
Malaysia

Country Overview

**Cultural Cities Profile
East Asia**

May 2021

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Malaysia in Numbers | 05 |
| Snapshot | 06 |
| Language and Ethnic Diversity | 08 |
| Strategic Context for Cultural Development | 09 |
| A Creative Portfolio | 12 |
| City Headlines | 14 |
| Appendix | 16 |

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Malaysia in Numbers

Capital City

Kuala Lumpur

Seat of the
Federal Government

Putrajaya

Malay (or Bahasa Malaysia);
English is widely spoken and
140+ other languages

Land Area

330,252 km²

Population

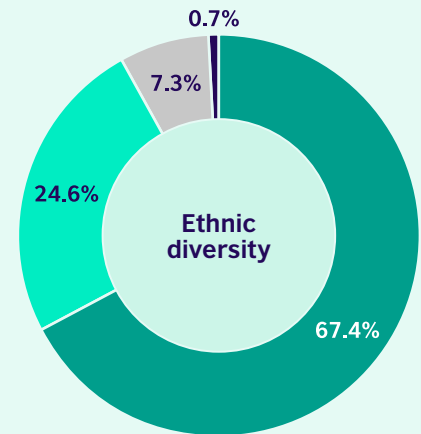
32.7 million

Urban
Population

76.6%
in 2020

GDP per capita
US\$11,373.3

≈ **GBP8,278**
in 2020



- ◆ Bumiputera
- ◆ Chinese
- ◆ Indians
- ◆ Others

The country has

4 UNESCO World
Heritage Sites

2 World Network of
Biosphere Reserves

5 Memory of the
World Register

1 Global Geoparks
Network

5 Intangible Cultural
Heritage Lists

Snapshot¹

Located in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy which shares its borders with Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and Thailand. Consisting of two main regions, conventionally referred to as the Peninsular Malaysia (known as Malaya or West Malaysia) and the East Malaysia (Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan or Malaysian Borneo).

Malaysia, a country of rich heritage, cultural diversity, digital dynamism and creative energy, has positioned itself as a place of innovation, renewal and enterprise. As one of the pioneer ‘tiger economies’ of the early 2000s, Malaysia positions itself as the springboard for regional expansion into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) thanks to its central location and multilingual mix of English, Malay, Chinese and Indian. Its diverse culture and digitally-driven creative industries are playing an important role in diversifying the economy and increasing the attractiveness of Malaysia in terms of investment, tourism and talent.



Malaysia is a land of harmony in diversity. Its multiculturalism and its natural marvels reflect the eclecticism of a nation which boasts one of the richest and most varied gastronomic traditions in the world.

Malaysia Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015²

¹ Malaysia Cultural Insights Report, 2021. Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy (TFCC) in collaboration with Dr Ann Lee, PhD Southeast Asian Studies (NUS). British Council.

² <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/culture/malaysia--a-mosaic-of-different-cultures.html>

CENDANA – the Malaysian Cultural Industries Development Agency



Set up in 2017, mobilised by the country's first strategic research programme on the cultural and creative industries (The Kuala Lumpur Creative Economy Blueprint), CENDANA is tasked by Government to support the growth and innovation of a sector which offers so much potential yet has lacked a systematic approach to strategic support and investment.

With the cultural diversity of Malaysia as a central asset, shaped by deep traditions and contemporary sensibilities, cities across this dynamic nation are being re-shaped through culture and the cultural industries.



Our mandate is to develop the cultural economy of Malaysia, which is a relatively new concept to the nation. We are there to energise, empower and reorganise.

Izan Satrina Dato' Mohd Sallehuddin, CEO of CENDANA

Language and Ethnic Diversity

Malaysia, a member of the Commonwealth, represents the political marriage of territories that were formerly under British rule. As a former British colony, English is one of the most widely-spoken languages and a lingua-franca in business. There are 140 languages spoken in Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia 40, Sabah 54, Sarawak 46). Malaysia also has a large and vibrant diaspora community in Singapore, Australia, India and the UK.

