Social Sustainability of *Kampung* Communities

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a tropical country and has rich tradition of vernacular architecture. Traditional vernacular houses (*Kampung* Houses) are proved to be environmentally sustainable, and the neighborhoods containing these houses traditionally showed the potential to build up community bonding inside the neighborhood, and hence social sustainable. But the future of this social sustainability might be in danger. Malaysia is currently rapidly urbanizing, and now 72 percent people live in urban areas. These urban areas are often very close to the *Kampungs*, and local people often move to urban houses. The urban housings lack the traditional pattern of community bonding. With every respect to the environmental sustainability of Kampung houses, and recognizing the rich tradition of social sustainability of *Kampung* neighborhoods as a whole, the question is whether *Kampung* communities will remain socially sustainable in future. This study took an ethnographic method, and interviewed existing *Kampung* dwellers of three different generations for their view on why people should or should not live in *Kampungs* in future. After qualitative analysis, several interesting findings evolved through grounded theories, and the study tried to suggest strategies on how to bridge this increasing gap between living harmoniously both in the rural and urban setup for the future generations in Malaysia. Data showed that though all generations acknowledged the benefits of living in *Kampungs*, better job opportunity motivates the young generation to leave *Kampungs*. It concludes that *Kampungs* still have the power to sustain the modern society with its powerful social potentials, but needs to be nurtured with modern facilities.

1.   Introduction

Sustainability in traditional *Kampung* architecture is developed through decades of trials and errors through various experiences in their own unique context. While issues on the environmental and economic sustainability of *Kampung* houses have been well documented, the aspect of social sustainability received less attention. Confirmed through statistics, a worrying trend in the decrease of rural *Kampung* population has been observed throughout Malaysia, which is challenging the social sustainability of *Kampungs.* One of the core issues is the problem of rural-urban migration. This situation not only endangers the replication of cultural continuity, and the loss of traditional indigenous knowledge, but also affects agro based economic sector.

2.   Background of Study

2.1   Traditional Malay Village: Kampung

Malaysia's cultural heritage is generally defined by wooden traditional Malay houses within a *Kampung* (village) setting. The organic growth of Malay villages, also known as *Kampung*, is a response to the country's hot and humid tropical climate. Located amidst cool and shady environment surrounded by lush greeneries, *Kampungs* are typically characterized by unpaved paths linking one house with another. These houses flow seamlessly into one another without any distinct boundaries, contributing towards communal living while adequate distance between houses aid in future expansion. Here, it can be said that culture and lifestyle provided a foundation for the planning of houses, contributing towards a close and intimate social relationship amongst *Kampung* communities (Malaysia Site, 2015).

Nevertheless, as human aspiration is growing at an accelerating rate, changes can be seen in lifestyle, livelihood and the links to obtain better living conditions. This causes migration to another place where a better future is anticipated (Chambers and Conway, 1992). According to Smailes (1995), social changes such as population increase through migration, rising personal mobility, falling density of dispersed population (centralization), rationalization, and centralization of both public and private sector services, as well as agricultural restructuring and changes in rural gender roles in rural areas must be solved or at least planned. While considerable efforts are being made to ensure both economic growth and conservation of natural capital in rural areas are maintained, Jones and Tonts (1995) noted that the human needs, or social dimension of sustainability must also be considered if problems faced in rural communities are to be addressed successfully. Hence, social sustainability becomes an issue to be addressed. This thus brings us to the issues of sustainability in *Kampungs*.

2.2 Issues of Sustainability in Kampungs

From a cultural aspect, the application of Malay traditional architecture portrays elements of regional identity while its response to the local climate reflects its ecological aspect (Hidayat, 2012). To further expound on this, the traditional Malay house is environmentally sustainable as it was designed to suit the requirements of local tropical climate using a variety of ventilation and solar control devices, as well as low thermal capacity building materials (Tahir et al, 2005). Use of natural material such as timber, bamboo, leaves, and other materials could be replicable, and also recyclable. Additional mechanical air ventilation is also not required as they utilize passive design strategies, lowering energy consumption. Besides being environmentally friendly, this also helps maintain economic sustainability. For instance, the use of natural materials such as timber and its secondary productions can improve the timber industry within the country while decreasing dependency on imported materials.

