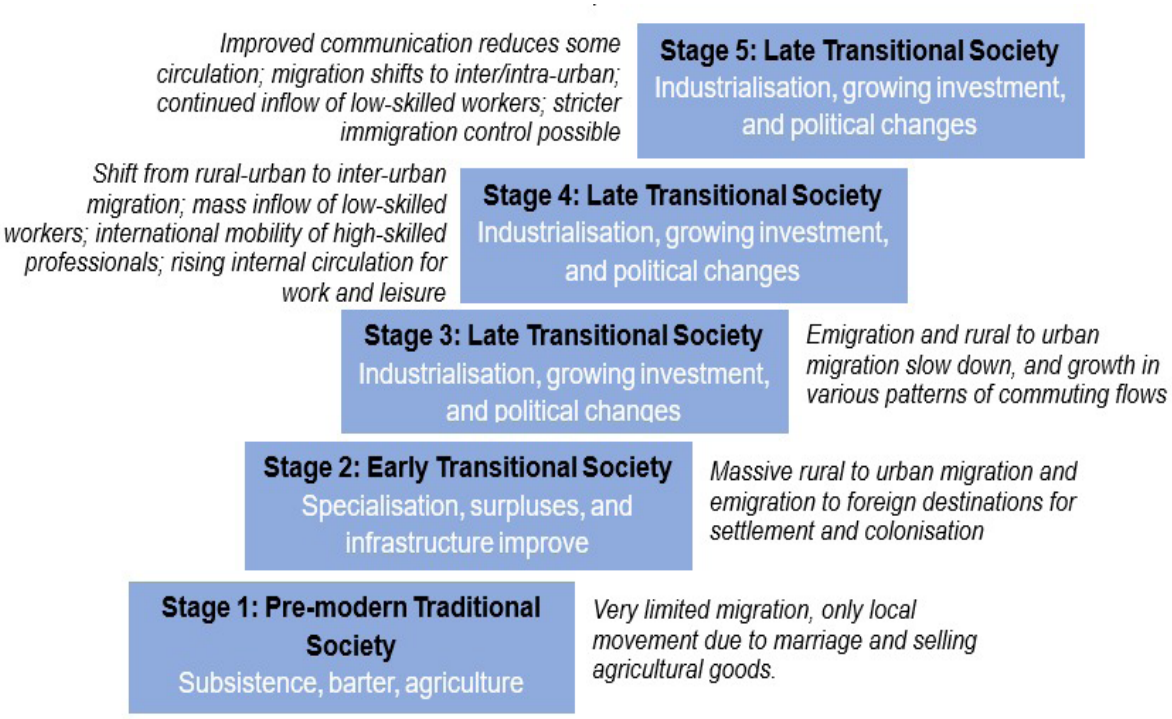
Why Do People Migrate?

For decades, migration has persisted as a viable solution to improve livelihoods and security for societies and families worldwide, and to enhance economic activity across numerous economies, despite its often unfavourable portrayal in politics and the media (International Organization for Migration, 2024). In reality, migration offers a multitude of opportunities for upskilling, higher income, and promotion of dynamism and innovation within communities and labour markets. Many scholars, economists, and historians have long attempted to explain why people migrate from one place to another.

The push-pull theory, introduced by Everett Lee in 1966, is one of the key neo-classical theories used to explain migration. It examines the factors that drive individuals away from their original residence (push factors) and those that attract them to a new location (pull factors). Push factors often include limited employment opportunities and inadequate infrastructure in their current location, which drives them to leave their present surroundings. In contrast, pull factors refer to the availability of better job prospects and improved infrastructure found in destination areas, which motivate individuals to relocate in search of a better life.

