

The Critical Nature of the Environment and the Life of Urban Village Inhabitants in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study is based on literature reviews that elaborate on the critical nature of the environment and life of the urban village inhabitants in Malaysia. The urban village inhabitant is part of the urban population that lives in a village surrounded or encircled by urban development. Since, the nation achieved its independence 59 year ago, the process of modernization, urbanisation and industrialization has greatly altered the social structure and people's way of life, especially in the urban areas. This development has directly affected on the quality of life of the urban village inhabitant. This study argues that the critical nature of life among the urban village society is greatly influenced by the urban village environment and the community living in the area. Early findings showed that the influence of the urban village environment could be explained based on current government policies, criticisms and negative views of the population living around the urban village and the facilities in the urban area. Whereas, the ability of the community to live in the urban village is due to the ability to grab economic opportunities in the area, the ability to adapt to the urban environment as well as services provided by the local authorities. The urban village environment and its occupants were also directly affected by the rapid development as well as rapid population growth in the area.

Key words: Critical nature, quality of life, urban village, urban environment, area

INTRODUCTION

The urban environment provides various facilities to the urban village inhabitant. The current facilities and infrastructure found in the urban environment has made urban living more meaningful by fulfilling the needs and wants of the urban population. The wide need-gap differential between urban and rural environments makes the urban population's quality of life look much better due to the infrastructure facilities and urbanization services besides the physical environment and population factors (Haller and Hadler, 2006; Narayana, 2009). A census carried by the Statistics Department of Malaysia in 2010 showed that 71% of Malaysians are concentrated in cities. The challenge faced is to provide urban facilities to ensure that the advantages of density is not jeopardised by increasing crime rate, pollution or congestion (Malaysia, 2010). The increase in urban population directly affects the population around the urban village area. Throughout the past decade, Malaysia has gone through a rapid urbanization process with the city population increasing by 2.2% compared to the rural

population by 1.6% from 2000-2009. The urban population in the Malaysian Peninsula comprises 67% of the total population, with urban growth at 2.1% compared to rural growth at 1.4% for the same period.

ISSUES AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE URBAN VILLAGE INHABITANT

The urban village community's quality of life is seen from two aspects, namely the urban village environment and the community that lives in the area (Fig. 1). The city environment provides the basics for building the urban village inhabitant's quality of life. A city is a permanent settlement that is relatively big and compact as well as portraying its various facilities to indicate that the city is a place that offers a better quality of life compared to a rural area. According to Liu *et al.* (2012), the urban village inhabitant had chosen to continue living permanently in the city not solely because of job opportunities or to improve the quality of life but because they were influenced by factors such as heritage, tradition and culture. Urban village residents were the original

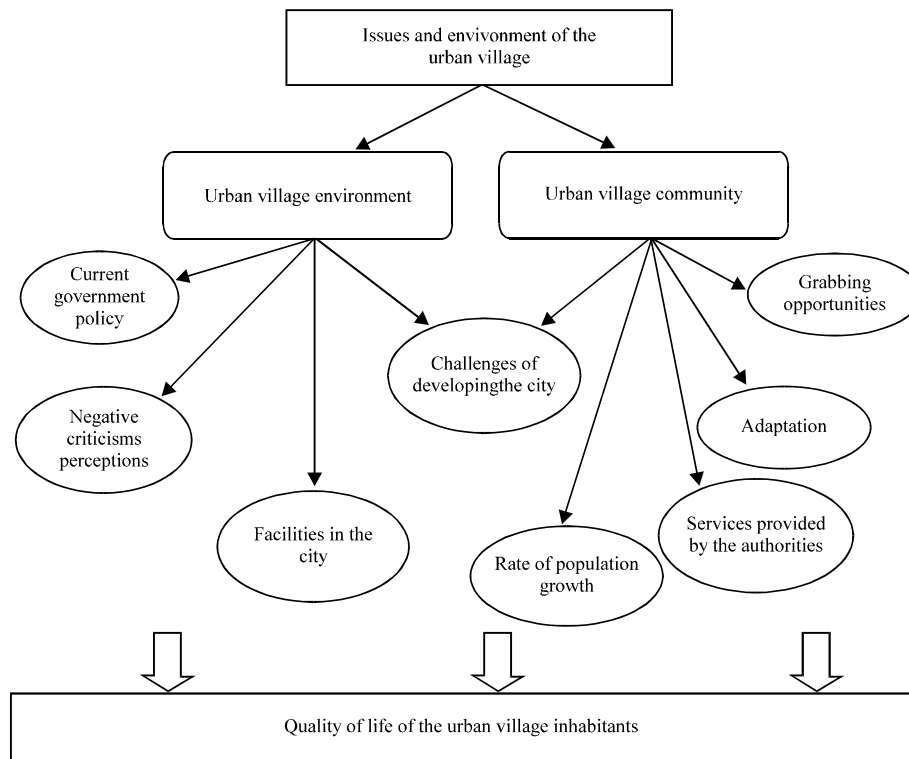


Fig. 1: Issues and environmental quality of life of the urban village

residents around the city even before the area was called a city or developed into a city. Changes in time and space had caused the urban village residents to be separated and surrounded in the middle of a developed city (Hin and Xin, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2012).

