

## Malaysian Path to Sustainable Development: Transitions to Sustainability

ABDUL SAMAD HADI, SHAHARUDIN IDRUS, ABDUL HADI HARMAN SHAH &  
AHMAD FARIZ MOHAMED

### ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the development path taken by Malaysia after Independence to achieve a developed country status by the year 2020, from pursuing economic development with redistribution paying somewhat little attention to the health of the environment to a balanced approach through a balanced development strategy involving the pursuance of economic growth, societal development and protecting the natural as well as the built-up environment. And then in April 2010 the Malaysian Prime Minister announced to the Malaysian public the concept and substance of the New Economic Model (NEM) that will leverage future Malaysian development efforts. In the NEM, economic growth is still a pivotal concern but this time with a difference to similar efforts to achieve economic growth in the past, in that economic growth in the NEM is to push Malaysia into a higher income country, thus freeing the country from the middle income syndrome. The average Malaysians will enjoy in the end living in a peaceful, prosperous and livable country captured in a living condition of a high quality of life. In short, for over fifty years after Independence Malaysia has experienced two development phases, and now entering into another one- a third one, forming in all three transitions to sustainability. What have been the environmental impacts of those development phases to the country and the Malaysian citizen? During the period of growth with redistribution, the economy was making the country a reasonably comfortable country with a rising middle class but poverty was still ravaging, and the environment was slowly degrading. There was a conscious effort by the government to conserve bio-diversity and protect the environment during the sustainable development phase; but the momentum of pursuing growth and societal development the environment continued to experience degradation. It is too soon to evaluate the fate of the environment in the NEM phase. But the fact that economic activities for high growth, social 'inclusivity' as the second pillar with sustainability as the third pillar the way forward for the environment seems well protected to deliver the promised higher and better quality of Malaysian life in the future.*

*Key words: economic development with redistribution, balanced development in the sustainable development, New Economic Model, environmental health, social inclusivity*

### ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini membincangkan laluan pembangunan yang diambil oleh Malaysia selepas merdeka untuk mencapai status negara maju pada tahun 2020, melalui pembangunan ekonomi dengan pengagihan semula tanpa menghiraukan sangat kesihatan persekitaran kepada pendekatan seimbang melalui strategi pembanguinan seimbang yang melibatkan pertumbuhan ekonomi, pembangunan masyarakat dan penjagaan persekitaran semulajadi dan persekitaran binaan. Pada 2010 konsep dan kandungan Model Ekonomi Baru telah diumumkan yang akan memandu langkah pembangunan negara pada masa mendatang. Dalam Model Ekonomi Baru, pertumbuhan ekonomi masih menjadi tunggak yang diutamakan tetapi kali ini dengan sedikit kelainan di mana pertumbuhan ekonomi dalam Model Ekonomi Baru adalah melonjakkan Malaysia menjadi sebuah negara berpendapatan tinggi, sekaligus membebaskan negara dari sindrom pendapatan sederhana. Rakyat Malaysia akhirnya akan menikmati kehidupan dalam negara yang aman, makmur dan boleh dihuni dengan keadaan kualiti hidup yang tinggi. Secara ringkasnya, setelah lebih lima dekad selepas merdeka Malaysia telah melalui dua fasa pembangunan, dan kini memasuki satu lagi fasa menjadikan tiga fasa kesemuanya untuk kelestarian. Apakah impak alam sekitar fasa-fasa pembangunan tersebut terhadap negara dan rakyatnya? Dalam*

*rangka pertumbuhan dengan pengagihan semula, ekonomi telah menjadikan negara sebagai sebuah negara yang agak selesa dengan peningkatan kelas menengah, tetapi kemiskinan masih wujud dan alam sekitar mengalami kemerosotan secara perlahan-lahan. Terdapat langkah sedar yang diambil oleh kerajaan untuk memulihara kepelbagaian biologi dan melindungi alam sekitar semasa fasa pembangunan mapan; tetapi momentum untuk mengejar pertumbuhan dan pembangunan masyarakat menyebabkan alam sekitar terus mengalami kemerosotan. Agak terlalu awal untuk menilai takdir alam sekitar dalam fasa Model Ekonomi Baru Tetapi berlandaskan aktiviti ekonomi untuk pertumbuhan tinggi, inklusiviti sosial sebagai tunggak kedua dengan kelestarian sebagai tunggak ketiga masa depan alam sekitar kelihatan terjaga untuk membolehkan kualiti hidup rakyat Malaysia yang lebih tinggi dan lebih baik pada masa mendatang seperti yang dijanjikan.*

*Kata kunci: pembangunan ekonomi, pembangunan dengan pengagihan semula, pembangunan seimbang dalam pembangunan mapan, Model Ekonomi Baru, kesihatan alam sekitar, inklusiviti sosial*

## INTRODUCTION

True to all countries that were moving out of the colonial clutch, Malay(si)a after achieving its Independence from Britain was making full efforts to build up its assets by engaging in productive industrial activities in agriculture and manufacturing industries. A reasonably high growth in the economy was able to facilitate wealth accumulation that was needed to upgrade the welfare of the people especially the bulk of them who were living below the poverty line. Environmental health was pushed far off the background of awareness to even attract specific mention (Malaya 1956). However, had it not been for the colonial administration's effort to gazette forest reserve and other related protection efforts with respect to water body and health related ecology especially in townships the state of the country's environment would have been poorer.

