Change In Rural Malaysia In A Global Context

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades Malaysia has ceased to be considered a ‘developing’ country and has experienced notable economic growth and reduction in poverty. We consider the extent to which three categories of change discussed in the literature – post-productivism, de-agrarianisation and what many refer to as the New Rural Development Paradigm – may usefully be applied to the changes encountered in rural Malaysia. Time series studies suggest that improvements in transportation have facilitated a diversification of household livelihoods. Tourism has increased, including both urban Malaysians and overseas visitors and has provided opportunities for rural communities. New crops such as vegetables and flowers have become important to satisfy demand in rapidly-growing cities, and also localised produce. The consumption of the countryside has stimulated homestays, conference centres and golf courses. Comparable studies elsewhere in South-East and East Asia suggest that some of these trends occur elsewhere but national and regional variations need further study.

Keywords: rural change; post-productivism; innovations

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid economic development of Malaysia since 1970 has stimulated changes in both rural and urban areas. While agriculture comprised more than 20 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 1985, by 2007 it had dropped to 9 per cent and the rapid rate of economic growth was associated principally with manufacturing and services. National poverty rates fell from 49 per cent to less than 5 per cent between 1970 and 2007 (UNDP 2007, ii) although there remain relatively large numbers of poor households in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu - as
well as in both states in East Malaysia (UNDP 2007, p. 79). Demographic changes between 1970 and 2000 in Malaysia saw the proportion of the population living in urban areas increase from 27 per cent to 62 per cent and the most striking improvements in quality of life have been in urban areas (UNDP, 2007; Jamaliah, 2004). The nature of change in rural areas is complex since some of the most important commercial agricultural products are produced on plantations rather than on smallholdings and rural households have become increasingly involved in a wider range of activities than farming. Change in rural areas inevitable reflects not only economic opportunities but also social and cultural changes that are the result of greater awareness of urban lifestyles, in part a consequence of increasing access to new communication technologies. Each new generation therefore has different expectations and desires which drive change.

Debates about the nature of changes affecting people and communities in rural areas in different world regions in recent decades have focussed broadly on three ideas. The rise of post-productivism implies less-intensive farming relying less on chemical inputs and the reduced use of high-yielding varieties of both plants and livestock. De-agrarianisation implies more diversified rural livelihoods with often less dependence on farming. Lastly, the emergence of what, in Europe, is referred to as the new rural development paradigm includes less-intensive production of higher-value commodities, often associated with a specified locality or region (often legally-defined) and sold through shorter supply chains. In this paper we will review the range of changes that have affected rural communities in Malaysia in recent decades in the context of rapid urban and industrial development. Much of the debate about rural change in Southeast and East Asia has made little reference to Malaysia, in part because of the lack of relevant published research during the past two decades. It is therefore particularly necessary to consider the extent to which changes in rural Malaysia are comparable to those occurring elsewhere in Southeast and East Asia. These changes may then be related to the continuing debates about changes in the nature of farming and rural livelihoods in a broader world regional context. In conclusion, we shall consider whether future changes in Malaysian rural communities may incorporate more of the components of the new rural development paradigm or whether distinctive elements in contemporary changes in Malaysia reflect the nature of the nation and the distinctive regions within it.