



DR AHMAD IBRAHIM

SMART CITY

CONCEPT WILL BOOST GROWTH FOR ASEAN

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ASK anybody where they would prefer to live, and my guess would be that many would opt for city living.

This is especially true in the developing economies where there is still a difference between city and village life. In the more developed countries though, the preference for city life is not as strong.

In fact, increasingly many in the developed west are attracted to living in the country where life is more laid back, instead of enduring the urban chaos. It is the opposite in the developing world where rural urban migration is rampant. The result is a bloated urban population crowding the limited city services.

This phenomenon is very much evident in many of the Asean cities. Nowadays, more than 50 per cent of the global population reside in cities.

Many cities still struggle to cope with the high population pressures. Bangkok used to be a nightmare for travellers. I still remember visiting Bangkok in the 1980s and 1990s. The traffic congestions were so bad then that some meetings were held in cars or vans which have been modified into meeting rooms. Travelling to meetings and appointments had to be well planned in order to beat the jams. Lately, though, the situation has improved with the construction and operation of an efficient urban rail network.

However, the same cannot be said for Jakarta. There, the traffic jams, or "macet" in the Indonesian jargon, remain challenging. It is much worse when it rains. A journey which normally takes 30 minutes can take more



Kuala Lumpur is among the 26 cities in the region for the Asean Smart Cities Network. FILE PIC

than twice of that. Since the train system is still under construction, most commuters would use the back lanes or "jalan tikus" to cut travel times. Some use the motorcycle public transport, also known as "gojek" to beat the jams.

Kuala Lumpur, which hosts relatively smaller number of people than both Bangkok and Jakarta, used to endure similar difficulties. But now, with the operation of a good system of rail network, there is comparatively much less congestion.

Traffic congestion is not the only pain of city living. Dealing with the vast amount of wastes is also problematic in big cities. The indiscriminate throwing of rubbish remains unresolved in crowded cities. This gives rise to serious environmental pollution, not only of the waterways but also the air. Air pollution arising from the exhausts of cars and other transport has also become a serious health hazard in cities. This explains why electric vehicles have become more preferred. All such happenings contribute to the generally low quality of city life. However, despite the nega-

tive characteristics, people still rush to live in the cities, mainly because of better job opportunities and more modern facilities for recreation.

And, this is why the idea of smart cities has caught on. The concept started in the developed west where smart cities have made good progress.

A smart city incorporates information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance the quality and performance of urban services such as energy, transportation and utilities in order to reduce resource consumption, wastage and overall costs. The overarching aim of a smart city is to enhance the quality of living for its citizens through smart technology.

In Germany, the Fraunhofer Research Network has perfected the technologies for a smart city design. Now, Asia is seen taking the initial steps to make their highly populated cities smarter. The heavily populated countries of India and China have made pronouncements to transform their cities, some of which have become badly polluted, into smart cities to reduce the envi-

ronmental hazards.

Asean countries also do not want to be left out of this new craze. Twenty-six cities from the 10 Asean countries have been named pilot cities for the Asean Smart Cities Network, according to a concept note released recently by the Asean Secretariat. Kuala Lumpur is on the list.

The concept note, which was released as leaders from the 10 countries recently met in Singapore for the 32nd Asean Summit, has outlined the proposal to establish the Asean Smart Cities Network.

An initiative spearheaded by Singapore, the network is envisioned as a collaborative platform where up to three cities per Asean country work towards a common goal of smart and sustainable urban development. This would augur well for Asean as the group prepares to be among the more successful regional groupings of the world!

ahmad.ibrahim@akademisains.gov.my

The writer is a fellow at the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, UCESI University, Kuala Lumpur

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