

QUALITY OF LIFE DESERVES MORE ATTENTION THAT IT GETS .

MIERSCOPE
By Kevin Chew

For the past two decades, Malaysia's development efforts have proceeded at a giddy pace, notwithstanding the recent drawbacks due to the Asian financial crisis and the global technological bust. Its income per capita has grown by leaps and bounds. From RM860 in 1970, its nominal income per capita, in ringgit terms, has jumped more than 15 fold to an estimated RM13,361 in 2002. This level of income is the third highest among the South East Asian countries after Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

Today, Malaysians can proudly boast of having the tallest building in the world, top class sporting facilities (though, sadly, without any top class athletes), an ultra modern airport, and a high-tech government administrative centre, which is one of the finest in East Asia. Malaysia is also one of the very few countries to use the high-tech microchip embedded passport and it also dreams of sending a Malaysian into space one day.

The growing affluence of the society has also been a catalyst of growth for some other sectors of the economy. The positive spin-offs were evident in the mushrooming of shopping malls, including some foreign hypermarkets, around major cities. And this is slowly transforming Malaysia into a shopping hub, largely at the expense of Singapore. The series of new property launches are also getting better and better. Luxurious resort-like residential enclaves, many with Balinese concepts, are receiving encouraging responses from buyers. Trendy international sidewalk cafes such as Starbucks and Coffee Bean and spunky watering holes are also lining the streets of Kuala Lumpur and some other major cities to grind out profits from well-heeled Malaysians. Overall, Malaysia has come light years from those humble beginnings when it was a lethargic commodity-based economy.

But rapid economic development does, sometimes, come with a price. Development, particularly unrestrained industrial activity, can generate serious environmental problems through toxic pollution, which may threaten human well-being and badly affect their quality of life. In this context, has the quality of life in Malaysia improved in tandem with the rapid pace of economic development? Based on official statistics, certain aspects of Malaysia's quality of life have been disappointing.

What is the quality of life? The Economic Planning Unit (EPU), in its report on the Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) 2002, defines it as *encompassing personal advances, a healthy lifestyle, access and freedom to pursue knowledge, and attaining a standard of living which surpasses the fulfillment of the basic and psychological needs of the individual, to achieve a level of social well being compatible with the nation's aspirations*. The MQLI takes into all the major aspects that contribute to the quality of life. The eleven factors are income and distribution, working life, transport and communications, health, education, housing, environment, family life, social participation, public safety and culture and leisure.

Using 1990 as the base year, the MQLI, which trended upwards gradually from 100 points in 1990 to 108.4 points in 2000, indicated a modest improvement in the quality of life. Whilst the other factors have progressed satisfactorily, the two factors that have worked against a better reading are environment quality and public safety. Against the base-year reading of a 100 points in 1990, the environment quality index remained, more or less, stagnant with a reading of 100.2 points, while the public safety index has plummeted sharply to 84 points. Unfortunately, these are the two factors that affect our everyday life the most. The Malaysian Urban Quality of Life Index (MUQLI), which measures the quality of life in four major cities (Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Johor Bahru and Kuching), also shows a similar trend. Whilst the MUQLI registered a modest improvement from 100 points in 1990 to 105.8 points in 2000, the readings in both the environment quality and public safety have fallen sharply from 100 points to 94.6 points and 91.9 points, respectively.

For most people residing in urban areas, these results are hardly surprising. These days (except during the monsoon season), the likelihood of waking up to a day with poor visibility has increased. While Indonesia should take some of the blame for the air quality problem, Malaysia is not entirely innocent. The problem of air pollution is not due to any lack of regulations, as we have enough rulebooks to fill an entire library. It is not entirely due to the high incidence of non-compliance with regulations and standards alone but also partly due to the lack of enforcement actions. Today it is not uncommon to read in the national dailies complaints about factories belching toxic fumes in residential areas, and the poor enforcement actions and indifference of the relevant authorities. Another example of poor enforcement is the Puduraya bus station, which serves thousands of Malaysians everyday. It is literally a chamber for carbon monoxide poisoning. Surely, there are rules requiring buses to turn off their engines while waiting at the platforms.

And the quality of drinking water, especially in Klang Valley, is another serious matter of discontent. A general survey would show that many houses in most housing estates in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur have water filters installed, all of them caked with layers of mud. Despite having raised the tariff rate, the water quality in these areas has, evidently, gotten worse.

The recent spate of high-profile criminal activities, some involving foreigners, has received extensive media coverage. Since the day Malaysia opened up its labour market to foreign workers, Malaysians have been forced to fortify their houses and housing estates with house alarms, electrical fences, grills, night petrols (Rukun Tetangga), security guards and guard dogs. Obviously, the social costs of allowing foreign workers into the country are enormous. Even the overall economic benefits of foreign labour are inconclusive with some empirical studies concluding that foreign workers in fact lower Malaysia's overall rate of productivity. Obviously, a more in-depth study has to be carried out to analyse both the economic and social costs and benefits of bringing in thousands of foreign workers into the country. There is no suggestion that the rising crime rate in the country is entirely due to the over-presence of migrant workers, many of them are here to earn a decent living. Local contribution to the crime rate is also substantial.

Our environment is a common natural resource of vital interest to everybody. And we owe it to the future generation to hand over an environment that is still livable. Of particular concern, at this juncture, are unrestrained economic activities, due to non-compliance and poor enforcement actions, which contribute to the degradation of our environment. These threats are real and very serious, as they carry potentially devastating long-term consequences. This warrants serious attention from policymakers as the market cannot be relied upon to effectively deal with such externalities.

How could the problem of pollution be minimised? Some economists have suggested that some form of taxes be imposed on the polluters for their transgression. But surely it will be much more logical for this problem to be avoided than to be paid for. How then could a higher degree of compliance with rules be achieved? As firms cannot be relied upon for voluntary initiatives, strict enforcement by the relevant authorities is the answer.

There is no doubt that sustainable development is an achievable goal although, in all fairness to the government, it would not be an easy task. But for the sake of protecting the larger community interest at stake, the government needs to apply restraint on national activities that are considered harmful to our environment and our safety.

What we also need is a better economic indicator than the conventional real Gross Domestic Products (GDP) to measure “economic progress”. After all, what is the true meaning of rapid development if we cannot even feel safe in our own homes? And what is the true meaning of economic progress if our fundamental rights to clean air have been constantly infringed by some money-grabbing firms that deliberately release toxic and carcinogenic fumes into the air? We need an index that captures not only the gains of growth but also the costs by subtracting the negative by-products of growth such as crimes, and environmental diseases and other hazards of industrial life from the indices of progress.

In 30 years time, Malaysia, like some other major East Asian countries, will begin to face the problem of an ageing population. A large and growing dependent elderly population will surely impose a heavy burden on the economy. And if the environmental problems that we face now are not tackled decisively and, worse still, allowed to deteriorate further, early deaths and chronic health problems due to environment-related diseases would surely compound the problem by placing an even greater stress on the economy and cause greater economic discontinuity. The nation would then reap a bitter harvest of our current inattention to a serious problem for decades to come.

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