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DRIVING HAPPY CITY DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERAK LOCAL AUTHORITIES' STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

A "happy city" is designated to foster quality of life through social connection, sustainable planning, and a place where people can live in harmony. In the 21st century, rapid urbanisation has led to numerous issues, especially those related to environmental degradation and quality of life. These challenges have placed a significant responsibility on local government to ensure people can live in social fairness. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the current challenges and strategies employed by local governments. Perak's local government has been selected as a case study because it was recognised as the happiest city in 2019. This study used a qualitative approach that combines primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with selected key stakeholders, including urban planners and local government representatives. Secondary data were gathered from government documents. The findings reveal that the primary challenges faced by local governments are limited funding, infrastructure gaps, environmental degradation, and declining community engagement. To tackle the challenges of limited funding and infrastructure gaps, the local government has overcome them through strategies that include encouraging public participation in planning, preserving green spaces, and establishing public-private partnerships. These measures directly address the constraints and pave the way for a community's quality of life to achieve sustainable and inclusive urban development. The research findings also recommended enhancing urban development policies, including public participation and infrastructure investment by local governments, to boost the quality of life for individuals, rather than solely providing basic needs. Overall, this study offers new empirical insights into how Malaysian local governments operationalize the happy city concept and highlights governance practices that can inform future urban development efforts.

Keywords: *Happy city, urban liveability, happiness index, local authorities, public well-being, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a "happy city" has been recognized as a sustainable and high-quality living environment, achieved by balancing economic and social well-being (Mohammad Mujaheed et al., 2023). In addition, a "happy city" can improve the emotional, social, and psychological well-being, apart from infrastructure development. Thus, cities have a tremendous impact on people's happiness.

Urban happiness is the total of the various features of cities that influence the happiness of their residents (Samavati and Desmet, 2022). To create happier cities, people should reside in dense, compact, and walkable urban areas rather than large, low-density suburban areas (Faizalnizam, 2014; Sahar et al., 2024; Saeideh et al., 2024). Meanwhile, rapid urbanisation poses considerable challenges to the well-being, liveability, and standard of living of city people, especially as the effects of climate change intensify (Saeideh et al., 2024). To ensure that people and communities have positive experiences, feel safe and comfortable, and possess collective resilience against future shocks, cities must address the requirements of society today (Ab Muin et al., 2024; Sapri et al., 2024). These requirements

include social inclusion, sustainable infrastructure, effective public transportation, and a sustainable environment, in order to establish a resilient and livable urban environment (PLANMalaysia, 2024).

According to Sobhaninia (2024), resilience is the ability to deal with and adjust to changes that are not in your favour. It is the capacity to adapt quickly or gradually and continue even under the most challenging circumstances. Mohammad Yusup et al. (2016) reported that physical planning development requires a strong urban governance administration system. The local authority's primary concentration is on planning administration, but it also implements state, federal, and municipal policies and programmes. Given its standing as the lowest layer of authority, it has the finest ability to regulate and oversee the growth of its territory.

The importance of a local authority in delivering a quality living environment has prompted academics and professionals to consider the ideal urban governance system at the regional level (Mohammad Yusup et. al. 2016). Local authorities directly shape happy cities by implementing policies on sustainable development, infrastructure upgrades, and urban design (Hiromi et al., 2022). Additionally, they serve as intermediaries by encouraging collaboration among interested parties, balancing the role of the public sector, and establishing new governance structures to implement the SDGs (Hiromi et al., 2022).

However, there are ongoing concerns about local authorities' financial and technical capacity, legislative limitations, and the development tools available to support urban service delivery in Malaysia (Mohammad Yusup et al., 2016). Therefore, this paper aims to examine the challenges and strategies employed by Perak's local government in supporting the development of a happy city. The findings are expected to offer local authorities in Malaysia practical insights that can help improve current practices and create a better living environment. This study also makes a unique contribution to the Malaysian urban happiness literature by providing empirical perspectives from municipal actors and illustrating how the Happy City concept is operationalized within a state-level context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of a Happy City

Charles Montgomery first proposed the idea of a "happy city" in his book "Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design," which focused on how urban planning may significantly affect people's and communities' levels of happiness. Based on this theory, it suggests that cities can be designed to make people feel happier, healthier, and improve their overall quality of life. This can include accessibility to parks and nature, effective roads and facilities, strong community relationships, and fairness in society. Thus, the 'happy city' idea should consider both physical and emotional needs, such as a clean environment, safety, fun activities, socializing, and better health, to create better living spaces for the community (Awang et al., 2022; Jabbar et al., 2021; Krefis et al., 2018).

