

Strengthening Cultural Understanding: Japanese Officials' Visit to Singapore and Malaysia

From 28 August to 6 September 2019 (inclusive of the three-day predeparture programme), we conducted the 'Regional Exchange Promotion Programme' in Singapore and Malaysia jointly with the Japan Intercultural Academy of Municipalities (JIAM). We visited the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Our Tampines Hub Integrated Community Centre in Singapore, Petaling Jaya City Council in Malaysia, and Japanese organisations such as the Embassy of Japan in Singapore, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) Kuala Lumpur Office, and other related organisations. A total of 15 government officials from various local municipalities participated in this programme.

Prior to this overseas study programme, a three-day predeparture training session was conducted in Japan to first gain an understanding of the countries of visit beforehand. During the actual visit in Singapore and Malaysia, we went to 13 sites and covered many topics such as urban planning, tourism and more. Here, we will introduce some takeaways from URA, Petaling Jaya City Council, and the MATTA Fair Travel Expo—the three main places in which the participants were most interested.

■ Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)

At URA, we visited the Digital Planning Lab, the department in charge of utilising and developing digital tools for urban planning. In their presentation, they explained how they use digital tools such as GIS and the data obtained from public transportation. There are three main tools used: "ePlanner" visualises and analyses population data on maps, "GEMMA" shares city planning information between ministries, and "Urban Systems Dashboard" visualises development plans and progress for infrastructure. By combining these tools, they were able to efficiently carry out city planning while checking the latest road maintenance status and simultaneously comparing with future plans—all based on real-time situations. Participants were also surprised at the fact that they are conducting analyses and city planning with relatively specific indices, such as decentralising office areas in order to reduce commuting time to within 45 minutes.

In addition to using data, the participants were also impressed by URA's initiatives to display residents' feedback and relevant suggestions with regard to city planning through panel displays and questionnaires.

■ Petaling Jaya City Council

A satellite city of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, Petaling Jaya city has a population of over 600,000 residents. There, we learnt about the city's SDGs and smart city initiatives. One of such initiatives is the installation of high-precision surveillance cameras in various parts of the city. We visited the control centre, where they explained how they were planning to use the collected data from the images to effectively plan transportation measures.

■ MATTA Fair

Held in Kuala Lumpur, MATTA Fair is the largest travel expo in Malaysia which receives more than 100,000 visitors every year. At this travel fair, many Japanese municipalities exhibited at the Japan Pavilion (by JNTO Kuala Lumpur) to promote their own regions for inbound tourism to Japan. Through attending the travel fair, the participants were able to see for themselves first-hand how the various Japanese local governments were promoting Japan in Malaysia, the visitors' responses, as well as how other countries were marketing themselves to Malaysian travellers.

We had visited the JNTO Kuala Lumpur office beforehand, which was a good chance to ascertain Malaysian tourists' preferences and trends. In addition to the Japanese travel agencies, many other agencies from other countries were also promoting travel to Japan. The participants therefore were also exposed to a wide range of other travel agencies which they could approach in the future so as to continually encourage inbound travel to Japan.

Participants were glad that they were able to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the Southeast Asian market, which would be extremely applicable in their line of work. In addition, through this training programme, they also managed to network with related companies and local governments. We strongly believe that they will be able to make use of this experience and new connections gained from this programme for policy planning in the near future.