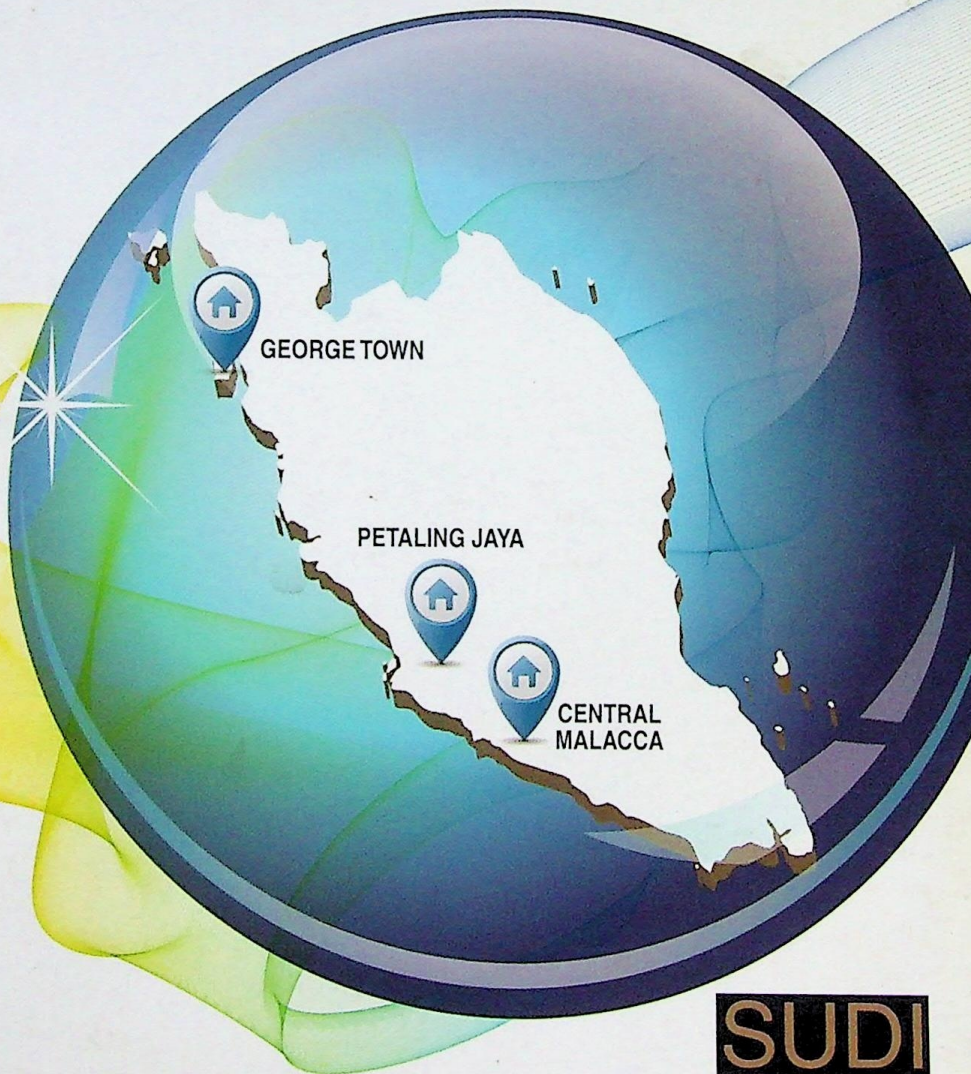


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ELUSIVE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

Challenges of entrenching
sustainability in Malaysian towns



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Challenges of entrenching
sustainability in Malaysian
towns



SUDI: CETDEM's Think
Tank

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ELUSIVE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: CHALLENGES OF ENTRENCHING SUSTAINABILITY IN EXISTING MALAYSIAN TOWNS

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FOREWORD

Green and low carbon have become rather popular terms recently but they seem to have many variations so much so that the concept of sustainability remains fuzzy. This study decided to address what are the challenges faced in entrenching sustainability within existing Malaysian towns. Putrajaya and Iskandar are new fangled towns on which much resources have been expended [and attention!]. But very little work has been done on the vast majority of Malaysian towns.

The study recognized that Malaysia itself does not have many effective sustainable practices ranging from comprehensive and efficient public transport systems and sufficiently clean rivers and drains. Even the nation's ecological footprint is too large at 4 global hectares. It would be very unlikely that sustainability is well entrenched in towns.

Within SUDI's constraints, 4 towns were initially chosen in Peninsular Malaysia on the basis that they had shown some moves towards sustainability with 2 of them administered by the Barisan {BN} and the other two under the opposition Pakatan [PR]. Two of them had also UNESCO declared World Heritage sites, which place constraints on any further development.

Many problems were encountered as detailed later but the most severe was the paucity of basic data which the study team felt was necessary for any reasonable assessment to be done. The lack of cooperation from some key officials at the local council level and utilities proved to be a major hindrance. One of the researchers dropped out and Kuantan had to be excluded.

The Executive Summary presents the findings as well the major challenges that need to be overcome for sustainability to be entrenched.

But because of the limited number of towns covered, it may be risky to extrapolate the findings to the entire country. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the other towns may not have better sustainability as they [perhaps with the exception of Kuching] have made no public commitment in this direction.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study [in the spirit of eco-transformation] aims to define appropriate sustainability criteria for **existing Malaysian towns**, assess how these can be entrenched within the town administration and community, examine the challenges faced in doing so in 3 Malaysian towns, and recommend actions to overcome these challenges.