Lee also emphasises the four factors that influence mobility: factors associated with the area of origin, factors associated with the destination, intervening obstacles, and personal factors (Lee, 1966). Subsequently, Wilbur Zelinsky presented the hypothesis of the mobility transition in 1971, aligning it with Rostow's five stages of growth to explain the interconnection between human mobilisation and economic growth, as well as the modernisation of the nation (King, 2012). Zelinsky's theory has shifted the way migration is seen from a utility-maximisation approach to a historical perspective. However, this theory is argued to be only applicable to advanced countries, as the model used European countries as the reference.

Figure 2: Hypothesis of the mobility transition by Wilbur Zelinsky (1971), using the five stages of the Growth Model



Source: (Brandt, 2008)

A closely related framework is the Harris-Todaro model, which explains migration in developing countries as the anticipation of higher urban wages than in their places of origin. Although the urban unemployment rate may be higher, migration is likely to continue. An empirical analysis across 12 regions of Turkey found that, in most cases, migration patterns were consistent with the model's predicted relationship between rural–urban migration, unemployment, and urbanisation. The results suggest that this occurs particularly in regions with stronger socio-economic opportunities, supporting Todaro's assumption that migration is primarily motivated by expected income (Sancar & Akbaş, 2022).

Malaysia's historical human mobility can be traced back to the 1970s, when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to reshape the socio-economic landscape and eradicate poverty. The policy encouraged rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migration, especially among the Bumiputera community, in pursuit of better living standards and greater job opportunities. The low wages in the agricultural sector at that time were considered the 'push factor' that led people to migrate from their hometowns to work in advanced industries, such as manufacturing and services(Ali Golam Hassan, 2004). At that time, migration improved Malaysians' livelihoods and contributed to reducing poverty, from 52.4% in 1970 to around 5-6% in the early 2000s (Mok et al., 2007).

However, in today's context, with rural-urban migration increasing the supply of labour in cities, risking a mismatch in supply and demand of labour, this may no longer be the case, at least in the short run. Rising rates of poverty in urban areas (dubbed "urban poverty") from 3.8% of households in 2016 to 4.5% in 2022 (Ministry of Economy, 2024), have created a struggling class. This rate of urban poverty, when considered alongside rural-urban migration rates, reveals a paradox. Despite the increasing poverty rate in urban areas, migration persisted. The percentage of migrants between states in Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, has almost doubled in just 2 years, from 41% in 2018 to 78.4% in 2020 *(Pelan Struktur Kuala Lumpur 2040 – PPKL2040, n.d.)*. This indicates a mismatch between migration patterns, potentially a proxy of aspirations and prospects, with the realities of urban living that persist at the broad level. Although job opportunities may be abundant and sound promising, aspiring migrants may have overlooked other factors that should be taken into account in their decision-making, which will be explained in the next section of this article.

Recent trends in internal migration in Malaysia indicate a growing trend of urban-to-urban migration. A plausible explanation for this outcome is that by 2015, approximately 75% of the population had already migrated to urban areas. Moreover, economic opportunity and social factors, including family networks, also contributed to this shift. This is supported by the results of the Migration Survey Report 2022, which highlight that the major reasons for migration include following family (47.3%), career (18.3%), and environment (19.3%) (DOSM, 2022). These findings are consistent with Zelinsky's model of mobility transition, which posits that modernisation is accompanied by distinctive shifts in migration patterns.

Image generated by OpenAI DALL·E (2025)

The City's Effectiveness: Promise vs. Reality

While understanding the drivers of migration is crucial, it is equally important to examine how effectively cities can accommodate and respond to these movements. To evaluate this, three dimensions will be discussed in this article: employability, cost of living, and essential services. To ground the discussion, occasional references shall be made to Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur to argue or demonstrate an argument, notwithstanding that such exclusive referencing may have limitations, given that Kuala Lumpur's experience may not completely reflect the unique realities of other cities in Malaysia. However, given its significance as the largest and most important city in Malaysia (by population), it is deemed a reliable benchmark.

