

**“AIR LAUT MACAM DAUN PANDAN” (THE SEA IS LIKE PANDAN LEAF): PULAU PINANG FISHING COMMUNITIES, CONTESTED DEVELOPMENT AND “ANTI-POLITICS”**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study identifies the developmental pathway that is taking place in the state of Pulau Pinang. The focus is on the responses of the ordinary people, namely fishing communities to the development pace of Pulau Pinang (island), the contestation on “developmental” discourses with the state (namely Pulau Pinang State Government, PSG), and the ways in which state institutions and communities construct the narrative of “development”. Through participant observation in the field sites with the fishing community and secondary resources analysis, the article showcases the contested meaning of “development”. The research findings are on the one hand by the PSG, which is underpinned by neoliberal economic principles, on the other hand, by the communities at large, which is multifaceted in nature.*

**Keywords:** contested development, developmental discourse, fishing community, Pulau Pinang, Penang South Reclamation (PSR)

## **INTRODUCTION**

On 24th June 2021, Astro Awani’s programme, *Consider This*, aired a forum on a topic entitled “Penang Contested Development”. The forum focuses on Penang’s Transport Master Plan (PTMP) and the controversy of the Penang South Reclamation (PSR) project. The PTMP aims to achieve Pulau Pinang state’s grand

vision to become a sophisticated and livable city, while the PSR's main goal is to create new industrial zones, in turn to finance the PTMP.

The two speakers, Pulau Pinang State Exco for Infrastructure and Transport, Zairil Khir Johari and Lim Mah Hui, an economist and former local council, have divergent views on these projects; hence, on Pulau Pinang's developmental path. On the one hand, Zairil Khir Johari supports the projects in creating job opportunities via the establishment of new industrial zones by building three artificial lands because land is scarce. Environmental impact will be at its minimal level. Through the new expansion of industrial zones, commercial and residential activities will follow. On the other hand, Lim Mah Hui, representative to the civil society's voices (specifically Penang Forum) asserts that these projects will come with a great impact on the environment, quoting lengthily the environment evaluation report; and civil society at large is not anti-development but emphasises a "balanced" development – a development that is cost efficient, serving the people's interests vis-à-vis business interests.

This article highlights this "contested development" in Pulau Pinang. It identifies the developmental pace that is taking place in Pulau Pinang. Since the 2008 General Election with the change of state government, we have seen relatively "open" practices of politics. This change of political regime begs the question on the development processes adhered to in Pulau Pinang, how developmental discourses are negotiated among various stakeholders. This article highlights the contested meaning of development that one must go beyond the monolithic narrative of developmental (economic) progress. In other words, what are the meanings of development, and its discursivity in Pulau Pinang's development processes. This article looks at the contested meaning of "development", on the one hand by the Pulau Pinang State Government (PSG), which is underpinned by neoliberal economic principles, the development pathway accentuated on the formation of Pulau Pinang's economic growth since 1970s; on the other hand, by the communities at large, which is multifaceted in nature.

The author argues that Pulau Pinang state development pathways cannot escape from the historical trajectories of its development since the 1970s, leading to the succeeding neo-liberal vision to become a global city. By "neoliberalism", it refers to a new economic orthodoxy in championing profits, in which production and capital are generated via free-market capitalism, deregulation, private-public partnership, while the state acts as prime agency of redistribution, which creates class power and the subsequent uneven development (Harvey 2006). The discussion extends to investigate Pulau Pinang state's development strategies, its logics of development, which has never separated from its industrialisation desire,

and neo-liberal orientation, friendliness to open market and technological leaning, which the above said PTPM and PSR have played significant role in materialising them. Development also derives from bottom-up. The author would like to illustrate this other aspect of development from the fishing community that desires the nostalgia of abundance as extrapolated in material resources from the sea, the well-being of sea livelihood, and development that has moral underpinning. Alas, these responses of the fishing community, which are politically expressed through local culture are transformed into technical problems.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL DISCOURSE AND PRACTICES**

The concept of “development” is a contested one (Abdul Rahman 2018, 13–14). Development discourse has its roots in the period of 18th and 19th century Europe with ideas of “the enlightenment and of modernity, science and industrial modernisation” (Caouette and Kapoor 2016, 1; Hall and Gieben 1992). Beginning from the time of colonial period of the West to the decolonialisation era and the end of Second World War, the model of development has always been based on scientific positivism aimed at modernisation rooted in notions of progress, scientific methods to extract nature. From the 1940s, development pertains to the issue of economic growth. Poverty became the new problematisation of the globe (Mason 1997; Rapley 2007; Rist 2014). In 1950s and 1960s, the focus was on distribution of growth up until the 1980s, with the “lost decade” of development, international organisations, such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund, came to the “rescue” of many Third World societies and governments (Larrain 1989; Leftwich 2007). Another discursive shift took place with “globalisation embodying the new face of old ideas of modernisation, progress, productivity and scientific rationalism” (Caouette and Kapoor 2016, 3). Under the regimes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, neoliberalism became the buzzword of international economic orthodoxy in the development industry (Harvey 2005). In the 1990s to 2000, development relates to the virtues of sustainability and human development (Abdul Rahman 2018, 13).