In the space of 54 years after achieving Independence, Malaysia had steered its development course through three major policy shifts, each as an adjustment to a trajectory that would take the country towards achieving a developed country status by the year 2020. The three policy shifts refer broadly to the policy that seeks growth with redistribution spanning the 1950's and 1960's, the sustainable development framework covering the period from about the 1970's to April 2010, and the New Economic Model phase as from April 2010.

This article will take a short journey in Malaysian development from the time of Independence in 1957 to the present, linking on the way the shift in development policies to diversified development drivers, the increasing importance of city as a human habitat and the subsequent consequences on the environment. In all transitions the articulation is toward shaping and maintaining sustainability in the country.

## BALANCED DEVELOPMENT: GROWTH WITH REDISTRIBUTION

Beginning with the development policy immediately after Independence as the first transition to sustainability, the newly Independent government lost no time in seeking and implementing development programmes and activities along the path of what was often summarized as 'development with redistribution'. The concept was the dominant development paradigm of the time articulated by many and institutionalized by the United Nations. In terms of the sociology of knowledge the response of the young country was in line with the current thinking on development originated from the developed North. What the country's immediate need at the time was to accumulate wealth in order to provide the Malay(si)an society with good physical, social and cultural infrastructures befitting an independent country. Thereby, the widespread poverty in the post colonial state could be contained and slowly abolished. That was no easy matter to solve since poverty groups in the country cut along ethnics and spatial line.

At least two major strategies were adopted to develop the country; one centered on the urban areas and the other on the rural areas. To retain as much as possible limited foreign exchange in the country import substitution industries were preferred. Policies were put in place to grant foreign investments pioneer status that provided tax holidays and other associated incentives such as well endowed new industrial estates close to the main ports of entry into the country. The impacts were recorded spatially in the rise of new towns with new industrial estates and new housing areas for the workers furnished with commercial centers; factory busses provided the connecting links between the housing areas to the factories. Relatively cheap labour having limited education and skill were readily available in large numbers; they could be recruited from the rural areas. Thus, the main urban centres with such factories became the main destination of these rural to urban migrants. The period was also providing another side to the story; displaced able bodied workers from rural over-populated areas made their ways to the main established urban centres. Failure to command better paid jobs they congregated into the 'dirty jobs' group with low pay and without proper place to stay. This was the time these major urban centers came face to face with spontaneous settlements, growing in large numbers on vacant government lands close to and within the urban areas; these settlements were essentially close to the settlers' work places despite without proper facilities and amenities.

The urbanization experience of Malaysia during the period was about the story of pseudo-urbanization as articulated by Terry G. McGee in the 1960-s (McGee 1971- apologies to Prof McGee who has since weaned himself of the term- personal communication 2010) involving the excessive rural to urban flows of unskilled workers to search for urban jobs in a fragmented labour market that is structurally incapable of absorbing the swelling urban labour force and consequently producing widespread poverty in the city areas; Parts of the consequences of which were rising spontaneous shelters in expanding squatter settlements with widespread distribution of poor and under nourished people.

Another noticeable impacts to the human habitat and the environment was land development for commercial cropping and the opening of new settlements to resettle poor villagers from over-crowded and lack of economic opportunities into what is now widely known as the Felda settlements (Malaya 1956), and with this land schemes the Malayan people saw thousands of forested areas were cleared for rubber and oil palm with housing schemes located within the plantations. In history this settlement was in fact a repeat act of deforestation for commercial ventures undertaken by foreign companies under the British administration in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lim Teck Gee 1977).

Both import substitution and land development strategies helped to reduce the number of poor groups in the country but at a cost to the environment. The manufacturing industries, squatter settlements, new housing areas and infrastructural development had their tolls on the health of the Malayan environment. Not only ecosystem resources were excessively affected but the ecosystem services were also widely extracted. In fact, the country suffered from a major nationwide flood in 1970 that led observers and researchers at that time to liken the flood to the big 'red flood' of 1926 following the extensive deforestation for rubber growing on an extensive scale.