GOVERNMENT POLICY

According to Jacobs (1961), the modern planning policy that was introduced (referring to the policy introduced in New York in the United States in the 1960s) could destroy and eliminate a community that lives in a city. The development and urbanization process that does not consider the existing community in the city could endanger the existing community by eventually causing the existing community to doggedly adapt and forcefully live with the changes. Issues related to the urban village have been discussed for a long time now with the only difference being the term urban village itself. Hence, the issue is still the same which is the guaranteed quality of life of the community living in the city. According to Jacobs (1961), urban development should always consider this group so that whatever that is planned does not oppress or victimise the community that lives in the area.

In 1973, Taylor had introduced the urban village development concept in America, which evidently is part of the planned urbanization process. The urban village concept mentioned here enables the prospective residents to experience friendlier neighbourhood relations, a safer surrounding, effective facilities, reduced traffic congestions and to carry out daily chores within the urban village area (Aldous, 1992; Brindley, 2003; Tait, 2003). In addition, prospective residents were given the opportunity to provide development designs for the “urban village” area (Brindley, 2003; Landman, 2004; Murray, 2004). This particular concept has managed to attract the attention of several developed countries such as Britain, France, Italy and Greece that wish to implement this development plan in their country. Hence, Landman (2004) and Murray (2004) are of the view that the development of the “urban village” concept actually depends on the community’s level of acceptance in the city because all these involves the quality of life of the community that live there.

The issue related to regeneration and redevelopment of cities has brought about an era of change among city folks (Yu and Kwon, 2011; Deakin, 2012; Leaf, 1995). This development would surely involve residents living in the

urban village area. The development concept is said to maximise the space in cities and subsequently provide a very good quality of life for the city residents (Deakin, 2012). Hence, what happened in Seoul, South Korea was that most of the city reformation projects occurred in the 1980s, after the urban Redevelopment Law was approved in 1976. The city redevelopment and reformation projects were able to transform the city surroundings to a more planned and systematic city. This development had enabled the housing developers (construction companies) and the house or land owners around the main Seoul area to implement projects by way of sharing or joint-ventures.

Projects that were initiated voluntarily under the direction of the house owners committee and officers from the construction companies selected by the house owners representatives had in theory, enabled the joint-venture to build apartments or multi-story houses as well as share the profits. Furthermore, it is estimated that <20% of the original residents (residents of the urban village) were able to purchase at least one apartment unit while the rest of the original residents were could not afford to own one due to financial constraints (Ha, 2004).

Another example is the issue about Kampung Baru in Kuala Lumpur which is among one of the numerous urban villages situated in the middle of the city and where interested parties had planned for the redevelopment of the area. The Kuala Lumpur City Hall estimated that the value of the land in the area could be more than RM20 billion if the residents fully accept the development concept. Hence, what happened to the Kampung Baru redevelopment plan is seen as a failure to command the confidence of the residents. One of the factors is the lack of confidence of the residents regarding the developer who had undervalued the property.

CHALLENGES OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Rapid urbanization development in big cities in the 21st century is becoming increasingly evident, especially in most developing countries. Urbanization is regarded as an important catalyst to economic growth besides being able to enhance the people's quality of life. Anuar Amir and Lee Kok Chai and Wan Rozali also gave a picture about the effects of urbanization whereby many villages situated at the fringes of cities were consumed by the tide of development. Most of these settlements had existed for a long time and had still not seen any development because they were not given due consideration in city development policies.

For example, China has experienced three big waves of urbanization development, which was in the 1980s, around 1992 and in 2003. These developments had caused a big urban sprawl. The development zones were extended beyond the agriculture areas. What is worrying is the community that lives in urban village areas in big cities such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The location of the urban village area had made the residents in the area become part of the city population (Hin and Xin, 2011; Song and Zenou, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, He *et al.* (2009), Vinh and Leaf (1996), Leaf (1995) and Liu *et al.* (2010) found that most residents of urban villages were not given special privileges such as work opportunities or reasonable compensation for the agricultural land that was acquired.

ADAPTATION

A study by Song and Zenou (2012) on urban village residents in the city of Shenzhen in China had shown that the urban village surroundings had forced the residents to arduously adapt to life in the city. Moreover, signs that the urban village residents had made other efforts to exit the affected area were not evident. This situation shows that the urban village residents' level of quality of life could be enough to satisfy their wants and needs so much so that they do not want to leave the urban village area.

