

MALAYSIA TOWARDS ZERO POVERTY BY 2020Yasin Elhadary^{*1} and Narimah Samat²¹ Faculty of Geographical and Environmental Science, University of Khartoum, Sudan² School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia*Corresponding author's e-mail: yasingeographya@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Since 1970, Malaysia have been adopted various policies to reduce poverty and address the socio-spatial inequality. These policies managed to reduce poverty rate from 52.4% in 1970 to 1.7 % in 2012. However, inequalities and disparity among regions and ethnic groups have not been properly addressed. Policies that worked well nationally might not be suitable to be used in addressing poverty at local level. Thus, this paper aims to critically look at the strengths and weaknesses of such policies particularly in eliminating poverty. The paper is based heavily on the review of the recent literature and the data gathered from Economic Planning Unit-EPU and the Department of Statistics, Malaysia. Empirical experiences have shown that Malaysia has managed to reduce poverty beyond the declaration of MDG; halving poverty by 2015. However several issues need to be addressed as the country aim to be a developed nation with zero poverty as indicated in its vision 2020. Although the slogan "growth with equity" was used, spatial disparities were found among region such as between Sabah and Penang. Penang State, which has experienced steady economic growth, has implemented top-up model of eliminating poverty where families earned less than poverty income line received top-up income from the state government since 2013, claimed to have zero poverty rate. However, the sustainability of this approach is questionable. In addition to that, the sign of incidence of poverty between rural and urban and among ethnic minorities is quite clear. This inequality with external factors (illegal migration and global economy) poses some challenges for achieving the vision 2020. By evaluating the policies and analyzing regional disparities the paper will enrich the literature on poverty and help the planners to formulate sound poverty eradication polices.

Keywords: Poverty, policy, Inequalities, MDG, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the developing countries located in the East South Asia and consists of fourteen states. The total population in 2013 is 29.715 million, which comprised of, the Malay (62.4%), Chinese (22%), Indian (6.6%) and others (8%). The country is diverse in ethnicity, language, culture and religion which have generated obstacles to achieve economic development with quality and equity at the beginning of its independence. Economically, especially at independence in 1957, the country relied heavily on tin and rubber and, to less extent, timber (Samat et al., 2012). During that period, huge proportion of the population were classified as poor (Samat et al., 2014) and overall poverty rate was 49.3% in the year 1970 (EPU, 2013). The government had recognized the challenges and worked hard to overcome poverty and socio-economic disparities.

After independence, several policies and programs were introduced and implemented to foster economic development and at the same time reduce overall poverty. Among the policies introduced were Pre-New Economic policy (PNEP) 1960 – 1970, New economic policy (NEP)1971 -1990, National development policy (NDP) 1991-2000, National vision policy (NVP) 2001–2010 and National transformation policy (NTP) 2011-2020, which aimed to continue nurture economic growth and eliminate overall poverty in the country. Available literature have shown that, these policies and its related programmes had succeeded in promoting economic growth and thus reduce the incidence of poverty very sharply (Elhadary and Samat, 2012). Malaysia has succeeded in reducing poverty rate from 49.3% in 1970 to 12.4 % in 1992 and 6.0% in 2002 to 1.7% in 2012 (EPU, 2013; Mohamed and Xavier 2015). The determination to eradicate poverty is in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where Malaysia together with other 188 countries has signed the Millennium Declaration Agreement (MDA) where halving poverty in 2015 is one of its eight goals. Available literature indicated that Malaysia has achieved the goal even before the date mentioned in the agreement (UNDP, 2005). The incidents of poverty in Malaysia had significantly declined from 12.4

