

Potential Deadweight Loss of Departure Levy

Adli Amirullah
Irene van Eldik





Adli Amirullah is an economist and research co-ordinator for the Economics and Business unit at IDEAS. He received his Bachelor's Degree in Economics from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). He has written a few policy papers and several opinion articles at mainstream newspapers about aviation sector.



Irene van Eldik is a recently graduated MSc Economics Macroeconomic Theory and Policy. She has obtained both her Bachelor and Master degree in Economics from the University of Groningen and has a special interest in Economic Policy and Developing Economies.

Introduction



The government announced, during the Budget 2019 presentation, the introduction of a new Departure Tax to be levied on all international outbound flights from June 1, 2019. This levy is stated to be RM20 for flights to ASEAN countries and RM40 to all other international destinations, with the aim to generate a higher revenue for the government. However, this new departure levy may affect both the aviation and tourism sector of Malaysia as it affects the price of flight tickets for both Malaysians planning to travel abroad, as well as ASEAN and other international citizens planning to travel to Malaysia. In ASEAN, aviation is of great importance as member states do not share the same landmass and are therefore forced to travel by air. ASEAN is also a melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and arts, with an immense potential to be a leading tourist destination in the world. Malaysian statistics illustrate this as well, as the short-haul or ASEAN market dominates with a 75.1% share of total tourist arrivals in Malaysia in 2017. Thus, the competitive position of Malaysia both in ASEAN as well as the rest of the world is important, especially with tourism being the third largest sector of Malaysia (The Star, 2017). Besides the potential direct effect on tourism and aviation, this tax might potentially harm the wider economy as well. With FDI and Trade being increasingly intertwined with air transport, both may potentially be affected by the new levy when considering the long run impact.

This new departure levy will threaten the position of Malaysia both within ASEAN as well as the wider international aviation and tourism market by raising air ticket prices and potentially creating a deadweight loss for society.

What is a deadweight loss

In general, a deadweight loss is an economic loss which occurs due to interference in a free market, making it impossible for an equilibrium to occur; usually due to subsidy, tax, price ceilings or other artificial (man-made) market adaptations. Due to a deadweight loss, for example a tax, a market-fair price for a product will not be reached due to the government intervening. In the case of a subsidy you might think this benefits the consumer as the price will be artificially lowered, however, part of the general economic gain of this alteration is lost because a fair market price is never reached. Thus, as a whole, the economy loses out, and directly or indirectly the consumer will do so too.

The Potential Deadweight loss of Departure Levy

1. *Tourism in Malaysia*

Tourism both in Malaysia and ASEAN overall has been doing well the past couple of years, with the ASEAN aviation market increasing threefold, from 98 million to 329 million passengers (The World Bank, 2018). In Malaysia alone, 75 million passengers were carried in 2017, which is an increase of approximately 50% since 2012. With the travel and tourism sector of Malaysia contributing 13.4% to total GDP and 11.8% to total employment in 2017 it is of significant importance to the economy as a whole (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). Ranking 7th place on the Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index of 2018, Kuala Lumpur is a central attraction, with approximately 12.58 million visitors each year. In 2017, Malaysian airports carried 99.1 million passengers and are expecting to hit 100 million in 2018 (MAVCOM, November 2018). According to IATA and Tourism Economics (2015), Malaysia's future seems bright, as they are expecting an additional 87,338 arrivals per year by 2034, implying an annual growth of approximately 5%. The government estimated the number of tourists in 2017 to be 25.9 million and is expecting to achieve the target of 30 million in 2020, which would increase the contribution to GDP by 2%. Though Malaysian tourism growth numbers in the past looked prosperous, the positive trend of growth might be at its end. Statistics provide evidence of a reduction in tourism arrivals of 3% in Malaysia for 2016-2017, with 25.9 million tourists visiting Malaysia in 2017. This decline has led the Ministry of Tourism to reduce arrival expectations by 17% for the years leading up to 2020. However, in the years preceding the 2017 decrease in arrivals, no negative trend of arrivals was found, except in 2014-2015. The switch from positive to negative growth numbers is striking, as well as the fact that aviation taxes in Malaysia were reformed right around 2017.

