

## The Agropolitan Way of Re-Empowering the Rural Poor

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**Abstract:** The agropolitan (meaning agrocity) concept is an approach to planning rural development from below which promises real economic and socio-psychological empowerment for the rural poor. The approach is a departure from the conventional top-down growth pole model which has resulted in, among others, the empowerment of the organizational agency rather than the targeted rural poor. This paper analyses the pro-poor empowerment potentials of the agropolitan approach with reference to Malaysia. The analysis was based on a study of the agropolitan model adopted by the Malaysian East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC) and its comparison to past models such as that of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA). It concludes that the model's operational set up does provide for economic empowerment of the targeted rural poor but not their decision making empowerment.

**Key words:** Agropolitan • Growth pole model • Network model • Rural poor • Empowerment

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### INTRODUCTION

General dissatisfaction with conventional approaches to rural development planning had led to several attempts at alternative models [1-3]. The agropolitan approach, which is generally regarded as unique to the developing world, is often described as "development planning from below" as opposed to the "top down" approach. This is micro-planning with involvement of the target groups, local government, local R&D and educational institutions.

The major characteristics of an agropolitan approach include integrated development involving a complete physical and institutional support system and an optimal use of local resources; integration of agricultural and non-agricultural activities especially resource-based activities; and, development of local service centres as an interface with the whole urban, regional and eventually the metropolitan centres.

In an agropolitan, economic activities within the agropolis shall be part of the regional, national or even global value chains in addition to the local market. Here, access to off-farm and non-farm employment and commercial opportunities are available within the agropolis, the growth centres and in some cases the metropolitan centres where they are within commuting distance.

Given its promise as the better alternative model to regional development than the conventional growth pole model, agropolitan has currently become the new buzz word of rural rejuvenation in developing countries, such as Indonesia [11], Nepal [12] and Malaysia [13]. In Malaysia, it is a central feature in the country's recently announced development regions such as the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) and the Sarawak Development Corridor plans (SCORE). It is hailed as an initiative aimed at eradicating hardcore poverty through various integrated agricultural and agro-based development projects and involving the participation of the public and private sectors, universities and social institutions. This paper analyses the empowerment potentials of the ECER's Besut-Setiu agropolitan approach.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Materials:** Sources of materials for this analysis were two-folds. One, documents published by the ECERDC and those prepared and presented by appointed experts to the ECERDC in 2008 regarding the projected potentials of the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project. Documents published by ECERDC pertained to the agropolitan framework and instrumentation adopted by the ECERDC.

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Documents prepared and presented by appointed experts to the ECERDC comprised calculations of projected incomes that the hardcore poor locals selected to participate in the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project would be receiving from the implementation of the variety of income generated projects of the agropolitan. This would enable assessment made on the economic empowering aspect of the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project

The other source of materials was the literature on the achievements and challenges facing contemporary Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers and families. The purpose was to enable comparison of the FELDA experience with the empowerment scenario projected for the participants of the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project.

**Method:** In making the comparison and evaluation, the decision making empowerment of the intended hardcore poor was examined against the organisational setup of the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project. Critical thinking was subsequently applied to arrive at a realistic conclusion of the overall empowerment potentials of the ECER Besut-Setiu agropolitan project.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**The Agripolitan Approach:** Theoretically, the agropolitan approach is a critique of conventional growth strategies which fail to explicitly unite rural with urban development [4-8]. It is couched in the alternative regional cluster or network model which exhibits features quite contrary to those of the growth pole model (Table 1).

Friedman who first introduced the agropolitan approach [9], [10] promoted a radical planning model based on “decolonization”, “democratization”, “self-empowerment” and “reaching out”. He described this model as an “agropolitan development” paradigm, emphasising the re-localisation of primary production and manufacture. It proposed that rural development could be best pursued by linking rural with urban development at the local level, in which production and distribution would be encompassed within the context of face-to-face political decision-making in appropriately sized ‘agropolitan’ districts. Decisions on economic activities would thus be subordinated to a territorial will in an act of reciprocal entitlement between individual and community.

**The ECER Agropolitan Model:** The ECER development will be is backed by a main development centre with tertiary and secondary economic activities. In turn, the project will supports employment growth and open income opportunities for the population. Thus, the objectives of the agropolitan Project in the ECER, for example, are to achieve zero hard core poor by 2010, to balance development growth between rural and urban areas, to accelerate rural economic growth through agriculture activities and farm based industry, to improve accessibility to and opportunities in non-farm activities for rural households, to increase employment opportunities in rural areas and to increase household income (ECER Masterplan).