According to Faizalnizam (2014), social contact is typically significantly impacted by a happy city. This aligns with the opinions of Awang et al. (2022) and Jabbar et al. (2021), which suggest that a happy city can indeed enhance people's productivity, happiness, and health by fostering interaction among its residents. This situation revealed that emotional infrastructure is the most critical aspect to consider in any city. As such, this also means that a happy city is built on emotional bonds and shared joy among its people (Toger et al., 2021). Furthermore, Sepe (2016) found that good bond among people usually motivates them to stay for extended periods of time. A happy city also provides good public spaces that can influence people's happiness by showcasing its local government's commitment to managing the region effectively (Samavati and Desmet, 2022; Samavati et al., 2024). As a result, the Malaysia Happiness Index (MHI) was developed as a tool to measure the happiness and satisfaction of Malaysians with their lives.

Malaysia Happiness Index (MHI)

The Malaysia Happiness Index (MHI) is a comprehensive framework to assess the level of Malaysians' happiness and satisfaction with their lives. Based on Awang et al. (2022) and Salaj and Lindkvist (2020), MHI was developed to provide an understanding of how various factors, such as environment, social relationships, health, and economics, affect people's happiness in different demographic groups in Malaysia.

The Federal Department of Town and Country Planning Malaysia is the responsible agency that developed the index to understand further what makes a city sustainable, focusing on the overall well-being of the community. In this regard, the bottom-up approach becomes essential to ensure the development of city is in line with community needs (Awang et al., 2022; Salaj and Lindkvist, 2020). A city is also a host to a diverse range of individuals; hence, it is essential to promote social inclusion, particularly for those from underrepresented groups (Salaj and Lindkvist, 2020; Bulakh et al., 2022).

According to Figure 1, there are six central components and indicators of the happiness index, which are: (1) physical; (2) social; (3) emotional; (4) living environment; (5) economic and (6) education. These components and indicators are used to assess a community's level of happiness and to ensure its general well-being increases in tandem with the development initiatives undertaken by the government. Goal 11 in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlines a global framework for creating sustainable cities and communities, fostering happier cities. The promotion of secure, resilient, and sustainable development is the key to improving quality of life, rather than just economic indices (Arslan et al., 2016; Muin et al, 2024; Modu et al., 2024). Aside from Malaysia, many cities worldwide have adopted this approach. Therefore, by learning from their experiences, the Malaysian local governments can better improve their future growth strategy.

Best Practices for Urban Development Worldwide

For local governments in emerging nations, models of urban development from around the world offer essential insights. According to case studies from North America and Europe, cities that prioritise walkability, mixed-use development, and green areas are likely to have higher resident well-being rates (Igbokwe, 2024). Integrating natural environments into cities significantly improves residents' social connections and mental health, as reported by Kwan et al. (2023) and Grilli et al. (2021).

Refer to Igbokwe (2024). Studies from North America and European countries show that cities with plenty of green spaces, availability of walkable streets, and a mix of different buildings contribute to people's happiness and health. Kwan et al. (2023) claimed that incorporating nature into cities also contributes to improving mental well-being, as well as social connections. Meanwhile, Wong et al. (2020) highlight that some Southeast Asian countries have successfully implemented transit-oriented development to control urban crowding while creating more sustainable communities.

In summary, numerous unanswered questions remain regarding urban development, particularly in how local governments in developing nations address the specific issues associated with urbanization and community well-being. Hence, this study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing the distinctive strategies employed by Perak local governments and situating them within the framework of global urban development. According to Baloch et al. (2023), tourism-driven urbanization