In short, “development” discourse was based on the Western idea of human progress and the idea of enlightenment. The Third World “problems” in the post war period could be remedied through development aids and programmes to archive the level of modernity that the Western world has enjoyed. A meta-model of “development” based on industrialism was the key to human progress under the beliefs that industrialisation and urbanisation are necessary routes to modernisation. Science and technologies were the new faith and the marker for success to bring progress to the globe (Escobar 1995). When investigating Malaysian (Pulau

Pinang) development paths, under the pretext of the ongoing challenges of global industrialisation pace that is taking place, the practice of development embeds the notion of science as the rationale for growth and productivity for human progress.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

While analysing the state's developmental strategies and narratives from a top-down perspective, this research also looks at the voices from the community (fishermen). As Roy (2014) has indicated, while the state developmental programmes are marginalising the society, simultaneously, the rural folks devise strategies to engage with the states' programmes, to negotiate and resist "development" programmes for survival. The author pays attention to fishing community's narrative on development and responses to the imposition of developmental discourse. The author would like to borrow Bulloch's (2017) approach on "new ethnography of development" that pays attention to the ethnography of development discourses and the agencies' developmental practices and politics. It investigates the politics of meaning making in development, the contestation, and negotiations, acknowledging the non-linear relations, at the same time putting the agency (the variously positioned state actors) not "as passive recipients...people have room to maneuver within structural constraint" (Bulloch 2017, 12). The approach of "new ethnography of development" allows the researcher to investigate the developmental discourses that are underway under the neoliberal principles of economic activities mostly adapted by the state institutions, while not losing the substance of the agency's interpretation and meaning making of development.

This is a qualitative research. The fieldwork was conducted for three months from July to September 2019 involving activities such as in-depth interviews and attending fishermen's local events and seminars. Both formal interviews and informal conversations with the folks were conducted. In-depth interviews with the local communities such as fishing folks, environmental groups, were the respondents to the research. The author conducted interviews with fishing folks at three sites, namely Teluk Bahang, Sungai Pinang, and Pulau Betong. Some of the interviews were conducted more than one time. An informal meeting was conducted with approximately eight fishermen organised by one of the informants and an interview with Jaringan Ekologi dan Iklim (JEDI) (Table 1). Secondary resources such as government documents, news reports, NGOs research reports, environmental reports were also collected to supplement the field narratives of the fishing community.

Table 1: Fieldwork interviews with interviewees' names and positions, locations and date of interviews

Interviewees	Position	Location	Date
Abu	Fisherman	Teluk Bahang	29 August 2019
Abu and several fishermen (names unidentified)	Fishermen	Teluk Bahang	7 September 2019
Ah Boon	Fisherman	Pulau Betong	6 September 2019
Kumar	Fisherman	Sungai Pinang, Jelutong	July 2019
Pak Zul	Fisherman, boat owner	Pulau Betong	28 August 2019
Shamsul	Fisherman	Sungai Pinang, Jelutong	July 2019
JEDI	NGO officer	Universiti Sains Malaysia	12 August 2022

## **THE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS: MALAYSIAN-PULAU PINANG INDUSTRIALISATION PRAXIS**

The development inquiry in Malaysia is hardly taken with cynicism (Lee 2004). When investigating Malaysian development, one would find that the inquiry is somehow difficult to identify in its developmental trend and scope except to realise that Malaysian “development” follows the interventionist state’s highly industrialised agenda (Lee 2004; Jomo 1993, 1). With the unprecedented growth of Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia’s industrialisation has the foundation of the late 18th-century post-enlightenment idea of economic progress and development that was closely identified with industrialisation (Jomo 1993, 1). Heng (2014, 227–230) critically assesses Malaysian modernisation that was it is aligned with the theory and practice of Western modernisation guided by the post-enlightenment ideas of growth and development prioritising science and technology. This aspect of development and modernity can be found in Mahathir Mohamad’s “Vision 2020” in 1991 (Khuo 1995; Goh 2002; Jomo 1989; Milne and Mauzy 1999).

In Pulau Pinang, there is this parallelism between the Malaysian state’s development path rooted in the idea of progress as the state adopts the thrust in economic growth through industrialisation in bringing about positive transformation to human progress. Despite the 2008 change of state government in Pulau Pinang and the subsequent emergence of “open” practices of politics, there is a continuity of development pathways from the previous regime under the Gerakan-led Barisan Nasional (BN) government. The “unchanged” development pathways can best be identified in Pulau Pinang government development preferences and

discourse, which desire science and technology, market, and capital as markers for progress. In essence, Pulau Pinang development pathways are shaped by three major trajectories: the decline of its port's status in the region; the adoption of export-oriented industry in the early 1970s in parallel to the Malaysian economic transformation period; the subsequent global competition for cheap labour and skilled labour.

Pulau Pinang lost to Singapore in the 1820s as a port that served as trading routes between India-China. With the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, Pulau Pinang had to reinvent itself that linked European and Chinese traders on tin mines and rubber plantations in Perak and Southern Thailand. The post-independence era saw another economic blow to Pulau Pinang as it lost its free port status, followed by the competition from Port Swettenham, renamed Port Klang (Saravanamuttu and Hutchinson 2012, xv).