Employment

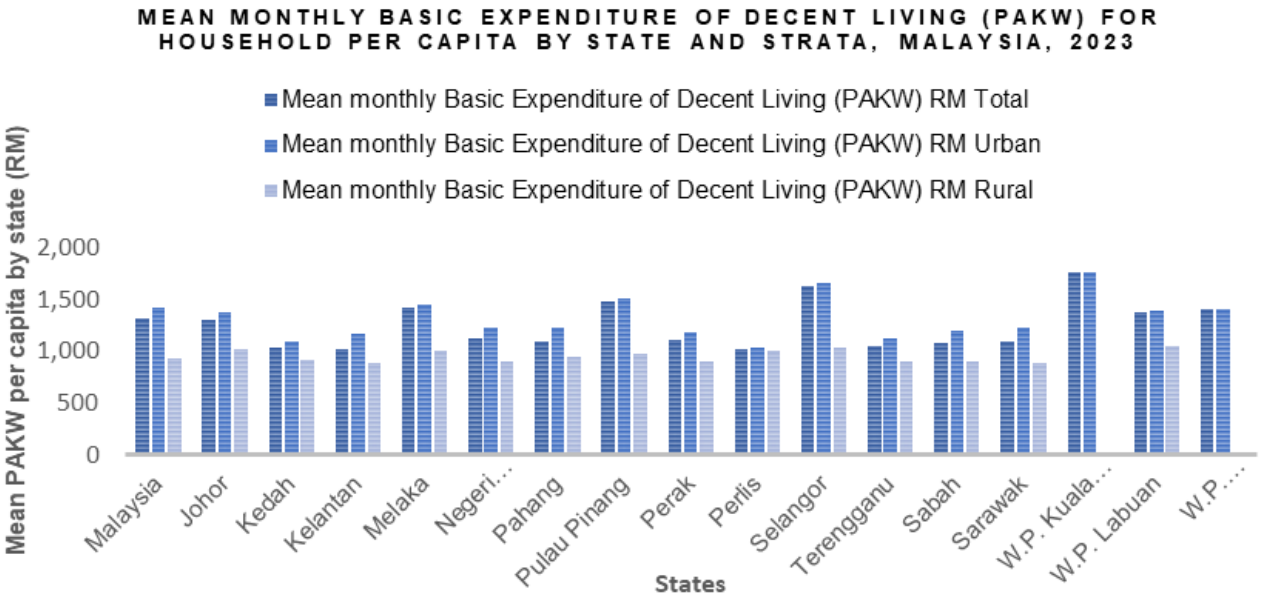
The first of three dimensions is employment and the returns to labour. Kuala Lumpur's unemployment rate stood at 2.7%, with a labour force participation rate (LFPR) of 75.4% as of the first quarter of 2025 (*OpenDOSM*, n.d.). In terms of wages, Kuala Lumpur has the highest median wage nationwide at RM4,200 as of December 2024, compared to Perlis at RM1,764 and Kelantan at RM1,664. The findings suggest that Kuala Lumpur has a high labour force participation rate and the capability to absorb workers. However, while labour markets within cities are deemed to have significantly greater capacity to absorb the surge in labour supply from inward migration, it is also important not to overlook the quality of the jobs offered. Furthermore, while urban labour absorption ensures employment, it does not necessarily ensure sufficient income, especially in Kuala Lumpur. In reality, income is often offset by significantly higher living costs, including housing, transportation, and basic expenses, as discussed in the next section of this article.

While there is demand for labour in cities, rural-urban migrants are at risk of ending up in informal or gig economy jobs, such as delivery riders, e-hailing, and freelance work, which offer flexibility but often lack stability, benefits, and opportunities for wage progression. A recent survey published by MyDigital showed that a portion of full-time gig workers (31%) opted for gig work due to their inability to find suitable employment. Furthermore, the survey revealed that among full-time gig workers engaged in location-based platform work, about one-third of those with limited job options possessed a tertiary education (MyDIGITAL, 2024). It can thus be observed that, while cities like Kuala Lumpur have relatively high economic capacity to absorb and employ large numbers of people with relatively high wages, this capacity is uneven. The prevalence of informal employment and cost-of-living pressures suggests that the city's labour market may not always offer decent jobs that can sustain urban living.