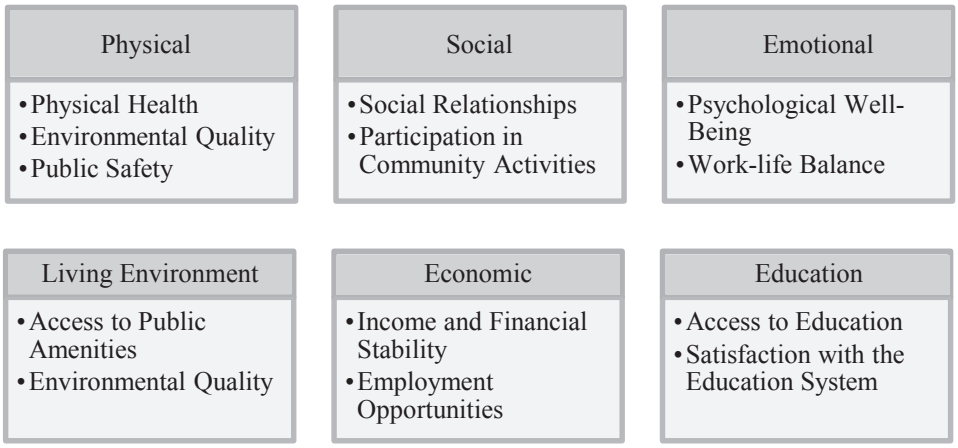


Figure 1 Main Components and Indicators of Malaysia Happiness Index (Shay-Wei et al. 2022)

intensifies pressure on infrastructure, public services, and sustainability. As a result, Perak is an excellent case study for balancing urban development and community well-being.

METHODOLOGY

According to Cresswell (2021), qualitative research involves an in-depth investigation of social phenomena through observation, interviews, and document analysis. In this regard, this approach enables researchers to gain a more thorough understanding of human behaviour and relationships (Silverman, 2021). This study aimed to investigate the challenges and strategies employed by a selected local government in building a happy city. Therefore, a qualitative research method was employed in this study to gain viewpoints from individual experiences.

The complex relationships between environmental, economic, and social forces that affect urban growth make it difficult to create a "happy city". Since Perak was named the happiest city in 2019 (PLANMalaysia, 2020), its local governments were selected for this study. Figure 2 shows the assessment results based on the Malaysia Happiness Index's six (6) main components and indicators. The combination of these components has established Perak's status as the happiest city in 2019. Both primary and secondary data were used in this study to produce a thorough analysis of urban growth in Perak. The primary data were gathered through interviews with selected stakeholders, while the secondary data were collected from the government's policy documents related to the concept of a happy city.

Secondary data were used to identify specific challenges and invent solutions. This strategy aims to understand how the selected local governments address urban development challenges with limited resources and specific regional contexts. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders chosen gathered the primary data. In this context, this study employed purposive sampling, as it is the most effective approach for obtaining in-depth data from participants who have experience or are directly involved in the planning process.

Therefore, five local governments in Perak, including urban planners, were interviewed (refer to Table 1). A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify officers with direct roles in planning and community development. This ensured that participants possessed relevant institutional knowledge to inform the study.

Taiping was purposively selected because it is one of the earliest municipalities in Perak to implement the happy city framework actively. Its mature governance structure and recognition in national discussions on urban liveability provide a rich context to explore strategies and challenges related to urban happiness. The use of a single-city sample is acknowledged as a limitation that may introduce geographic bias. However, Taiping's leadership in happy city initiatives offers meaningful insights into Perak's municipal strategies. Future studies may include more municipalities for comparative analysis.

The semi-structured interview is conducted to obtain data on their experiences, the effectiveness of local strategies, and community participation in the planning

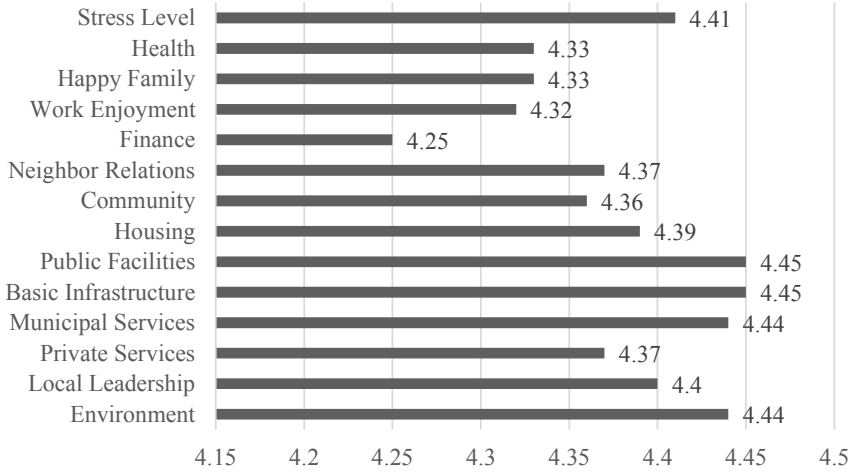


Figure 2 Perak State Happiness Index 2019 (PLANMalaysia Happiness Day Report, 2024)