The new departure levy on all international outbound flights puts a possible strain on tourism in Malaysia. With the arrival growth number currently turning negative and future expected arrival numbers being adjusted downward, the loss of tourism in Malaysia might be further magnified by this levy, as passengers choose to travel to other holiday destinations with more competitive pricing. While the government aims to increase revenue, it might be contradicting its own policy in the long run, as it loses out on reduced tax income from the expenses of tourists now traveling elsewhere, creating a deadweight loss.

2. Air Travel Competitiveness in Malaysia

According to the World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism (WEFT&T) Competitiveness index, Malaysia ranks 6th place concerning tourism price competitiveness, and 25th place overall (World Economic Forum, 2015). With Malaysia having competitive Low Cost Carrier (LCC) options emerging in recent years and an enormous growth of available flights to both far and nearby destinations, it seems to be a great competitor. However, the Malaysian aviation sector is a very price sensitive market. Cheaper flight tickets have enabled growth for the industry, contributing to both the Malaysian national economy as well as the ASEAN economy in general. For example, in the case of Malaysia and Thailand, where in 2003 there were five nonstop routes, while by 2014 there were 17 nonstop routes, almost tripling the seat capacity.

However, currently Malaysians already pay 1% to 3% more tax on full-service flight tickets to nearby destinations compared to other ASEAN nations. This has been calculated by taking the tax as percentage of ticket price for a representative sample of flights from and between Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. This pressures the Malaysian aviation market and possibly limits the growth of tourism, as other nearby countries are relatively cheaper to visit. When the new departure levy is implemented on our calculations, ticket prices from Malaysia are raised by RM20, and the 'total tax' becomes RM56. With this departure levy in place, this price difference significantly increases to a 7%-9% difference of tax on flight tickets to nearby destinations, compared to other ASEAN countries. When visiting non-ASEAN destinations, the part of tax paid on a full-service flight ticket after the implementation of the departure levy will increase by approximately 3%. With the ASEAN and Malaysian passengers being such price sensitive customers, this loss of the competitive position is a threat to both the tourism and aviation sector and could potentially create a deadweight loss to society.

Table 1. Change in the average percentage of tax for a ticket

	Average % Tax of Ticket Price	Average % Tax of Ticket Price incl. Levy
Malaysia	13%	19%
Thailand	10%	10%
Singapore	10%	10%
Indonesia	12%	12%

Box 1. Calculating the percentage tax of ticket

We have calculated the tax of tickets for routes between the main airport of Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia using one-way ticket prices for May 8th 2019 (6 months into the future). Subsequently we examined the tax that is paid on each ticket and divided it by total ticket price to get the percentage tax of ticket. Next we took the average of these and compared them, which lead to the conclusions of the first column in Table 1.

For the second column we added the RM20 departure levy to both the one-way ticket price and included it in the tax (changing from RM36 to RM56). This increases the percentage tax paid on a ticket when the departure levy would be implemented by 6%.

IATA Air Travel Demand (Smyth & Pearce, 2008) research has calculated the price elasticities of passenger demand for Intra-Asia travelling. Using the calculations from this report, we find the specific estimated price elasticity of demand for a national levy in Malaysia to be -0.836^1 . Assuming that the consumer will bear the full burden of the levy, ticket prices will increase by RM20, thereby increasing average ticket prices on full-service carriers for short-haul intra ASEAN return journeys by 3%. Combining this, we can conclude that a 3% increase of full-service ticket prices will result in a 2.51% reduction of short-haul passengers. With the prospect of tourism in Malaysia to reach 30 million arrivals by 2020², and Tourism Malaysia estimating that the share of ASEAN tourism is 75%, a total of 565,503 ASEAN tourists will be missed out on when implementing the levy. As a result, there will additionally be a substantial loss of income from tourism, as tourists on average spend RM3,169³ per person in Malaysia. This will mean an absence of RM1,792,079,007 in tourism spending due to the departure levy, not only affecting tourist-related industries, but additionally increasing the missed tax income as tourists would have paid tax over their expenses.

¹ For a national level change, short-haul, Intra-Asia estimation: $(0.8 \times 1.1 \times 0.95)$. For more details please refer to (Smyth & Pearce, 2008).

