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Rural–Urban Socioeconomic Disparities in Malaysia: An Analysis of Demographic, Economic, Digital, Educational, and Health Indicators (2023–2024)

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Abstract

This study examines Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic profile for 2023–2024, with particular emphasis on rural–urban disparities across key development indicators. Using secondary data obtained from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU), and related national reports, the study analyses trends in population structure, labour force participation, income distribution, poverty incidence, migration patterns, ICT accessibility, education, and healthcare access. The findings indicate that Malaysia continues to demonstrate stable socioeconomic progress, supported by a population of 33.38 million, a labour force of 16.37 million, and a relatively low unemployment rate of 3.4% in 2023. Nevertheless, substantial disparities remain between rural and urban communities. Rural areas recorded higher poverty rates, lower household incomes, weaker digital connectivity, limited access to healthcare, and lower educational participation compared to urban regions. Migration trends further reveal an increasing concentration in urban areas, reflecting persistent structural imbalances in regional development. The study highlights that although national development initiatives such as the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, MyDIGITAL, and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12) have contributed to overall socioeconomic improvement, targeted policy interventions remain necessary to reduce spatial inequality and promote inclusive growth. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable and balanced development in emerging economies by providing an integrated assessment of Malaysia's contemporary socioeconomic landscape.

Introduction

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2024), Malaysia's total population in 2023 was 33.38 million (preliminary data). Of this total, approximately 8.10 million people resided in rural areas. The population comprised 17.46 million males and 15.92 million females. Despite Malaysia's consistent socioeconomic progress and its transition toward a high-income nation, significant rural–urban disparities continue to persist across key development dimensions, including income distribution, employment opportunities, digital access, education quality, healthcare accessibility, and poverty incidence (Economic Planning Unit [EPU], 2021; World Bank, 2022; Idris et al., 2025). Existing national reports produced by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) and other government agencies provide extensive descriptive statistics; however, these reports often present fragmented sectoral information without offering an integrated socioeconomic interpretation of how demographic and structural inequalities interact across rural and urban populations (DOSM, 2024; EPU, 2021).

Furthermore, previous studies on Malaysian socioeconomic development have frequently focused on isolated themes such as poverty, labour markets, migration, or ICT accessibility independently, resulting in limited understanding of the multidimensional nature of rural vulnerability and development imbalance (Rahman et al., 2024; Mohammad & Masrukhin, 2025). As Malaysia advances the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, MyDIGITAL, and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12), there remains insufficient consolidated analysis examining whether socioeconomic improvements are being experienced equitably across geographic strata (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Ministry of Economy Malaysia, 2023).

The persistence of higher poverty rates, weaker digital connectivity, lower healthcare access, and smaller educational participation in rural areas indicates that development benefits may remain unevenly distributed (World Bank, 2022; Lee et al., 2026). For example, rural poverty rates remain substantially higher than urban poverty rates, while rural internet accessibility and healthcare coverage continue to lag behind urban regions (DOSM, 2023; Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2023). These disparities raise important policy questions regarding the effectiveness of current inclusive development strategies and the sustainability of balanced national growth (EPU, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Therefore, this study seeks to address the gap by providing a comprehensive and integrated analysis of Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic profile for 2023–2024, with particular emphasis on rural–urban disparities. The study examines population trends, labour force participation, poverty, migration, ICT accessibility, education, and healthcare indicators to evaluate the extent of socioeconomic inequality and identify critical areas requiring targeted policy intervention.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. To analyse Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic trends for 2023–2024.
2. To compare rural and urban disparities in income, employment, ICT access, education, and healthcare.
3. To identify structural socioeconomic challenges affecting rural communities.
4. To evaluate how current national development policies support inclusive and balanced socioeconomic growth.

Literature Review

Demographic and Socioeconomic Development in Malaysia

As of 2023, Malaysia's labour force was 16.37 million**.** Of this total**,** 15.81 million persons were employed, while 553.4 thousand persons were unemployed, resulting in a national unemployment rate of 3.4%**.** In rural areas, the labour force totalled 2.86 million persons, with 2.73 million employed and 130.3 thousand unemployed, indicating a rural unemployment rate of 4.6%**.** Labour data reveal Malaysia's resilience in maintaining near-full employment post-pandemic. However, rural employment opportunities remain concentrated in agriculture and low-value sectors, requiring strategic diversification under RMKe-12.