While the environmental and economic sustainability of *Kampung* houses has been well documented, the aspect of social sustainability received less attention. Nevertheless, this aspect of sustainability is deemed crucial as Malay *Kampungs* contain socially urban spaces contributing towards close knitted social relationship amongst the community. Yet, through the evolution of time, the lives of *Kampung* residences in contemporary Malaysia are becoming substantially and qualitatively urban (Thompson, 2004). If some unwanted incident occurs, putting forces to the social sustainability of a unit, the last solution can be moving or migrating due to the fact that the society is flexible and will take many ways to protect itself from total disaster (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

2.3 A need for Social Sustainability in Kampungs

From a social stand point, the ability of a community to develop its structures to not only to meet the needs of its current members but also in support of future generations in maintaining a healthy community is known as social sustainability. Social sustainability is the ability to maintain and improve livelihood, while maintaining or enhancing the local and global assets and capabilities on which livelihood depends (Chambers and Conway, 1992). In other words, it refers to whether a human unit (individual, household or family) can not only gain but also maintain an adequate and decent livelihood. The aim of sustainability in society can thus be counted as creation of working days, poverty reduction, wellbeing and capabilities, livelihood adaptation, livelihood vulnerability and resilience, and finally natural resource based sustainability (Scoones, 1998). Hence, sustainable livelihood is a normative concept made up of multiple and sometimes contested elements.

The major role of social elements in sustainability is that it helps increase in living standards against least possible environmental degradation. Social sustainability as defined by McKenzie (2004) is a life enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition. Some of the goals of social sustainability include equity of access to key services, equity between generation, cultural desired, political participation, and awareness of transmitting sense of community and responsibility through generations (ibid).

Coupled with its own unique spaces and considerable functional circulation, the essence of social sustainability is thus visible in the traditional Malay *Kampung* as these spaces also bolster interaction between family members, and potentially promote greater social relationship amongst the *Kampung* community. Nevertheless, the social sustainability aspect of *Kampungs* is being challenged as a worrying trend

in the decrease of rural *Kampung* population that has been observed throughout Malaysia. This concern has been confirmed through statistics.

While the total population of Malaysia has seen as a steady increase with the last recorded data at 29.2 million people in 2012 as compared to 8.2 million in 1960, the annual growth rate of approximately 1.6% measured in 2011 was one of the lowest through the decades. Interestingly, the increase in population was observed in urban areas with the last measured percentage at 72.20% in 2010 with the actual population increasing from 5 million in the '70s to over 20 million in 2010. Contrastingly, according to the World Bank data, based on calculations of differences between total population and urban population, the rural population in Malaysia has seen a decrease in terms of percentage from nearly 70% in the '70s to 27.8% in 2010, with the actual population increased from 7 million to just 7.8 million during these four decades (Trading Economics, 2015).

Based on these trends as observed in the falling rate of population in rural areas and subsequent increase of population in the urban settings, it can be predicted that the population depletion of rural area was caused by migration. According to the Malaysia census report, the percentage of migrants from rural to urban areas in the year 2012 increased compared to the previous year, from 6.4 to 7.5 percent. Based on these results, migration issues may serve as a general topic to be addressed in ensuring social sustainability in *Kampungs*.

2.4 Issues Affecting Social Sustainability: Migration

Migration is the human movement from one place to another, and is seen as one of the main issues influencing many aspects of society both in cities and villages. In recent decades, Malaysia has experienced rapid urban growth due to various reasons ranging from growth of population in urban areas, transformation of rural areas to urban spaces, and also from migration (Masron et al, 2012). Although issues of migration are vast and wide, this paper looked into the issues of rural-urban migration and urban-rural migration.

Rural-urban migration can be described as the main type of migration, and has been discussed by many researches (Williams and Sofranko, 1979; Crow, 2010, and Bijker, 2013). In brief, reasons encouraging people to migrate from rural areas to urban ones include aspiration for quality life, seeking employment, urge for higher studies into higher education institutions, seeking better job opportunities, searching personal freedom etc.