² Comparing both Malaysia's tourism numbers and international departure numbers, they are practically identical. Therefore we use tourism numbers, as air travel seems to account for almost all tourist arrivals in Malaysia.

³ With 25,900,000 tourists in Malaysia in 2017 accounting for RM82,100,000,000 of receipts.

Box 2. Calculating the impact of ticket price increases

We have calculated the deadweight loss due to the increase in price tickets of full-service flights intra-ASEAN. We calculated the price of a one-way ticket from Malaysia to Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia's main airport on May 8th 2019 (6 months into the future) and in the next step added the departure levy of RM20 to this. We calculated the price increase for each ticket and took the average to find the average price increase of a one-way ticket: 7%. From Smyth and Pearce (2008) we obtained the short-haul, Intra-Asian price elasticity for a nation-wide change in prices, being $(0.8 \times 1.1 \times 0.95) = -0.836$. Knowing this we combined the two, and find that a price increase of 7% leads to a demand decrease of 5.852%. With Malaysia having an ASEAN tourist percentage of 75.1%, and the 2020 tourism forecast being approximated to 30 million, we find that the departure levy will reduce the 22,530,000 ASEAN tourists by about 1,318,456. With these tourists not departing or arriving in Malaysia, the deadweight loss of departure levy solely for ASEAN tourism is about RM26.37 million (1,318,456 ASEAN tourist multiply by RM20 of departure levy). With the reduced number of ASEAN tourists arriving in Malaysia, the government will miss part of the income from tax, as these tourists will choose to go elsewhere.

We have performed a sensitivity analysis for non-ASEAN short-haul flights, for flights to Hong Kong, Colombo and Taipei. For these routes, on which both the ticket prices and departure levy is higher, this gives a price increase after the levy of 6%. We conclude therefore that our result is applicable on both ASEAN and non-ASEAN short-haul flights.

Percentage price increase of one-way flight from Malaysia

Malaysia Airlines	Thailand	Singapore	Indonesia	Average
	6%	9%	7%	7%
	Hong Kong	Colombo	Taipei	Average
	5%	7%	5%	6%

Doing the same for a two-way flight, we find a price increase of 3%. This combined with the price elasticity leads to a demand decrease of 2.51%. This will reduce the number of tourists by 565,503, making the deadweight loss of about RM11.3 million (565,503 ASEAN tourist multiply by RM20 of departure levy).

Percentage price increase of two-way flight from Malaysia

Malaysia Airlines	Thailand	Singapore	Indonesia	Average
	3%	4%	3%	3%

Taking it a step further

Malaysia Tourism has provided numbers on not only the number of tourists, but also the amount of receipts from tourists. With currently 25.95 million arrivals accounting for RM82.1 billion in receipt, the average spending of a tourist is RM3,169 per person. Knowing that 565,503 fewer ASEAN tourists would visit Malaysia in 2020 due to the departure levy, this means that the economy will miss out on RM1,792,079,007 in tourist receipts.

3. *FDI in Malaysia*

Air transport is not only important for tourism and travelling, it also has indirect implications for the amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) in a country. With FDI in Malaysia to be worth RM41 billion, and being one of the top recipients of FDI in the region, FDI is of great importance to Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). According to The World Bank (2017), net inflows of FDI in 2017 were 3% of GDP. Bannò and Redondi (2014) proved that there is a correlation between air connectivity and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). With air transport being a medium of connectivity between countries, higher connectivity will lead to international trade and inward investment will grow faster (Oxford Economics, 2011). With new air routes being established, firms will be able to reduce their transport cost and thus increase the probability of FDI exchange between connected regions. Once the new route is open, Bannò and Redondi (2014) estimated that FDI would increase by 33.7% in two years' time. Growth of connectivity in the aviation industry can additionally attract businesses to expand their operation by setting up headquarters in the well-connected region. (Bel & Fageda, 2008). Both the research made by Bel and Fageda (2008) and Bannò and Redondi (2014) prove that a flourishing aviation industry will contribute to a higher FDI in the long run. Therefore, authorities need to be careful when it comes to charging and taxing the aviation industry, in order to prevent deadweight loss in the economy for the long run.