SERVICES OR TREATMENT BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Gu and Shen (2003) found that although the urban village area (society in China) is within the city, the village atmosphere is still maintained as in the rural areas. Consequently, the effect of this isolates the urban village area from development planning, infrastructure facilities as well as services by the city authorities. However, due to the development around the village area, landowners in the urban village had taken the opportunity to benefit from the situation by attracting those working in the city to live in the urban village and for this purpose the landowners had built rooms for rent (Hin and Xin, 2011; Xie, 2005; Lin and Meulder, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2010). This situation had brought about several social ills such as safety issues and prostitution (Xie, 2005).

CRITICISM AND NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

The urban village frequently faces criticism and negative perceptions from city residents and local

authorities. The area is frequently seen as a sight for sore eyes and disrupting the city's development process as well as the ad-hoc building of new dwellings by urban village residents. These developments had brought about several suggestions by the authorities to take over the urban village area in order to re-develop the area in a more planned manner whereas the residents would be re-located to a new settlement area which would be more accommodating and of better quality (Hao *et al.*, 2011; Xie, 2005).

POPULATION GROWTH RATE AND COMPETITION IN URBAN AREAS

Based on the current growth projections, the city areas in Peninsula Malaysia would need to cater for an increase of six million people from between 2010-2020. Areas for development, especially in 'greater' Kuala Lumpur, are limited and would not be able to support the increasing demand. During 10th Malaysia Plan (RMK 10), which stretches from 2011-2015, a compact city development plan would be initiated to sustain this growth. This development plan would surely have a big impact on the resident's quality of life in the urban village and continue to make the urban village relevant in the present context.

The 10th Malaysia Plan (RMK 10) launched in June 2010 showed the government's commitment to city planning which was more towards the people-based development approach. The government is now designing infrastructure that decreases the distance travelled and encourages people-friendly activities around the city by focusing on various activities and facilities that are easily accessed. The RMK 10 is an indication of the government's awareness that without a public transport system that functions well; issues such as congestion, loss of productivity as well as a decline in the quality of life could cause big and medium cities to lose competitiveness as well as its status as a city. This plan would indirectly lend a positive effect on the urban village inhabitant to continue living in the urban village.

In Malaysia, the question that arises is what are the special privileges received by the urban village inhabitant in Malaysia at present. Could it be that the urban village inhabitant's quality of life is far better than that in urban village settlements in cities such as Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, Seoul as well as Guangzhou in China. This study elaborates on how much of this scenario is faced by urban village residents in Malaysia according to individual, social and environmental characteristics and what is their current level of quality of life.

FACING THE CHALLENGES OF URBAN VILLAGE LIFE AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

The structural changes on the village area due to the processes of modernization, urbanization and industrialization are something that surely would occur. In facing the challenges from these three processes, the urban village residents need a significant thrust in efforts to procure higher levels of quality. Hence, would these three processes mentioned above take humans to a higher level of quality of life? Quality of life is not only measured according to capabilities such as the ability of the urban village community to grab economic opportunities in the city, the ability to adapt with the city environment and level of services or treatment offered by the local authorities. Conversely, quality of life is related to the level of morality and religious values that reflects strong humanistic values. Consequently, this would make one refrain from all actions related to negligence, deceit, oppression and cruelty.

Besides that, the urban village residents must turn these three processes that occur around their village into a source of strength and not a source of weakness. This is emphasised by Allah (SWT) in his exhortation:

Let those fear (the result of mistreating orphans) who, were they to leave behind weak offspring, would be concerned on their account. So, let them be wary of Allah and let them speak upright words (Al-Nisa', 4:9)

Pertaining to this matter, urban village residents should not make the processes that surround and change the structure of their village areas as something that has a negative impact on their lives. The fear is that they would leave the upcoming generation in a precarious position. Hence, the urban village residents must possess qualities that enable them to generate positive ideas as well as form a prosperous society. A quality-filled life could be achieved when the nation successfully fulfils its population's aspiration for a religious life is able to develop the level of education, provide a peaceful life, the opportunity and right to own property as well as guarantee an excellent future for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

Pertaining to environmental management and from an ecological perspective, the urban village residents are a part of the city population. Urban village residents always face changes in the city's environment from a physical, social as well as economic aspect. These changes have forced the urban village residents to adapt with the

environment. Therefore, how far are the urban village residents seen as being a part of the city population according to several aspects such as city services rendered, good infrastructure and communication facilities, work opportunities, ability to grab economic opportunities, level of education and health, safety guarantees, social involvement, housing and working environment and finally, the natural environment?

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