Malay or Bahasa Malaysia, being the national language, is the most common language spoken in Malaysia. English, being another compulsory linguistic subject in the national education system, is also widely spoken. Other common languages in Malaysia are Mandarin and Tamil, as well as the dialects of the different ethnic groups.



Malaysia's vibrant arts scene is set for a surge... We can look forward to strategic and tactical developments in how culture is experienced and how the arts can transform the look and feel of a city...

Izan Satrina Dato' Mohd Sallehuddin, CEO of CENDANA³

³ Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA), Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural and Creative City, 2018, https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Documents/Cendana%20Report%20Web%2006_02_18.pdf

⁴ Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1>

Strategic Context for Cultural Development

(see Appendix for more detail and city-specific overview in the city profiles).

Malaysia's gross output of the arts, entertainment and recreation services recorded a value of RM22.3 billion in 2017.⁴

- Sports and recreation activities recorded the highest value added in 2017 which amounted to RM7.8 billion (81.1%).
- This was followed by museums, amusement and cultural activities (RM1.5 billion ≈ £0.2 billion; 15.4%) and creative, arts and entertainment activities (RM0.3 billion ≈ £52 million; 3.5%).

- Although most policy and infrastructure development is Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley focused, the development of the arts and culture scene is increasingly multicentric.

Malaysia is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. The country has three government tiers – federal, state, and local – with regular elections at the national and state levels. However, there have been no elections at the local government level since they were suspended in 1965.

Vision 2020 Creative Industries

Since 2000s, the Malaysian Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN: The Malaysian National Creative Industry Policies) has identified the creative industries as a policy focus in line with the national Vision 2020.

DIKN was introduced to raise public awareness, improve quality, and enlarge the domestic or international market of the country's creative industries. The cultural and creative industries were categorised into three main areas in the DIKN planning:

- Multimedia creative industry: film and TV, advertising, design, animation and digital content
- Cultural arts creative industry: crafts, visual arts, music, performing arts, creative writing, fashion and textiles
- Cultural heritage creative industry: museum, archives, restoration and preservation⁵



Creativity is what we, Malaysians, have in abundance. What we ought to figure out is how do we make these sectors into sustainable economies.

Johan Ishak, ex-CEO, MyCreative⁶

⁵ National Creative Industry Policy 2009.

⁶ MyCreative Venture, 2018.

In Malaysia, the cultural and creative industries are governed under multiple federal ministries and the policy response for creative industries lies with multiple agencies, schemes and programmes. Funding is then channelled through federal, state and local governments which have their specific mandates.

- In general, the arts sector is overseen by Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MoTAC) – and its agency National Department for Culture and Arts (Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, JKKN).
- At the federal level, cultural funding is being funneled through the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) – which has been allocated RM15 million in the 2021 budget to boost arts and culture and aid post-Covid recovery. (see below)

Since 2000s, the Malaysian **Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara** (DIKN: The Malaysian National Creative Industry Policies) has identified the creative industries as a policy focus in line with the national Vision 2020.

In early 2021, the government introduced **MyDIGITAL** and the **Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint** to transform Malaysia into a high-income country driven by technology and digitisation. The creative industries are featured as a key focus in helping the country to realise this ambition of becoming a regional leader in the digital economy.⁷

MyCreative Ventures⁸ was established to provide dedicated creative industries investment. It also provides the governance for a range of targeted sector development initiatives, including CENDANA.

A dedicated agency, **Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA)**⁹ was set up by former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in 2017, to empower the creative industries with resources, expertise and data. This was a key outcome of the Kuala Lumpur Creative Economy Blueprint, the country's first strategic baseline mapping study for the creative industries.¹⁰

- This Blueprint recommended the establishment of an arm's length development agency for the creative economy – with a focus on empowering, energising and reorganising the sector. As a result, CENDANA was set up by the Malaysian government to 'build a vibrant, sustainable and ambitious cultural economy for Malaysia'.¹¹
- It has proven vital for many arts makers during the pandemic, providing seed and support funding for performing arts, visual arts, independent music (and as expected soon, literature).
- With a goal to transform Malaysia into a cultural destination, it aims to function as a connector between creators, regulating bodies, private investors or businesses, policymakers and consumers.¹² RM20 million was initially allocated to spearhead arts and cultural development in Malaysia.¹³