The incident opened another development pathway, the start-up of Pulau Pinang's entrance towards industrialisation. The Pulau Pinang master plan also known as Munro Report was established in 1964 to rebuild Pulau Pinang's economy. To arrest decline of Pulau Pinang's economic performance it called for a programme for industrialisation located on the mainland part of Pulau Pinang (Ooi and Goh 2010, xxi). However, industrial growth continued to decline in Pulau Pinang. In 1968, Pulau Pinang state's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was 12% below the national average, with unemployment rate at 15% (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 68).

With the loss of Alliance Party (the predecessor of BN) to Gerakan in the 1960 General Election, a new master plan was completed, known as the Robert Nathan Report in 1970. Unlike the Munro Report that focused on Import Substitution Industry (ISI), Nathan Report called for an Export Oriented Industry (EOI) strategy and infrastructure development plan (Ooi and Goh 2010, xxiii). It called for a basic restructuring of Pulau Pinang economy that focused on manufacturing industries, tourism, fisheries, education, health, and research facilities to pull Pulau Pinang out of the "poverty trap." The then Chief Minister Lim Chong Eu turned Pulau Pinang's economy from an ageing entrepôt into an offshore manufacturing hub for the electronics industry and tourist site (ibid).

Arguably, Pulau Pinang's developmental outward looking plan to become neoliberal and integrate its economy with the outside world had already begun in the 1970s as Malaysia adopted the EOI strategy. The Penang Development Council (PDC) was established in 1972 to materialise the tasks. Led by the manufacturing sector, it accounted for 12.7% of GDP in 1970 to 46.0% of GDP in 1990 mainly

concentrated in the Bayan Lepas Free Trade Zone (Ooi and Goh 2010, xxii–xxiii, xxiv). Within the manufacturing sector, electronics is the primary growth engine, which accounts for 54.5% of all employment in 2006 (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 69; Rasiah 2019).<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s, Pulau Pinang became one of the major exporters in manufacturing especially in the semi-conductor sector. To continue and enhance the industrial development path, between 1991 to 2000, a new development plan, the Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDP) recommended to emphasise the service sector in promoting higher order services, such as finance, education, and information technology, medical services, in addition to the deepening of the industrial base with skill intensive, technology intensive and high-value added industries (Ooi and Goh 2010, xxv). In 2017, the service sector remained as major contributors towards Pulau Pinang’s GDP growth accounting for 49.3%, while manufacturing was 44.8%. In contrast, agricultural, mining and quarrying, and construction sectors accounted for 2%, 0.1%, and 2.6%, respectively (Penang Institute 2019, 22).

Even though Pulau Pinang has excelled in manufacturing and service sectors, competition continues to haunt Pulau Pinang especially from China and India in terms of labour market. In addition, these two countries have increasingly invested to develop their innovative capacity (Wong and Ho 2010, 26). By 2000, most of the lower value-added operation of the multinational corporations (MNCs) have moved out of Pulau Pinang as many of these MNCs were altering their existing operations towards higher value activities, while at the same time looking for a lower cost operations site. Part of the problems for Pulau Pinang’s less impressive performance in the higher-value added activities was “the industry’s inability to leverage its learning base to create increasingly higher value-added products and services in a timely manner to satisfy the higher end needs of a fast-changing market” (Yoon 2012, 130). Pulau Pinang needs to venture and advance its development path.

To stay competitive, middle-income economies can no longer remain at its existing economic model – the low-cost producer, labour-intensive. Malaysia, and Pulau Pinang, ought to shift its economic models to consist of high-value chain, knowledge- and innovation-based products and services (Yoon 2012, 5). In lieu of these challenges, Pulau Pinang seeks to move from its “traditional ‘high volume, low mix’ production to ‘low volume, high mix’ operations”, to invest in more technology intensive works such as in research, design, and development (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 71).

## **PENANG2030: A HIGH-TECH INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA AND DISCOURSE**

In conjunction with the rise of industrial competition at global level that Pulau Pinang state has muddled through in the changing international industrial relations, Pulau Pinang state's subsequent development pathways aim at constructing a high-tech industrial framework agenda. Pulau Pinang has begun to focus on the high value-added electronics industry, information, and communication technology industry, such as chip design, water fabrication, and research and development, which requires high skilled labour with knowledge-technology-capabilities, as continued in its Second Penang Strategic Development Plan (PSDP2) from 2001 to 2010 (Au Yong 2012, 386; Ooi and Goh 2010, xxvi). Technological knowledge aligned in digitalisation of market structures became the marker for the next development path. This relates to the subsequent challenge to Pulau Pinang, that is the feasibility of sustaining in the production domain and the need to progress towards knowledge economy that requires a re-structuring and revisiting of Pulau Pinang's industrialisation direction (Hutchinson 2012, 2, 11; Yoon 2012). Another challenge was that Pulau Pinang's economy is highly depended on the changes of external factors and is vulnerable to external swing of the global economy (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 70).

As a result, PSG has launched the Penang2030 in 2018 as a catalyst towards building a strong economy in lieu of the changing industrial relations. One of the development plans is to attract the next generation of electrical and electronic (E&E) companies such as in autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, 5G and internet of things (Penang2030 Unit 2019; The Edge Market 2019). This is in addition to the development of medical tourism, biotechnology, and aquaculture that require high-skilled professionals (Kharas, Zeufack and Majeed 2010, 82).

