

Agents And Livability: Constructing The Underlying Premises Of Local Sustainability

ABDUL SAMAD HADI¹, ABDUL HADI HARMAN SHAH¹,
SHAHARUDIN IDRUS¹, AHMAD FARIZ MOHAMED¹,
RUSLAN RAINIS² & NARIMAH SAMAT²

ABSTRACT

The deconstruction of development through the processes of local agency, looking at how local actors, situations and path dependence result in the patterns of physical development of a region, provides a different perspective to the urbanization process in Malaysia. The more common approach is by looking at how macro and meso changes impact upon the local scenes. The alternative complexity analysis approach used in this article allows for a better understanding on how the local situation impacts upon the macro and meso urbanization observed through land use and economic activity changes. Using the Bernam-Linggi basin as a living laboratory of urbanization, this article presents the concepts used to structure a study on local urbanization and the resulting sustainability conditions that result from such changes. The study also emphasizes multidisciplinary and the effects of uncertainties in analysing the socio-spatial dynamics of the region.

ABSTRAK

Dekonstruksi pembangunan menerusi proses agensi lokal yang memberi penekanan kepada bagaimana pelaku, situasi dan sejarah lokal menghasilkan pola pembangunan fizikal di sesebuah wilayah. Ini membolehkan perspektif yang berbeza terhadap proses pambandaran di Malaysia daripada pendekatan lazim meneliti bagaimana perubahan peringkat makro dan meso memberi dampak ke atas keadaan setempat. Pendekatan analisis kompleksiti yang digunakan dalam artikel ini memberi kefahaman yang lebih baik tentang bagaimana situasi lokal menghasilkan pola urbanisasi di skala makro dan meso, tergambar menerusi perubahan aktiviti ekonomi dan guna tanah. Menggunakan lembangan Bernam-Linggi sebagai makmal hidup pambandaran, artikel ini menyampaikan konsep-

konsep yang digunakan untuk menstruktur kajian tentang pembedaran setempat dan kelestarian yang terhasil dari perubahan yang berlaku. Kajian ini juga memberi penekanan kepada pendekatan multidisplin dan kesan ketidakpastian dalam analisis kedinamisan sosio-reruag wilayah tersebut.

MODELING THE OPTATIVENESS OF A CITY: SUSTAINABILITY AND LIVABILITY

Urban modeling primarily focuses on analysing the workings of the city. It often goes beyond simple description to analysing how different components relate to one another. Guttenberg would clasify this as begin the analytic part of planning. Yet planning has also been concerned with the ideal. Utopian concepts of the city have evolved over time, once the product of visionaries such as Mumford or Corbusier to a more democratic result of the people, currently realized in the idea of the sustainable and livable city.

The entire framework on sustainability modeling is also dependent on the basic premise of what makes for sustainability and vulnerability. Does a model adopts the position that sustainability is a basket of utilities to be maximised or should it be seen instead as a scheme based on some intrinsic values that a city should have? Putting aside for the moment a debate between a Utilitarian or Kantian view of what a city should be, the choice of position would eventually influence the final form of any sustainability model to be proposed.

ANALYSING UNCERTAIN DEVELOPMENT

Growth, let alone development, often proceeds tentatively. While boom periods characterized by the influx of large capital seems to be constantly increasing rapidly, and bust periods show uncontrolled decline in general, a more detailed look will show more fluctuations and uncertainties; with decisions to expand a business or fold taking longer and that there are more decisions involved than what may seem at the surface. There are many more participants during the peaks and valleys that make the overall patterns of growth and decline more apparent especially for the economy in general and affecting the general perception of individuals within. The mob or herd mentality that drives a pattern up or down is often triggered by a threshold of participants that have been reached, or

breached. However, general trends tend to mask the difficult decisions made to change directions and do not highlight the various attempts at saving a business or even the difficulties in starting or expanding one.

DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY: THE BERNAM-LINGGI BASIN

Yet the story of development, seen from this ground-up approach would provide an insight into the factors that move or stifle development itself. In the case of the Bernam region, highlighted in this research, the period of mass uncertainty began with the nation's first interstate highway, PLUS, that spans the North-South corridor of the country. The development project had a big impact on the Bernam area, especially with regards to the town of Tanjung Malim which used to be the main transit area for people travelling from north to south and vice versa. The highway with its own rest areas almost totally bypassed the small towns and their surroundings, making them obsolete in terms of interconnectivity within the wider national network. Businesses that were doing well went into a decline that the places settled to cater only for the locals, at least for a while. The cause and effect stories of the PLUS highway are abundant. However, one would need to consider the resiliencies of communities, especially those that has established itself over the years. Such stories would have glossed over the efforts of individuals to retain businesses and continue to make a living in a place that they have invested so much on. To understand the resulting patterns that continue to make Tanjung Malim and the surrounding towns alive, an understanding of the livability of Tanjung Malim is needed.

Tanjung Malim's livability stem from many sources. Surrounded by long established villages that formed the agricultural base of the region, the three small towns of Tanjung Malim, Kuala Kubu Bharu and Batang Kali for the urban hub for this border region between the Perak and Selangor states. Tanjung Malim has long been known for its educational role especially with the Sultan Idris Teachers' College (SITC), the premier teaching institution in the 50's and 60's. Today the new Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris took over from SITC, continuing the resilience of the educational institution in the area.

Such an institution provides a basic identity to the area, one that has evolved and is retained over time. Yet these institutions bring in mainly transients, students and lecturers that come and go. The question is to what extent do these educational institutions impact upon the life of the locals apart from the usual multiplier effects expected from external

sources into the local economy. However one should not dismiss these effects too quickly. The assumption tied to this theory is that it will bring in extra capital in the form of of labour income and expenditure, as well as increased demand for local labour and facilities such as housing and commerce.

Increased spending power will boost the economy, bringing more capital into the area and improve the local livelihood in general. At least in theory, and the Malaysian government follows this formulae closely in making development plans.

As with many theories of economic development the relationships presented are simplifications that need to be given local context, geographic and social. These are often forgotten or simply unrecognized in understanding impacts of development projects. Local social topography skews development results to benefit a portion of society, at times to the detriment of others. Planning for local sustainability would require the understanding of these social valleys and ridges.

If one follows Marx in understanding the local situation, then traditional development theory would favour the landed rather than labour and at first glance it is expected that landowners would benefit most from development projects. However this assumes that there is only one category of landowners, or at the most, land owners with different land holding size. In the study area of Bernam-Linggi, as is the general case in Malaysia, there are several categories of landownership that have an effect upon its potential for development and development projects. There are at least four broad categories of land ownership that need to be considered; government, plantation holdings, small scale modern land owners, and traditional land owners. In principle and governance land is a state matter (as opposed to federal or local). Any land that is yet to be alienated belongs to the state government and these would be the ideal area for development projects, from a planning viewpoint. It has the least hassle in terms of negotiations for development and ample area size for most projects. However these lands also include forest reserves that are not suited for development. Government land can also be conferred to individuals and agencies for various purposes other than development projects and these limit the extent to which state land can be used. The corporatization and privatization efforts since the 90's have also required developers to look beyond state land for development.

Next on the ownership list are large plantations holdings that served as the agricultural backbone of modern agriculture in Malaysia. Guthrie, Golden Hope and Sime Darby are major landowners in the area,

along with FELDA, the Federal Land Development Authority that is responsible for developing land as early as the 1970s. These plantations originally owned land alienated to the by the British government which the plantations later increased over the years. These plantations also expanded their business to include non-agricultural industries, especially during the decline of rubber and palm oil prices in the 1980s.