Cost of Living

A second critical dimension in our analysis of cities' effectiveness is the cost of living. While wages in urban areas may offer a higher amount compared to rural areas in absolute Ringgit terms, they may not be commensurate with the higher living costs associated with urban living.

Figure 3: Mean monthly Basic Expenditure of Decent Living (PAKW) for household per capita by state and strata, Malaysia, 2023



Source: (DOSM, 2023b)

According to recent cost-of-living indicators in Malaysia, the average monthly basic expenditure for a decent standard of living was RM4,729 per household in 2023. However, urban areas average RM5,040, while rural areas stay lower at RM3,631. Observing this at the per capita level by state and strata, urban areas again hold a higher mean monthly basic expenditure for decent living (according to (MyPAKW) for household per capita in Malaysia in 2023, at RM1,423, above the Malaysian average at RM1,314, while rural areas remain lower at RM927.

This suggests that living in urban areas has a higher cost of living compared to rural areas. To survive in an urban setting, a person should have at least RM1,423 for expenses. Additionally, to live decently, a household in an urban area requires more financial resources than one in a rural area. Comparing the urban median household income of RM8,139 (DOSM, 2024a) with the basic expenditure for a decent standard of living of RM5,040, urban households are left with only about 38% of their income after covering only the most basic and essential expenses. Even with 38% income remaining after basic expenditure, rising and variable costs across key necessities can reduce real disposable income, which helps explain why households may continue to struggle with the cost of living. As such, migrants may consider economic opportunities outside the labour market, such as entrepreneurial or business opportunities, or turn to credit to survive. This may be particularly important not only for supplementing wages and salaries to meet the high costs of living in urban areas, but also for long-term financial stability and growth.

This trend is evident across all states in Malaysia, where living in urban areas has higher living costs compared to rural areas. In addition, some states, such as Selangor, Pulau Pinang, and Melaka, have a higher urban mean monthly basic expenditure for decent living (PAKW) per household per capita than the average total basic expenditure for decent living (PAKW) per household per capita across all states. The higher cost of living in urban cities in Malaysia puts pressure on households. An increase in urban poverty indicates that more people are struggling financially. The gap between income growth and the cost of living contributes to rising urban poverty and inequality. Policies that focus solely on poverty eradication without addressing urban affordability may fail to address the deeper issue of the true cost burden of urban households.

Essential Goods and Services

The third dimension concerns the provision and delivery of essential goods and services in Malaysian cities, which is central to assessing urban capacity to support migrants in achieving a decent quality of life. These goods encompass affordable housing, transportation, education, healthcare, and social inclusion. Housing prices in cities are significantly higher than in other areas, with Kuala Lumpur averaging RM751,240, Johor Bahru RM350,009, and Petaling Jaya RM489,257 in 2023 *(Pelan Struktur Kuala Lumpur 2040 – PPKL2040, n.d.).* Given the high costs of homeownership, many residents turn to the rental market.

However, rental affordability also presents its own unique challenges. The IQI House Rental Index (Q2 2024) reported Kuala Lumpur's average rent at RM2,863, compared to the national average of RM1,955. Similarly, StarProperty reported that even within the affordable rental category, Kuala Lumpur recorded the highest average rent (RM1,808) relative to the national average (RM1,674). These figures indicate that, even for budget-conscious renters, living costs in the capital remain substantially higher than in other parts of the country *(KL Retains Crown as Nation's Most Expensive Rental Market | StarProperty, n.d.).* In this sense, while urban housing markets provide adequate accommodation for incoming populations, the cost of housing may restrict access for low- and middle-income groups. Therefore, migrants may experience housing insecurity or be forced to live in less desirable neighbourhoods, highlighting an unequal capacity of Malaysian cities to provide inclusive and affordable living conditions.