#### FROM DEVELOPMENT WITH REDISTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the second transition, the policy on growth with redistribution was overtaken by the promise of a new conceptual balanced development articulated in 'sustainable development' whose spirit was already floating to streamline development programmes and activities in the country in about the mid 1970's, helping to give order to the pursuit of economic growth, spending for societal welfare and at the same time paying attention to environmental resources and services' protection and conservation.

At the time, the urbanization process in the country, especially in the Peninsula, is about moving forward towards achieving the first world country status by 2020 or thereabout. It is time to focus on the quality of urban life with all the possible modern trappings befitting the rising metropolitan lifestyle in a robust urban economy that has transformed the urban centres almost throughout the urban hierarchy. The grim prospect of pseudo-urbanization of yesteryears has been taken over by city modernity that showcases economic and social vibrancy along with increasingly healthy environment usually associated with an attractive city as a place to stay. Such a vibrant and attractive city is best summarized as a livable city.

In an accelerated move along the development path from third to first world by 2020, Malaysia opened its door wider to the world for investments to help propel its engine of growth. By coupling appropriate developmental policies with the readiness of the world to come and make a contribution to the third world in early 1970-s Malaysia was able to attract foreign investors and subsequently expanded its economic cake through export industrialization. The accumulated wealth had made it possible to finance comprehensive physical, social, economic and governance, infrastructural, and socio-economic development projects (Malaysia 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006).

The overall Malaysian quality of life since then has gone up along with the development curve to be among the middle income countries of the world (Malaysia 2001, 2006). The core poor group in the country has been reduced from more than 50 percent in the 1950-s to about 4 percent in 2006 (Malaysia 2001, 2006). Most urbanites now have modern shelters, sustained jobs and have access to better food, clothing, means for mobility, and have more time for recreation and holidays. In short, the Malaysian city people have better material assets today compared to about three decades earlier, and most of the modern trappings have become affordable to them. The development paradigm of growth with redistribution (Malaysia 1966) over those years bears the necessary fruits.

The success story of the socio-economic development is however not without its problems. Persistent wealth accumulation has taken its toll on the Malaysian environment's health. Virgin forest was converted to agricultural lands for commercial produce largely in palm oil; lands close to existing towns and cities in turn were converted to 'urban use' in the forms of commercial, industrial, services, infrastructures and extensive urban housing areas. Amidst the positive outcomes from the land cover conversion lurks a chain of negative outcomes culminating in land degradation, bio-diversity loss, ecosystems dysfunction that disturbs the regime of ecosystem services, increasing carbon emission in heavy congested city streets and boulevards, piling up of industrial, commercial and household wastes to be disposed of, and rising temperatures in built-up habitats forming heat islands over cities. Beyond the physical environmental problems the city human environment is beset with human problems arising from community and social exclusion from mainstream economic and larger social services provisions.

Realization of the need to contain and streamline the pursuit of economic growth and socio-economic development with the decline in environmental quality came early in the country. The Department of Environment in the Ministry of Science Technology and the Environment was established in 1974 and soon after the Malaysian Environmental Law was enacted and offered to protect the environment and to scale down people's utilization of ecosystem resources and services. All are in response to increasing global awareness and needs to balance socio-economic development with the ecological carrying capacity. Malaysia also participated in the UNESCO's-led initiative of the International Geosphere and Biosphere Programme (IGBP) of the 1980-s leading to the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) that initiates 'sustainable development' which was later adopted by countries around the world at the Rio Earth Summit 1992 to be the new development framework for all. And to date as we are all aware most countries globally have adopted to use it in their development initiatives (Osorio et al. 2005) although Switzerland has been the only country to write sustainable

development into its constitution. Malaysia too charters its development route along the course of sustainable development.

As a concept, sustainable development has provided the flexibility to allow each country the freedom to define and to understand it in a way that suits its capacity and needs. Malaysia too has adopted a simple basic interpretation by defining sustainable development as 'a balance development' between the three economic, social and environment pillars. This is different from the balanced development of the earlier development paradigm of searching for 'social and spatial equity' to a new balance development that looks for economic growth in order to pay for social development but with a conscious effort to protect the health of the environment through ethical resource and non renewable energy utilization. An important element of the sustainable development paradigm lies in its inter-generational investment for equity such that the future generations of Malaysians are able to pursue development initiatives in a sustainable manner too.

## BALANCED DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN HABITAT IN FOCUS: CITY SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA

### **The Initial Stage**

'Cities as systems within the system of cities' articulated by Berry (1964) offer a system way of looking at all number of cities. In Malaysia towns and cities grew from those urban settlements founded by British colonial administration as from about the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Pre colonial settlements even if they were cities remained isolated from each other to function as a system (Lim Heng Kow 1974). These British colonial urban settlements were interconnected by modern road systems that provided the needed linkages for business and the maintenance of law and order (Hamzah Sendut 1962).