Malaysia has experienced substantial demographic and socioeconomic transformation over the past several decades, driven by industrialisation, urbanisation, and economic diversification. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2023), the country's population reached approximately 33.38 million in 2023, reflecting continuous demographic growth alongside improvements in education, healthcare, and labour force participation. The World Bank (2022) noted that Malaysia's rapid economic expansion since the 1970s has significantly reduced poverty levels and strengthened the country's transition from an agriculture-based economy toward a diversified manufacturing and service-oriented economy.

Rapid urbanisation and structural economic reforms have contributed substantially to Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income nation under the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (Economic Planning Unit, 2019). Urban centres such as Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, and Penang have emerged as major economic hubs, attracting investments, improving employment opportunities, and accelerating infrastructure development (UNDP, 2021). Furthermore, digital transformation initiatives under the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL) have enhanced digital connectivity and supported socioeconomic growth through greater access to technology and innovation (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, 2021).

Previous studies have shown that socioeconomic development in Malaysia is closely associated with improvements in employment opportunities, healthcare services, educational attainment, infrastructure development, and social welfare programmes (Todaro & Smith, 2020; World Bank, 2022). However, scholars have also highlighted that the benefits of development remain unevenly distributed between urban and rural populations, particularly regarding income inequality, access to quality education, healthcare services, and digital inclusion (Khazanah Research Institute, 2023; UNDP, 2021). Rural communities continue to face challenges such as lower household incomes, limited access to advanced infrastructure, and weaker internet connectivity than urban populations (DOSM, 2023; MCMC, 2023).

Table 1.
Summary of Key Socioeconomic Indicators (2022–2023)

Indicator	Malaysia	Rural Areas	Source
Total Population (2023)	33.38 million	8.10 million	DOSM (2023)
Male Population	17.46 million	—	DOSM (2023)
Female Population	15.92 million	—	DOSM (2023)
Labour Force (2023)	16.37 million	2.86 million	DOSM (2023)
Employment	15.81 million	2.73 million	DOSM (2023)
Unemployment Rate	3.4%	4.6%	DOSM (2023)
Poverty Line Income (PLI)	RM2,589	RM2,342	DOSM (2022)
Hardcore PLI	RM1,198	RM1,199	DOSM (2022)

Indicator	Malaysia	Rural Areas	Source
Poverty Rate	6.2%	12.0%	DOSM (2022)
Gini Coefficient	0.404	0.351	DOSM (2022)
Average Household Income	RM8,479	RM5,147	DOSM (2022)
Average B40 Income	RM3,401	RM2,424	DOSM (2022)
B40 Income Threshold	< RM5,250	< RM3,510	DOSM (2022)

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). (2022–2023). *Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report*; *Key Statistics of Labour Force, Malaysia*; *Current Population Estimates, Malaysia*. Putrajaya: DOSM.

Rural–Urban Socioeconomic Disparities

Rural–urban inequality remains one of the major development challenges in Malaysia. Although poverty rates have declined nationally, rural communities continue to experience disproportionately higher levels of poverty and economic vulnerability compared to urban populations. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2023), the incidence of absolute poverty in rural areas remains substantially higher than in urban areas, while average monthly household income in rural communities is significantly lower than that of urban households. These disparities reflect unequal economic opportunities and uneven regional development patterns across Malaysia.

Table 3.
Poverty and Hardcore Poverty (eKasih, August 2024)

Category	Malaysia (Total KIR)	Rural Areas (KIR)	Rural Share (%)
Poor Households (KIR Miskin)	389,940	188,331	**48.3%**
Hardcore Poor Households (KIR Miskin Tegar)	22,393	11,063	**49.4%**
Total Poor + Hardcore Poor	**412,333**	**199,394**	**48.4%**

Sources:
Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). (2022–2023). *Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report*; *Key Statistics of Labour Force, Malaysia*; *Current Population Estimates, Malaysia*; *Migration Survey Report, Malaysia*. Putrajaya: DOSM.
Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU), Prime Minister's Department. (2024). *eKasih Database, August 2024 Update.*

According to the Khazanah Research Institute (2023), regional income inequality in Malaysia is strongly influenced by unequal access to high-paying employment, limited industrial diversification, and disparities in infrastructure and public service provision. Rural economies remain heavily dependent on agriculture and low-productivity sectors, which constrain opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility and sustainable income growth (Rigg & Salamanca, 2019). Similar findings by the World Bank (2022) indicate that spatial inequality continues to affect household welfare, particularly among B40 communities and vulnerable rural households, where access to quality healthcare, education, and digital infrastructure remains comparatively limited.