Founded in 2014, **Malaysian Global Innovation & Creativity Centre (MaGIC)**¹⁴ is an agency under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI). It was founded to strengthen Malaysia's position as an emerging innovation nation by discovering and empowering technology startups and social innovators through creativity, innovation and technology adoption. It organised capacity building programmes, market & funding opportunities and regulatory assistance that impacted more than 100,000 aspiring and seasoned entrepreneurs with an overall value creation of RM1.9 billion.

Other programmes and agencies – such as **Think City**¹⁵ (a subsidiary of Malaysia's Sovereign Wealth Fund) was set up with a focus on urban revitalisation and creative solutions. (See **Appendix** for more details on policies directives.)

⁷ <https://www.epu.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-02/malaysia-digital-economy-blueprint.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.mycreative.com.my>

⁹ <https://www.cendana.com.my>

¹⁰ Led by TFCC with Frost and Sullivan MY. The British Council also had an advisory role.

¹¹ MY. The British Council also had an advisory role.

¹² CENDANA, 2018.

¹³ The Star, May 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/09/17/cendana-to-launch-its-first-arts-funding-programme-in-november>

¹⁴ <https://www.mymagic.my>

¹⁵ <https://thinkcity.com.my>

Consumption Habits



Cultural consumption and production habits are shaped primarily along ethnic lines and by mother tongues – Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin and/or other Chinese dialects and Tamil and/or other Indian dialects. There are also movements along Sarawakian and Sabahan languages.

The growth of digital platforms and creative industries have allowed for a proliferation of micro

segments – anyone can be a content producer or cultural influencer by virtue of sharing content online and amassing a large number of followers overnight depending on the virality of the content. This proliferation of digital content has birthed the phenomenon of culture key influencers.



Malaysia's art scene is...gaining momentum... across the world. Driven by passion and experience, Malaysian artists share their unique voices and stories through art.

Lu Yin Wai, the Culture Trip¹⁶

¹⁶ Culture Trip.

A Creative Portfolio

Malaysia has a diverse, fast-changing and increasingly inter-disciplinary arts and cultural sector, with each city providing a unique combination of assets and opportunities. Despite the hit of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cultural community has developed a strong solidarity and is finding digital solutions while seeding plans to reactivate as a key part of the nation's recovery.

Malaysia has a strong and growing festival sector (pre-Covid), and cities in every region have taken great strides in building their cultural capacity and profile through their festivals. These vary from art-form specific festivals to a growing portfolio of issues-based events, such as those which seek to champion environmental sustainability, heritage, or urban renewal.

Galleries, cafés, stores and other independent spaces are growing in profile, scale and number, operating as creative hubs and platforms. They are driving a new generation of Malaysian creative practice. See the British Council Creative Hub Malaysia microsite for more: <https://creativehubs.my>

Below is a snapshot of the country's creative portfolio.

Design and the Wider Creative Industries

Malaysia has a burgeoning creative economy, albeit one in considerable pain due to the Covid-19 crisis. The country's growing middle class, digital literacy and appetite for conspicuous consumption (from fashion to games), have provided fertile ground for creative enterprises across every sector. Malaysia's design industry is dynamic – it celebrates a fusion of design thinking with the traditional tradesmanship and multicultural aesthetics. In recent years, there has been an increasing reliance on design and design thinking as a solution for inclusive growth and sustainable development. This is part of a push for bottom-up involvement in urban planning.

Visual Arts and Crafts

Malaysia has a vibrant traditional and a growing contemporary art scene. It has a healthy mix of stakeholders from national galleries, independent spaces, collectives and hubs that support across both commercial and non-profit works. Malaysian craft is astonishingly diverse, expressive of the country's wide-ranging traditions and its close relationship to nature and natural resources. Traditional craft forms like batik are being re-invented as contemporary high value design products.