The early British colonial urban settlements consisted of port towns including the former British Strait Settlements entre-port town of Melaka and the port of Penang. More urban settlements were founded when more of the Malay States in the interior became British protectorates, to be the centres of administration for law enforcement and public order so that colonial investments could go about exploiting alluvial tin in the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang (also gold) at first. Later on rubber was grown extensively as industrial agricultural produce for the industries in Britain and elsewhere. British colonial protection was soon diffused to cover the non-Federated Malay States on the east coast, southern and northern parts of the Peninsula. In 1948 the Federation of Malaya was formed consisting of the Strait Settlements of Melaka and Penang, the Federated Malay States and the non-Federated Malay States. The Federation completed the British holds on the Malay states and hence the exploitation of resources for trade. Urban centres continued to grow and new ones founded (Andaya & Andaya 1982).

The drivers of the urban development and expansion at the time came basically from resource exploitation and rubber growing in the hinterland. While these urban settlements were small in size and therefore having limited impacts on the environment as opposed to the huge area of forest either destroyed by the mining of tin as shown in the Kinta valley in Perak, the Klang valley in Selangor and the Linggi valley in Negeri Sembilan, and gold in the Pahang river basins or millions of hectares converted for commercialization of alien rubber species from Brazil.

### **Urban Expansion during the Growth with Redistribution Period**

The balance development paradigm for social and regional equity was adopted after Malaya achieved its Independence in 1957 and six years later in 1963 Malaysia was formed. Socio-economic imbalances among the multi-racial Malaysian population and regional disparities in

the country as by-products of colonial development process needed correction in order to realise a multi-racial Malaysia in an Independent country. The development initiatives of the time gave priority to economic growth in order to bring out the country from its third world syndrome (widespread poverty, limited salaried jobs and over-dependence on export agricultural produce, rubber, and tin).

The development paradigm brought two broad impacts; first, forest conversion for land settlements to settle poor landless rural people into the FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) schemes involving millions of hectares (Malaya 1956). These land schemes, we would like to argue, were also new urbanized areas as opposed to the traditional kampungs. The other broad impacts were seen in the urban hierarchy but with the main foci on Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, and Johor Bahru. In these major towns lands were converted to make way for industrial estates, supporting infra-structures, commercial areas and modern housing (Malaya 1956, 1961; Malaysia 1966). Despite achieving moderate economic growth of 4-5 percent per year, the redistribution of wealth was far from the target so that by 1969 poverty was still rampant in both rural and urban areas. Rural to urban flows of unskilled youth seeking for limited urban jobs exacerbated the social condition of the time.

The paradigm of balanced development then was made sharper in 1970 after the social upheaval of May 1969 in an attempt to redress the inequality among the multi-ethnic population, and also the regional imbalances. The New Economic Policy introduced in 1970 aimed basically at eradicating poverty among all races and to restructure the Malaysian society such that not any one group would in the end be identified with any economic label (Malaysia 1971). Numerous strategies, programs and activities had been undertaken to meet the broad socio-economic goals and targets. The impacts of the policy on the urban areas are far reaching.

Between 1970-1990, the original time frame for the implementation of the new economic policy--more emphatic efforts were made to expand fully the Malaysian economic cake and at the same time to distribute it fairly among the people. Export industrialization became the key driver to shape the expanding economic cake. The accumulated wealth from export industrialization was able to be spent on socio-economic and infrastructural projects to uplift the general quality of life among Malaysians. The export industries found their homes in existing industrial estates closer to the older industrial estates in the main towns and cities, and also in newer industrial estates throughout the urban hierarchy traversing the whole country. The immediate impacts on these cities were the incorporation of newly converted lands for industries and supporting infrastructures, commercial and services centers and of course housing beyond those functions (Malaysia 1976, 1981, 1986).

Larger cities were getting larger in area- forming urban conurbations such as seen in the Kelang valley with continuous string of cities stretching from Kuala Lumpur to Port Klang and in areas to the north and south of the valley, the Penang-Kulim conurbation and the Johor Bahru-Pasir Gudang urban conurbation; intermediate towns also grew outwards to the rural areas, converting in their advancing frontier agricultural lands, and new towns were created for industries. Minor urban conurbations have grown also focusing on state capitals such as in the Kota-Kinabalu-Spangar Bay, Sabah emerging conurbation in recent years.

Beyond the cities, the hinterland too continued to register changes. While land development was extended further for commercial agriculture and more settlements, more infrastructures were put in place to link these agricultural areas to the rest of the world. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Development Plan (Malaysia 2006), more development corridors were planned and implemented, namely; the northern corridor covering Penang, Northern Perak, Kedah and Perlis; the East Coast corridor - stretching from Kelantan to east coast of Johor; the Sarawak and the Sabah development corridors. All of these development corridors will impact further on the towns and cities. Judging from past experiences of the outcome of past development regions, these new development corridors will certainly produce strings of new towns to accommodate the expected population growth in response to the overlapping opportunities

there. The hinterlands of the towns too will be equally impacted by new settlements and commercial agriculture.