Penang2030 is a development plan introduced by the post-2008 DAP-led state government. It contains 16 strategic initiatives, including women's development, community welfare, digital infrastructure, tourism and culture, housing, and green, safer, and smart technology. As indicated by the Chief Minister, Chow Kon Yeow, such vision is to align with the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. (Hadzlihady 2018). In facing the Industrial Revolution 4.0 that has shaped the world, "smart city" is seen as a global trend that Pulau Pinang ought to adapt. Pulau Pinang has planned its industries to be digitalised, capable of encountering the technological challenges that the world is operating.

The launching of Penang2030 is not a mere developmental pathway, it is a response to the ongoing global challenge of structural adjustment, which is heading towards



knowledge-based economy. To achieve economic growth, productivity through technological advancement, namely IT and digitalisation, is the (new) way to go. One can surmise that the Penang2030 encompasses the desire to build economically resilient industries (knowledge-based economy, manufacturing, and agriculture) that head towards the digital technology era.

## **PENANG SOUTH RECLAMATION (PSR) PROJECT**

To accommodate this global industrial trend, the necessity for land is the primary factor to achieve this development vision. Developmental discourse in Pulau Pinang is made into the necessity of land acquisition. To alleviate land scarcity, the PSG began to explore coastal land reclamation and land acquisition to transform the production-based economy (P-economy) to the knowledge-based economy (K-economy) (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 82). In the forum, Zairil Khir Johari's justification is not without its basis of references on Pulau Pinang's developmental path. He adopted this narrative that industrialisation was the key to uplift Pulau Pinang's growth. Pulau Pinang once reached at a poverty rate at 44% in the 1970s. Since it adopted the industrialisation path, poverty rate went to 2% in the post industrialisation period. The reclamation projects to create the three artificial lands are necessary to create additional industrial zones as way to continue the developmental path in Pulau Pinang.<sup>2</sup>

The PSG initiated the reclamation of three artificial islands on the south of Pulau Pinang island. The reclamation land covers 1,832 hectares of land to generate a fund for an USD11 billion transport plan of the state to avoid traffic congestion, improve public transit services and relieve development pressure on the forest land. The three islands are allocated into an industrial park, housing estates, and green public spaces. For industrial purpose, it focuses on the first island – Penang South Island (PSI) – measuring 2,300 acres of land (930 hectares) to attract the next generation of E&E companies. Such initiative is to accommodate the continuous growth of the existing 480 tenants in MNC clusters at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, covering the next generation E&E industry (Environmental Impact Assessment Report 2019; The Edge Market 2019). In short, the PSI is to create a new urban-business centre based on a smart city vision with digital connectivity, energy management, intelligent traffic system (Penang2030 Unit 2019; The Edge Market 2019).

Urban city is the (new) developmental progress in the globalised world. New forms of livelihood are planned to accommodate this change. In Malaysia, urban dwellers have increased from 20% in 1950 to 75% in 2018 by 2050 it is projected to rise at 87% (Tan 2019, 4). The Pulau Pinang’s population density as estimated (2022) is 1,685/km<sup>2</sup>, ranked at the third largest in Malaysia (see Table 2).

Table 2: Population, area, population density in the states of Malaysia, 2022 (preliminary estimate)

States	Population	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population density (km <sup>2</sup> )
Johor	4,022,700	19,102	210.6
Kedah	2,170,900	9,447	229.8
Kelantan	1,829,300	15,101	121.1
Kuala Lumpur	1,945,200	243	8,005
Labuan	96,800	92.0	1,052
Melaka	1,007,700	1,652	610.0
Negeri Sembilan	1,209,000	6,686	180.8
Pahang	1,612,500	35,840	44.99
Perak	2,521,700	21,038	119.9
Perlis	289,800	818	354.3
Pinang (Pulau Pinang)	1,738,600	1,032	1,685
Putrajaya	120,300	49.0	2,455
Sabah	3,390,900	73,904	45.88
Sarawak	2,470,900	124,451	19.85
Selangor	7,038,200	7,931	887.4
Terengganu	1,187,000	12,959	91.60

Source: City Population (2023)

One of the approaches to accommodate this challenge is for the state government to create “Smart Cities” (Tan 2019, 2). Pulau Pinang has launched its own transformation into a Smart City by 2030 through the launching of Penang2030. This was launched concurrently with the Penang Structure Plan 2030, focusing on becoming a smart and harmonious hub, aiming at three key areas namely public transportation, green building, and disaster management (Tan 2019, 6). In addition to that is the establishment of PTMP that consists of an integrated transport infrastructure that connects the PSI with main parts of Pulau Pinang Island, such as the Pan Island Link, Light Rail Transport, trams, and water taxi services, to resolve Pulau Pinang’s traffic congestion and transportation issue in 2009 and to accommodate upcoming urbanisation.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2011, the PSG together with the Northern Corridor Implementation Agency (NCIA) appointed AJC Planning Consultants Sdn Bhd (AJC), in association with Halcrow Consultants Sdn Bhd (Halcrow) and supported by Singapore Cruise Centre (SCC) to come out with a PTMP study. In October 2011, Halcrow submitted four reports that included: public transport approach; highway-based strategies; accessibility report; and institutional reforms. In August 2015, the then Chief Minister, Lim Guan Eng announced the appointment of SRS Consortium<sup>4</sup> as the project delivery partner (PDP) for the PTMP that costs RM27 billion. Aside from the above, there is an additional proposed plan, which is a RM6.3 billion three paired roads and undersea tunnel, to be implemented by a different PDP, Consortium Zenith, as part of the plan (Mok 2019; Penang Forum 2021; JediPenang 2021).