Urbanisation trends have further intensified regional imbalance. Migration studies suggest that younger populations tend to migrate toward urban centres in search of better employment opportunities, educational facilities, and improved living conditions (Todaro & Smith, 2020). This rural-to-urban migration contributes to labour shortages, population ageing, and reduced economic dynamism in rural areas, thereby widening developmental disparities between regions (Nasib et al., 2023). Studies on Malaysia's B40 population also reveal that low-income households continue to experience multidimensional vulnerabilities related to housing affordability, income instability, and social exclusion (Mayan et al., 2017; Samsudin & Nadzrulizam, 2020).

Table 2.
Migration Flow by Strata, Malaysia (2020–2022)

Migration Flow (Strata)	2020 (%)	2022 (%)	Change (Percentage Points)	Trend
Urban → Urban	73.3	78.2	**+4.9**	Increasing
Urban → Rural	18.1	16.7	**–1.4**	Decreasing
Rural → Urban	3.0	2.4	**–0.6**	Decreasing
Rural → Rural	5.6	2.7	**–2.9**	Decreasing

ICT Accessibility and Digital Divide

Digital transformation has become a central component of Malaysia's socioeconomic development agenda, particularly under the MyDIGITAL initiative and the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. Increased internet penetration and ICT accessibility have enhanced educational delivery, economic participation, e-commerce growth, and public service accessibility (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, 2021). According to the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2023), internet usage in Malaysia has continued to increase significantly, reflecting the growing integration of digital technologies into everyday economic and social activities.

Table 4.
Suggested Data Visualization: Urban vs Rural ICT Access (2023)

ICT Indicator	National (%)	Rural (%)	Difference (Percentage Points)
Television Ownership	99.4	98.6	**0.8**
Paid TV Subscription	77.0	64.1	**12.9**
Internet Access	96.4	89.8	**6.6**

Nevertheless, the digital divide between rural and urban areas remains a critical issue. Although national internet accessibility has reached relatively high levels, rural households continue to experience lower internet penetration, weaker connectivity quality, and reduced access to digital services compared to urban households (Samsuddin et al., 2021). Previous studies have identified affordability constraints, limited ICT infrastructure, and lower digital literacy levels as major barriers affecting rural digital inclusion (Ariffin, 2021; GS & Ab Karim, 2024). Research by Nohuddin et al. (2025) further indicates that several rural regions in Malaysia continue to record lower broadband penetration rates and weaker digital readiness despite ongoing government digitalisation initiatives.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) argues that unequal digital access can widen existing socioeconomic disparities by limiting educational opportunities, labour market participation, and access to digital healthcare and e-government services. Similarly, Umar (2021) highlights that unequal access to digital technologies contributes to knowledge gaps and unequal participation in online learning and economic activities, particularly among underserved rural populations. Consequently, strengthening rural digital infrastructure, improving affordability, and enhancing digital literacy remain essential for achieving inclusive socioeconomic development and reducing regional inequality in Malaysia.

Education and Human Capital Development

Education plays a critical role in promoting social mobility, human capital formation, and long-term economic growth. Malaysia has invested substantially in expanding educational accessibility through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which emphasizes equitable educational opportunities, quality improvement, and inclusive access across geographic regions (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The blueprint aims to strengthen educational outcomes by improving teacher quality, expanding digital learning, and reducing disparities between rural and urban schools.

Despite improvements in school accessibility, disparities between rural and urban educational environments continue to persist. Rural schools frequently face shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate digital learning facilities, limited internet connectivity, and insufficient access to educational resources (Awang & Ghani, 2025). Research by UNESCO (2022) indicates that students in rural communities generally demonstrate lower educational attainment and reduced participation in higher education compared to urban students due to socioeconomic disadvantages and unequal educational opportunities.

Studies on digital education in Malaysia further reveal that rural students experience greater difficulties in accessing online learning platforms and digital educational tools, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kok, 2025; Jalli et al., 2026). Limited digital literacy, weak ICT infrastructure, and affordability constraints have contributed to unequal learning experiences between rural and urban students (Azman et al., 2025). Furthermore, migration toward urban centres contributes to uneven educational concentration, where urban schools benefit from stronger infrastructure, better funding allocation, and greater access to skilled educators (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Consequently, addressing educational inequality remains crucial for reducing long-term socioeconomic disparities and strengthening inclusive human capital development in Malaysia.