However, the proposed departure levy would increase costs for international trade and investment. With traveling to Malaysia becoming more expensive, we can see from other country case studies that a shift in the hub might occur, with airlines relocating to other countries in order to reduce costs. Thus the proposed departure levy might hinder the aviation industry and might indirectly affect FDI through a reduction of routes to Malaysia, thereby reducing connectivity and hindering FDI.

4. *Importance of Trade in Malaysia*

For Malaysia it is essential to ensure high efficiency of air transport as it is a critical component for trade in Malaysia. In 2017 alone, total trade value for Malaysia is about RM1.77 trillion which is approximately 130.88% of Malaysia GDP. This amount of trade volume indicates the importance of trade to the Malaysian economy. Oxford Economics (2011) described that trading through global value chain makes modern economies highly dependent on the air transport. Therefore, better air connectivity will make trade more accessible. Research by Oum, Zhang, and Fu (2010) showed that lower air transport costs increased trade volume. Additionally, Oum et al. (2010) indicated that as a result of a relative decrease in air travel cost, air cargo is growing more important in cargo logistics, which makes up 40% of international trade by value. This shows the importance of low cost air transport, and indicates that a departure levy would potentially harm trade via air cargo. With the advent of technology and air transportation, it is common nowadays for a consumer to purchase physical goods from a different country that is located far across the world. For example, with the help of online shopping technology like Lazada and Shopee, and the advancement of air transportation, consumers in Malaysia are able to purchase physical goods from the Philippines that is located across the South China Sea. Therefore, policy concerning extra charging and taxing of the aviation industry needs to be used with caution in order to prevent a potential deadweight loss for the economy.

Case Studies: Other Country's Experience

An extensive amount of research has been done on the effect of air taxes on several economies world-wide.

Sweden: Implementation of a Climate Tax

In Sweden, the aviation sector contributes to 4.2% of GDP and supports approximately 240,000 jobs (IATA, 2017). Compared to 2009, when aviation contributed only 1.7% to GDP and supported 83,000 jobs, this is a substantially growing sector (Oxford Economics and IATA, 2011). On April 3rd, 2018, Sweden implemented a new tax imposing fees on all passengers flying from Sweden, amounting to 60SEK (\$7) per person for a domestic or EU flight, and up to 400SEK (\$48) on long-haul flights. The aim of this tax is to combat climate change and reduce the demand for travel by air in Sweden. Prior to implementation, there have been reports warning that the proposed tax would cost 7,500 jobs and cost SEK5 billion of GDP, reducing the Swedish economy on the World Economic Forum (WEF) Cost Competitive Index. Though the tax has only been implemented very recently, the aviation sector has already started to feel the effects. Considering the Swedish main airport operator Swedavia's statistics, numbers are less prosperous in 2018 compared to other years. Where in all other years since 2010, October always had positive growth of passengers of on average 6% y-o-y, growth is actually found to be negative, -1% y-o-y, this year. The consequences of the tax for airlines are also present after only a few months of implementation, as Norwegian Air has recently cut two routes from Sweden to the US, for which it actively blames the Swedish tax. For the upcoming winter, Norwegian Air has announced to double flights from Denmark, cutting down on Sweden (Howard, 2018). In addition to Norwegian Air, national and Scandinavian operator SAS has announced its move from Stockholm to Copenhagen for its five times weekly Hong Kong service (The Blue Swan Daily, 2018). From this country case study of an increase in aviation tax, though with a different purpose, it seems very clear that the short term results are unlikely to be positive for Malaysia.

Netherlands: Effect of the Air Passenger Tax in 2008

On July 1st, 2008, the Dutch government introduced a distance-related aviation tax of 11,25 to 45 euros per ticket, with exemption of transferring tourists, which was abolished exactly one year later. Prior to implementation, it was calculated that the number of passengers travelling via Schiphol would reduce by 8-10%, but this was not a concern to the government as continued growth was expected. With the economic crisis however, the effect of the tax was magnified, and caused reductions of approximately 18% in passenger counts for some months. The main Dutch airport Schiphol experienced a remarkable overall decline of passengers of approximately 1% after continuous years of growth. Even though the tax was abolished after only one year, Dutch citizens have continued to use different (foreign) airports for travelling, most remarkably because those nearby foreign airports served more low cost carriers (LCC), thereby magnifying the LCC trend (Gordijn & Kolkman, 2011). Though the research done on the Dutch case might not be similar enough to predict the same effect for passenger growth in Malaysia, it does show how the tax could generate a larger increase in the use of LCCs, as their tickets become a relatively better option for consumers. This implies a possible threat to full-service airlines especially, who might transfer their course to relatively cheaper (nearby) airports and create new hubs.