Controversy began in 2015 as the proposed cost of PTMP was estimated at RM27 billion but later rose to around RM46 billion, not including the RM6.3 billion as proposed by Consortium Zenith. As an opposition-led state then, the PSG could not obtain the funding from the BN-led federal government (Vasu 2020). As a result, the PSG had to seek for alternative funding for the Light Rail Transit (LRT) and Penang Pan Island Link 1 (PIL1)<sup>5</sup> that cost RM15.9 billion. This was where the PSR enters the scene. To do so, SRS Consortium would need RM11 billion to reclaim the three islands, that has a total of 4,500 acres of lands. Island A will be an industrial park where the lots will be sold to the investors to raise fund for PTMP; Island B covers high-end support services; Island C will be the creation of new tourism products and residential properties. It is estimated that at a price of RM200 per square feet for the industrial park (Island A), Pulau Pinang can raise about RM70 billion that can cover the cost of PTMP.

The controversy as highlighted by the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and fishing folks, were about the ineffectiveness of PIL1 to resolve Pulau Pinang's traffic congestion and unbalanced development problems between the island and mainland of Pulau Pinang. Penang Forum's Lim Mah Hui argues that the PSR is not able to finance the PTMP (Nambiar 2021). The state government then justified the continuation of PSR to establish smart city, expand free trade zone, retain human capital, and release development pressure on George Town. The Penang Forum is critical that all these objectives can be achieved on the mainland and the state government's weakness to recognise the unbalanced development between the island and the mainland led to escalating land prices and pressure on the island (Lim 2021). Penang Forum and Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) preferred to adopt the 2012 Halcrow's proposal that focused more on implementing a public transport network instead of a RM7.5 billion highway. Other concerns are safety and environment of the blasting works under Penang Hill and Paya Terubong (to

create tunnels for the highways), the effect on the Air Itam dam area and Jesselton area. Another major concern, especially on the effect of PSR is the fishing communities on fishing resources, livelihood issue, and food security (Dermawan 2019; FMT Reporters 2022; Penang Forum 2018).

Pulau Pinang's development pathways, its industrial strategy, and structures are in constant negotiation with the changing of world industrial structures, subscribing to the global trends of digitisation of industrial revolution. As such, Pulau Pinang's development pathways are historically contingent, that is affected by the loss of port status and the subsequent parallelism to federal (Malaysia) industrialised agendas since 1970s up to present day: from the adoption of EOI concentrates on low-value added industry to knowledge-based industry focusing on building an IT city, in pursuit of a new lifestyle and livelihood, while attaching to its urbanised framework of development that creates (industrial) opportunities as the marker for the next development path. The solution to this challenge is by upgrading the basic needs and to head towards technological savvy infrastructures; at the same time empowering the general public's participation in achieving a sustainable and technological environmentally friendly living conditions. In short, a new livelihood is being made that orient towards a combination of technology and nature. The development pathways of Pulau Pinang are becoming more neo-liberal, accommodate the trends of an urbanised lifestyles, and outward looking parallel to the rapid changes of the globalised economic trends.

## **AQUACULTURE AND PROLETARIANISATION**

The PTMP and the PSR have invited protests from the fishing communities, civil organisations groups, politicians and ordinary people. Beside the investigation on the physical and tangible aspect of development, one must also be critical of the discourses that these developmental pathways (and the subsequent opportunities and threats) have had on the community at large. Putting the author's inquiry into this perspective, this article takes its research direction and places emphasis on the discourse of development.

The early study and research on the fishing community in Malaysia concentrated in the field of anthropology such as Firth's (1946) ethnographic study of the Malaysian peasantry (fishing community) economy and Carsten's (1997) study of the Langkawi fishing community kinship system. Others look at issues and challenges in fishing development (Mohammad Raduan et al. 2011); coastal resources management (Wong 1990; Ogawa 2004; Jahara 1988); challenges of the fishing industry and overfishing (Mohammad Ferdous, Ishak and Squires 2002);

poverty relations and fishing industry (Solaymani and Kari 2014); and the coping strategies of small-scale fishermen in Pulau Pinang and Malaysia (Hayrol Azril, Asnarulkhadi and D'Silva 2017; Suriati 2009; 2011). Even though these studies contribute to the research on fishing sectors, there is a vacuum in understanding the dynamic relations between the state and the society (fishing community), the politics of development vis-à-vis management of development, which this study is complementing into the literature.

In managing the issue of fishing community as affected by the development paces of the state in general, and PSR in specific, the state government introduces new modern fishing industry namely aquaculture industry as the solution. Aquaculture industry provides job opportunities, new source of income, reduce scarcity of fish food source issue, and it is a high value capital generation industry; thus, assumed to generate income to affected fishing communities (Penang Institute 2019, 116). Between 1995 and 2015, aquaculture industry in Pulau Pinang has displayed a significant average annual growth rate of 8.2% and 23% in production and value in comparison to marine-capture fisheries that has a slower growth rate of 1.7% and 8% in quantity and value. Aquaculture industry also contributed over 54% to the state's food fish production (58,736 metric tonnes valued at RM1,090.60 million) (Vaghefi 2017, 3). As predicted by the Department of Fisheries Malaysia, aquaculture production in Pulau Pinang will continue to increase at a rate of 10% per year until 2020 (Penang Institute 2019, 116). Furthermore, Pulau Pinang is the third-largest producer of aquaculture products in Malaysia after Sabah and Perak.