In contrast, urban-rural migration happens when people are driven back to rural areas for reasons such as rural area offering the best environment for bringing up children, fulfilling family ties / responsibilities, retirement (change of life style), obtaining low cost housing, or if rural areas are rich in amenities.

It should be noted that different factors influencing 'young' people's migration are bit different, such as migration for personal development, and these motivational factors may vary in terms of age, gender, family backgrounds, and the likes as noted by Chiang et al (2013). Nevertheless, these issues should be given due attention in order to mitigate various social challenges foreseen to be faced by *Kampungs* in the near future.

2.5 The challenges of Kampung's future

The fast track to modernization and globalization warrants a trend towards uniformity; threatening to sweep the once ubiquitous *Kampung*

houses into oblivion. While the Malaysian urban areas are growing prosperously, the rural hinterlands are generally experiencing declination. References from statistical data shows whereby in 1970s, approximately 70 percent of Malaysia's population were considered rural, as compared to 73 percent of the Malaysian population considered urban today. Hence, the growing divide between the rural-urban divisions within Malaysia should not be overlooked to ensure that the problem of rapid rural-urban migration is substantially alleviated.

Migration of youth to cities is especially significant and it is rooted to incidences of wider entrepreneurial opportunities. High urban wages causing rural-urban migration always have the possibility to create a labor shortage in rural areas. Coupled with the rising cost of petroleum inputs, the production cost for food has increased tremendously, making food production in rural areas uncompetitive. On the other hand, no development has being undertaken to show appreciation of the rural ecosystems in line with the concept of sustainability in general.

Changes in lifestyle in *Kampungs* and consumer desire for fast, canned and processed food have replaced native agricultural products. This situation is not only endangering the replication of cultural continuity and the loss of traditional indigenous knowledge, but also affecting job opportunities for farmers which had fallen to its lowest causing economic problems, and disrupting the livelihood of rural communities. The issue at hand is critical as self-reliance is the most distinguished characteristic of rural communities.

Acknowledging this major challenge faced, Malaysian researchers are urged to step out into the *Kampung* communities to explore solutions that are able to enrich society as a whole. There is still a wide opportunity to protect rural communities along with their vibrant cultural traditions in a call to promote self-sufficiency and aid in sustaining communities to ensure that indigenous knowledge and skills are able to withstand economic and social downturns. In line with sustainable development, ensuring the continuity of *Kampungs* and its social cohesiveness are rudimentary solutions for Malaysia to take in ensuring that these communities which have been part of the rich Malaysian cultural landscape thrives and are accepted through the decades and centuries to come. In emphasis, the rural communities as a legacy of Malaysia's culture must be preserved, if it is to survive the passage of time (Ernawati et. al., 2014).

2.6   Advantages and disadvantages of living in rural area

Modern society and cities have been formed by the demand of new and modern technologies anticipated by people living in the cities. Modern lifestyle coupled with glorious living in luxurious accommodations, in brief, westernization, was the symbol of progress in the last century. If people were to ask to select between living in rural or urban areas 50 years ago, a majority would vote in favour of urban settings. These demand in lifestyle caused rural areas to be replaced or transformed into urban and small cities, attracting the population which grew bigger in each city. Nevertheless, many things have changed today. Villages are no longer unreachable and far from urban settings. In fact, with the onset of new technologies and efficient transportation system, villages are now closer to cities. Facilities and infrastructure in rural areas have also improved unlike the past.

Besides discussing on issues regarding motivation of migration into and out to rural areas, Crow (2010) mentioned that in recent years, the number of people moving into rural areas are higher than those moving out in Scotland. It has been said that besides the first generation that are returning to the villages for retirement, continuous development in technologies is expected to drive young people back to villages. Also,

limited energy usage leads communities to rethink rural living as the use of renewable energies and traditional activities are able to mitigate energy issues (Kammen, 2013).

3.   Methods

While enquiring on social sustainability issues in *Kampungs*, this study adopted a qualitative approach. Respondents from three different generations were selected through conditional sampling from *Kampungs* that were selected randomly. Open ended interviews were conducted by carefully selected participants who were members of the community, and hence the approach reflected ethnographic method (Spradley, 1980). The extensive and in-depth interviews complemented for the limited number of respondents as suggested by qualitative researchers (Glesne, 2010).

