Overview of Internal Migration in Malaysia
Malaysia Context

- Malaysia’s total population, as recorded by UNESCAP in 2016, stands at over 30 million.
- Malaysia is entering a demographic age transition. It has one of the lowest total fertility rates in Southeast Asia (2.0) and a population growth rate of 1.4 (ibid.). The population aged under 15 is expected to decrease from 27.4% in 2010 to 19.6% in 2040 while the elderly (aged 65 and above) will more than double within the next three decades (Department of Statistics 2012).
- Among non-city states in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is the most urbanized, with 75.2% of its population living in urban areas (UNESCAP 2016).
- Internal migration has contributed greatly to the restructuring of society. In 1996, 25% of workers were employed in agriculture, declining to 11.1% in 2012, while over the same period the proportion of workers employed in services and manufacturing increased from 47.3% and 19.9% to 53.6% and 28.9% respectively. The overall poverty rate has also declined from 16.5% on 1990 to 3.8% in 2008, with poverty rates in rural areas decreasing from 58.7% in 1970 to 11% in 2002. (Tey 2014).
The 2016 Migration Survey estimated that for the period of 2015-2016, only 2.0% of Malaysians aged one year and over migrated, a 20.6% decrease in the number of migrating individuals from 2014-2015 (Department of Statistics 2017a).

From 2015-2016 internal migration constituted 88.7% of all migration in Malaysia (63.9% intra-state and 24.8% inter-state), while international migration made up the remaining 11.3% (ibid.).

Approximately one-fifth of persons enumerated in the 1991 and 2000 population censuses were living outside their state of birth, though this figure probably represents an under-estimate given that it excludes return migrants. About half of the population in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur were born in other states. In contrast, less than 5% of the population in Kelantan and Sabah and Sarawak were born in other states (Tey 2014). This indicates that internal migration is more prevalent than international migration, since total international migrant stock (immigrants to and from Malaysia) was just over 3.9 million in 2017 (UNDESA 2017).

In 2015-2016 internal migration in Malaysia was primarily urban-urban (73.6%). Urban-rural migration constitutes 15.2% of all internal migration, while the percentages of rural-rural and rural-urban migration are 7.0% and 4.2% respectively (Department of Statistics 2017a). These numbers are the culmination of a trend of increasing urban-to-urban migration and decreasing rural-rural and rural-urban migration; in 2011 urban-urban migration constituted only 58.5% of all internal migration (Department of Statistics 2011).

High urban-urban migration and low rural-urban movement make Malaysia unique among the nations surveyed here. This feature of Malaysian internal migration has been observed since the 1991 and 2000 National Censuses, and is at least partly attributable to the rapid growth of urban centres and the reclassification of previously rural areas as urban centres (Jali 2009).

The main migration suppliers are Kuala Lumpur and Perak, while the main destinations for migrants are Selangor, Pulau Pinang, and Johor (Department of Statistics 2017a). The particularly high outflows from Kuala Lumpur and inflows into Selangor can be accounted for by the fact that Kuala Lumpur is enclaved within Selangor state, and has a very high population density of about 6,890/km² (Department of Statistics 2017b). Pushed by factors such as rising house prices (Knight Frank 2016) and high costs of living, and attracted by the availability of new residential

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1 The migration survey uses a highly restrictive definition of migrant, focusing on flows rather than stocks. A migrant is any person whose locality of usual residence has been different at any two points of time within the period of a single year. The survey hence only captures a snapshot of movement within the period of a single year: long-term migrants are effectively excluded. To illustrate the implications of this definition, if three consecutive surveys all report migration rates of 2%, this might indicate anywhere between a 2% migration rate (if all migrants are repeat yearly migrants), or a 6% migration rate (if there are no repeat migrants).

2 It should be noted that this figure excludes migrants from Malaysia to other countries.
areas outside Kuala Lumpur (Rashid et al 2014), migrants are moving out of Kuala Lumpur into the surrounding Klang Valley, a conurbation that is one of the fastest-developing in the world in the (Knight Frank 2017; Rashid et al 2014).

- Pull factors attracting migrants to the Klang Valley include rapid industrialisation in Selangor (where a third of manufacturing projects in 2001-2005 were located), the region's status as federal capital as well as commercial and educational hub (28.3% of all jobs in 2000 were located in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor while most tertiary institutions are located in the Klang Valley), its better developed infrastructure and amenities such as roads and entertainment services, and its central location (Tey 2014).

Migrants’ Characteristics

- From 2015-2016, men represented 51.9% of internal migrant flows (Department of Statistics 2017a). This number has remained constant in recent years: in 2014-2015 men represented 51.7% of internal migrant flows (Department of Statistics 2016).

- Migrants tend to be young: 21% are aged 1-14, 26.1% 15-24, and 34.8% 25-34 (Department of Statistics 2017a).