Performing Arts

Malaysia's performing art sector comprises of independent, private and public sector-supported practitioners, practices and institutions. These make for the mosaic of majority/minority cultures and national/vernacular languages, some of which have origins from over 2,000 years ago.

Literature

The country has a wide range of oral and written traditions of literature that dates back 3,000 to 4,000 years. A plethora of modern literature is written in national and vernacular languages. Critically-acclaimed Malaysian authors exist in many languages. Kuala Lumpur has genuine critical mass - from writing to publishing. Penang, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching are providing fertile ground for new writers to flourish.

Contemporary Music

The music industry, like other cultural sectors in Malaysia, is diverse and draws from a rich mix of cultural traditions. Music, alongside performing arts, connects the country's distinctive intangible heritage to a contemporary reality where multi-lingual code-switching offers a distinctive structure and flavour to the art form. There is a strong and growing festival and events sector, with music at its heart.

Film/TV/Audiovisual

Malaysia has a robust film, broadcast and digital content industry that produces for a culturally diverse market, with significant government subsidy. In recent years the country has developed as a hub for post-production and is a major global player in digital animation. Malaysia's domestic box office has long been dominated by Hollywood, Bollywood and ethnic Chinese imports, with the Government supporting a broadly 'open market' policy with limited quotas on foreign films.

City Headlines



Table 1 8 Cultural City Profiles are featured for Malaysia

| Cities at a glance | In numbers |
|---|---|
| <p>Kuala Lumpur is the nation's capital and one of the most diverse and dynamic cities in Southeast Asia. It is an international hub for culture and a regional driver of the creative industries. It is a leading-edge city for design, architecture, urbanism, digital and fashion, with a thriving independent arts scene mobilised by a growing network of independent creative hubs and spaces. KL, and the wider Klang Valley conurbation, convenes creative talent from across Malaysia's diverse regions and connects this talent to an increasingly international art and creative scene with a growing festival and events offer and some organisations of genuine excellence in a range of art forms.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater KL-Federal Corridor Economic Region is the main commercial hub in Malaysia. Key economic sectors in this urban region are: business services (engineering construction, aerospace, halal services), financial services, knowledge process outsourcing, oil and gas as well as tourism. Total population of Greater KL was 7.7M in 2019. Kuala Lumpur (includes Putrajaya) GDP per capita was RM129,472 (≈GBP23K) in 2019. In 2016, KL cultural and creative industries contributed RM11.2 billion (≈GBP1.9 billion) over 86k jobs. |
| <p>George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a progressive city with a rich cultural heritage of over 200 years of history. Many of the cultural and religious festivals have national and regional influence. The city is a regional lead in community-driven urban revitalisation through heritage preservation. It has one of the most significant cultural festivals in the region – The George Town Festival; and a burgeoning street art scene. The city has particular strengths in music, visual arts and performing arts.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Located in the northeast tip of Penang Island, George Town is the capital city of the state of Penang. George Town has a UNESCO World Heritage Zone designated in 2008. It had ≈2.8M citizens in 2019. GDP per capita of Penang was RM55,243 (≈GBP9,851) in 2019. 20 countries have established consulates office in Penang. There are 3 digital libraries in Penang, located in George Town, Bayan Lepas and Butterworth. Penang State Structure Plan 2030 aims to embrace the digital age and Industry 4.0. |