% in 1992 and it reached 3.8% in 2009 (Abdul Hakim et al., 2010; Muhamed and Haron, 2011), with hard-core poverty nearly eradicated, declining to 0.7% in 2009 (EPU, 2013). The UNDP (2014) indicated that despite an increase in population by nearly three times since 1970, there are fewer people living in poverty than there were more than four decades ago. Despite this outstanding success in eradicating poverty, still there are some gaps need to be filled if Malaysia is targeting zero poverty and be one of the developed nation in 2020. These limitations of achieving zero poverty are highlighted by several authors. According to Mohamed and Xavier (2015), although the incidence of poverty was significantly reduced in Malaysia, pockets of poverty exist with high incidence among specific ethnic groups and localities. In the same line Nair (2010) indicated that rural, urban and stubborn poverty are still critical issues to grapple with and urgent problems need to be resolved. Based on EPU (2013), poverty in urban area in 1970 and 1992 was 21.3% and 4.7% respectively and 2.3% in 2002 and 1.0% in 2012. While in rural area, poverty rate was 58.7%, 21.2%, 13.5%, and 3.4% in the stated years. The main aim of this paper, therefore, is to uncover the secret behind the sharp reduction of poverty in Malaysia. Not only tracing the story of success, the paper also highlighted the challenges and constraints in addressing poverty. The paper would contribute to the on-going debate on poverty and provide road map towards formulating sound policies that may lead to eradicate poverty and assist Malaysia to be a developed nation by 2020.

DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN MALAYSIA

Since its independence five major plans have been introduced by Malaysian government to ensure economic growth and thus eradicating poverty. These policies include PNEP 1960 – 1970, NEP 1971 -1990, NDP 1991-2000, NVP 2001–2010 and NTP 2011-2020. The following are some details about these policies. The PNEP adopted immediately after independence to develop the economy of the country. This plan focuses on (i) eradicating absolute poverty irrespective of race by raising income levels and increasing job opportunities, and (ii) restructuring society to remove the identification of race with economic functions (UNDP, 2005). The NEP that ended in 1990 succeeded to reduce the overall poverty incidence in Peninsular Malaysia from 49.3% in 1970 to 17.1% in 1990 (Mohamed and Xavier, 2015). While the poverty among the *Bumiputera* has also decreased to 20.8% in 1990 from 65% in 1970. The NEP is followed by NDP for the period 1991-2000. The NDP is basically a pro-Malay policy, or what is called by Torii (1997) “ethnicity oriented policy”. In this era several programmes to eradicate poverty were implemented. These include the development of local commercial and industrial community, involvement of private sector and development of human resources. Accordingly, poverty incidence continues to decrease from 15% in 1990 to only 6% in the year 2002, and *Bumiputera* poverty stood at 9% for the said year. The NDP is followed by the NVP introduced in 2001.

Generally, NVP aimed at establishing a united, progressive and prosperous Malaysia, where the citizen lives in harmony and engages in full and fair partnership. Moreover, it focuses on minorities group like in Sabah and Sarawak, which still records the highest poverty rates among all the states in Malaysia. This phase ended with continues drop in the incidence poverty to 3.8% in 2009 for Malaysia and 5.3% for *Bumiputera* (Samat et al., 2014; EPU, 2013). The NVP is followed by the NTP (2011-2020). The NTP emphasizes mainly on human development and maintains the people-centric focus through the NEM. In this phase Malaysia set an ambitious goal to be one of the high-income economic countries that is encompassed both inclusive and sustainable. True to its inclusive concept, NEM aims to ensure poverty eradication and a more equitable distribution across ethnic communities and regions. Inclusiveness programmes will seek to enhance the income levels of low-income households from RM 1,440 (USD 480) per month in 2009 to RM 2,300 (USD 770) in 2015. This is alongside with commitment of being a developed nation by 2020 with zero-poverty in that year (EPU, 2013). Since the poverty incidence is considered very small, the government has embarked on addressing the low-income group, which include the bottom 40% and socio-economic inequality between people and places. This policy is still going on but in 2012, poverty rate was at 1.7% for the nation and 2.2% for *Bumiputera* (EPU, 2013).