Table 1 List of Respondents

Code	Position	Department	Competency
R1	Director of the Urban Planning and Development Department	Department of Urban Planning and Development	Urban Planning, Policy Development
R2	Assistant Officer of Urban Planning and Development	Department of Urban Planning and Development	Urban Development Support, Planning Regulations
R3	Director of Urban and Health Services	Department of Urban and Health Services	Public Health Management
R4	Assistant Director of Engineering	Department of Engineering	Engineering Project Management
R5	Assistant Administrative Officer	Department of Corporate, Public Relations, and Tourism	Administrative Management

process. Finally, both the primary and secondary data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can identify themes and patterns within a phenomenon, including those present in interview transcripts (Kwon et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings on challenges and strategies for driving happy city development, as reported by the selected respondents, are discussed. The details of these challenges and strategies are as follows.

Outcomes of the Challenges in Maintaining Happy Cities

Infrastructure and Resource Limitations

As metropolitan regions expand in size, the concept of a "happy city" has gained traction, emphasizing the importance of cities promoting their citizens' happiness and well-being. Maintaining this delight in the face of increasing urbanisation is difficult. One of the significant challenges is the strain on infrastructure and resources, which are often insufficient to meet the demands of growing populations.

Urban development officials commonly cite infrastructure and resource limitations as significant barriers to maintaining the standard of living in cities such as Taiping, which is considered the world's third most sustainable city. As stated by R1:

"Our infrastructure has suffered as a result of Taiping's rapid expansion. Despite our early, significant investments in transportation and public infrastructure, we are currently struggling to preserve these resources. If we do not continue to improve, we risk losing even more resident satisfaction."

It is also more challenging to create happy cities because research indicates that poor infrastructure might have a negative impact on resident satisfaction (Kleinhans et al., 2015; Medeiros, 2021). R2 explains:

"Residents' expectations for services are becoming increasingly divergent from what we can provide with our current resources. This has an impact on everything, from public services to road maintenance."

The remark emphasises the mismatch between resource allocation and infrastructure development. Although the initial investment has transformed Taiping into a pleasant city, long-term planning and resource management are still necessary to maintain this reputation, which is a challenging task.

Ecological Sustainability

Taiping's once-dominant position in the happiness rankings is currently under threat due to the detrimental environmental effects of rising urbanisation. According to R3:

"Our green spaces contributed significantly to Taiping's 2019 recognition. However, urbanisation has had a negative impact on these locations. More pollution, deforestation, and less biodiversity are currently hurting locals' quality of life."

Green places are decreasing while air pollution is getting more widespread. These environmental issues reflect a broader trend in metropolitan areas that fail to strike a balance between development

and sustainability, contributing to Taiping's decline in satisfaction rankings.

Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

Although community involvement is crucial to a city's success, respondents from the Corporate, Public Relations, and Tourism Department reported that resident engagement has recently declined. According to R5:

"We noticed that after earning the prize for happiest city, we spent less time engaging with locals. As the initial euphoria faded and estrangement set in, involving residents in development activities became increasingly difficult. It will take time to regain trust."

This decline in public engagement is strongly related to the city's deteriorating social cohesion, which once fuelled its reputation as a desirable place to live.

Outcomes of the Strategies in Addressing the Challenges

Using Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to Revitalise Infrastructure

Engineering department officials have supported public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a solution to address resource constraints and infrastructure gaps. As R4 said.

"PPPs have helped us address infrastructure concerns, particularly those related to trash management and road repairs. Although these collaborations provide us with resources that we would not otherwise have, they also require specific constraints to ensure that the general public's interests are prioritised."

PPPs are increasingly seen as a way to address the lack of resources in the public sector, which is in line with worldwide trends. Nevertheless, local governments must oversee these collaborations to strike a balance between the private sector's goals and the community's welfare.

Enhancing Initiatives for Environmental Sustainability

In response to the environmental degradation noted by the Department of City and Health Services, the local government has taken steps to enforce legislation that protects green spaces and encourages sustainability. According to R3:

"We have launched new environmental initiatives, such as protecting green belts and community gardens. Nonetheless, enforcing environmental standards is challenging, especially given the stresses of urbanisation." – R3

More stringent enforcement of regulations is still required to protect Taiping's natural resources, despite field observations indicating the establishment of several new parks and eco-friendly projects.