| Cities at a glance | In numbers |
|--|---|
| <p>Ipoh is a rising creative city, with a distinct youth culture and a vibrant independent scene working to re-imagine the city's distinctive heritage landscape. Recent grassroots movements to preserve and activate the city through the renovation and preservation of historical buildings and heritage assets have given a new edge to the cultural profile of Ipoh within the country. The city also has a robust music and subculture scene.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ipoh is the capital of the state of Perak. • Kinta district, the metropolitan area of Ipoh, recorded 835k population in 2019. • Perak state GDP was RM31,668 (≈GBP5,575) in 2019. • The economic activities of Ipoh under Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER)'s Strategic Development Plan for Perak focuses on eco-tourism and heritage tourism; modern agribusiness; automotive, and the creative industries. |
| <p>Kota Bharu is the epitome of the Malay culture, with its rich cultural heritage and distinctive urban landscape. It is the birthplace of many traditional arts in Malaysia, from giant kites to intricate textiles, performance art and traditional games. The city is a significant hub for celebrating indigenous culture and for supporting traditional cultural practice in a contemporary context. This includes a strong and innovative crafts sector.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kota Bharu is the state capital of Kelantan. • Local people speak Kelantanese-Pattani Malay – a unique dialect. • GDP of Kelantan state in 2019 was RM14,300 (≈GBP2,491). • It had 608.6K population in 2019. • Religion has a pronounced role in the civilian life and policy direction. • The efforts of the government focus on attracting domestic tourists with programmes carrying the theme: 'Family, Food and Festival'. |
| <p>Melaka, a beautiful coastal city, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with a plethora of heritage assets which are being restored as spaces for contemporary cultural practice, with a growing festival and events sector. Both tangible and intangible, these heritage assets have been developed over 500 years of trading and cultural exchange between East and West in the Straits of Malacca. Today, Melaka, which is just about reachable for day trips from Kuala Lumpur, is a major cultural tourism draw and is becoming a key cultural hub in its own right.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bandaraya Melaka is the capital city of the Melaka state. • Melaka recorded 17M visitors in 2018. Domestic visitors accounted for 67%. • Central Melaka in 2019 records a population of 579K people. • In 2019, Melaka state recorded GDP at RM49,172 (≈GBP8,578). • Melaka is one of the forerunner states in Malaysia to launch smart grid technology. • Its creative scene surrounds its history and identity as a maritime city with develop focusing on sustainable tourism and heritage management. |
| <p>Johor Bahru has been influenced by trading visitors and tourists throughout its history. Its cuisine, art and costume manifest cultural fusion from influences as diverse as the Arabs, Bugis, Chinese and Javanese. The city has harnessed a portfolio of traditional art forms, which have fused to give Johor Bahru a rich contemporary identity and energy. The launch of Iskandar Malaysia – a special economic district bordering Singapore – has brought the city further opportunities in the creative industries, especially regarding film and digital.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johor Bharu is the capital of Johor state and one of the most important hubs for finance, commerce and technology in Malaysia and the region. • Johor state GDP was RM37,342 (≈GBP6,509) in 2019. • Special economic region, Iskandar Malaysia, is 2,217km² and 3 times bigger than Singapore and 2 times the size of Hong Kong. • Greater Johor Bahru had a population of ≈2.6M in 2019. |
| <p>Kuching, the capital of Sarawak on the island of Borneo, is a dynamic, fast-growing hub which merges traditional/ indigenous cultures with a contemporary creative scene, and sophisticated urbanism with environmental sustainability. It has a dynamic grassroots creative scene and takes inspirations from its indigenous cultures. The city is also a hub for arts and culture which champions indigenous rights and environmental sustainability.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kuching City is the capital city of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. • The economic activities are service based and heavily dependent on tourism and hospitality with recent initiatives from the government to diversify. • In 2019, Malaysian visitors to Sarawak accounted for ≈55%, followed by ASEAN visitors at ≈39%. • Kuching had 700K population in 2019. • Sarawak state had GDP RM53,358 (≈GBP9,402) from 2018 – 2019. • About 62% (7.72 million hectares) of the State land mass area is under forest cover. |
| <p>Kota Kinabalu is the cultural and economic centre of north Borneo. The city is a base for cultural tourism attracted by the surrounding bio and cultural diversity. It is also a pioneer in environmental protection and indigenous rights. The city is an innovator for sustainable development through culture, connecting the urban to the natural environment; supporting local communities to take ownership of development and to practice traditional culture.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located in the northern corner of the island of Borneo, Kota Kinabalu is the capital of Malaysia's Sabah state. • In 2019, Sabah welcomed 4.1M visitors (2.7M Malaysian and 1.4M international visitors). • It had a population of 553K in 2019. • In 2019, the GDP of Sabah was RM25,326 (≈GBP4,415). • Sabah State Policy on the Environment 2018-2033, launched in 2017, was the first state policy of its kind in Malaysia. • The economic drivers for Sabah State are tourism, agriculture (palm oil), natural resources (forestry; oil, gas and energy) and secondary industries of manufacturing and logistics. |

Appendix

Culture, Creative Industries and Tourism

National Culture Policy, Accepted by the National Culture Congress in 1971.