POVERTY ERADICATION: ACHIEVEMENTS

The adoption of the above mentioned policies and programmes implemented have led to massive economic growth and sharp reduction in poverty. Moreover, the country has witnessed rapid economic growth during the last five decades. Statistical data has shown that between 1971 and 2000, real GDP per capita grew at an impressive 4.2 per cent per annum, on average, as a result of effective public policy which played a direct and key role in alleviating poverty over the same period (UNDP, 2005). According to Mohamed and Xavier (2015), the success at eradicating poverty has been due as much to the steady economic growth as it is due to the wise policies and plans implemented. Furthermore, this economic growth has benefited all Malaysian despite its race and religion. Subsequently, UNDP (2014) agreed that the policy benefited only Bumiputeras, or only rich Bumiputeras at the expense of poor Bumiputeras and the non-Bumiputeras is factually and empirically incorrect. Below are some figures collected from various sources (EPU, 2015, HDI, 2014) reflecting the positive impact of economic growth on the eradication of poverty in Malaysia.

- Overall poverty incidence declined from 49.3% (1970) to 1.7% (2012). Poverty in urban and rural areas decreased from 21.3 % and 58.7% (1970) to 1.0 and 4.3 (2012) respectively.
- The incidence of hardcore poverty also showed a decrease from 6.9 % in year 1970 to 0.2 per cent in year 2012. The hardcore poverty for urban and rural areas showed decreases from 2.4 % and 9.3 (1970) to 0.1 and 0.6 (2012) respectively.
- The incidence of poverty for *Bumiputera* decreased from 64.8% in year 1970 to 2.2 per cent in year 2012. The incidence of poverty for Chinese also dropped from 26% (1970) to 0.3 per cent (2012). Meanwhile for Indians, it decreased from 39.2% (1970) to 1.8 per cent (2012).
- Some states like Melaka, Penang, Selangor and Putrajaya are on the way to approaching zero poverty status.
- MDG target in 1990 (16.5%) of poor people to be halved in the year 2015. This has been achieved 2000 (8.5%) even before the mentioned date.
- Malaysia is moving ahead in Human Development Index as it ranked number 62 in 2014 with overall value increase from 0.577 in 1980 to 0.770 (nearly approaching one).
- The mean monthly household income for Malaysians increased from RM264 (1970) to RM4,025 in 2009 and later to RM5,000 in 2012 with an increase of 7.2 per cent per annually.
- 72.8% of Malaysian population owned houses, 24.0% rented while 3.2 live in quarters in 2012.
- Perception of individual wellbeing in 2013 as indicated in HDI (2014) is 91% for education quality, 87% for health care quality, 75% for standard of living and 83% for job satisfaction.
- The Gini coefficient for both Bumiputera and Chinese continued to improve from 0.440 and 0.425 (2009) to 0.421 and 0.422 (2012) respectively.

The impressive record of poverty reduction in Malaysia is paralleled with massive improvements in basic amenities. By 2013, 95% of overall population served with clean and treated water, while a household with piped water inside reached 93.7%; public water stand pipe 0.2% and other 6.1 % in 2012. Accessible to electricity in general is 99.8 %, and only 0.2% have no electricity. Electricity coverage in rural areas increased from 93% in 2010 to 98% in 2013. During the period 1970-2010, primary education enrolment rate increased from 87% in 1970 to 99% in 2010. Life expectancy rates for both females and males increased to 75 years and 70.2 years, respectively. Literacy rate was as high as 94% in 2010 (Mohamed and Xavier 2015). The EPU in 2015 reported that the road length increased from 137,000 km in 2010 to 230,000 km in 2015. Although these figures reflected the unprecedented development in accessing services, some states still is less developed compared to other. For example in Sabah and Sarawak only 77% of its population had accessed to electricity. The challenges and constraints for not achieving equal access to services and location disparities are discussed in the following section.