Its approach was to work around a series of indicators [including proxy ones] using numerical values as the benchmark for assessing satisfactory urban sustainability in Malaysian towns.

The first chapter was compiled from discussions and literature review to spell out the benchmarks. Members of the study team then examined each of the final 3 towns through site visits, interviews and published documents. They assessed how well sustainability had been entrenched and identified what were the challenges to be overcome.

Petaling Jaya [PJ] was the youngest of the 3 towns and with clear boundaries. Most of the selected 14 indicators had information [could be populated], including that on the annual budget. Its population had a reasonably good standard of service but there was a let down on cleanliness of drains and the rivers. It had the highest solar PV installations among the 3 and had the advantage of a long running Local Agenda 21[LA21] programme.

THERE IS A CONCERN THAT MOST OF MBPJ'S GREEN INITIATIVES ARE STILL IN A PROGRAMMATIC FORMAT RATHER THAN A HOLISTIC REFORM PACKAGE THAT IS ABLE TO MOVE PJ TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC CHANGE MUCH NEEDED IN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS.

The 5 challenges in entrenching sustainability were

first - addressing path-dependent tasks such as tackling traffic congestion caused by decision-making made in the past before the popularization of LA21 and sustainable development in PJ.

second - broadening the base of citizens who are aware of the importance of mobilising a collective PJ community and creating societal cohesiveness among the public at large and the importance of managing common pool resources responsibly.

third - gaining more autonomy from the State and Federal governments in institutionalizing policy tools that encourage behavioral change at the local level.

fourth - coordinating the various government and private sector stakeholders to ensure harmonized policy and administrative decisions and actions.

fifth - ensuring the political will (through a cross- political party platform) to champion sustainability.

Unlike PJ, **George Town [GT]** is not a local authority [despite having been conferred City status by the British Queen before Mederka] - being part of the Penang Island

Municipal Council [MPPP] but has a longer history [having been founded in 1786]. Like Central Malacca, it has a UNECSO recognized World Heritage City area.

Despite three officials being interviewed, much data was not forthcoming – hence only half of the stipulated matrix indicators could be assessed. Only 1 rubbish trap was detected along a river but its drains around coffeshops and flats were much cleaner than those in PJ.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO STATE THAT GEORGE TOWN IS IMPLEMENTING AN ADEQUATE LEVEL OF SUSTAINABILITY DESPITE THE GREEN RHETORIC OF THE CURRENT STATE GOVERNMENT AND MPPP.

The five challenges were:

First – improving transparency and public accessibility to key data, this proved to be a major problem for this study. It is pointless to have a Freedom of Information Act if this cannot be done;

Second – improving a more in-depth understanding of what sustainability implies for GT, at all levels of the administration;

Third – making public participation in planning and implementation more effective. This should extend to accepting views from think tanks other than the Penang Institute;

Fourth – assembling relevant data from other government agencies to help assess sustainability, not relying on Murninet alone;

Fifth – separate GT from MPPP and have all its councilors and mayor directly elected by residents, and restoring its city status. This will ensure good accountability and response to residents' needs;

Somewhat like GT, **Central Malacca** [CM] has no clear legal boundary and falls within the City of Melaka Bersejarah. It is the oldest of the 3, being started in the 15th century and shares with GT a UNECSO recognized World Heritage City status. None of its officials responded positively to phone calls, faxes and emails. Data collection was very difficult and only 5 of the indicators could be completed.

IT CANNOT BE STATED THAT CENTRAL MALACCA IS IMPLEMENTING AN ADEQUATE LEVEL OF SUSTAINABILITY DESPITE THE GREEN RHETORIC OF THE CURRENT STATE GOVERNMENT.

The five challenges were:

First – improving transparency and public accessibility to key data, this proved to be a major problem for this study. It is necessary to have an effective Freedom of Information Act.

Second – improving a more in-depth understanding of what sustainability implies for CM, at all levels of the administration;

Third – making public participation in planning and implementation more effective. This should extend to accepting views from think tanks including SUDI;

Fourth – assembling relevant data from other government agencies to help assess sustainability, not relying on Murninet alone;

Fifth – separate Central Malacca from MBSM and have all its councilors and mayor directly elected by residents,. This will ensure good accountability and response to residents' needs;

COMMON CHALLENGES

Arising from the study of the three existing Malaysian towns, the following are the common challenges to be overcome in order to entrench sustainability within them:

First challenge – improve transparency and public accessibility to key data

Second challenge – improve a more in-depth understanding of what sustainability implies for each town, at all levels of the administration;

Third challenge – make public participation in planning and implementation more effective;

Fourth challenge – assemble relevant data from other government agencies to help assess sustainability, not relying on Murninet alone;

Fifth challenge – have all councilors and Mayor / President directly elected by residents. This will ensure good accountability and response to residents' needs and environmental expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations arising from the above challenges are:

1. - **establish** a sustainability unit [reporting directly to the President/ Mayor] that will regularly collect GHG and other environmental/social data to be published in an annual Sustainability Report [can initially be included in the current Annual Report];
2. - **give** civil society a permanent role in all sustainability efforts, beyond the occasional meeting/ forum;
3. - **engage** the SMEs and the informal sector especially hawkers and small traders from all communities in all sustainability efforts;
4. - **reduce** private motor vehicle usage by 50%, substituted by a matching increase in clean, efficient, affordable and interconnected public transport with also significant increases in cyclists lanes and pedestrian walkways;
5. - **learn** lessons from others [not just from overseas] and team with other Malaysian towns moving in the same direction.