This policy serves as a guide in developing and maintaining Malaysia's national identity around the world. It was created based on the region's and Malaysia's rich history. The policy's principles include the indigenous culture and components from other cultures such as Chinese, Indian and others. Islam, being the country's official religion, is an important component in the formulation of the national culture policy.¹⁷

National Creative Industry Policy (NCIP), 2009. Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture.

The National Creative Industry Policy aims to boost the country's economy and socio-culture through the following: generating national wealth by creating employment opportunities and preserving intellectual property; cultivating creative talents; exporting local innovative products to other countries; and increasing public awareness of the creative industry's products to expand the local and international markets.¹⁸

National Tourism Policy 2020 – 2030, 2020. Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia.

The policy is to leverage the principles of competitiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness as a basis to position Malaysia as one of the top ten destinations in the world for tourists in terms of arrivals and receipts, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.¹⁹ Cultural & Heritage Tourism constitutes an important element of the policy.

Communications and Digital

Creative and Communication Blueprint 2018 – 2025: Digitise and Humanise, 2018. Ministry of Communications and Multimedia.

The objectives of the blueprint are to position the Communications and Multimedia (C&M) sector for sustainable growth amid digital disruption and broader technological advancement; fasten the development and transformation of other sectors of the economy; and develop a connected, knowledgeable and empowered society.²⁰ Local creative content producers and broadcasters are an area threatened by shifting consumption preferences towards global content and global content platforms, which have reduced advertising revenues and shrunk broadcast value pools. Measures to revitalise local content production and distribution, and enhancement of Malaysian content beyond borders will become primary government focus to combat the situation and inspire the Malaysian creative content sector.

Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021. Economy Planning Unit, Prime Minister Department.

The Government introduced MyDIGITAL, through the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, to transform Malaysia into a high-income country driven by technology and digitisation, as well as a regional leader in the digital economy. For the art and culture sector, it is to enable virtual access to cultural products and services through high-resolution imaging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), encourage the use of digital technology in amusement and recreational parks, cultivate and improve digital talent skills in the creative industry, and enabling digital content production and adoption of digital marketplaces.

¹⁷ National Culture Policy. P. 1 – 4.

¹⁸ Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara. P.7-8

¹⁹ National Tourism Policy 2020 – 2030. P.8.

²⁰ Communications & Multimedia Blueprint 2018 – 2025. P. 30

Environmental Sustainability

National Policy on Biological Diversity 2016 – 2025. Biodiversity and Forestry Management Division, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

The National Policy on Biological Diversity 2016 – 2025 (NPBD) seeks to preserve Malaysia's biological diversity and to ensure that its components are sustainably used for the continued progress of the nation. In alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal, it aims to conserve biodiversity, promote sustainable use and ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of biological resources.²¹

Green Technology Master Plan (GTMP) Malaysia 2017 – 2030. Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water.

Through GTMP, the government declares a leadership role in green technology by mainstreaming green technology into markets; prioritising and focusing on technology innovation; and developing and improving human capital.²² Some of the key areas to mainstream Green Technology include: public transportation, private transportation, green building design, sustainable construction practices, and green building materials.

Malaysia's Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastics 2018 – 2030: Towards A Sustainable Future, 2018. Ministry of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change.

The vision of the policy is to achieve zero single use plastics in Malaysia by 2030 for a cleaner and healthier environment.²³

²¹ National Policy on Biological Diversity 2016 – 2025. P. 10.

²² Green Technology Master Plan Malaysia 2017 – 2030. P. 8

²³ Malaysia's Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastics 2018 – 2030. P. 3. <https://www.smecorp.gov.my/index.php/en>