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

Despite the unprecedented success in reducing the incidence of poverty, pockets of poverty exist among some specific ethnic groups and between localities. Malaysia has to work hard to address such issues in order to reach zero poverty and be one of the developed nation in 2020. The following section highlighted some socio-economic and regional disparities that are in urgent need to be embarked upon.

Income Inequality among Ethnic and Social Classes

The incidence of poverty among ethnic groups reflected a sign of inequality. Although the incidence of poverty among *Bumiputeras* has decreased from a high of 65% since 1970 to 2.2% in 2012, it is still higher compared to only 0.3% for the Chinese and 1.8% for the Indians (Mohamed and Xavier, 2015). The incidence of poverty for *Bumiputera* was 64.8% (1970), 17.5% (1992), 9.0% (2002) and 2.2% (2012) while it was only 26.0%, 3.2%, 1.0% and 0.3% among the Chinese during the same period (EPU, 2013). The incidence of poverty among the Indian was also lower than *Bumiputera* where poverty rate was 39.2% (1970), 4.5% (1992), 2.7% (2002) and 1.8% (2012) (Samat et al., 2012). This implies that despite the positive discrimination (the act of giving advantage to those groups in society that are often treated unfairly because of their race, sex, etc.) made still the incidence of poverty is a little bit higher among *Bumiputera* than Chinese and Indian. This is due to the *Bumiputera* population who are living in rural areas and depend basically on traditional farming and rice cultivation. The inequality between ethnic groups is also found particularly between Indians and the rest of the ethnic groups. The result of Gini coefficient has shown that there is a decreased of inequality between Malay and Chinese compared to Indian. According to the EPU (2015) the Gini result for the Indians had increased from 0.424 (2009) to 0.443 (2012) which reflected income inequality among the Indian community. Even for Malay and Chinese, the measure in the stated year is above four, indicated there is some sign of inequality. This is not only existed between ethnic groups, but also among the three major social classes in Malaysia. The income share of the top 20 % of households fell from a peak of 55.7 % in 1970 to 48.6% in 2012. Over the corresponding years, the income share of the middle (bottom) 40 % households was 32.8 % and 36.6 % while the lower of the social ladder (bottom 40%) is increased from 11% in 1970 to 14.8% in 2012 (EPU, 2015). This indicates that more than half of Malaysian population (Middle and bottom classes) are vulnerable to poverty. Even though the average monthly income of the Bottom 40 households has increased by 12% per annum between 2009 and 2014, its income share of total household income only increased marginally from 14.3% in 2009 to 16.5% in 2014 (HDI, 2014). This led HDI in 2014 to classify China, Malaysia and Uganda as countries that have witnessed high inequality and the poorest end of growth in consumption (HDI 2014). This finding has been supported by data from the (EPU, 2015). Furthermore, the Gini coefficient of Malaysia was decreased from 0.52 in 1970 to 0.431 in 2012. But during 1997- 2004 the income inequality was increasing very sharply from 0.459 to 0.462 despite the fact that the incidence of poverty is decreasing from 6.1% to 5.7% in the corresponding years. These contradicting figures showed clearly that there is no correlation between the income inequity and reduction of poverty in Malaysia.

Gender Inequality

Malaysia is progressing well in addressing gender equality particularly in issues related to education and job accessibility. According to the HDI (2014) female primary schools enrolment has reached 48.6% in 2012 while female university enrolment is approaching 58.2% in the same year. Despite its progress in gender matters, still the participation of female in socio-economic and political arena is below the standard of the developed nation. According to HDI (2014) the gender inequality index value for Malaysia is 0.210 ranking number 39. Moreover, female share of seats in parliament is only 13.9% compared to male. Added to that labor force participation rate of age 15 and older is 44.3% for female while is 75.3 % for male and the total female employed is 36.4%. The gender bias will be higher if we considered the percentage of female population. According to the department of statistic the sex structure in 2012 is 48.6% for female and 51.4% for male. Not only that even the incidence of

poverty among female is higher compared to male. With the reference to the EPU (2013) the incidence of poverty in 2012 it reached 1.6% for male while is 2.1% for female. Moreover, the mean monthly income for female is 3,671 while is 5,248 for male in the same year of 2012.

