

'We must tackle population imbalance' [NSTTV]

KUALA LUMPUR: Internal migration, fuelled by the desire to improve one's quality of life, is stressing infrastructure and public amenities in urban areas and is putting some rural areas at risk of underdevelopment due to a population imbalance.

Experts believe that while uneven development is common, there is a pressing need for authorities to address the issue.

Universiti Malaya urban and regional planning expert Dr Noor Hashimah Hashim Lim said uneven development between states was not uncommon, as businesses tend to cluster together to profit from externalities.

However, she noted that the problem required immediate attention.

"When people migrate and there are no longer able-bodied people who want to work in rural areas, no matter what you plan there — either agriculture or innovative biotechnology — it will go to ashes.

"Everyone will flock to urban areas, where they share and overburden public facilities, utilities, amenities and infrastructure, as rural areas go underdeveloped due to a population dearth," she said, adding that authorities in areas with smaller populations would also find it hard to justify their need for development.

URBAN SHIFT

The **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)** in 2020 stated that more than 75 per cent of the population, — more than 24 million people — are crammed in urban areas.

Among the reasons cited for migration include following their families (45.3 per cent), career (23.6 per cent) and environmental reasons (22.3 per cent).

Noor Hashimah said planners would factor in the pros and cons when drafting their plans, including a state's physical attributes that would determine its development suitability, even down to the sectors.

She said it was common for some states to not be developed as others due to different physical attributes that make it unsuitable for certain sectors.

"Around 90 per cent of Kelantan comprises flood-prone areas, making it less attractive for foreign direct investment.

"So, economically, maybe at the national level, they have identified sectors that are suitable and have potential growth there."

Noor Hashimah said the government's National Physical Plan sees the country's development intensity in three layers.

Kuala Lumpur would be in the first layer, where there is the most development. The next, supportive, layer would be Johor Baru and George Town, while the rest of the country made up the third layer of development.

"This is why some states or areas appear more developed than others," she said.

Noor Hashimah added that the effects of imbalanced internal migration were best seen in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, which had become packed urban centres marred by heat islands, traffic congestion, pollution, a hike in housing prices and worsening quality of life.

Overcrowding, she added, has also led to the overburdening of public facilities.

"When they planned it back then, for example, a clinic might be designed for one to 10 people, but because of urbanisation and migration, now one clinic could be filled by up to 500 people."

THE TOLL ON HEALTH

The effects are also palpable on an individual's well-being.

Noor Hashimah said most urbanites were spending more time at work and on the road, and less time on their hobbies and families.

Environmental issues, such as air and noise pollution, in the city, she said, could also affect a person's physical and mental health.

Easy access to fast food is also detrimental to the population as it will worsen a person's diet quality and body mass index.

"If you compare the number of fast food restaurants within a 5km radius in any urban area versus a rural area, the number of outlets in urban areas would be much higher."

She also cautioned that with more land being developed, there would be less access to recreational areas in urban cities.

She cited the example of the Kuala Lumpur City Hall studying the possibility of establishing rooftop gardens.

FORGING A BETTER PATH

On how to improve the situation, Noor Hashimah said a review of the government's three-tier system may be in order.

Under the three-tier system, development plans are made at the federal level, followed by the regional and local government levels.

She suggested a decentralisation of development plans, where local authorities are empowered to draft plans.

She said local authorities would know the strengths and weaknesses of their areas.

"Decentralisation creates an opportunity for local authorities to be more creative in assessing the potential and resources within their areas.

"It can even help create a balanced growth as it will promote healthy competition."

She said that local authorities would know their demographics best and could better manoeuvre through intangible issues.

She said Malaysia also needed more transit-oriented developments (TOD) with affordable housing.

TOD, she said, meant establishing town centres where people could live, work and play in the same area without travelling by car.

"It promotes active mobility, such as cycling and walking.

"Now, some people might live in Nilai but are commuting to Kuala Lumpur for work, which may take a few hours via public transport, which is why they opt to drive."

Another suggestion is for Malaysia to develop satellite cities, where people move towards digitalisation, allowing them to work remotely.

"Having satellite cities for workers to be able to work remotely would allow people in Kelantan and Terengganu to get a job in Kuala Lumpur and work in their hometowns," she said.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/04/895619/we-must-tackle-population-imbalance-nsttv>