

Asian cities at the crossroads

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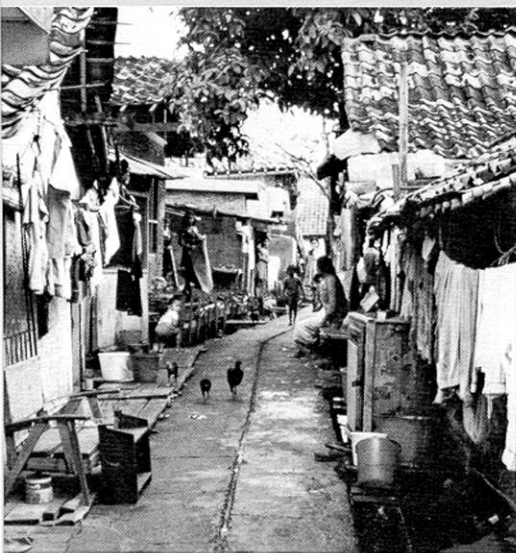


Photo: Neill McKee

On the periphery in Jakarta, Indonesia:
80 percent of residents are outside the
reach of basic urban services.

Southeast Asia is not only characterized by an overall low level of urbanization, but also by a high degree of primacy — the largest or primate cities are many times the size of the next largest in rank. The increase in urban population has been outstripping the growth of the population as a whole. It is estimated that the urban population of Southeast Asia will double in slightly over 14 years, and according to one projection, its urban population of 60 million in 1970 will triple by the year 2000. Whereas one in five persons in the region lived in cities in 1970, one-third of the population will live there by the end of the century.

Within the urban sector the saliency of the primate cities is readily apparent, and although the rate of population increase in some of these cities has slowed down in the decade 1960-1970, the growth rates of most capital cities are still too rapid for the comfort of planners and administrators.

It is the urban environment of these primate cities that poses the greatest challenge to city administrations: providing enough jobs, decent housing, basic infrastructure, free-flowing traffic, and ideally, the machinery to transmit positive growth-generating impulses down the urban hierarchy and to the countryside. The urban environment has been visibly deteriorating, in some cases to such an extent that an urban crisis is at hand.

Many metropolitan governments in Southeast Asia are faced with an urban challenge of unprecedented proportions. Urbanization in the region, as in many parts of the developing world, has been racing ahead of industrialization and economic growth. Yet, an urban transformation cannot be said to have occurred. The economic structure in many countries is little modified from the traditional in which the highest proportion of the labour force is engaged in agriculture. Despite limited progress in grain output associated with the Green Revolution, the remarkable upsurge in agricultural productivity that accompanied the urban transformation of the developed countries is nowhere in sight. In the cities, there has been only a limited reorientation of the urban economy toward manufacturing industries. The combined result of the lack of basic changes in the economy is the persistence of relatively low annual per capita gross national products. As a consequence, urban functions are increasingly involuted, and dualistic economies, symptomatic of underdevelopment at large, are prevalent. Unemployment and underemployment are becoming major developmental and social problems confronting city governments.

Yet urban growth and urbanization continue to gain pace through considerable rural-urban migration and natural increase. The population dynamics of the region may be termed a combina-

tion of pre-industrial fertility and post-industrial mortality. Cityward migration has also been triggered by war-related factors. In a different context, under the Second Malaysia plan, *bumiputras* (indigenous peoples) have been encouraged to move into cities.

A consequence of government-induced rural-urban migration is the challenge posed, in varying degrees, to city governments in mediating among ethnic, religious and cultural differences inherited from a pattern of colonial development. In both the precolonial and colonial city, ethnic segregation was practiced so that people of the same ethnic group but of varying socioeconomic backgrounds tended to live in close proximity. Under the impact of modernization and urbanization, residential location and occupational specialization with ethnic affiliation has been weakened. Social class, denoted by income, wealth and occupation has gradually become a new criterion for residential separation. If this is so, it is clear that profound changes are taking place in the spatial organization and urban ecology of Southeast Asian cities. City governments will have to alert themselves to potential conflict based on class lines.