Healthcare Accessibility and Social Well-being

Malaysia's healthcare system has achieved substantial progress in improving life expectancy, reducing maternal mortality, and expanding healthcare coverage nationwide. Government initiatives under the Ministry of Health and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12) continue to emphasize equitable healthcare accessibility, preventive healthcare services, and healthcare system strengthening (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023; Economic Planning Unit, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), Malaysia has demonstrated significant improvements in public health indicators through expanded healthcare infrastructure and wider healthcare service coverage.

However, rural healthcare disparities remain evident in terms of doctor-to-population ratios, healthcare infrastructure availability, and digital health accessibility. Rural populations frequently encounter logistical

barriers, transportation difficulties, and limited access to specialist healthcare services compared to urban populations (Mohamed Nazar et al., 2025). Studies indicate that healthcare inequalities in Malaysia are also associated with socioeconomic status, healthcare affordability, and uneven distribution of medical facilities and healthcare professionals across regions (Teo et al., 2025).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), unequal healthcare distribution in developing economies contributes directly to variations in life expectancy and overall public health outcomes. In Malaysia, ongoing initiatives such as telemedicine services, mobile clinics, and the PeKa B40 programme have been introduced to reduce healthcare disparities among low-income and vulnerable populations (Jamal et al., 2023). Research further suggests that telemedicine can improve healthcare accessibility for rural communities by reducing travel costs and increasing access to healthcare consultations and medicine management services (Qi, 2024; Mohamed Nazar et al., 2025). Nevertheless, implementation challenges remain, including digital literacy limitations, internet connectivity issues, and uneven adoption of healthcare technologies in rural areas (Lim et al., 2025).

Research Gap

Existing literature on Malaysia's socioeconomic development has largely focused on individual dimensions such as poverty, labour markets, migration, ICT accessibility, education, or healthcare independently (World Bank, 2022; Khazanah Research Institute, 2023). While national statistical reports published by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) provide extensive descriptive socioeconomic data, relatively few studies have integrated these indicators into a comprehensive rural–urban socioeconomic framework that examines multidimensional inequality holistically.

Previous research has separately explored rural poverty and income inequality (Rigg & Salamanca, 2019), digital divide and ICT accessibility (Samsuddin et al., 2021), educational inequality (UNESCO, 2022), and healthcare accessibility disparities (WHO, 2023; Mohamed Nazar et al., 2025). However, limited attention has been given to how these socioeconomic dimensions collectively interact to shape structural inequality, social exclusion, and inclusive development outcomes in Malaysia. Existing studies also tend to emphasize either urban poverty or rural development independently without providing integrated comparative analysis across regions and socioeconomic sectors (Khazanah Research Institute, 2023).

Furthermore, there remains insufficient discussion regarding the combined influence of demographic transition, digital transformation, educational inequality, and healthcare accessibility on long-term socioeconomic sustainability and regional development balance in Malaysia. Therefore, this study addresses the existing research gap by providing an integrated analysis of demographic, economic, digital, educational, and healthcare indicators for 2023–2024, with particular emphasis on rural–urban disparities and policy implications aligned with the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis to examine Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic conditions for the 2023–2024 period. Quantitative descriptive research is widely used in socioeconomic and development studies because it enables systematic

measurement, comparison, and interpretation of population trends and socioeconomic indicators using official statistical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study focused on analysing rural–urban disparities across major socioeconomic dimensions, including labour force participation, income distribution, poverty incidence, migration patterns, ICT accessibility, education, and healthcare indicators.

A descriptive-comparative analytical approach was employed to evaluate structural inequalities between rural and urban populations. According to Neuman (2014), descriptive comparative analysis is appropriate for socioeconomic profiling because it facilitates systematic comparison of development indicators across different geographic and demographic groups. Similarly, Todaro and Smith (2020) argue that comparative socioeconomic analysis is essential for understanding regional inequality, human capital distribution, and development imbalance in developing economies. Previous studies have similarly utilized descriptive secondary-data approaches in assessing regional development inequality, social well-being, and public policy effectiveness in Malaysia and Southeast Asia (Rigg & Salamanca, 2019; Khazanah Research Institute, 2023).

