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## A Glimpse of the Future Social Democratic Policies in Selangor

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In 2008, the Malaysian state of Selangor voted out the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front) coalition for the first time since independence in 1957. After the elections, the three main opposition parties—Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR, People's Justice Party) and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS, Malaysian Islamic Party)—got together to form a coalition government, known at the time as *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR, People's Coalition). In 2016, the alliance was subsequently transformed into *Pakatan Harapan* (PH, Coalition of Hope), which remains till today.

Selangor has approximately 6 million residents and surrounds the federal capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Selangor contributes approximately a quarter of Malaysia's gross domestic product and is the international gateway to

Malaysia via the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Port Klang.

The change of government brought along both improvements in good governance and a slew of new policies and programs for the people of Selangor. While only the DAP has identified itself as a social democratic party, the coalition was largely progressive in many areas, especially on economic questions.

One of the areas that this new coalition worked on was access to healthcare. Healthcare is now one of the most pressing challenges for any society, and Malaysia is no different. While healthcare falls

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under the jurisdiction of the federal government and not the state governments, we identified a major shortcoming in public primary healthcare in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area, where the bulk of Selangor residents live.<sup>1</sup>

Primary healthcare is available through both public and private healthcare providers. Public clinics are normally more accessible in smaller towns, but in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area, it is often located in areas that have poor public transport access and requires up to half-an-hour travel to reach by private car. Access by public transport could take over an hour.

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<sup>1</sup> Greater Kuala Lumpur covers 2,793 square kilometers that encompasses the city of Kuala Lumpur and the 10 local districts surrounding the capital—the editor.

For this reason, a lot of poorer residents still have to turn to private clinics, which could cost anywhere from US\$10 to US\$25 per visit, which would be nearly the same as accessing public clinics via taxi. The Selangor government decided to fill this gap by introducing a scheme called *Peduli Sihat*. This scheme gives poor families (defined as those earning US\$750 a month) a medical card for them to get treatment at participating private clinics up to US\$125 a year per family. This was a game changer to give access to healthcare for poorer families in the state, who either had to travel for medical care or self-medicate if they could not afford private clinics.

A study in Southern Italy discovered that 31.5% of hospitalizations were preventable if patients had access to primary healthcare.<sup>2</sup> The access provided by *Peduli Sihat* is not only helping ease the financial burdens of lower income families in Selangor, but it also helps protect their health and wellbeing in the long run.

The study found that of the preventable hospitalizations, 40% were for congestive heart failure, 23.2% for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 13.5% for angina without procedure, 8.4% for hypertension, and 7.1% for bacterial pneumonia. Any of these will not only be bad for the health and wellbeing of the patient; but they could also be financially catastrophic for lower income families, if the only breadwinner of the family is put out of work, even temporarily, by these conditions.

Another area where Selangor has implemented several progressive policies is in the area of transportation. Our first major



Image: [www.nst.com.my](http://www.nst.com.my)

## “Selangor has implemented several progressive policies in the area of transportation.

policy has been to provide allocation to implement free bus services to connect poorer areas of the state to public transport nodes, namely LRT and MRT stations. The federal government, which also has legal jurisdiction over public transportation, operates a system wherein private operators apply for licenses to operate routes that they wish to. This leaves a lot of gap in the Greater KL area which has no public transportation service. Starting with one bus route in 2014, the Selangor bus service currently has 43 routes, that otherwise would not exist.

Apart from ferrying general passengers, the free bus service has also created impact in ferrying children to school, especially secondary schools. Not all students

go to schools that are near their homes, near as defined by walking or cycling distance. For those who need to go further, the option is often a parent who can drop them off, or to rely on private transport providers.

School bus fares can cost between US\$25 to US\$40 a month per student, which is a heavy burden for lower income families. Upper income families normally drop off their children at school. Some lower income families also compromise their income/jobs to send their three to five children to school because private school buses are simply too expensive. Having this free bus service gives huge financial relief to these families, besides freeing up parents to have more flexibility in their respective

<sup>2</sup>Rizza, Paolo et al. (2007). “Preventable Hospitalization and Access to Primary Health Care in an Area of Southern Italy.” *BMC Health Services Research*, 7 (134).

job options. One case that I personally got to know was a man who used to drive a taxi earning around US\$250 a month in net income, but was able to take up a lorry-driving job at US\$400 a month now that he didn't have to ferry his kids to and from school daily.

And for the first time in history, Selangor has developed a public transportation masterplan. This is our second progressive policy. Neither the federal government, which is responsible for public transportation, nor the previous state governments invested in producing a transportation masterplan. While financial constraints mean that it will take time to implement in full all the 12 railway lines and bus routes, it is a very crucial step to guide public spending and government decisions in the years to come. This masterplan will also affect land use planning, which is under the local authority's jurisdiction.

Our third progressive policy integrates transportation with housing, by putting in place the Transit-Oriented Development Policy. In 2016, the Selangor government formally recognized the role zoning played in encouraging the use of public transport. We then doubled the allowable plot ratio (gross floor area) in areas within a 400m radius from any train (MRT, LRT, KTM) station.

Considering that the public transportation network is weak to non-existent in many parts of Greater KL, this policy encourages development to focus in these areas where there is already rail infrastructure. The policy however is not a "free gift" for landowners and property developers. Among the conditions imposed on them is that they must contribute financially to the construction of pedestrian connectivity in the area to enable

and encourage walking within all buildings and from the buildings to the train stations. This is a costly exercise for the state government and local authorities, but with the increased land value windfall for property developers, it is only fair that they play this role.

Property developers must also contribute a portion of the increased land value to the local authority as development charges. At the moment, the rate is 30% of the land value increase after the zoning (gross floor area) increase was granted. This contribution is earmarked to be spent on capital expenditure projects to benefit the residents in the area. It cannot be used for operating expenditures.

The final progressive policy that I would like to share is our food stamp program called *Kasih Ibu Smart Selangor* (KISS). The state has taken a bold step to give RM200 (US\$50) a month to families of low-income households earning less than RM2000 a month (US\$500). This amount is sufficient for all basic food requirements for a

family, ensuring that no family in Selangor should ever go hungry. This RM200 is given through a smart card (not cash) and can only be used to buy certain categories of product from our partner shops. By doing so, we avoid the possibility that the money is used to buy alcohol or cigarettes. Another unique aspect of this non-transferrable smart card is that it is given to the mother of the household, thus empowering her to make the spending decision for the family.

While these progressive policies are something that the DAP can be proud of, we still have a long road ahead in the state of Selangor to further narrow inequality and build better homes for all our 6 million residents. It is a work in progress, and we must always look for areas that we can improve on. But at this point, 13 years after taking over the administration from the previous government, we have definitely shown that progressive policies are welcomed and accepted by people of all races and backgrounds.♥

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