UK: Possible Effects of the Abolishment of Air Passenger Duty

In the United Kingdom the Aviation and Tourism sector contributes approximately 4.5% to GDP and supports 1.6 million jobs (IATA and Oxford Economics, 2016). In the UK, tourism is doing very well, ranking 5th overall on the WEFT&T Competitiveness Index, but is an especially expensive country with a 140th position out of all 141 countries on the price competitiveness index. This is mainly due to the ticket taxes and airport charges, for which the UK has one of the most expensive taxes in the world, the Air Passenger Duty (APD). This is also one of the most debated aviation topics in the UK, with many changes in the tax over the past years since its initial introduction in 1994. Currently the APD on flights from the UK is either £13 or £78 (RM69 and RM416) for short or long-haul flights respectively. A recent study by Airlines UK and Frontier Economics shows that the APD represents approximately 16% to 27% of ticket prices and raises approximately £3.4 billion per year (Airlines UK and Frontier Economics, 2018). Abolishing the APD would raise demand for flights by 10%, create approximately 65 potential new connections, create up to 61,000 jobs and would ultimately pay for itself as a 10% increase in connectivity would increase GDP by £890 million per annum in the long run. In the short run of 12 months, GDP would already be increased by approximately 0.5%. It is calculated that abolishing the tax would lead to net positive gain of £0.5-£0.3 billion per annum, therefore paying back itself (PwC, 2013, 2015). The United Kingdom's Air Passenger Duty shows a clear example for the effects of a high tax on both regional competitiveness and country earnings. Though this tax is already in effect, the Malaysian increase of departure levy could see similar results for missing out on GDP revenue, jobs and competition and connectivity.

Conclusion: Is It Worth It?

With the introduction of the departure levy, Malaysia's competitive advantage and previous growth rates of tourism might be overestimated, especially considering the effects found in other countries' case studies. With lower tourist arrivals and fewer passengers expected for the future, the aviation sector is facing challenges for future growth. Not only will it limit Malaysia's aviation industry and the jobs it creates, it will also affect the economy as a whole and its international status as a tourist destination. In order for Malaysia to retain or increase its status as an attractive international destination or regional hub, the cost advantage is one of the most important factors that should be maintained. In such a competitive and price sensitive environment, passengers may easily choose a different destination for their next holiday, or choose another nearby ASEAN country for a cheaper lay-over. With Malaysian flights already paying a 1-3% higher tax rate of full service flights, the widening gap with a 7-9% difference compared to other nearby destinations will very likely reduce Malaysia's low-cost advantage and might induce travelers to go elsewhere. These are preliminary estimates and should be further refined through a thorough impact assessment of the new levy.

The three example cases illustrate the wider negative effect of taxes on air tickets in other countries. Though tax revenue is a gain for the government in all countries, the net effect for some would have been higher if the tax was either not implemented in the first place. The country cases show the importance and effect of the aviation sector on a country's economy, GDP, competitiveness, jobs and connectivity. With FDI and trade being essential to a country, measures which would hinder this should be avoided. Besides the negative country effects from the departure levy, the effect on Malaysian citizens -both directly and indirectly- are not prosperous either; possibly missing out on jobs, income and connectivity. The departure levy additionally poses a threat to airlines as increased ticket prices might lead passengers to choose LCCs over full-service carriers more often, as ticket prices become relatively more expensive. The posed threat to Malaysia as a possible global hub is stringent, with chances being that when the 7-9% higher tax on air tickets is imposed, both tourists and airlines might choose to move to more competitive neighbors. Considering that the only positive effect of the departure levy is the increased tax revenue, whilst missing out on a portion of tax from reduced tourism and aviation simultaneously, you could doubt whether this tax would be worth it.

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