As a heightened sense of social justice is developed amongst the proletariat and the urban poor, the question of growth and equity has to be faced. The prevailing trend in many of the large cities is an ever-widening chasm between the urban rich and the urban poor. Additionally, the wide relationship between city and countryside has to be reviewed critically since growing urban-rural imbalance may lead to the demise of the cities themselves.

The challenge faced by many urban governments is how to keep the city economically vibrant, physically functional, and growing in an orderly manner. Viewed against the general background of a plural society, persistent dualism, widespread poverty, a teeming population, a labour explosion, a sluggish economic transition and minuscule budgets, the challenge is indeed enormous. With the exception of Singapore, almost every national and metropolitan government has to devise means and incentives to hold the farmers on the land so that any incremental urban improvement has a chance to be felt, and a balanced national development strategy can be maintained.

It is the design of indigenous solutions to the urban problems that ultimately hold the key to success. Within the past ten years, at least five distinct approaches have been tried with varying degrees of success. In Jakarta, for example, where 80 percent of the residents are outside the reach of basic services, the governor declared the city "closed" to jobless settlers in 1970. Evidence of employment and housing must be shown before a residence permit is obtained, and the cost of the return

fare to their point of origin must be deposited for six months. The results have been mixed: some suggest that in-migration has not slowed down, and others that the high price attached to the residence card has contributed to bribery and corruption.

Manila's approach has been to create a Commission grouping the metropolitan area's 28 separate administrative districts — the first time city services and resources have been integrated. Bangkok is pursuing plans to decentralize, locating industries and accommodation beyond the city. Universities are also relocating to peri-urban areas, and satellite communities are being planned. Policies to encourage regional growth and reduce rural migration to Bangkok are largely fragmented, however, and show only limited results.

Malaysia's cities face different problems because of the imbalance between the *bumiputras* and the immigrant groups. Of the total urban population in 1970, Malays made up about one-quarter and their share of property ownership was disproportionately lower than their share of the population. In the aftermath of the 1969 racial conflict, the Second Malaysia Plan set out to reduce poverty by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians. It also aimed to restructure society by reducing and eventually eliminating identification of ethnic groups with economic activities.

Singapore as a city state has taken some bold and innovative measures. Two recent policies adopted in Singapore have potential application to other countries. These are the introduction of a battery of economic disincentives aimed at attaining zero population growth, and the use of a multiplicity of tax and fiscal measures in an effort to curb private automobile ownership.

Despite these measures, most of the primate cities in Southeast Asia will become gargantuan agglomerations of 10 million or more inhabitants by the end of the century. If the beginnings of a workable solution are not soon found, the prospects for the cities cannot be but grim. To meet the problem squarely, the cities need to be designed for the poor rather than follow the prevailing mode, adopted from the industrialized countries, of fitting the poor into cities basically designed for the moderately wealthy and the rich. Urban Southeast Asia is at the crossroads. One road leads to relative hope, the other to despair. It is vital that the right decisions are made at this time. □

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Paving the way for low-cost transportation

Rowan Shirkie

Urban transportation and urban growth go hand in hand. And while only about one-quarter of the developing world population is urban, typically nearly half the national output is produced in towns and cities.

Transportation in cities and towns is essential in maintaining the necessary concentrations of workforce and production units. Transport facilities expand employment opportunities, and give access to health, education, and other social services that are often only available in urban areas where the numbers of people make them more economical.

These are the basic essential purposes of urban transportation. But in fact, people make the most use of urban transport — and spend more money on personal travel — for additional comfort, convenience, and time saved over and above the "bare necessities" of transport.

In developing countries, public transport cannot cope with the growing demands. The level of service and area of coverage is inadequate, and a large portion of the travelling public is too poor to afford any but the least costly means of movement.

Enter the *becak*, jeepney, *samlor*, *silor*, and *dolmus*. These are the thousands of small-engine or muscle-powered vehicles that zip, buzz, and glide through busy streets in Asia. In most cases they are the ingenious adaptations of existing types of transport. The Indonesian *becak* is a muscle-powered tricycle that can carry two passengers, the jeepney, a remodelled (and usually brightly



Photo: Neill McKee

A samlor pedicab in Thailand. Is there a place for such low cost transportation in growing cities?