- Malays are the primary migratory ethnic community. This has led to a shift in the ethnic composition of the urban population, as the Chinese share has decreased from 55.5% in 1970 to nearly 29% in 2010 (part of this decline is also due to their lower fertility rate), while the Malay share has risen from 27.6% to 47% (Tey 2014).

- Internal migrants are better-educated than their non-migrant counterparts. 36.9% of internal migrants have tertiary education, compared to only 27.3% of non-migrants (Department of Statistics 2017a).

- Migrants to the Klang Valley are likely to be better educated. Half of Chinese migrants, 45% of Malays and 30% of Indians have received tertiary education (Tey 2014).

- In contrast to trends in other countries, internal migrants are more likely than non-migrants to be married (61.9% compared to 55.3% respectively), corroborating data which suggest that a large proportion of internal migrants move for family-related reasons (Department of Statistics 2017a).

3 Also known as Greater Kuala Lumpur or the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area, this region was established in 1973 in response to a regional planning study (Shankland et al 1973), and comprises urban areas that have merged through expansion and growth with Kuala Lumpur to form a continuous metropolitan area. The Klang Valley encompasses cities such as Ampang Jaya, Cyberjaya, Klang, Petaling Jaya, Rawang, Shah Alam, and Subang Jaya.

4 Note that these figures were calculated from 2% sample data from various censuses and surveys.
• Internal migrants in Malaysia consider following family the primary reason for migration (46.5%), followed by environment (21.6%), career (21.4%), marriage/divorce (5.7%), education (3.7%), and other reasons (1.1%). Males are more likely to migrate for career purposes and females to follow family or for marriage (ibid.). These numbers are very similar for the period 2014-2015 (Department of Statistics 2016).

Working and Living Conditions in the New Setting

• Migrants participate in the labour market more than non-migrants. Their labour force participation rate is 76.7%, compared to 67.8% for non-migrants (Department of statistics 2017a). These participation rates have been similar since 2009-2010 (Department of Statistics 2011).

• Male migrants are more likely to work than female migrants. 88.8% of male migrants participate in the labour market, compared to 63.7% of female migrants (Department of Statistics 2017a). While the rate of male migration participation in the labour market has remained relatively consistent across time, the rate of female migrant participation in the labour market has increased significantly, since it was only 50.4% in 2009-2010 (Department of Statistics 2011).

• Of those employed, 1.3% of internal migrants consider themselves employers, 84.3% employees, 12.2% own account workers, and 2.2% unpaid family workers. The comparable percentages for non-migrants are 3.4%, 74.3%, 17.9% and 4.5% respectively (Department of Statistics 2017a).

• Most internal migrants work in the service industry (63.3%), consistent with the trend of high urban-urban migration and Malaysia’s relatively developed economy. 17.1% work in manufacturing, 12.0% in construction, 6.6% in agriculture, and 1.1% in mining and quarrying (ibid.).

• Consistent with Malaysia’s pattern of relatively well-educated and urban internal migrants, 36.2% of internal migrants in 2015-2016 were skilled workers, 49.5% semi-skilled workers, and 14.3% were low-skilled workers (ibid.).

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5 This refers to a person who operates his own farm, business or trade without employing any paid workers in the conduct of his farm, trade or business.
6 Managers, professionals/associate professionals, and technicians.
7 Clerical support workers, service and sales workers, skilled agricultural, livestock, forestry, and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, and plant and machine operators/assemblers.
8 Elementary occupations such as cleaners and helpers, mining, construction, manufacturing labourers, food preparation assistants, street workers, and refuse workers.
Some research has suggested tensions between Peninsular Malaysians who move to East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and indigenous peoples of East Malaysia\(^9\) due to indigenous peoples’ fears of cultural erosion, economic marginalization, and loss of political power (Sadiq 2009), but no study has been carried out to fully assess the scale of these tensions. Official migration data do not differentiate between Malays and other indigenous groups, which are all classed as “Bumiputera”\(^10\).

### The Impact of Internal Migration on Those Who Stay Behind

Little attention has been paid to the impact of internal migration on those who stay behind.

Given the large proportion of migrants who move to follow family, the dominance of urban-urban migration and the fact that 23.6% of migrants in 2015-2016 were aged 1-14 (Department of Statistics 2017), a percentage that has remained relatively constant since 2009-2010 (Department of Statistics 2011), it is likely that many recent migrants have brought children with them to their new destination. However, this can only be confirmed with more disaggregated data on reasons for movement, or specific studies on those who stay.

### References


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\(^9\) In particular, the non-Malay Khazadandusun and Murut communities.

\(^10\) Literally “Son of the Land”, referring to Malay Muslims and other indigenous ethnic groups in Malaysia.


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This brief is part of a series of Policy Briefs on Internal Migration in Southeast Asia jointly produced by UNESCO, UNDP, IOM, and UN-Habitat. These briefs are part of an initiative aimed at researching and responding to internal migration in the region. The full set of briefs can be found at http://bangkok.unesco.org/content/policy-briefs-internal-migration-southeast-asia