To achieve the above target, participants will be are involved in two types of main activities: (1) primary activities where each participating family (head of family) will be given shares of palm oil, rubber and cocoa;

Table 1: Growth Pole and Regional Network Models Compared

Component	Growth pole/center model	Regional cluster/network model
1.Basic Sector	Urban-based; manufacturing usually focuses on large-scale ‘propulsive’ industries and ‘footloose’ production units headquartered outside the region	all sectors, depending on local regional endowments and conditions; emphasis on local small-medium size regionally-based enterprises
2.Urban System	Hierarchical, centered on a single number of population size and associated with the assumptions of central place theory.	Horizontal, composed of a dominant center, usually identified by centers and their hinterlands, each with own specializations & comparative advantages.
3.Rural- urban Relations	Image of diffusion processes moving down the urban hierarchy and outward from the city/town to its rural periphery. Rural areas as passive beneficiaries of “trickle-down” from urban growth.	Image of complex rural-urban activities, with growth stimuli emanating from both rural and urban areas and with the intensity increasing along regional inter-settlement transportation corridors.
4.Planning style	Usually top-down via sectoral planning agencies and their field offices. Regions have “misty” boundaries determined by economic interaction.	Implies the need for decentralized planning systems, with integration and coordination of multi-sectoral and rural and urban activities at the local level.
5. Major Policy Areas	Industrial decentralization incentives: tax holidays, industrial estates, national transportation trunk roads.	Agricultural diversification, agro-industry, resource-based manufacturing, urban services, manpower training, local inter-settlement transportation networks

Source: Friedmann and Douglass, 1978 [4]

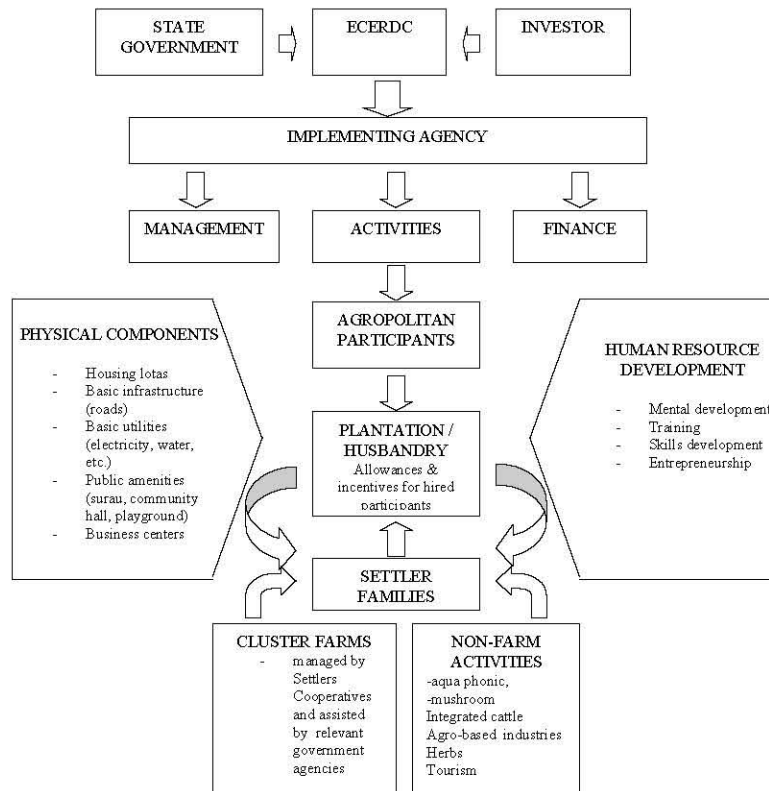


Fig. 1: The operational set-up of the ECER agropolitans (Source: Adapted from ECERDC, [14])

Table 2: Income Projections for Integrated Farming for Resettlement Project in the Besut-Setiu Agropolitan

Scenario	Crop	Production	Cost (RM)	Revenue (RM)	Income per month (RM)
1	Chilli + Com	21,600 kg per 0.4 ha (chilli) + 150,000 heads of corn/ 0.4 ha	28,368 + 24,000 = 52,368	51,840 + 45,000 = 96,840	3,706
2	Chilli + Goat	21,600 kg per 0.4 ha (chilli) + 30 goats	28,368 + 5,000 = 33,368	51,840 + 21,000 = 72,840	3,289
3	Corn + Goat	150,000 heads of corn per 0.4 ha + 30 goats per cycle	24,000 + 5,000 = 23,000	45,000 + 21,000 = 66,000	3,000
4	Chilli + Com + Goat	21,600 kg per 0.01 ha (chilli) + 150,000 heads of corn per 0.4 ha + 30 goats per cycle	28,368 + 24,000 + 5000 = 57,368	51,840 + 45,000 + 21,000 = 117,840	5039.3

Assumptions:

Chilli Farming under the Rain Shelter Fertigation System (2 cycles per year)

Corn Farming Income Projection on 0.4 ha of land and 3 cycles of production per year

Goat production 1 cycle per year

Source: Wan Johari Wan Daud [15]

(2) secondary activities where each participating family (the dependents) will be involved in crops, livestock and tourism; (3) support activities comprising collection, processing and packaging centres (CPPC) and collection and marketing centres (CMC) which will undertake product grading, product planning, inventory control, packaging, distribution and export management for agricultural products.