Overall, the balanced development paradigm that guided the development programmes until the end of the 1980-s had made its mark in expanding the size and the number of urban areas and commercial agriculture at the expense of pristine forest. More importantly, Malaysians have begun to witness a new dimension of environmental problems originating from these townships and cities. That these towns and cities utilize proportionately a small percentage of the total Malaysian lands but impacting the most damage to the environment is the principal issue to ponder further. The paradigm that attempts to balance social and spatial equities in the country has served the country's development goals since the 1970-s to redress poverty among all racial groups in the country and regional imbalances but at a cost which can be summarized as wholesome environmental degradation, some loss of biodiversity and rising water and air pollution, rising temperatures and the formations of urban heat islands that certainly add to the problems of not only local climate but climate change at large.

### **Embedding Sustainability**

Awareness of the need to conserve resources and protecting the environment had been lingering in the thinking of development implementers of the period under the previous balance development policy. The policies of a Ministry looking after the welfare of the Malaysian environment and the work of its various agencies, the rise of non-governmental organizations associated with environmental protection, the growth of environmental programmes at the tertiary educational level and the incorporation of environment into school syllabi were some of the more important steps taken to minimize the total impacts of the activities pursued to realize economic growth and societal development then. Even in cities where the voices of the people were getting louder to minimize the impacts of overt transformation of habitat had led to the urban authorities implementing useful programmes and activities to arrest the decline in environmental quality. This means that by the time the concept of sustainable development had been widely adopted by the Malaysian authority in early 1990-s (Malaysia 1991) there had been that awareness about the environment, the need to protect our limited resources from excessive development, and to rehabilitate bad lands.

Balanced development among the three components - economy, society and environment - as articulated in the sustainable development paradigm continues to allow the pursuit of economic growth to continue to pay for more socio-economic development, and concurrently to assert the protection of the environment. Yet the empirical reality of life in post sustainable development years beyond Rio 1992 shows that our environment continues to suffer in the midst of economic development. The trajectory and the momentum of development under the aegis of capitalism continue to progress on the path of continuing economic pursuit for societal development with somewhat subdued concern for the environment. In short, both foreign and local investors have grown accustomed to the rule of maximizing profits for their shareholders, minimizing payments to their workers and compromising on the standard for environmental health.

The Malaysian cities are very attractive for people to come and stay as evident by the growing industrial, commercial and social infrastructures including new housing schemes. While internal flows of workers from rural areas is slowly tapering off. Malaysia is increasingly becoming a visible choice of destination for foreign workers. As argued elsewhere sustainable city can be understood better through the concept of city livability; it is clear that the contemporary Malaysian cities are generally vibrant economically and socially. The environment is getting greener with rising green physical and social infrastructures, clean, healthy and reasonably safe for the urbanites. The general positive representation of the city does not mean that there are no problems. As population of the cities increases in number there are bound to be socially generated problems in addition to problems in the city physical

environment. All the problems are under control as there has been no total social breakdown that would bring about total chaos to the city, however. Thus, the Malaysian cities have the quality of life appropriate to their level in the urban hierarchy that ensures their livability (Azahan Awang et al. 2008).

### **Further Challenge Posed by Malaysian Cities**

Theoretically, once 'sustainable development' is adopted as a main thinking of development the acute problems of the city environment and the hinterland should not matter any more. But as stated in the previous paragraph the application of the sustainable development principles to the whole development initiatives in Malaysia post-dates the development initiatives that had battered the Malaysian environment in the earlier balance development paradigm. Thus, all development pursuits taking place within the previous balance development paradigm had reared their ugly heads with respect to the environment before we are being made accustomed to thinking in terms of the new balance development of economic growth, social development and environmental protection.

The cities, of course, should take full responsibility for all the environmental problems. It is in the main cities that development policies are formulated and implemented; strategies, programmes and activities are determined and implemented. It is in the cities also the responses, impacts and mitigation measures to protect the environment are analyzed, and then appropriate actions to contain them taken. Yet there are clear gaps between what have been thought and planned and what steps can and have been undertaken.

The city biased development of the early years had brought widespread poverty to the rural hinterland and to the environment also. The contemporary city biased development however, has caused further widespread land degradation, pollution, increasing grey areas and an increasingly threatening inconvenient truth to Malaysian life (Al Gore 2006).