The participants were current dwellers selected from *Kampungs*. The interviewers were the key for this study. Sufficient experience on *Kampung* was the pre-condition to select them. Once they were selected, their *Kampungs* automatically became the selected Kampung for the study. The interviewers were then asked to question three different generations of participants consisted of; (1) (>60 years old) first generation who were born and lived in the *Kampung*; (2) (40-60 years old) second generation who were born and lived in the *Kampung* but have limited experience in living in urban areas; and (3) (20-40 years old) third generation who were born in *Kampung*, but have more experience in living in urban areas. The younger generation consisting of those below 20 years old were not considered as these individual's experiences were assumed to be inadequate in generating and influencing genuine decisions of migration.

Informal interview with open ended questions was conducted among the participants in their natural settings, within their *Kampungs*. They were selected through conditional sampling method with the conditions stated above. A sample group which consisted of five individuals from different predetermined generations was selected.

In the interview, questions were set up to obtain an image of past, present and future issues affecting social sustainability in *Kampung* communities. The participants were asked about a range of positive and negative issues related to social sustainability. However, to avoid skewed perception, all components of sustainability such as social, environmental, economic and physical aspects within the *Kampung* was touched. As the focus of the research was on social aspects, the majority of questions asked were regarding social sustainability. The interviews were conducted three times using the same set of interview questions on the same sample group on three separate visits for reasons of comparability and to verify the answers, and to validate the findings. After the interviews, the responses were transcribed and categorized based on the participant's age group for analysis. Data were analyzed based on similarities and differences of the participant's opinion.

4.   Responses on different components of Sustainability

The responses were summarized under four components of sustainability. Besides the major three pillars, physical factors such as urban development and infrastructure facilities were also considered, as they may not fall directly under any of the three major pillars, but are inevitable components of built environment.

4.1 Increasing Physical Advantages

The first one was their view on the physical components of sustainability in *Kampungs*. Almost all the participants from all generations agreed that the facilities such as transport, shopping, education, and health/clinic are now adequate and to some extent cheaper than in cities. Nevertheless, these facilities were incomparable with the urban ones in terms of standards, but they were undoubtedly able to facilitate the *Kampung* dwellers. Figure 1 shows a glimpse of a modern *Kampung* House with almost all facilities as in urban setup.

Figure 1: *A Kampung House with modern facilities (Credit: Hamiza binti Ahmad Tajuddin)*

4.2 Economic Benefit

All participants were found to have the same view that living in *Kampungs* was economically more advantageous and preferable. The first generation (60 years and above) and second generation (40-60 years old) mentioned that agricultural benefits of *Kampung* living such as gardening and fishery, as experienced in the past and continuing today, can economically help family to reduce expenditure in the future. The third generation (20-40 years old), however, did not mention on matters pertaining to agriculture and fishery, but had the same view as other generations with regards to low cost of living in the *Kampung*. The third generation generally planned to move to urban areas for opportunities in obtaining better job prospects and making more money even though they were aware of the higher cost of living in urban areas.

4.3 Environmental Advantages

Environmental aspect of sustainability and housing environment were asked with questions prompted towards nature, pollution and the likes. All participants gave a unanimous response citing fresh air and water as the most significant aspect of living in *Kampungs.* In addition, the second and third generations (40-60 and 20-40 years old) mentioned that having beautiful natural views in rural area encouraged them to remain in *Kampungs* mitigating forces motivating them to leave.

4.4 Social Sustainability

This was the major part of the interview. Questions regarding social sustainability enquired into issues of *Kampung* community, their behavior as well as relationship and privacy matters. The first generation (60 years and above) emphasized neighborhood spirit as the most important

element in *Kampungs*, which they hoped will proceed into the future. They stated that the community are respectful and have responsible behavior by helping each other (for example, *gotong-royong*, or traditionally assisting neighbors in festive way for cleaning, building, or just helping in various ways) in various aspects of work and life by encouraging cooperation and collaboration, more so during festivals and ceremonies. The second generation (40-60 years old) specially mentioned about looking after each other, a general characteristic of *Kampung* living that makes the community bond very tight and impermeable. Like the first generation, they also mentioned the getting together between *Kampung* communities in completing house chores amongst the women and on special festivals and ceremonies such as *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* (celebration for the Muslims on the first month of lunar month Shawaal that comes after one month of fasting during the month of Ramadan) or weddings.