The typical operational set-up of these ECER agropolitan projects is illustrated in Figure 1.

The set up seems to point to the strengthening of the participants' position who will largely come from the rural poor through synergetic dynamics of the public and private sectors, the latter being a component not normally conspicuous in previous rural development plans of the country. With finance and marketing apparatus set in

place right from the start through the anchoring of projects in vibrant participating companies the ECER agropolitans are not expected to suffer from chronic maladjustment of resources and lack of commercial competitiveness of the public-sector led projects that normally characterize Malaysian rural development.

**The Income Projections of the Besut-Setiu Agropolitan Participants:** By the look of it, the operational set-up of these ECER agropolitan projects seems to have been planned to enable participants of the rural poor to earn incomes well above the current national poverty income line (PIL) of RM 750 per month. For instance, through the proposed inception of multiple and organically integrated projects in, participant incomes the Besut-Setiu Agropolitan have been projected to range between RM 3,000 and RM 5,000 per month thus exceeding at least by more than 100 per cent the rural poor existing monthly incomes (Table 2).

**The Empowerment Issue of the Rural Poor:** The challenge posed by the agropolitan approach as originally intended by Friedman [8] is how to incorporate local capacity building and popular participation into a programme to foster mutual benefits for rural and urban areas in the course of national development. He defined empowerment as a process by which households and their members wield greater socio-political and psychological power - such as knowledge, skills, voice, collective action, self confidence - to reshape the actions affecting their own lives. In other words, empowerment should not just be a tool to improve efficiency but also as a metaphor for fundamental social transformation.

Yet, all too often empowerment may come to mean different things to different players in the Malaysian rural development scene. For instance, the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlement schemes had been showcased as a model of empowerment for the country's originally landless rural poor. At the height of the productive phase of a rubber or an oil palm scheme significant increases in the settler household incomes had sent many FELDA children to tertiary education. Upon graduation, these fortunate members of the FELDA second generation managed to secure white-collar employment outside the schemes which brought into the settler household monthly incomes much higher than those of their settler parents and thus uplifted the settler households out of poverty [16-17]. For such FELDA households we may acknowledge that empowerment in the form of some fundamental social transformation had indeed occurred [18-19].

Not all FELDA households had experienced such smooth empowerment, however. Over the latter years of the FELDA episode the bright picture of empowerment has increasingly turned dim and gloomy. The image of bright FELDA yuppies has been overtaken by a second generation of drug addicts and unemployed youths involved in various juvenile delinquencies [20].

Apart from that, there is the unsettling operational issue of replanting the old holdings. Many settlers found the replanting a hard thing to do as it was like going back to square one of having to borrow again and to go through the same old belt tightening period again before the new harvests will take place. Those settlers who chose to do it their own way by not going through the FELDA management system also felt disadvantaged and disempowered as they were met with various unfavourable responses [21- 22].

Yet, over the years FELDA has grown by leaps and bounds such that not only has it become the world's largest oil palm plantation operator [19] but that it has also undergone organisational transformation from a mere government agency to a large corporation with several highly diversified subsidiaries and activities.

In other words, in the FELDA case, it was the organisational agency that experienced empowerment rather than the originally intended rural poor. Would the same happen to the Malaysian agropolitans? Here, the inclusion of private companies does assure the viability and relative economic sustainability of the projects. While it is reassuring that the poor participants' income may double or triple by means of the projects, it is not certain that this would be equivalent to real social empowerment for them.

This verdict on the ECER agropolitans stands in contrast to the keen optimism expressed by some observers [13]. The reason for the present uncertainty may be seen in the operational set-up of the ECER agropolitans (Figure 1). As depicted in Figure 1, the arrows from the bottom tier where the poor participants belong to, stop at the ground work level and never reach the top decision-making echelons. It does seem then that the rural poor are still taken as not smart, capable and intellectually fit enough to be there.

For empowerment programmes in Malaysia to be credible, they would have to be perceived as possessing integrity [23] and sensibility [24] especially when disenfranchisement may easily become the plight of the weak in grand regional development projects like the ECER agropolitans [25]. If the Besut-Setiu Agropolitan organizational setup proves to be not a significant

departure from the familiar top-down design of many a Malaysian development project, it does mean that ECER's agropolitans fail to comply with the tenets of the agropolitan approach as prescribed by its proponents. This failure, in turn, begs the question: were the ECER's agropolitans meant to provide the means by which privileged stakeholders could make business out of poverty?

### CONCLUSION

The agropolitans are just taking off in Malaysia. As such they cannot be empirically judged for having succeeded or not in conferring real empowerment to the rural poor. On paper, the existing ECER's agropolitans does provide for economic empowerment of the targeted poor through the designed income enhancement projects. However, the same cannot be said for the poor's social empowerment as the organizational design does not confer much decision power to them as did the FELDA's. The import of all this is that in order to comply with the essence of the Agropolitan approach, it is imperative that future agropolitans provide for a more comprehensive decision making empowerment of the targeted poor.

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