### **Sustained Environmental Challenges: Outcome of Contemporary City-Biased Development**

Let us grapple with some of these lingering environmental challenges as impacts of the contemporary 'city biased' development, meaning all developments that leverage towards cityness. Beginning with the hinterlands, continuing extensive forest clearance that makes way for the planting of commercial agriculture and logging (including illegal poaching of trees with commercial values such as that reported in the mass media in Pahang and Kelantan lately) in the hinterland in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, in Sabah and Sarawak- that had affected rivers badly through sedimentation. Consequently, land degradation especially in areas that have not been properly looked after became widespread. The continued extensive land-cover change must have contributed to not only the loss of valuable pristine forest but also some carbon sink loss, notwithstanding the green cover provided by the plantations such as the oil palm plantations has balanced that loss somewhat.

The largest contribution to all of the environmental woes originates from within the city precinct itself. More investments into manufacturing industries, commercial centres, physical and social infrastructures, and escalating housing development areas have transformed further the cities. Housing development has continued to use sand and minerals, hence more metal will be lost.

Human consumption, in addition, has contributed to mountain of wastes that until now the various levels of urban authorities find it hard to cope with collecting and disposing off those wastes. The industrial and commercial expansions too have added further to the problems of wastes; some are bulky in nature, others are less visible but hazardous to human health. Rivers as an important source of drinking water are constantly under threat from pollution.

The urban air quality too is continuously threatened by vehicular emissions of poisonous gases such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, contributed largely by unprecedented growth in the number and volume of cars on the roads, choking at particular times of the day almost all city roads and streets. The gaseous emissions including the heat release from air conditioners from city buildings worsen the formation of urban heat islands that in calm days hold back all the pollutants over the city centre (Sham Sani 1987).

In another direction Malaysian cities are slowly grappling with health related issues too. City people are aware and familiar with a range of diseases associated with the improved quality of life and comfort in city living. Modern trappings have also brought in diseases associated with rich man's problems. People are now concerned with cardiac problems, obesity and a host of others. Beyond that there is need to highlight the newly emerging health problem that has to relate to clean water habitat for aedes mosquitoes which affect people with dengue. More examples can be articulated here, and they are available in the Malaysian environmental quality report 2006 (DoE 2007). But suffice it to say that the quality of the city environment has problems despite all the steps that have been taken to minimize them.

Lest the story telling is becoming too negative, implying that the city people in various levels of city authority seems incapable of reducing those negative outcomes, there have been sustained efforts by those concerned to reduce city people's vulnerability towards declining environmental quality. Apart from laws and guidelines with respect of aspects of everyday life, habitat, building and construction, health, safety, and the environment there are initiatives to develop awareness through sustainable education, sustainable campaign by stakeholders and the involvement of people from all walks of life (DoE 2007).

### **Two Malaysian Initiatives for Embedding Sustainability**

It is worth mentioning here about two initiatives which the Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI) has been very involved in working partnership with the Department of Environment Malaysia. The two initiatives are the Bandar Lestari- Anugerah Alam Sekitar (Sustainable City- The Environment Award) initiated in 2003, and the Sekolah Lestari- Anugerah Alam Sekitar (Sustainable School- The Environment Award- initiated in 2001). Both attempt to bring all stakeholders in the 148 local governments (cities, towns and district), and primary and secondary school pupils in the country to be aware of and to contribute to doing something to protect the environment (Patrick Tan et al. 2006; Patrick Tan et al. 2007). These two initiatives have made impacts to both the cities and the schools respectively. While all these initiatives have created awareness about participating in the awards and consequently the city managers attempt to make their cities environment more pleasant and attractive. The schools likewise have sustained their school compounds clean, green and attractive by involving the school pupils. All will contribute to make Malaysia sustainable.

### **THE NEW ECONOMIC MODEL: SUSTAINABILITY FOR MALAYSIA?**

The third transition is positioned in the announcement by the Malaysian Prime Minister on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2010 of the New Economic Model (NEM) for Malaysia. NEM concerns primarily with freeing Malaysia from the middle income country syndrome to move on to the high income country league (Economic Planning Unit 2010).. Consequently, a quality Malaysian life is in the offer with strong assurance that all strata of the society, especially the lower 40 percent, are going to benefit from the economic growth while making sure the environment with its resources and services are protected.

Sustainability for Malaysia should be the shared vision of all Malaysians across strata and regions of the Malaysian society. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 has established the sustainable development concept as the framework for development (Figure 1). Malaysia adopted it and ever since the time Malaysia has used sustainable development as a framework

to organize its development initiatives. At this point in time 'sustainable development' is still a useful framework for the pursuit of development. Indeed, there is no other competing framework at the moment that can edge sustainable development out of the mainstream thinking on a balanced development incorporating economic growth, societal needs for development, and increasing responsibility to nature, resources and the environment not only for the present generation but for the future generations also.