Another essential dimension to consider is transportation, which plays a crucial role in enabling migrants to move freely within cities and pursue economic activities. Despite significant investment into expanding public transport networks in urban areas, private vehicles remain the dominant mode of mobility for urban dwellers. In 2022, the proportion of households in urban areas owning private cars stood at 92.9%, while 84.6% owned motorcycles, contributing to persistent traffic congestion (DOSM, 2023a).

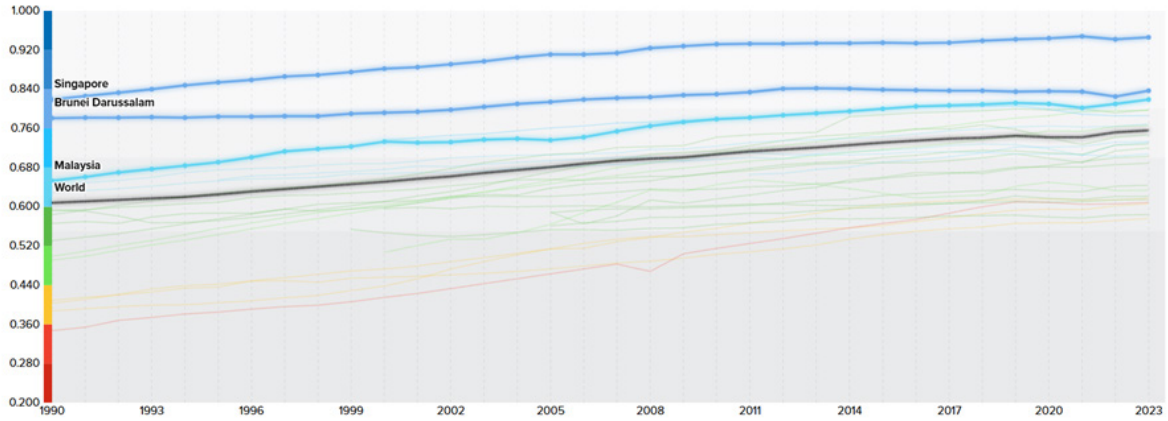
In terms of social services, Malaysian cities demonstrate considerable advantages over rural areas. The Basic Amenities Survey Report 2022 confirms that citizens in urban areas have access to healthcare services in all Malaysian cities, as evidenced by DOSM data indicating that 100% of households in the city are within a 5 km radius of the nearest health centre. Similarly, the prevalence of education centres within a 5km radius of households is significantly higher in urban areas than in rural areas. As for schools, an estimated 99.6% and 99.2% of households are located within the vicinity of at least one primary school and one secondary school, respectively. These conditions make cities attractive destinations for migrants, providing *at least* physical access to basic social services.

The question that thus arises hereon is the financial and social access to these services. Abd Wahab et al., (2022) found, for example, that the urban poor continue to face challenges in accessing health care due to financial and structural constraints. Moreover, while education centres are *physically* available, the increasing population and the number of students enrolled in schools (public and private) pose challenges to the provision of adequate, quality education, especially in cities with very limited land. Taken together, the availability of essential goods and infrastructure in Malaysian cities generally enhances their capacity to attract migrants. However, the uneven distribution of costs and accessibility underscores ongoing challenges for migrant populations, particularly those with limited resources.

Do Cities Expand or Limit Migrants' Capabilities?

