

The Klang Valley MRT project has received so much media attention over the past six weeks, the whole project is beginning to seem bigger than it actually is. Never before has so much anger, bitterness and frustration been poured over an infrastructure project. It would appear that all the bad experiences associated with packed LRT trains, stalled buses and walks in the scorching heat have rained on the proposed MRT line running from Sungai Buloh to Kajang.

The underlying fact is the Klang Valley needs an efficient public transport system. Over the last 20 years, Klang Valley residents have seen many changes with only minor improvements to the way they get from point A to point B, which is why they are demanding much, much more from the proposed MRT. The cost of the MRT will be bigger, the disruptions during construction will be greater and therefore expectations are higher.

The situation today

In the Klang Valley today only 17% or approximately 1.24 million trips per day are completed using public transport, which can be broken down as follows:

- Buses — 600,000 trips (made on 1,050 buses)
- LRT — 400,000 trips (for both the Ampang and Kelana Jaya lines)
- Monorail — 40,000 trips
- KTM Komuter — 100,000 trips
- ERL — 20,000 trips
- Taxis — 80,000 trips

The remainder of the 83% or six million trips were made using private transport, mostly single occupancy vehicles (SOVs). This explains the huge traffic jams and constant gridlock even though the Klang Valley has one of the highest concentrations of roadways and tolled highways in the world.

There are currently six million people in the Klang Valley and this is expected to increase to 10 million by 2020. The Klang Valley also has 3.2 million cars. This number is growing at an exceedingly fast rate — an average of 30,000 cars per month.

At this rate we would have approximately seven million cars by 2020, a number that the Klang Valley cannot support. Already we are facing space constraints to build more roads and more parking lots. Cars are being double- and triple-parked, causing even more congestion. Traffic jams in the city are increasing and it is taking longer and longer to get to work.

Very soon, the argument that driving to work takes less time than taking public transport is not going to be true anymore. We would have eschewed public transport for traffic jams, time wastage and lost productivity.

This situation is very different in Singapore, Hong Kong and London, whose share of public transport trips is 64%, 74% and 90% respectively. All these cities share a common fact — they have an MRT but they also have public transport policies in place, and this has resulted in a high share of public transport trips. A well-grounded public transport policy has to be put in place and coordinated public transport planning is needed to ensure that the Greater KL area becomes one of the top 20 most liveable cities in the world. An effective policy can determine how public transport will move ahead. Otherwise, people are going to get into their cars and drive off before you can even say MRT.



The MRT is not a silver bullet, the overall policy must be got right before people trade private transport for public.

Importance of policies and coordinated planning

The over-dependence on cars is a direct result of an unplanned public transport system that relies on piecemeal improvements. One of the reasons is the lack of coordinated planning by a single agency that takes ownership of the responsibility of looking at public transport as a network instead of piecemeal "projects". It is therefore timely that the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD) officially came into being on June 3, 2010, with the coming into force of the Land Public Transport Act 2010.

The core functions of SPAD are to draw up policies for land public transport, planning, regulation and enforcement of laws, rules and regulations concerning land public transport.

To achieve the 50% public transport share as envisaged by the Economic Transformation Programme under the Greater KL National Key Economic Area, SPAD will have to cure the deficiencies in the public transport system with more than piecemeal efforts. It will need to look into policies and plans to ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated and the solutions are grounded in the following:

Utility

Governments have realised that public transport is not a business but a utility that it is very difficult to make money from. There are ways to reduce costs and increase revenues, but generally operators have a tough time recouping costs and running their operations profitably. The story is the same whether it is in London or Hong Kong. In these countries, there is a single manager which ensures operators are given certain routes to ply, wear standard colours and meet certain key performance indicators. In exchange they are paid a fee. This way the participation of operators is guaranteed and the regions that are covered by a public transport system will be more complete as opposed to having areas that do not have any.

In the case of the Klang Valley, for example, Syarikat Prasarana Negara Bhd, set up under the Ministry of Finance, should be the single manager. It should manage the various rail operators with SPAD ensuring that Prasarana does a good job. SPAD should be dealing only with a single entity, Prasarana and not multiple entities. SPAD can then focus on the big picture, such as public transport policy directions, fare standards and so on.

Lessons of the past in the Klang Valley, where various operators were allowed to run the rail and bus networks for profit, resulted in operators not being able to make returns on their investment and consumers on unprofitable routes being underserved. This mistake should not be repeated.

Inclusivity

Any public transport system in a major urban area needs to cater for the entire population and not just the lower- or middle-income group or tourists. A lack of such planning will result in an under-utilised public transport system.

This means that the service level should be one that serves a high-level executive or a manual labourer equally. This for the most part means air-conditioned comfort, clean public toilets, well-lit covered walkways, proper signage and on-time scheduling at an affordable price.

This will ensure a higher take-up rate among the general population, who will now view public transport in a more positive light. Today many private vehicle owners in the Klang Valley give public transport the thumbs-down because it is not up to the mark, to be tolerated only by those who have no choice.

Integration

Rail-based infrastructure in the Klang Valley is fairly extensive and has a total rail length of 224.6km comprising the following:

- Ampang Line — 27km (25 stations)
- Kelana Jaya Line — 29km (24 stations)
- Monorail — 8.6km (11 stations)
- KTM Komuter Sentul-Port Klang — 43km (13 stations)
- KTM Komuter Batu Caves-Sentul — 7km (4 stations)
- KTM Komuter Sungai Buloh-Kajang — 53km (14 stations)
- ERL — 57km (5 stations)

While this figure is commendable, there should be greater strategic integration within the rail network and with other forms of public transport.

A passenger should be able to travel on the network seamlessly, without having to worry about buying tickets for different lines, and be able to switch trains with ease.

He or she should find it easy to get from home to the train station and once he gets off the train should find it easy to reach his or her destination. Because rail networks have a limited reach and cannot go to every destination, it is important that they are supplemented by a good feeder bus network. This feeder bus network must be planned in such a way that people living within a 3km radius of any station can reach the station in 15 minutes.

So while more kilometres of rail are added to — the extensions of the Ampang and Kelana Jaya lines by a further 35km and MRT lines will add another 141km of rail to cater for the growth in population to 10 million by 2020 — strategic integration, that is, using different modes to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the other should be emphasised, otherwise adding kilometres of rail will not get people to make the move from private to public transport.

Sustainability

Public transport especially rail networks which are more environmental friendly can be part of an overall "green" policy, the broader issue of reducing CO2 emissions and environmental protection through the promotion and use of rail networks to replace exhaust-emitting cars, especially SOVs. It is estimated a single four-carriage MRT train would be able to carry 1,200 people, the average number of people carried by 700 cars.

Conclusion

The Klang Valley needs an MRT system for sure. But more importantly it needs to put in place a sustainable public transport policy. The Klang Valley Public Transport Master Plan should incorporate all these elements of utility, inclusivity, integration and sustainability in order that public transport gets the buy-in from the public it is meant to serve. The MRT alone is not a silver bullet, a well-grounded public transport policy is.

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