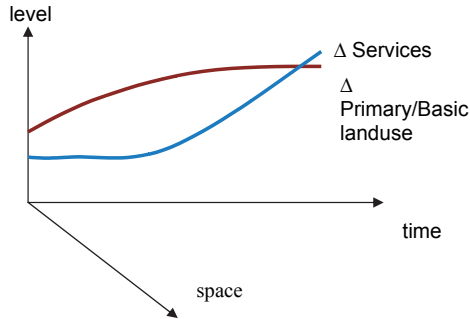
These plantations proved to be of huge potential in the development industry beyond their original goal of agriculture. They provided the large areas within a limited ownership that allowed for new development to take place, essentially the ideal source of land for major urban development. Various major projects such as the Sime UEP housing projects, Putrajaya and KLIA are national examples. In the Bernam valley the Proton City Project, Bukit Beruntung and Lembah Beringin are among the major developments that arose out of these plantation areas. Unfortunately, to date, unlike Putrajaya or KLIA in the Langat basin, development projects in the Bernam Valley have faced major financial setbacks, especially with respect to the latter two. Development setbacks have impacts that last for years, often exacerbating into other problems including social, environmental and even health.

There are several issues that relate to the sustainability of these areas, the first of which is the impact of decisions taken to inhabit these two areas. There is a minimum threshold of decisions taken to move into the area that is needed to have a massive influx of population, apart from decisions made to purchase and continue investing in the area. Bukit Beruntung and Lembah Beringin in the Bernam valley are at a juncture in their development that require them to shift strategies. This shift needs to attract people to start moving into the area and not create a disincentive that will result in people moving away from the area. While these two development projects can be argued to be the most problematic in the area, there are other development attempts that also face similar problems.

DETAILING THE DECISIONS OF LOCAL AGENTS: ENGAGEMENTS WITH DEVELOPMENT

This paper progresses from an earlier conceptualization of the study to understand of local sustainability and livability through the interaction of individual local agents with a development structure that they face, in a process of structuration as suggested by Giddens (Abdul Samad Hadi et al, 2007). The sustainability of this development structure is represented

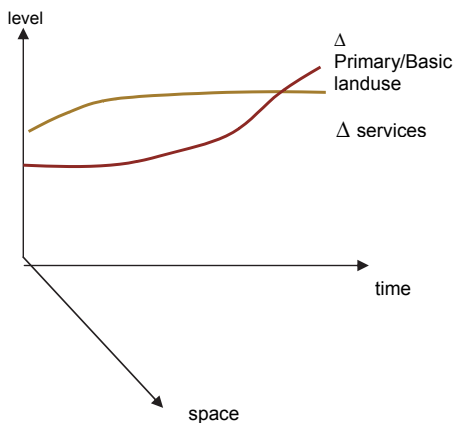
by a landscape of changing land-uses and the services needed to cater for the changes.



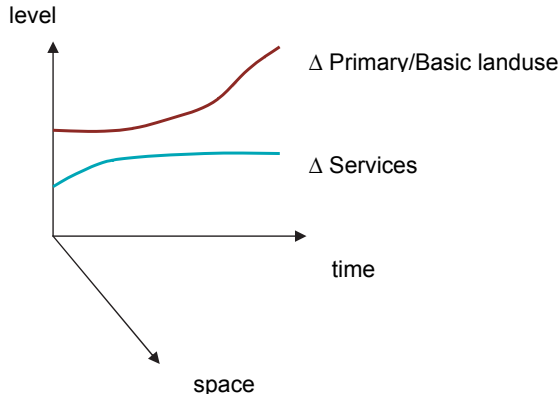
Structure Of Overdevelopment

The first part of the model links the relationship between a specific development initiative in the form of land use change and changes in the levels of services needed to support the particular land use change. Services in this linkage can be in the form of infrastructure services such as road access, general transportation or water and energy services. It can also be a corresponding change in a service sector land use such as the commercial sector. The module finds its roots in the basic-non basic dichotomy of urban land use economics.

Of course, for any given period, differences in land use change and services needed may not converge to sustainability but diverge to increasing vulnerability. The areas enclosed by the curves represent the vulnerability function for the particular area.