Having outlined the concept of migration and the city's overall capacity, the next step is to examine what this means for migrants. For them, Kuala Lumpur is not just an economic hub but a place where they hope to work, live, and build better futures. The key question, then, is whether the city truly expands their capability to pursue the lives it values. Human development is worth said as "the enlargement of the range of people's choices" (United Nations Development Programme, 1990). In his Nobel Prize-winning work, Development as Freedom, Sen (1999) posited that a human being can develop when they are allowed to become what they wish to be and do what they wish to do, offering freedom and opportunities for growth. This paradigm aims to shift the narrative from an income-based approach to a people-centred capability approach (Frediani, 2010). **Examining this from a similar perspective, this paper argues that cities should therefore prioritise the needs of their current and prospective residents as facilitators of human development and well-being rather than merely as places to earn a livelihood.**

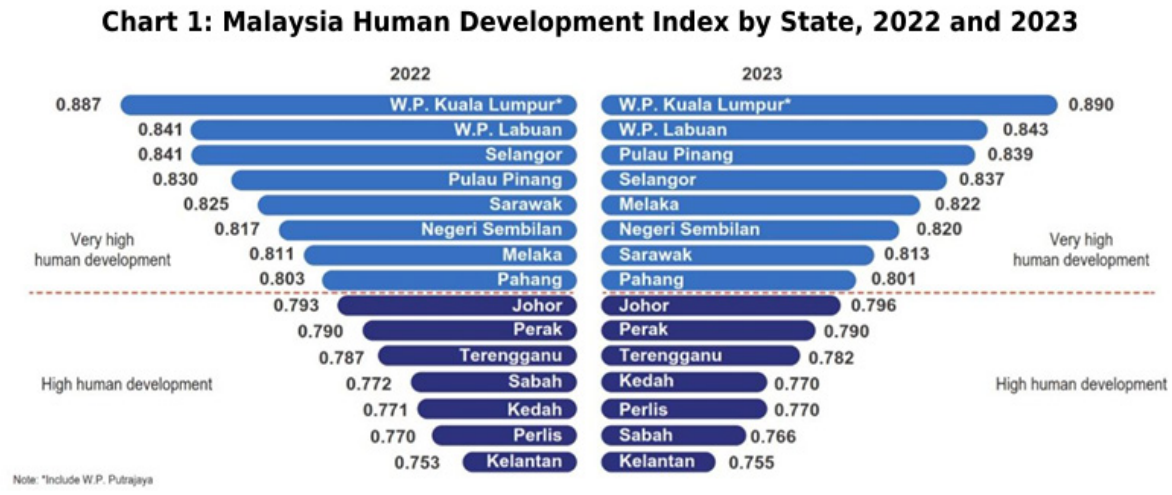
Figure 4: Human Development Index for East Asia and the Pacific (1990-2023)



Source: (Documentation and Downloads | Human Development Reports, n.d.)

According to the Human Development Index, Malaysia ranks among the top 3 in the East Asia and Pacific region, with an HDI of 0.819 in 2023, surpassing the global average. This suggests that Malaysia is at the forefront of enhancing human well-being and quality of life.

Figure 5: Malaysia Human Development Index 2022 and 2023



Source: (DOSM, 2024b)

Urbanised state areas, such as W.P. Kuala Lumpur, W.P. Labuan, and Selangor, are also reported to have higher human development indices than states like Kedah, Perlis, and Kelantan. This suggests that urbanised states in Malaysia are able to provide better health, education and standard of living.

The question is thus whether the sufficiency of such static measures determines whether the city can effectively absorb and expand a continuous process of inward rural-urban migration, thereby enhancing migrants' capabilities to achieve the desired outcomes. This is a core question of our discussion: lest inequality and gaps persist and urban life deteriorate for many of its aspirants. Sen's central argument was how crucial it was to remove obstacles that hinder a human from achieving their freedom (Kuhumba, 2021). In the case of Kuala Lumpur, the city has the economic capacity to absorb labour by providing employment opportunities, which is often the primary motivation for migrants.