The former State Health, Agricultural and Agro-based Industry and Rural Development Committee chairman, Afif Bahardin in responding to the affected fishing folks from the PSR projects, asserts that with the introduction of aquaculture, together with deep sea fishing, water taxies, entrepreneurship and tourism, jobs will be created. In addition to that is the venture into tuna fish industry as the potential site to increase the income of fishing folks (McIntyre 2019). To the state, dealing with the issue of fishing community is about the transformation of mode of production as a way forward towards progress.

Shamsul, a fisherman, is critical of the state government's proposal to transform the fishing folks and their economic affairs to becoming breeder in aquaculture or to become watchers to boats. In the aspect of the state as the interventionist regime, proletarianisation is taking place, that is "the set of process which increases the number of people who lack control over the means of production, and who survive by selling their labor power" (Tilly 1979, 1). The fishermen's peasantry identity is gradually being transformed into wage workers as breeders (*penternak*), turning the fishermen vulnerable to the new capitalist relations of production in the

aquaculture industry. This uncertainty is expressed in the fishermen's nostalgia on the sea, "it is difficult to work on land, we want to go to the sea." Another fisherman, Kumar, asserts that, "even when I do not go fishing, I still go to the jetty, sit there and look out at the ocean, even without doing anything, I need to look at the ocean, it calms me down."<sup>6</sup>

To Abu, it is unrealistic to become a breeder as it requires a capital at RM1.5 million to start the business. In addition to that is the acquisition of new skills to become breeder, and the new knowledge about market mechanisms. All these are beyond the fishing folks' ability to accommodate the (new) challenges in the industry rendering their loss of autonomy in skills and industrial capacity. In the current situation of Pulau Pinang, sea water pollution because of overflow from land development, low water quality has headed to incidents of disease that cause damage to the fish farms. For instance, in 2015, the production of cockles dropped by a dramatic 78% mostly due to water pollution (Vaghefi 2017, 6). In addition is the environmental change that affects the quality and quantity of aquaculture production such as severe water stress caused by the El Nino phenomenon. Another challenge is labour shortage in the aquaculture sector especially the competition for labour and wages in electronic and manufacturing sectors and local youths prefer to work in factories for the higher income.

From an economic perspective, Shamsul welcomes development programmes; but from a fishermen's welfare perspective, "the state government does not take care of the people at the bottom." Shamsul's expression of not being concerned can be taken as a local expression against the development management towards fishermen's welfare. As he stated, "fishermen are not anti-development, but the ways state government is not concerning the welfare of the fishermen when handling the issues."<sup>7</sup>

Shamsul is contesting the narrative of development, one that is long-term livelihood as desired by the fishing community vis-à-vis the state's over-idealised aquaculture industry. He does not agree to the way the state government handles the dispute especially that the compensation matter is not feasible because the fishermen cannot purchase housing property due to the difficulty to secure bank loans. He suggests a cooperative structure that allows the fishermen to purchase housing from the state government, which is more secure and sustainable. The nuance of fishing folks' critical reactions to the state government's initiatives is the despair on fishing cultural lifestyle, stripping off the identity of being "real" fishing folks, whose life has relied on (sea) nature and rights to fish, and the incompatibility of the compensation programmes to fishing livelihood. The issue is about the identity politics of the fishing community and the transformation of that identity

into a commercial category as breeders that integrate to marketisation of capitals at the expense of traditional fishing culture. According to Shamsul, “traditional fishermen will become extinct and this will happen when development projects such as reclamation land projects are ready to be implemented.”<sup>8</sup>

Another justification for Pulau Pinang to adopt aquaculture is that traditional fishing as a trade has become outdated. From the state’s narrative, the reason for the “backwardness” of the industry is the shrinking of fish productivity and overfishing caused by trawl fishing. The remedy to overfishing is commercialisation of fishing industry or aquaculture. To Ah Boon,<sup>9</sup> the persistence of overfishing caused by trawls fishing has to do with the negligence of local authorities on the illegal encroachment of “foreigners” into the traditional fishermen’s sea territory and the illegal usage of trawl fishing net within the designated area. It is a bureaucratic problem in dealing with the trawling fishing operation and the compromise of the authority when executing rule of law in protecting the traditional fishermen. The “Siamese” people work for the *tekong* and have encroached into the traditional fishermen territory of 5 nautical from the epi-continental sea which they are supposed to be out about 15 nautical.<sup>10</sup>

Ah Boon was annoyed with the local authority for the negligence of reports made to the marine about the foreigners’ encroachment. As many occasions have taken place, the traditional fishermen were disturbed by the authority, such as checking the license and permit. Subsequently, the fishermen refused to make any report and instead approached the foreigners by themselves. Abu has similar complaint that fishermen rarely make report to the authority because they have been accused of making false reports. As a result, fishermen took the matter into their own hands. To the fishermen, overfishing caused by trawl fishing is a long-hauled issue and it is bureaucratic inefficiency on the authority side to capture the illegal fishing practices. However, the state de-politicises the overfishing issue and turns it into a technical and programmatic one that can be resolved by increasing productivity through aquaculture.