However, the third generation (20-40 years old) was found to have slightly differing view from the previous two generations. Though they had the same view as the other generations which emphasized that the advantages of living in *Kampung* ensures close family relationship, and a cooperating life with other members of the community, however, a common issue brought up by the third generation was the lack of job opportunity that drives them to plan to abandon *Kampungs* at some point in future. They also mentioned that the lack of appropriate job opportunities in rural area might be the cause for problems with drugs among younger generation.

However, they also mentioned that these problems in the rural area were similar to those in urban areas. Drugs and other social abnormality especially among teenagers was said to be not very different in both rural and urban area. According to them, there may be a considerable difference between social problems in rural and urban area in the past but they are generally similar now, and they predicted that this trend will continue into the future. On another issue, the younger generation viewed that telecommunication nowadays can be used instead of face to face relation in the rural areas, and that is changing the pattern of social interaction significantly. Of course, as they mentioned, it is not a problem that is only faced in rural areas. Urban areas are also prone to this problem. The summary of the findings were shown in Table 1.

The view of the respondents were also structured down further and were summarized under the three time phases such as past, present and future, in order to give the reader to sense continuity if there is any (Table 2).

5. Findings

Based on the responses, several findings emerged. They were discussed under the fours components of sustainability as in the previous section, with more importance given to the social component. The reason behind discussing all of the components is that social component of sustainability is not an isolated phenomenon, and the responses of the open ended interviews helped to create inter-link among them.

5.1 Increasing physical facilities are definitely an advantage to hold the people in Kampungs

It can be said that in oppose to the past, where the lack of facilities pushed people to leave the *Kampungs*, nowadays the people are often satisfied with the provided facilities. Hence, the developing and growing facilities should not be considered as a disadvantage to *Kampung* living. In advent of globalization, modern technologies will

Table 1: Responses on Components of Sustainability

Generations	Social aspects	Physical aspects	Economic aspects	Environmental aspects
First: above 60 years old	• Neighborhood spirit • Cooperating • Collaborating	Enough facilities and infrastructure	Self sufficiency by agriculture and fishery	• Fresh air • Fresh water • Less pollution
Second: 40-60 years old	• Looking after each other • Getting together	Enough facilities and infrastructure	Possibility of sustained self sufficiency by agriculture and fishery, but not yet achieved	• Fresh air • Fresh water • Less pollution
Third: 20-40 years old	• Community bonding • Never ending relationships • Helping each other	Facilities and infrastructure are better than past but still not enough	Lack of appropriate job opportunities	• Fresh air • Fresh water • Less pollution • Beautiful views

continue to contribute to the rural area in terms of physical aspects, making all components of sustainability achievable.

5.2 Reduced Economic Benefit for Younger Generations

Although the first and second generation mentioned about opportunities in agriculture and fisheries, the third generation (20-40 years old) however did not mention on matters pertaining those two economic means. This may be because they have less experience in those areas. Most of them are going for higher education, and therefore have spent less time on these fields. This later generation also mentioned the lack of job opportunities in the *Kampung*, causing them to be interested in migrating to urban areas. While they become more aware about different job openings through media and tele-communication, it seems inevitable that they would look for more varieties in jobs rather than only the agro based ones. This aspect definitely worth more inquiry in order to link up agro based jobs with various other related modern jobs

in order to give the younger generation more choice to stay within *Kampungs* and help the *Kampung* lifestyle self-sustainable.

5.3 Environmental Advantages remain as major attraction

One of the main advantages cited by the respondents was that of environmental benefit as there was unanimous reply on *Kampung* environment being less polluted compared to urban areas. The traditional houses are also environmentally friendly, even though less 'green' elements is being used in the construction of the houses these days. Together, this makes environmental factor a major advantage for considerations to live in *Kampungs* and thus contributes to the social component of sustainability.