As argued earlier, while cities offer superior employment opportunities, expansive transportation networks and virtually full access to basic social services, challenges remain. The agglomeration of cities, shaped by inward rural-urban migration, puts migrants at risk of an inferior quality of life due to high living costs relative to income, abundant housing but a shortage of affordable housing, and access to healthcare that is financially out of reach. As a result, many may turn to the abundant opportunities in the informal sector that cities offer for survival. Informality, while holding promises for economic prosperity in the short term, is much more uncertain and unsustainable in the context of expanding the migrant's long-term capabilities. While the decision to migrate into cities has enabled upward mobility for some, others may find themselves trapped in precarious conditions, far worse than the lives they previously enjoyed in more rural areas.

In summary, it can be concluded from our simple analysis that urban-rural migration into cities, for citizens, is not always positive. The city may both limit or expand migrants' capabilities. The question that emerges, therefore, is whether the city can be said to continue to offer migrants opportunities as it did in the past. Have Kuala Lumpur or Malaysia's key cities run their course and reached a saturation point, thus encouraging the problems associated with urban sprawl, for example? On the one hand, it offers opportunities for employment and improved living standards. On the other hand, structural challenges limit the extent to which migrants can achieve fulfilling lives. Kuhumba (2021) conception of Sen's human capabilities approach thus offers solutions in the role of institutions, law, and societal arrangements in promoting development and ultimately, "freedom" for people.