Regional Disparities

The existence of ethnic, economic and regional disparities in Malaysia is to large extending related to the policy adopted during the colonial area. At early years of independence, the Malaysian map has shown that each ethnic group was segregated in terms of geographical area. Therefore most of *Bumiputera* were found in rural areas at the east northern part, along the coasts and riverbanks, in states like Terengganu, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis in Peninsular Malaysia, and Sabah, and Sarawak (Henderson et al., 2002). Economically they have engaged mostly in subsistence economy particularly rice cultivation, fishing, and rubber tapping. On the other hand Chinese and Indians are occupying urban areas at the western coastal plains around the tin mines, agricultural estates, and urban centres in states like Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Pulau Pinang, which are relatively more developed compared to north eastern states.

Currently, Malaysia's poor are mainly concentrated in the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis, and Sabah, and in particular in the rural areas of those states (Samat et. al. 2014). In 2012 there some states like Melaka, Penang, selangor and Putrajaya have reached or in the way to record zero poverty status in nearly coming years. In other states like Sabah still the number of people living under poverty line is higher compared to the rest as it reached 8.1 per cent in 2012 (See table 1 below). The inequality between states led Malaysia to classify poor people differently. For example, in 2013 a Malaysian household can be categorized as poor if their income is below 830; while is below 840 for urban and below 790 for rural areas. Moreover in Sabah and Sarawak the measurement is quite differ, as 1090 for Sabah and 920 for Sarawak (EPU, 2013). The disparities among states has been justified by (Mohamed and Xavier 2015) who stated that the west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia are more developed and have tended to attract more foreign direct investment compared to the other which is less developed. Moreover, the incidence of poverty also varied between urban and rural till higher among rural areas. By 2012, just one per cent of urban households were living in poverty compared to 3.4 % of rural areas. This rate of rural poverty is a bit higher than the national poverty rate which is 1.7%. Although the urban poverty rate is very low, rapid urbanization might increase the number of poor people (see Samat et al, 2012 for more details).

Illegal Migration

The above mentioned information indicates that Malaysia is progressing well in addressing the internal issue regarding poverty reduction. But Malaysia has to think carefully about the external factor like the massive rate of uncontrolled illegal migration. To be an only developed nation in 2020 among several poor countries will speed up the process of illegal and legal migration. The influx of migration coupled with threat of open economy is challenging the achievement of being a country with zero poverty in 2020. It is clear to say that, illegal immigrant issues has become one of the major problems worldwide, Malaysia has no excuse. With the existence of attractive pull factors, Malaysia is and will always be the ultimate destination of illegal immigrants. Statistical data indicated that there are around 3 million of illegal immigrant people in 2012 staying in Malaysia. Most are coming from neighbouring and surrounding countries like Indonesia (Tajari and Affendi, 2015). This phenomena if not controlled and addressed will destroy all effort made to ensure better economic growth and poverty eradication.

Table 1: Incidents of Poverty by Ethnicity, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2012