The study was further contextualized within Malaysia's national development agenda, particularly the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, MyDIGITAL Blueprint, and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12), which collectively emphasize inclusive growth, balanced regional development, poverty reduction, digital transformation, and social well-being improvement (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, 2021). These policy frameworks provide important institutional and developmental context for interpreting current socioeconomic trends and rural–urban disparities in Malaysia.

Data Sources

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from official government publications, national statistical databases, and policy documents. The primary source of statistical data was the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), which provides nationally representative demographic and socioeconomic datasets widely used for policy planning and academic research. Additional data were obtained from the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU), Prime Minister's Department, particularly the eKasih poverty database.

The datasets analysed in this study were extracted from the following official reports:

- *Current Population Estimates, Malaysia*;
- *Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report*;
- *Key Statistics of Labour Force, Malaysia*;
- *Migration Survey Report, Malaysia*;
- *ICT Use and Access by Individuals and Households Survey*; and
- *eKasih Database Update (2024)*.

The use of official government datasets enhances the reliability and validity of the study because these reports are compiled using standardized national statistical methodologies and extensive nationwide sampling frameworks. Furthermore, these datasets provide comprehensive coverage of Malaysia's demographic, economic, and social conditions across both urban and rural populations.

Unit of Analysis and Variables

The unit of analysis comprised national and rural socioeconomic indicators reported between 2022 and 2024. The study categorized the variables into six major dimensions:

Dimension	Indicators	Evidence
Demographic Profile	Population size, gender composition	Malaysia recorded a population of 33.38 million in 2023, consisting of 17.46 million males and 15.92 million females.
Labour Market	Labour force participation, employment, unemployment rate	Labour force participation reached 16.37 million, with unemployment at 3.4%.
Income and Poverty	Household income, poverty rate, Gini coefficient	Rural poverty remained higher at 12.0% compared to the national rate of 6.2%.
Migration	Rural–urban and urban–urban migration flows	Urban-to-urban migration increased from 73.3% to 78.2% between 2020 and 2022.
ICT Accessibility	Internet access, television ownership	Rural internet access stood at 89.8% compared to 96.4% nationally.
Education and Health	School enrolment, healthcare access, life expectancy	Rural schools accounted for 47.2% of primary schools but only 22.2% of enrolment.

These indicators were selected because they collectively represent multidimensional socioeconomic development and are widely used in development economics and public policy analysis to assess inequality and social well-being.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including percentage analysis, frequency distribution, comparative analysis, and trend interpretation. Comparative assessments between national and rural indicators were conducted to identify socioeconomic disparities and development imbalances.

Tables and statistical summaries were utilized to facilitate systematic comparison across socioeconomic dimensions. For example, comparative analyses of poverty rates, labour force participation, ICT access, educational participation, and healthcare accessibility were used to evaluate structural differences between rural and urban communities.

Trend analysis was also employed to assess changes in migration patterns and socioeconomic indicators over time. The increasing concentration of urban-to-urban migration and declining rural migration trends were interpreted as indicators of continuing urbanisation and regional imbalance.

The findings were further interpreted within the context of Malaysia's national development agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, quality education, healthcare accessibility, and reduced inequalities.

Theoretical and Policy Framework

This study was guided by the concept of inclusive development, which emphasizes equitable access to economic opportunities, social services, education, healthcare, and digital infrastructure across different social and geographic groups. Inclusive development theory suggests that sustainable national growth cannot be achieved without reducing structural inequalities and ensuring balanced regional development.

The policy framework of the study was grounded in:

- Shared Prosperity Vision 2030;
- Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12);
- Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL); and
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The relevance of this framework is reflected in the study findings, which indicate persistent rural–urban disparities in poverty incidence, digital access, healthcare availability, and educational participation despite overall national socioeconomic progress.

Reliability, Validity, and Limitations

The reliability of the study was strengthened through the use of official national datasets produced by government institutions such as DOSM and ICU. These datasets are compiled using standardized statistical procedures, large-scale household surveys, and nationally representative sampling methods, thereby ensuring consistency and data credibility.