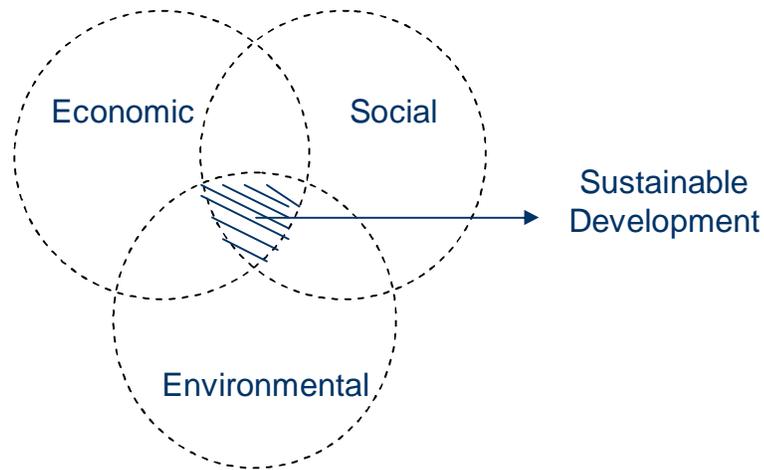


Figure 1. Sustainable development components

Yet sustainability is still far off the development target for the majority of countries around the world. Partly, the problems lie with the sustainable development concept itself. Not only the concept can be vague to some countries, off the need for others but also it is associated with the advanced economies. The poorer developing countries need more than just balancing the triple pillars in pursuing development; their economic base is still very much tied to environmental resources and services for growth, their societies are still strongly tied to the environment for daily needs, and environmental protection remains minimal in the eye of outsiders. More over the concept itself is linear in its argument, suggesting that if the three pillars are in balance then the development of a country will be sustainable. In the real world such an outcome may not materialize; there are intervening factors that intervene to derail the expected outcome.

The NEM offers new dimensions to the Malaysian development efforts in the future. For certain the model stressed on high economic growth that is needed to propel the country out of the middle income trap to move on to a high income country. Such high growth will expand the country's wealth for societal advancement without damaging further the quality of environmental resources and services, and the general health of the environment. This is to be achieved through the expansion of manufacturing based on new knowledge, creativity and innovation. This means that the economic drivers have to rely on quality human resource, on greater investment on R&D, innovation and creativity with a wider scope for industry-University networking. Thus, since environmental resources and services will be utilized in a more ethical manner, just to meet the basic needs, the third pillar - the environment - will remain protected and healthy. Of course, the societal need for development should be in line with the need for ethical redistribution of wealth from the high economic growth. If the poorer 40 percent among the Malaysian people that have been identified to linger on in the vulnerable group category are lifted to join the upper 60 percent then there are chances that the vulnerable group will be able to play their roles in ensuring Malaysian sustainability.

The emergence of sustainability in the country will be contingent upon the ethical implementations of development strategies that should reflect in programmes and activities for

the multi-ethnic Malaysians. To date Malaysia has still to grapple with some basic issues that have to be overcome before vulnerable areas and groups can be brought to the mainstream of Malaysian quality of life. Figures 2a & 2b summarize the lingering problems in the Malaysian space-time that can counter the move towards sustainability.

From Figure 2a, the original three pillars in Brundtland’s model- economic, social and environment - need to be further disaggregated to capture the Malaysian situation at present. The economics as in the NEM should emphasize growth (but with knowledge based production) to accumulate wealth for societal and infrastructural development required to refine further the needs for a society that is moving to a developed country status. But the societal scenario of Malaysia can be best viewed by dissecting the social reality into two pillars, one looking at the population dynamics and the quality of life, and the other is about ethnic equity that has political overtones; both need to be grappled with and solved. There is another dimension that cuts across the economic, social and environmental realities, that is the need for spatial equity; issues in regional disparities remain to be resolved. With respect to the environment, we need to grapple with the natural resources, energy and bio-diversities on the one hand and the built-up environment associated with human habitat on the other.