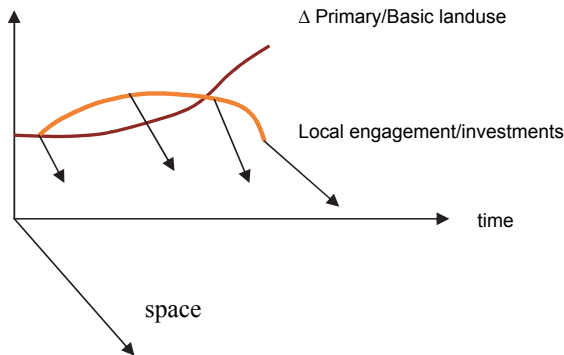


Structure during Underdevelopment and Increasing Vulnerability



The second part of the model analyses the timing of an agent's decision to engage in a development activity. There are four possible decisions with respect to change that an agent can be involved in;

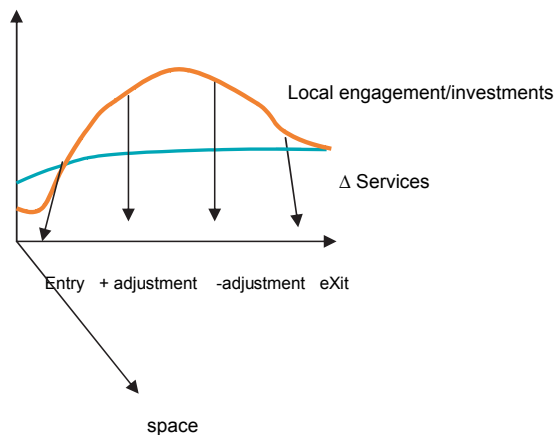
1. Entering the development arena
2. Positive adjustment to the development arena
3. Negative adjustment in terms of reductions
4. Exiting the development arena



Each agent is assumed to decide independent of one another but is nevertheless affected by the decisions of others. The agents, be they in

their capacity as businessess or residents, make these decisions given a change in the phase of their life, business and local environment. Individual firms or people engage the city and contribute to its sustainability and local factors determine the type and level of engagements that the agents will be involved in. This second part of the model links the decision taking phase of the individuals and the larger group aggregation with land use change at two different scales. One at the immediate local level and the other at the wider regional land use change level. The decisions will also be correlated against levels of services in the area, forming the third part of the model.

Correlation between levels of services and individual decisions of engagement



Individuals often make decisions within an imperfect knowledge environment. Individuals make do with whatever information from various sources to determine the right time to engage the development process. One of the most observable and easily identifiable source is the existence of physical amenities representing basic services needed by individuals. It is argued that an individual would start thinking of moving into an area when basic access, waste disposal and utilities are available and would consider moving out once these services are deemed to be too inadequate. Frequency of power interruptions, for example, would be a disincentive to staying.

A LATTICE

Planning is about the future of cities and their surroundings. People do not passively assume that a desired quality of life will come about from the processes of urbanization, rather they plan, either professionally or through everyday activities, towards what Guttenberg (1992) argued to be the optative mode of the city, or the desired state of the city. While there are many phases to this effort at visualizing the city's desired state, the idea of sustainability as proposed by Brundtland, is currently underlying many current ideas on what makes a good city, and a good city life. An interpretation of sustainability extends this notion to the livable city, a perhaps more down to earth image of the desired city based on local needs and context rather than one drawn by any one particular person. To develop such a desired state, an understanding of the local engagement with the city and its surroundings is necessary, the mechanisms and complexities of which, within the context of the Bernam Basin in Malaysia, is being outlined by this research.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Samad Hadi, Abdul Hadi Harman Shah, Shaharudin Idrus, Ahmad Fariz Mohamed. 2007. Roundtable dialogue No. 15. Modelling Local Urban Sustainability: Developing a Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Development. LESTARI, UKM.
- Guttenberg. A.Z. 1992. The Language of Planning. University of Illinois Press:Urbana.

- ¹ Institute for Environmental and Development (LESTARI)
43600 UKM
Bangi
- ² School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)
11800 Penang, MALAYSIA