The validity of the study was enhanced by the use of multiple socioeconomic indicators covering demographic, economic, technological, educational, and healthcare dimensions. This multidimensional approach enabled a more comprehensive assessment of socioeconomic inequality and development conditions in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied exclusively on secondary data and therefore did not incorporate qualitative perspectives from affected communities or stakeholders. Second, some datasets were preliminary estimates and may be subject to revision in future official publications. Third, the study primarily utilized descriptive statistical analysis and did not apply advanced econometric modelling or inferential statistical testing to determine causal relationships between variables.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive and policy-relevant overview of Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic profile and contributes to understanding persistent rural–urban development disparities.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic and Labour Market Trends

The findings indicate that Malaysia maintained relatively stable demographic and labour market conditions in 2023, reflecting continued post-pandemic economic recovery and labour market resilience. Malaysia's total population reached approximately 33.38 million, with labour force participation remaining strong at 16.37 million economically active individuals. The national unemployment rate declined to 3.4%, suggesting gradual stabilization of employment conditions following disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends are consistent with national economic recovery patterns reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2023) and the World Bank (2022), which identified improvements in labour market activity alongside broader macroeconomic recovery.

Despite these positive national indicators, substantial rural–urban labour disparities remained evident. Rural unemployment was recorded at 4.6%, exceeding the national average and indicating weaker labour market resilience in rural regions. This finding reflects the continued dependence of rural economies on agriculture, informal employment, and lower-productivity economic sectors. Previous studies have similarly argued that Malaysia's labour market transformation remains spatially uneven, with industrialisation, investment concentration, and high-value economic activities disproportionately concentrated in urban centres (Khazanah Research Institute, 2023; Todaro & Smith, 2020).

The findings further suggest that urban labour markets benefit from greater economic diversification, stronger industrial ecosystems, and higher demand for skilled labour, while rural employment opportunities remain comparatively limited. Such structural labour inequalities contribute directly to income vulnerability, outward migration, and weaker socioeconomic resilience among rural populations. The results therefore reinforce earlier literature emphasizing that regional labour imbalance continues to represent a major structural development challenge in Malaysia's pursuit of inclusive growth and balanced regional development.

Income Distribution and Poverty Disparities

The analysis revealed substantial disparities in income distribution and poverty incidence between rural and urban populations, indicating that economic growth in Malaysia remains unevenly distributed geographically. Although Malaysia has experienced sustained macroeconomic progress, rural households continue to demonstrate significantly higher levels of economic vulnerability and poverty concentration. The national Poverty Line Income (PLI) was recorded at RM2,589, while rural poverty incidence reached 12.0%, almost double the national poverty rate of 6.2%. In addition, average rural household income remained substantially below the national average, highlighting persistent structural income inequality.

These findings indicate that rural economic participation continues to be constrained by lower wages, reduced industrial diversification, weaker access to high-income employment, and limited economic mobility. The concentration of rural employment within low-productivity sectors such as agriculture and informal labour contributes to slower income growth and greater exposure to economic shocks. Similar observations were reported by the Khazanah Research Institute (2023), which highlighted widening regional income disparities and uneven development concentration across Malaysian states and districts.

Furthermore, eKasih statistics demonstrating that nearly half of Malaysia's poor and hardcore poor households are concentrated in rural regions reinforce the persistence of spatial poverty inequality. This suggests that rural poverty in Malaysia is not merely temporary but structurally embedded within broader patterns of unequal regional development. Consistent with Rigg and Salamanca (2019), the findings suggest that rural transformation in Southeast Asia continues to be shaped by unequal access to infrastructure, investment, and human capital development.

The findings therefore imply that future poverty reduction strategies must extend beyond general economic growth policies toward more targeted rural-focused interventions. Strengthening rural entrepreneurship, economic diversification, infrastructure investment, and skills development programmes may be essential for reducing long-term regional income inequality and improving socioeconomic resilience among vulnerable populations.

Migration Patterns and Urbanisation

The findings demonstrate that Malaysia's urbanisation trajectory continues to intensify, with migration flows increasingly concentrated toward urban centres. Urban-to-urban migration increased significantly between 2020 and 2022, while migration involving rural regions declined across nearly all categories. These trends indicate that urban areas continue to function as dominant centres of economic opportunity, educational accessibility, healthcare provision, and infrastructure development.

The concentration of migration toward urban regions reflects broader structural transformations associated with industrialisation and service-sector expansion. Urban centres provide stronger labour market opportunities, better educational institutions, and improved public services, thereby attracting younger and economically active populations. Similar migration patterns have been widely documented in developing economies, where urbanisation is closely associated with economic modernization and labour mobility (United Nations ESCAP, 2021).