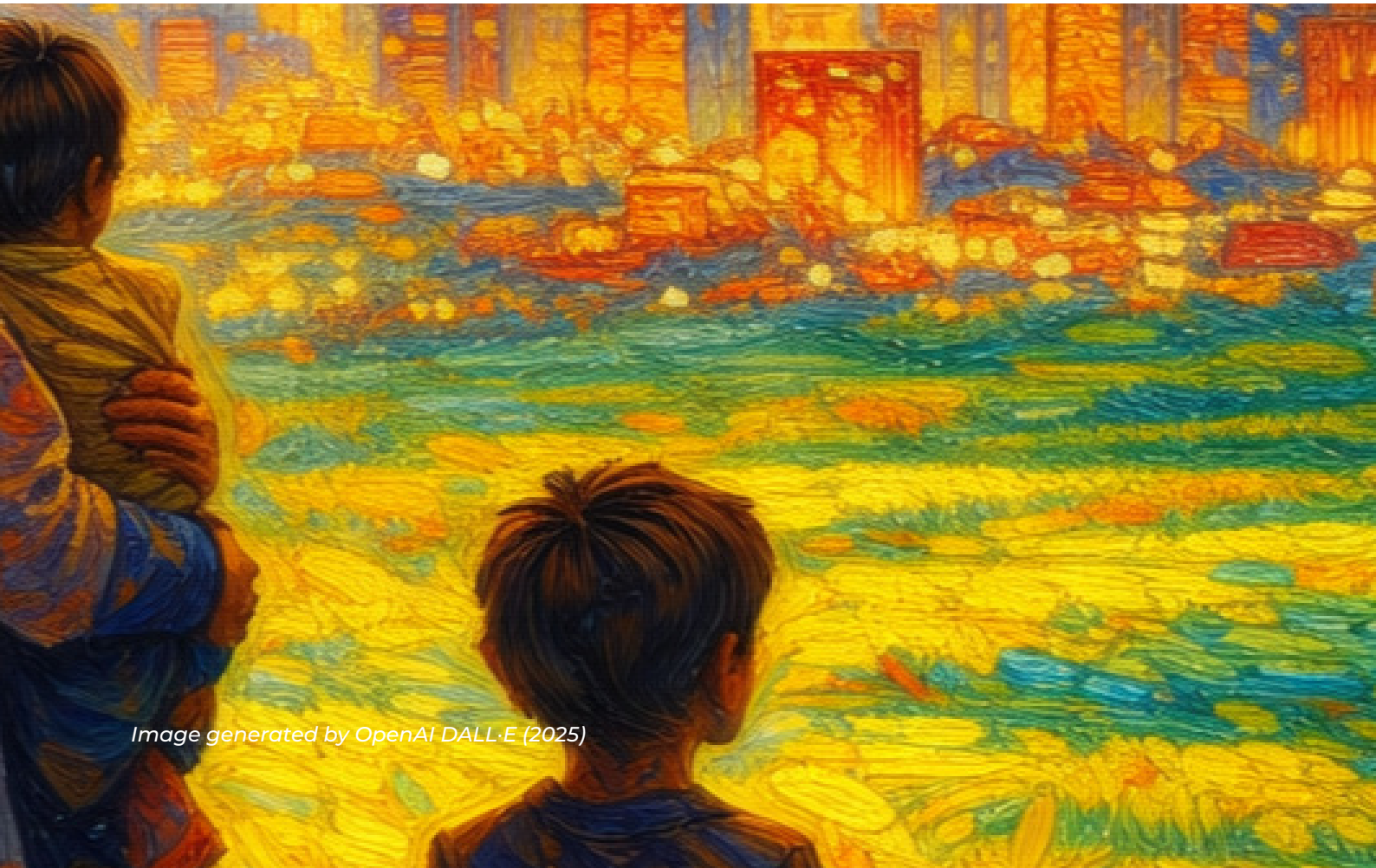


Image generated by OpenAI DALL·E (2025)

Moving Forward: Building a City Not for Its Sake and More for Its People

Kuala Lumpur's absorption capacity presents a mixed picture, suggesting that migration is neither a certain route to advancement nor a futile endeavour. This duality explains why economic disillusionment often emerges within Malaysia's urban system. In this sense, the cost of moving forward is not merely financial, but also emotional and social, as migrants navigate between seized opportunities and unmet expectations. This article provides an overview of the internal migration trend in Malaysia and the city's role in absorbing and expanding human (particularly migrant) capabilities. Several points discussed above have led to the recommendation below.

Firstly, it is essential to consider the role of governments to incentivise industries within the city to enable and absorb migrants. The government plays a crucial role in enhancing the city's capabilities by introducing supportive policies and improving public infrastructure to boost residents' living standards and well-being. Incentives such as skills-matching programmes, entrepreneurship grants, affordable housing schemes, and access to legal and welfare services can help expand migrants' labour-market and social-arrangements-related capabilities. These kinds of policies could transform migration from mere survival into genuine human development, allowing them to be and do what they value.

Secondly, consider enhancing regulations and engaging systemically important platforms that are increasingly providing opportunities for citizen migrants in the informal sector, such as the growing gig economy and microenterprise sector, where many migrants seek work and business opportunities for livelihoods. While the gig economy provides immediate entry into the urban labour market for many migrants, it often lacks the necessary protection against risks, is vulnerable to income volatility, and offers incomes that are unsustainable due to limited career progression. Thus, by introducing policies that ensure fairer wages, better bargaining positions for workers and micro-entrepreneurs, social security contributions, and basic employment rights, the government can raise the bar and transform this sector into a more sustainable option for developing human capabilities in the long run. This measure will not only expand migrants' economic capability but also strengthen the city's overall capacity to absorb rural-urban citizen migration.

Last, but most importantly, is to explore strengthening the linkages between central cities and surrounding suburban areas. Concentrating opportunities solely on cities such as Kuala Lumpur risks overburdening them, while peripheral regions could host urban neighbourhoods and enclaves with high concentrations of urban poverty, akin to the undesirable suburban or *banlieue life,* becoming a testament to this 'economic disillusionment'. It is important that local and federal governments play more active roles in designing cities that distribute economic opportunities more evenly across the urban system by investing in transport infrastructure, decentralising industries, and promoting coordinated regional development. These linkages will alleviate pressure on cities like Kuala Lumpur while enabling migrants to seek socio-economic mobility in suburban areas, thereby broadening the scope of capability expansion beyond a single urban centre.

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