

Transport Policy in the Klang Valley, Malaysia: The Sustainability Agenda

Raja Noriza Raja Ariffin^{1,a}, RustamKhairi Zahari^{2,b}, Makmor Tumin^{1,c}

¹Department of Administrative Studies and Politics, Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya, Malaysia

²Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

^arnoriza@um.edu.my, ^brustam@iium.edu.my, ^cmakmor@um.edu.my

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Abstract. There are many definitions of sustainable transport system, but generally it takes into account the three elements of sustainable development: the economy, the environment and the social well-being when deciding on policy that is affecting transportation activity. This paper examines the urban transport policy and its implications on sustainable transport agenda in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The research utilizes a combination of primary and secondary data. Interview was employed to gather the primary data, while scholarly works, government documents and archival records are the instruments used for gathering the secondary data. The findings shed light on the implications of transport policy on sustainable transport agenda in the Klang Valley. The main challenge seems to be the lack of holistic measures in tackling transport issues that are in conflict with the objectives of sustainable transport. This main factor stems from a combination of several other issues such as decision-making based on short-term result that are mostly driven by economically viable alternatives and the lack of understanding on the real meaning of sustainable transport. These scenario inadvertently influence development processes and threaten the implementation of sustainable transport agenda.

Introduction

Sustainable transport system generally takes into account the three elements of sustainable development: the economy, the environment and the social well-being when deciding on policy that is affecting transportation activity. Transport sustainability can only be achieved when policy embraces a more holistic approach, is people-oriented, takes greater account of environmental and social criteria and attempt to reduce the demand for travel by using land-use measures [1]. In contrast, Malaysia has an extremely high automobile dependence, which is regarded as a negative criterion towards achieving sustainability agenda.

Recent phenomena all over the world stress on the need of sustainable development. The concern for air quality, increasing congestion, lack of land for parking, the cost of transport infrastructure, and constraints on financial resources, has resulted in many cities exploring a range of environmentally friendly solutions to counter these emerging problems. Decision-makers and planners in the early years of Klang Valley's development seem to overlook on the motorization trend and the impact it would bring to the environment. This paper examines the implication of transport policy on sustainable transport agenda in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Klang Valley is a region that goes beyond the boundaries of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.

Background to the Study: The Development of Transport Policy in the Klang Valley

Road building has always been the main instrument for achieving the objective of social and economic development in Malaysia. Growing urban population and increasing household incomes have led to a rise in car ownership. Although the quality of life and the standard of living for the city's residents have improved, the increase in population and their demands for a better life have exerted unprecedented pressures on the city's transportation network. Despite growing affluence, quite a number of the population would still be left without access to car or motorised vehicles.

Urban transportation planning methods in Kuala Lumpur grant better mobility to motor vehicles as much as possible [2,3,4]. The high priority that was placed in improving traffic flows led to the erosion of pedestrian space and the replacement of many pedestrian crossing places with overhead bridges. Many policies suggested by several studies that points towards achieving sustainability objectives have either been abandoned or not well-received [5, 6,7].

The launching of a national car in the early 80s is a factor contributing to the difficulties in implementing car restraint policy. Motorcycle ownership and usage have also faced no active restraint in Kuala Lumpur [3]. Unrestrained road capacity encourages and promotes the use of cars and other private motorised vehicles. Heavy use of cars in turn means reduced use of public transport, leading to reduced public transport efficiency.

Literature Review

According to Thompson [8], transportation problems are interrelated and have to be tackled holistically to offer maximum benefit towards resolving these issues. Congested urban area prompted people to move to the suburb, which subsequently created a dispersed urban form [9]. The dispersal of cities has then caused a demand for more roads, which consequently led into longer journeys, more congestion, more fuel consumption and pollution.

Sustainable transport policy according to many researchers is an integration of land-use and transport planning, management of private vehicle travel, optimisation of public transport use as well as promotion of non-motorized transport [1, 10, 11]. Transport sustainability can only be achieved when policy embraces a more holistic approach, is people-oriented, takes greater account of environmental and social criteria and attempt to reduce the demand for travel by using land-use measures [1].

Although holistic measure is a fundamental concept in sustainable transport, many studies show that this is one of the most difficult issues to resolve. Hull [12] who undertaken a study on five local transport authorities in England found that transport policy at the local level competes with other service sector policies and are often in conflict. In addition, there was an element of territoriality between the different teams. Visions of what a sustainable transport system might look like vary according to sectors and, often times are 'translated' into transport planning practice in different ways in different localities.

Research Methodology

The research utilizes a combination of primary and secondary data. Semi-structured interview was employed to gather the primary data, while scholarly works, government documents, archival records and online newspaper reports are the instruments used for gathering the secondary data. The respondents for the semi-structured interviews came from various sectors, who are directly or indirectly involved in urban transport policy decision-making.

An interview guide was used to ensure that all issues intended for the research were covered in each of the interviews. The researcher adopted the coding procedure as advocated by Cope [13]. Codes emerged from the collection of data through an iterative process called 'analytic induction' and this process of categorisation helps to organise the material so that interesting relationships can be observed and reflected to the research question and research objectives [14]. The data were coded and then examined to identify emergent themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings shed light on the implications of transport policy on sustainable transport agenda in the Klang Valley. The main challenge seems to be the lack of holistic measures in tackling transport issues that are in conflict with the objectives of sustainable transport. Generally, this conundrum is due to the lack of integration. The commitment from transport policy community to coordinate is not as great as some would like it to be.

The absence of a national transport policy is a case of concern. The interviewees are of the opinion that there is no document to steer implementation. Moreover, many documents that cover similar issues are disintegrated and actions are done without proper planning.

Political intervention has also been mentioned as being the barrier to achieving sustainable transport in the Klang Valley. It seems that this phenomenon penetrated the whole of the planning system. It is not uncommon for policies to be changed to suit the need of the political masters. It seems that the public and policy makers have yet to understand the concept of sustainability. People who misconstrued and misunderstood sustainability see it as an impediment or hindrance to development.

Conflicting policies is one of the factors that has been mentioned as contributing to the difficulty to promote effective sustainable transport in the Klang Valley. Many interviewees are of the opinion that since the country is dependent on industry as the engine of growth, priority is given towards those policies that are viewed as contributing to this mission. Many new developments in the Klang Valley are low density and there is a trend towards heavy investments in car-oriented mobility, which is in line with an automobile dependence scenario. The lack of a comprehensive understanding of the term sustainable transport might result in the government giving less priority to public transport improvements compared to private vehicle. When there is competition for funding, sustainable transport related initiatives would most likely be at the losing end.

Conclusion

Growth and economic development has been the two main justifications for road expansion program in the country, particularly in urban areas. This emphasis on road building as the catalyst for growth and economic development has resulted in a rise in motor vehicle ownership and usage. Consequently, this phenomenon has taken its toll on Klang Valley's infrastructure, creating gridlock in various parts of the conurbation. This scenario has triggered other problems, including, air pollution, urban sprawl, and high-energy consumption. Various policies have been proposed and some implemented with the intention of alleviating these problems, however, many other conflicting policies are undermining the progress made in tackling them.

The main challenge seems to be the lack of holistic measures in tackling transport issues that are in conflict with the objectives of sustainable transport. These phenomena mainly stems

from the lack of understanding on sustainable transport agenda. To achieve sustainability, transport policy in Malaysia, particularly in the Klang Valley must include the wider systems in which transportation activity is rooted.

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