However, the findings also reveal important developmental consequences for rural communities. Declining rural migration and continued outward population movement contribute to rural depopulation, ageing demographics, labour shortages, and reduced local economic dynamism. This demographic imbalance may weaken long-term rural productivity and reduce the sustainability of rural socioeconomic development.

The findings further reinforce arguments that Malaysia's development trajectory remains highly urban-centric despite policy frameworks promoting balanced regional development. While initiatives under RMKe-12 and Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 emphasize inclusivity and spatial equity, the persistence of urban concentration suggests that existing interventions may not yet sufficiently address structural regional imbalances. Consequently, stronger regional economic planning and rural revitalisation strategies remain necessary to reduce excessive urban concentration and improve balanced national development.

ICT Accessibility and Digital Divide

The findings demonstrate that Malaysia has achieved substantial progress in ICT penetration and digital connectivity, reflecting the effectiveness of national digitalisation initiatives under MyDIGITAL and the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. National internet accessibility reached 96.4% in 2023, indicating that digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into economic participation, education, communication, and public service delivery.

Nevertheless, notable rural–urban disparities in ICT accessibility remain evident. Rural internet penetration remained below the national average, while subscription rates for digital services were comparatively lower in rural households. These findings suggest that digital inequality continues to reflect broader socioeconomic and infrastructural disparities between urban and rural communities.

The persistence of the digital divide has important implications for inclusive development. Unequal digital access may restrict participation in online education, digital entrepreneurship, e-commerce, telemedicine, and remote employment opportunities. Previous studies have similarly argued that digital exclusion reinforces existing socioeconomic inequalities by limiting access to information, labour markets, and public services (UNDP, 2021; Samsuddin et al., 2021).

The findings further indicate that digital inequality is not solely related to infrastructure availability but also involves affordability, digital literacy, and connectivity quality. Rural populations may face additional barriers associated with weaker broadband infrastructure, lower ICT readiness, and limited technological capabilities. Consequently, improving rural digital inclusion requires integrated policy interventions that address infrastructure expansion, affordability support, and digital skills development simultaneously.

From a broader developmental perspective, the findings reinforce the growing importance of digital inclusion as a key determinant of socioeconomic mobility and human capital development in emerging economies. Without balanced ICT accessibility, digital transformation may inadvertently widen rather than reduce existing structural inequalities.

Education Accessibility and Human Capital Development

The education findings indicate that Malaysia has achieved relatively extensive educational accessibility nationwide, particularly at the primary education level. However, substantial rural–urban disparities remain evident in student distribution, educational concentration, and resource accessibility. Rural areas accounted for nearly half of all primary schools nationwide, yet rural enrolment represented only a small proportion of total student participation.

This pattern suggests that rural schools primarily serve smaller and geographically dispersed populations, resulting in lower enrolment density and potentially higher operational challenges. At the secondary education level, rural student participation declined further, reflecting increasing educational concentration within urban

areas. The findings imply that many students may migrate toward urban centres to access higher-quality educational facilities, broader academic opportunities, and improved learning environments.

The unequal distribution of educational participation reflects broader structural disparities involving infrastructure quality, teacher allocation, ICT accessibility, and educational resources. Rural schools frequently experience limitations in digital learning readiness, internet connectivity, and access to qualified educators. These conditions may contribute to lower educational performance and reduced opportunities for upward social mobility among rural populations.

Consistent with UNESCO (2022), the findings suggest that educational inequality remains closely associated with geographic location, household income, and digital accessibility. Educational disparities therefore represent not only differences in schooling access but also long-term inequalities in human capital formation and socioeconomic opportunity.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for continued investment in rural educational quality enhancement, digital learning infrastructure, and teacher distribution policies. Strengthening educational equity remains essential for reducing intergenerational poverty and supporting inclusive national development.

Healthcare Accessibility and Public Well-being

Malaysia's healthcare system continued to demonstrate relatively strong national performance indicators in 2023, reflecting sustained improvements in healthcare accessibility, public health outcomes, and healthcare infrastructure expansion. National life expectancy reached 75.3 years, while infant mortality rates remained comparatively low by regional standards. These indicators suggest that Malaysia's healthcare system has achieved substantial progress in improving overall public well-being.