5.4 Social Sustainability and availability of jobs for the youth

The *Kampung* community in general are a close knit one, whereby the altruistic behavior of the community supports harmonious living. They

Table 2: *Views from respondents on sustainability components along time line*

Generations	Sustainability aspects	Past	Present	Future
First: (60 years old and above)	Social	Neighborhood spirit, Cooperation, Collaboration	The same as past	Going to lose
	Physical	Lack of facilities	High development	More development
	Economic	Self sufficiency	Increase in living cost	Living cost will increase
	Environmental	Fresh air and water	Some pollution	More pollution
Second: (40-60 years old)	Social	Getting together, Taking Care	Stronger than past	Should continue
	Physical	Lack of facilities	Adequate development	More development
	Economic	Self sufficiency	Increase in living cost	Living cost will increase
	Environmental	Fresh air and water	Some pollution	More pollution
Third: (20-40 years old)	Social	Community Bonding, Privacy	Stronger than past	Should continue
	Physical	Lack of facilities	Not enough yet	Will develop
	Economic	Self sufficiency	Increase in living cost	Living cost will increase
	Environmental	Fresh air and water	Some pollution	More pollution

maintain community spirit by helping one another cooperatively and collaboratively in both their private and work related issues. The gathering of the community to attend to even small matters help them to stay aware of their neighbor's predicaments which in a sense promoted community responsibility. The matter on migration to urban areas due to better job opportunities is crucial as technology today is able to ensure contact with family members living in *Kampungs*. But the question remains that whether technology is able to compensate for the sense of inclusion with the family if the members are physically far away. This can be studied in a separate research.

Next, although social problems within the *Kampung* were not highlighted in the majority of views of the respondents, it is still worthy to be discussed. Nowadays, although living in *Kampungs* brings in its advantageous traditional set of social characteristics, conceding that economic, physical and environmental aspects have some difference with tradition, forces from other realms have great influences on social sustainability. For example, in terms of economic aspect, as wider job opportunities are available in urban areas, this factor will motivate young members of the society to migrate from *Kampungs* to urban areas. Moreover, the asymmetrical development between urban and rural areas remains one of the main factors contributing to rural-urban migration especially for the younger generation. Although there are benefits living there, the future of living in *Kampung* still can remain uncertain. Societal trends showing that the younger generation is migrating away from the *Kampung* despite the advantages from the other components of sustainability. Nevertheless, it can be explained that the advantages of living in *Kampungs* refer directly to the social, environmental, and partially, physical aspect in terms of facilities, while the disadvantages of living there include only the economic setbacks, and the imbalanced rural-urban growth. Hence, the social sustainability of *Kampungs* can be said to be dependent on the planned restructuring of economic regeneration around the *Kampungs*, with a more balanced rural-urban proportion, and only that can bring in the complete sustainability acceptable by the younger generations of *Kampung* community. The findings can be summarized in Table 3.

6.   Conclusion

To summarize, social sustainability in *Kampung* communities is rooted in tradition, which was derived through the history of a dweller's experiences through trial and error and adopted by the people who lived there. Although some forces such as economic and urban developmental pressures are threatening the *Kampung*'s social sustainability, with advantages in social cohesiveness and positive environmental aspects, the social sustainability of *Kampungs* can still be protected. Social issues such as strong family bonds, neighborhood spirit, and cohesion undoubtedly can construct a stronger foundation to leverage the society into achieving social sustainability.

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Table 3:   *Summary of Findings*

Sustainability	Status	Details	Conclusion
Social aspect	Advantages	Family bonding, neighborhood spirit, cooperating, collaborating, looking after each other, getting together	Sustainable, if migration issue be solved
	Disadvantages	Migration for job opportunity	
Physical aspect	Advantages	Facilities are adequate and going to be better	Sustainable, if the proportion of rural-urban growth can be controlled
	Disadvantages	Rural-urban growth is disproportional	
Economic aspect	Advantages	Living in Kampung is economically preferred	Can sustain if job opportunity can be provided
	Disadvantages	Job opportunity is low in Kampungs	
Environmental aspect	Advantages	Fresh air and water, natural resources	Sustainable
	Disadvantages	-	

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