Year	1970	1984	1992	1997	2002	2009	2012	hardcore
Malaysia	49.3	20.7	12.4	6.1	6.0	3.8	1.7	0.2
Ethnic								
Bumiputera	64.8	28.7	17.5	9.0	9.0	5.3	2.2	0.3
Chinese	26.0	7.8	3.2	1.1	1.0	0.6	0.3	0.0
India/Indian	39.2	10.1	4.5	1.3	2.7	2.5	1.8	0.2
Lain-Lain/Others	44.8	18.8	21.7	13.0	8.5	6.7	1.5	-
Strata								
Bandar/Urban	21.3	8.5	4.7	2.1	2.3	1.7	1.0	0.1
Luar Bandar/Rural	58.7	27.3	21.2	10.9	13.5	8.4	3.4	0.6
Negeri/State								
Johor	45.7	12.2	5.6	1.6	2.5	1.3	0.9	0.1
Kedah	63.2	36.6	21.2	11.5	9.7	5.3	1.7	0.1
Kelantan	76.1	39.2	29.5	19.2	17.8	4.8	2.7	0.3
Melaka	44.9	15.8	8.5	3.5	1.8	0.5	0.1	-
N.Sembilan	44.8	13.0	8.1	4.7	2.6	0.7	0.5	0.1
Pahang	43.2	15.7	6.9	4.4	9.4	2.1	1.3	0.2
Pulau Pinang	43.7	13.4	4.0	1.7	1.2	1.2	0.6	0.0
Perak	48.6	20.3	10.2	4.5	6.2	3.5	1.5	0.2
Perlis	73.9	33.7	19.8	10.7	8.9	6.0	1.9	0.5
Selangor	29.2	8.6	4.3	1.3	1.1	0.7	0.4	0.0
Terengganu	68.9	28.9	25.6	17.3	14.9	4.0	1.7	0.2
Sabah/F.T.Labuan		33.1	27.8	16.5	16.0	19.2	7.8	1.6
Sarawak		31.9	19.2	7.3	11.3	5.3	2.4	0.3
F.T.Kuala Lumpur		4.9	1.7	0.1	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.1

Source: Economic Planning Unit (2013)

Uncertainties in the Global Economy

Economically, Malaysia is based mostly on the external trade which accounts for more than 200 per cent of its GDP. The export revenues has shifted from RM 5,163 million in 1970 to RM94.50 billion in 1991 and reached RM702.2 billion in 2012 (EPU, 2015). The global and regional competitiveness will make the country vulnerable to any external chocks. For example, during the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the real GDP of Malaysia fell by over 7 per cent and the incidence of poverty rate has increased from 6.1% in 1997 to 8.5 % in 1999 then start to decrease in the following years till it reached 1.7 % in 2012 (EPU, 2015). Another issue related to the economy need to be tackled is the fact that still Malaysian economy to some extend is driven by labour intensive. To compete with other (China) and be a developed nation in 2020 Malaysia has to move to capital intensive and knowledge base economy. Malaysia has embarked on that and introduced several programmes to increase the awareness of its population and move to the implementation of knowledge based economy. These include ICT training, improving education and shifting to government. Despite these positive factors, the diffusion of ICT is still uneven within Malaysia (UNDP, 2005). Still in Malaysia there is spatial and social 'digital divide' as not all the entire population access ICT facilities equally.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia is considered as one of outstanding Asian economy and representing an excellent example in eradicating poverty among developing countries. The secret behind such success is the adoption of

wise economic policy that ensures all are benefiting equally regardless of the ethnicity and location. Despite this positive progress, still the incidence of poverty is not equally distributed across states and within ethnic groups. At the times when Penang approaching zero poverty, states like Sabah and Sarawak are lacking behind. Malaysia has to overcome several constraints if it is serious in joining the developed nation with zero poverty in 2020. Malaysia is in urgent need to address poverty of and among Bumiputera (Orang Asli) particularly in localities like Sabah and Sarawak, poor in rural areas, single female-headed households and the elderly especially those not covered by pension schemes. Also addressing urban people is necessary especially in the process of rapid expansion of unplanned urbanization. To compete with other (China) and ensure competitive economy, Malaysia has to shift to knowledge based economy. The external factors like the collapse of global economy and influx of illegal migration if not well addressed they will destroy all the previous efforts made to eradicate poverty and make 2020 ambition of being developed nation challenging. the government need to implement serious immigration policy and support the neighbouring counties into being developed nation. To be an only developed nation in the region where the surrounding is poor, It is a handicap for Malaysia rather than something advantage.

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