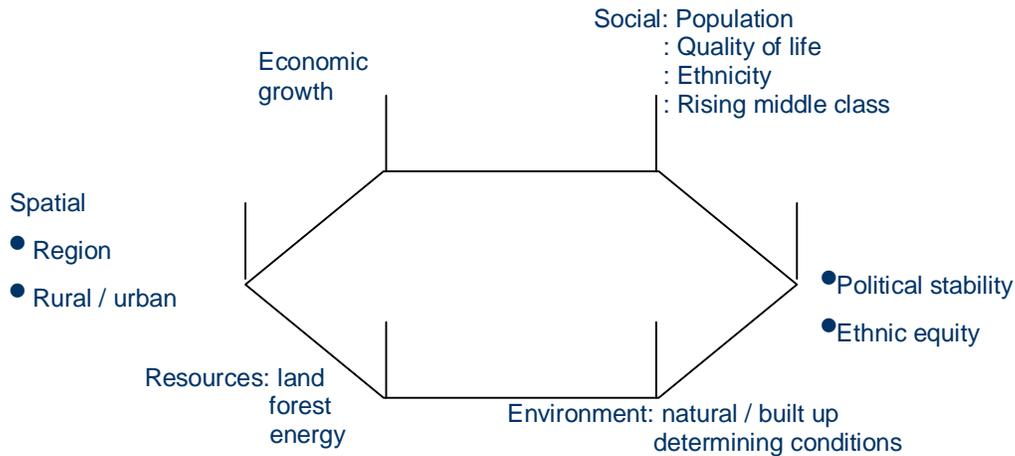


Figure 2a. The “Six Pillars of Sustainable Development Concept” for Malaysia

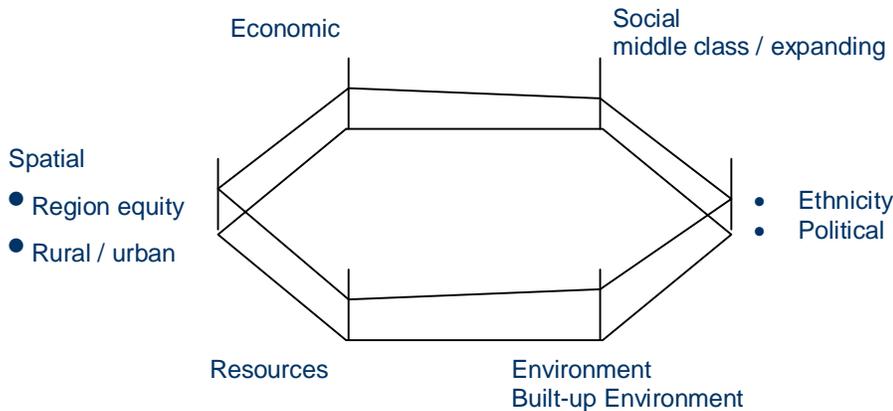


Figure 2b. The “Six Pillars of Sustainable Development Concept” for Malaysia

In Figure 2b upper connecting lines to all the six pillars show what have been achieved so far; although the upper connecting lines are drawn based on perceptual interpretations of the reality the diagram does raise some thoughts on the state of the Malaysian attempt at embracing sustainability. (Certainly, there is a need to map the actual progress so far in each pillar for us to come to terms with the need to move forward).

## CONCLUSION

The issues of Malaysian development were linked to the Malaysian paradigms of development since Independence. The earlier decade of balanced development paradigm stressing development with redistribution was necessary for wealth accumulation to pay for socio-economic transformation of the country so that Malaysia could move out of its colonial inflicted problems at first, and later to move the country from third world condition to first, in order to shape a truly multi-racial developed Malaysian society. But all are achieved at a cost to the environment.

Under the aegis of balanced development embedded in the 'sustainable development' paradigm environmental problems should be a non-issue. Yet, efforts at continuing pursuit for economic growth and enhancing socio-economic development in recent decades have continued to degrade the environment. As implied in earlier paragraphs, the momentum in the growth trajectory for Malaysia predates the call for sustainable development. Until the trajectory is brought under control Malaysia will continue to grapple with excessive environmental problems despite the various steps being taken to contain those environmental impacts from non-ethical activities in pursuit of economic growth and socio-economic development.

The New Economic Model of development recently announced to be the new development framework for Malaysia opens with new promises with respect to correcting the social and regional disparities, and protecting the quality of the Malaysian environment. The promise is worth anticipating because the much needed wealth to drive social development in the country will come from economic programmes and activities that stress high growth based on productivity, creativity and innovation rather than on pristine resources and labour intensive manufacturing industries. Knowledge is the new economic catch phrase. If in the decade of growth with redistribution environmental protection was lagging far behind, and during the sustainable development decades economic growth went hand in hand with societal development and environmental protection for a new balanced scenario, the NEM when ethically executed could produce the much needed sustainability so much alluded in the earlier development paradigms but fail to materialize for the simple reason that growth in the economy to pay for societal development moves faster than the 'caring for the environment.

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*Abdul Samad Hadi, Ph.D.*  
*Principal Research Fellow*  
*Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI)*  
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*  
*43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.*  
E-mail: asamad@ukm.my

*Shaharudin Idrus, M.Env. Mgmt.*  
*Senior Lecturer*  
*Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI)*  
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*  
*43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.*  
E-mail: dinn6358@gmail.com

*Abdul Hadi Harman Shah*  
*Associate Professor*  
*Faculty of Social Science and Humanities*  
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*  
*43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.*  
E-mail: aharmans@ukm.my

*Ahmad Fariz Mohamed, Ph.D.*  
*Associate Professor*  
*Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI)*  
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*  
*43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.*  
E-mail: fariz@ukm.my