Revitalising Community Engagement

New efforts have been launched to increase community involvement and restore social harmony. In line with R5:

"We've started several community events and online discussion boards to encourage people to participate in the planning process again. Even if the response to these efforts has been excellent thus far, more has to be done to re-establish the sense of collective ownership that has contributed to Taiping's success."

To promote sustainable urban growth, this project adheres to community engagement best practices, which encourage long-term and substantial resident participation in local planning and governance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that in Taiping, the local government of Perak faced significant obstacles and used strategic approaches to preserve urban happiness. These results were built upon and mirror more general patterns found in the literature on urban growth and happiness, especially in relation to the interplay among community involvement, environmental sustainability, and infrastructural development. To achieve sustainable happiness, this discussion emphasizes the importance of long-term adaptive methods by situating these findings within the context of urban development. To provide a clearer synthesis of the strategies identified in this study, the key themes are summarised in Table 2.

The strategies in Table 2 indicate that Taiping employs several measures to maintain the city's happiness and

Table 2 Summary of Key Happy City Strategies Identified in Taiping

Theme	Description
Community Well-Being	• Strengthening social participation through community events • Neighbourhood programme • Digital platforms to rebuild trust and enhance community ownership
Environmental Quality	• Protecting green belts • Preserving green spaces • Establishing community gardens • Enforcing environmental regulations to support sustainability
Collaborative Governance	• Leveraging public-private partnerships (PPPs) • Inter-agency cooperation • Stakeholder engagement to address resource limitations and improve service delivery.

livability. For community well-being, the focus is on rebuilding trust and bringing people together through neighbourhood activities and online platforms. For the environment, the strategies aim to protect green areas and improve natural spaces as the city expands. For governance, local authorities collaborate with private companies, other agencies, and community groups to overcome limited resources and deliver improved services. Together, these three areas form the primary approach used by Taiping to maintain its status as a happy city. These priorities also reflect broader themes in urban development literature, especially the importance of infrastructure, sustainability, and long-term planning.

The significance of infrastructure as a factor of city pleasure is frequently emphasised in the literature on urban development. As demonstrated by Taiping's early recognition in 2019, early infrastructure investment can boost public satisfaction (Mendez et al., 2021). However, this study indicates that if long-term planning and maintenance are not prioritised, the advantages of infrastructure upgrades may be fleeting.

These results are consistent with the larger body of research that demonstrates how rapid urban growth can jeopardise infrastructure and public services without adequate financial planning and governance, resulting in long-term discontent (Ali and Singh, 2022). Public-private partnerships (PPPs), as described by R4 are a potential answer, but they must be strictly regulated to safeguard the public interest.

Besides that, the urban planning literature has consistently emphasized the importance of urban planning in the literature on urban design as a key factor influencing people's long-term happiness (Kwan et al., 2023). This is in line with a global trend where rapid urbanisation is frequently exchanged for environmentally sustainable growth, resulting in a decline in people's quality of life (Lim and Yusuf, 2022). The results suggest that local governments should prioritize sustainability and environmental preservation initiatives in their long-term development objectives.

Moreover, these findings support research that argues long-term well-being and social cohesion depend on ongoing community involvement. Feeling disconnected from the local government makes people less trustworthy and more unsatisfied (Ali and Singh, 2022). Local governments are cognizant of the problem and are attempting to reconnect individuals through community-based projects and internet forums, according to the interview.

CONCLUSIONS

Following Taiping, Perak's designation as one of the happiest cities in Malaysia in 2019, this study examines the increasing challenges and strategic approaches of local officials in maintaining happiness in the city. The results indicate that although substantial investments in community involvement and infrastructure were key to the early success, maintaining happiness over time calls for a longer-term, more flexible strategy. The analysis provides several important lessons for urban development, drawing on key findings from the literature on urban development.

Cities looking to strike a balance between growth and well-being could benefit further from Taiping's experience. The results demonstrate that achieving lasting happiness is a dynamic process that necessitates continual adaptation to shifting social, economic,

and environmental circumstances rather than a static goal. Local governments must adopt a comprehensive approach, integrating community involvement, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure development into a cohesive, long-term plan.

To ensure that infrastructure can keep pace with population expansion and changing needs, the government must simultaneously allocate funds for both initial infrastructure investment and ongoing maintenance and upgrades. It is crucial to integrate good environmental protection practices with urban development. Long-term happiness can be enhanced by policies that combine pollution prevention, preservation of green spaces, and sustainable urban development.

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