“Anti-politics machine” is at work (Ferguson 1994).<sup>11</sup> By “anti-politics machine”, it refers to practices of the state in “depoliticising everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power” (Ferguson 1994, xv). That is to say, we are seeing the de-politicisation of development-related PSR vis-à-vis the fishing community’s livelihood and tradition, whereby the problems of “human development” and negligence that embedded the social and political inquiries are transformed into technical problems as exercised by the bureaucratic regime.

There is a contestation on developmental progress and the threats between the fishing folks and the state. To the fishing folks' language of development, development simply connotes the narrative of long-term survivalism, heritage sustenance (fishing culture and tradition), development with apprehension over productivity, conscience management. The conception of "traditional fishermen", the political and structural issues faced by fishing community, are reduced to the level of individual values, attitudes, and motivations instead of seeing it as socio-political and developmental problems casted upon the fishing community by the bureaucratic state. The struggles, demands, responses from the fishermen, their political vocabulary, and statements in relation to development agendas are narrowed down as mundane and pristine from politics that the official thinking of state's development agencies is inclined to see the developmental projects as neutral instruments of "development" that technical solutions and social services to the fishermen can mobilise and remedy (Ferguson 1994, 87). In this developmental discourse, fishermen's mundane livelihood and the problematique can be resolved through commercial fishing (aquaculture), open-market infrastructures, new industrial zones, land reclamation, a creation of liveable life with ICT; thus, ushering the policy and solution into an inquiry of productivity and growth based on science and technology akin to the Penang2030 agendas pushed by the expanding bureaucratic power. Put it simply, there is the expansion of bureaucratic power to dictate the narrative of development on how the fishermen should earn a living in the midst of the ongoing development challenges and as such marginalising and displacing the heritage, traditions, and autonomy of the fishing community.

## **LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AS "OTHER WAYS" TO DEVELOPMENT**

*"Air laut macam daun pandan"* (The sea is like pandan leaf)

A leader of the fishing community in Pulau Pinang nostalgically narrated the memory of fishing life and the colour and the cleanliness of the sea, the abundance of fishes to catch in comparison to the present-day destruction of the ocean. The fishing communities are declaring their version of development in the language of culture. The state's narrative of development and "modern" workers are resisted, and their language of development is hybridised within local forms, logics, a sort of cultural assertiveness of livelihood that needs to be understood in "other ways" of what development is and is not.

Despite the environment report published by the relevant authority on environmental pollution, fishermen do not understand the scientific jargons and concepts. Abu expresses his opinion that the fishermen have practical experiences to deal with the



environmental problems of the sea, while the government authority has the letter of recognition that is filled with technical jargons on environment.

To Abu,<sup>12</sup> fishermen's local knowledge on ecology can provide tremendous inputs to the fishing industry and food security. Unfortunately, this is neglected by the state government's development apparatus, as echoed by JEDI.<sup>13</sup> One negligence of fishermen's local knowledge is the ways fishermen identify pollution. Shamsul's way of identifying ecology and pollution is the identification on mud quality and marine fauna. Places where mud had been destroyed are Teluk Kumbar, Batu Ferringhi and Batu Maung, where food (plankton) for fishes and the breeding ground for prawn has been destroyed. Another indication of environmental degradation is that *beranggas* (a type of shell on the rock) has become poisonous due to chemical infection, "when one's leg is cut, the wound takes longer to heal because the water is poisonous."

The sea pollution caused by reclamation is associated to sea current that is unique to Pulau Pinang island. Fishermen's description is not based on marine science or oceanography explanation, sedimentation of oceanic soil, changes of water depth, and so on, but instead is based on local experiences and idioms: Increasingly, the seabed (*dasar laut*) is polluted and has become muddy. When the digging of mud is happening, pollution takes place and affects other areas, especially the western part of Pulau Pinang island. Abu asserts that Pulau Pinang is located in the Peninsular Sea (between mainland Pulau Pinang and Pulau Pinang Island). Pollution takes place when the sea current circles around the island in an unrestrained fashion (*air mengalir melalui banyak hala*), which would bring pollution (garbage, sand) from different directions around the island. The state government does not understand this sea phenomenon, known as "the deep sea is circling around" (*laut selut berpusing-pusing*) as indicated by the red circle in Figure 1. The storm would bring the soil (that has been dig from the reclamation) into different direction of the island and gradually the soil would settle into the sea and enter the seabed. The mud is stuck and this subsequently causes fishes to run away and not lay eggs.

The cause of sea pollution is man-made rather than nature. Abu complains that sea pollution was due to the irresponsible boats that carried the mud dig from the seabed from land reclamation. These boats were paid per trip. These boats which were supposed to throw the mud outside 20 nautical but instead threw at 5 or 6 nautical to save cost and petrol, which is the fishing area of the traditional fishermen. This action had destroyed the harvest of the fish within 1 to 2 nautical, where the fishes lay eggs. Pak Zul's reiterates that sea water becomes muddy because of the sand thrown into the ocean from the reclamation and caused reduction of shrimps because they live on clean water surface.