However, the findings also reveal persistent disparities in healthcare accessibility between rural and urban populations. Rural communities experienced lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality rates, lower doctor-to-population ratios, and lower digital healthcare accessibility than urban regions. These inequalities indicate that healthcare accessibility remains uneven despite broad national healthcare coverage.

The disparities may be attributed to several interrelated structural factors, including geographical isolation, healthcare workforce shortages, transportation barriers, and weaker healthcare infrastructure in rural areas. Furthermore, limited internet access in rural healthcare facilities suggests slower integration of digital health technologies and telemedicine services within underserved communities.

The findings are consistent with WHO (2023), which emphasized that unequal healthcare distribution contributes significantly to variations in public health outcomes across developing economies. Similarly, previous Malaysian studies have identified healthcare workforce concentration and infrastructure imbalance as major contributors to rural healthcare inequality (Mohamed Nazar et al., 2025).

Although government initiatives such as PeKa B40, telemedicine services, and mobile healthcare outreach programmes have improved healthcare outreach, the findings suggest that implementation challenges remain significant. Rural healthcare inequality therefore continues to represent both a public health issue and a broader socioeconomic development challenge linked to poverty, digital exclusion, and regional infrastructure imbalance.

Overall Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Malaysia has achieved substantial socioeconomic progress in labour market recovery, educational accessibility, digital expansion, and healthcare development. Nevertheless, the analysis consistently reveals persistent rural–urban disparities across nearly all major socioeconomic dimensions examined in this study.

The evidence indicates that rural populations continue to experience structural disadvantages related to employment opportunities, income generation, digital participation, educational accessibility, and healthcare provision. These inequalities reflect broader patterns of spatial imbalance, uneven development concentration, and differential access to infrastructure and public services.

Importantly, the findings suggest that socioeconomic dimensions are deeply interconnected. Digital inequality influences educational participation and healthcare accessibility, while labour market limitations contribute to migration patterns, income inequality, and rural depopulation. Consequently, rural–urban disparities should not be viewed as isolated sectoral issues but rather as multidimensional structural challenges requiring integrated policy responses.

Although national development frameworks such as Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, MyDIGITAL, and RMKe-12 emphasize inclusive growth and balanced development, the persistence of regional inequality indicates that stronger rural-focused interventions remain necessary. Future policy priorities should therefore emphasize rural economic diversification, digital infrastructure expansion, healthcare workforce strengthening, educational quality enhancement, and sustainable regional planning.

Addressing these structural disparities is essential not only for achieving inclusive socioeconomic development but also for ensuring balanced national progress toward high-income nation status and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conclusion

This study examined Malaysia's demographic and socioeconomic profile for the 2023–2024 period, with particular emphasis on rural–urban disparities across key development dimensions, including labour markets, income distribution, poverty, migration, ICT accessibility, education, and healthcare. The findings demonstrate that Malaysia continues to achieve steady socioeconomic progress, supported by stable labour market performance, expanding digital connectivity, improved healthcare indicators, and sustained educational accessibility.

Despite these positive developments, the study identified persistent structural inequalities between rural and urban populations. Rural communities continue to experience higher poverty rates, lower household incomes, weaker digital access, reduced healthcare coverage, and more limited educational opportunities compared to urban regions. Migration trends further indicate increasing urban concentration, reflecting continuing spatial imbalance in economic and social development.

The findings suggest that although national initiatives such as the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12), Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, and MyDIGITAL have contributed significantly to national development, substantial challenges remain in achieving fully inclusive and balanced socioeconomic growth. Addressing these disparities requires stronger policy coordination, targeted rural development strategies, infrastructure expansion, digital inclusion programmes, human capital enhancement, and equitable resource distribution.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive development and regional inequality by providing an integrated analysis of Malaysia's contemporary socioeconomic landscape. Future research should extend beyond descriptive analysis by incorporating longitudinal datasets, econometric modelling, and qualitative approaches to better understand the underlying determinants of rural socioeconomic vulnerability and

development inequality in Malaysia.

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7. Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

8. Author Contribution Statement

Author Azahari Jamaludin 1 contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.
Author Mohd Farid Shamsudin 2 was responsible for data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.
All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

9. Ethics Statement

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia and in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the [**Institutional Ethics Committee/Review Board**] under reference number [**Approval Number, if applicable**]. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

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