The contestation of development discourse is that on the one hand, sea pollution is caused by climate changes, while another narrative is sea pollution is man-made. The consideration of local tradition and logic of the economy among the fishing community, their responses and resistance towards Pulau Pinang’s development path (and projects) evoke a strong cultural value – morality and rights to fish, environment, and sustenance of the sea – is in constant contestation with a technocratic and programmatic logic of development adopted by the bureaucratic power of the state. We are observing the practice of local knowledge, to borrow Scott’s (1998, 313) concept of the *mētis*, “cunning intelligence,” which means “a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment.” With the practical knowledge that the fishing community has acquired through their life experiences, they are resisting the simplification of the principles of the state’s programmatic solutions because the oceanic life, in which they have lived and exercised their work are so complex and unpredictable that formal procedures and programmes based on scientific rationale are impossible to apply and control. The fishing folks’ responses derive from the other ways of seeing development deeply related to the local livelihood beyond the technology that developmental apparatus would subscribe. Sea is not a commodity, it is life.

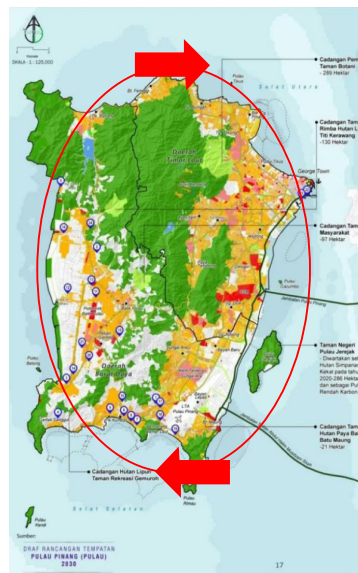


Figure 1: Deep sea circle (Author’s own illustration).  
Source: Anilnetto.com (2022).

## CONCLUSION

A closer look at Pulau Pinang state's developmental projects, taking the PSR as case study, the developmental agendas of the Pulau Pinang state are underpinned by a technocratic, programmatic discourse vis-à-vis fishing folks' livelihood issues pertaining to environment, human security, and moral underpinning. Development issues have become apolitical and technical under this new political regime, paradoxically a regime that is considered more "open" and "democratic", in comparison to the previous regime.

The developmental agencies, including the politicians, their preferential orientation in comprehending the problematiques of poverty, rapid development, class disparity, are causes pressured by the neo-liberal challenges, lacking in industrial capacity to compete at the international level, which requires a set of technical "solutions" to those problems: scarcity of land vis-à-vis over-populated space; commercialisation of agricultural vis-à-vis traditional agriculture; modernisation of livelihood and trades to catch up with the world vis-à-vis heritage and traditional livelihood; national economy vis-à-vis local economy.

In retrospect, the danger of de-politicisation of development, the exercises of the "anti-politic machines", is that the seemingly "open" politics in a (new) regime is the recurrence of a new form governmentality that conforms to the developmental design of the state, which only recognises the technical and programmatic problematiques at the expense of a more democratic exercises of political rights, citizenship, and cultural autonomy.

If we continue to observe that development is indeed a discourse and practice as constructed by the bureaucratic power, we will only limit our observation of meaning making (of development) within the relations of contestations, risk in losing the other meanings of development arising from other social relations. There is another proposition that development indeed has other meanings especially from the subaltern voices, deriving from local histories, values, ideologies, traditions and cultural autonomy that are always intertwine, negotiate, and resist, with the capitalist and neoliberalist values and structures. Developmental discourse and practice are more fluid in form and that this relation is in constant change in a non-linear fashion.

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## NOTES

1. The next industry is tourism that registered 5.96 million tourist arrivals in 2009 compared to 6.3 million in 2008 (Lee, Wein and Loke 2012, 70). In the northern coast area of the island, small fishing villages were transformed and turned to cater to local and international tourists (Ooi and Goh 2010, xxv).
2. In May 2023, it is announced that the three-island reclamation project is reduced to only one island from 4,500 acres to 2,300 acres.
3. For a detailed plan, please refer to PTMP websites at <https://pgmasterplan.penang.gov.my/en/>
4. SRS Consortium comprises of Gamuda Berhad (60%), Pulau Pinang-based Loh Phoy Ten Holdings Sdn. Bhd. (20%), and Ideal Property Development Sdn. Bhd. (20%) (Mok 2019).
5. Pan Island Link is a proposed 20 km toll-free highway to reduce traffic congestion on the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway (LCE) and adjacent roads.
6. Note that all names of the interviewees are pseudonyms. Kumar, interview by the author, July 2019, Sungai Pinang, Jelutong.
7. Shamsul, interview by the author, July 2019, Sungai Pinang, Jelutong.
8. Ibid.
9. Ah Boon, interview by the author, 6 September 2019, Pulau Betong.
10. *Tekong* refers to fisherman who owns boats, while *awak-awak* or *awek-awek* work for the *tekong*. The *tekong* receives a bigger share of the catch as *tekong* are responsible to shoulder the cost of operation such as petrol, boat services, net, and others. *Awak-awak* takes minimum salary in which usually derives from the profit of the catch.
11. Ferguson's analysis on the live stocks' economy in Lesotho, demonstrates the development apparatus of the state denies the "politics" of the incompatibility of Lesotho culture and suspend the political effects of the resistance. See Ferguson (1994, 141).
12. Abu, interview by the author, 29 August 2019, Teluk Bahang.
13. JEDI, interview by the author, 12 August 2022, Universiti Sains Malaysia

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