

Agriculture land suitability analysis evaluation based multi criteria and GIS approach

Goma Bedawi Ahmed^{1,2*}, Abdul Rashid M. Shariff¹, Siva Kumar Balasundram³,
Ahmad Fikri bin Abdullah⁴

¹Geospatial Information Science Research Centre (GISRC), University Putra Malaysia

²Arab Center for Desert Research and Development of Desert Communities Morzok- Libya

³Department of Agriculture Technology, University Putra Malaysia

⁴Department of Biological and Agricultural Engineering, University Putra Malaysia

E-mail: joma762001@gmail.com

Abstract. Land suitability evaluation (LSE) is a valuable tool for land use planning in major countries of the world as well as in Malaysia. However, previous LSE studies have been conducted with the use of biophysical and ecological datasets for the design of equally important socio-economic variables. Therefore, this research has been conducted at the sub national level to estimate suitable agricultural land for rubber crops in Seremban, Malaysia by application of physical variables in combination with widely employed biophysical and ecological variables. The objective of this study has been to provide an up-to date GIS-based agricultural land suitability evaluation (ALSE) for determining suitable agricultural land for Rubber crops in Malaysia. Biophysical and ecological factors were assumed to influence agricultural land use were assembled and the weights of their respective contributions to land suitability for agricultural uses were assessed using an analytic hierarchical process. The result of this study found Senawang, Mambau, Sandakan and Rantau as the most suitable areas for cultivating Rubber; whereas, Nilai and Labu are moderately suitable for growing rubber. Lenggeng, Mantin and Pantai are not suitable for growing rubber as the study foresaw potential environmental degradation of these locations from agricultural intensification. While this study could be useful in assessing the potential agricultural yields and potential environmental degradation in the study area, it could also help to estimate the potential conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses.

1. Introduction

The growing population numbers, acutely in developing countries, has intensified the pressure on both natural and agricultural resources. To meet the economic demands of the growing world population, an increased economic return is required. Both population increases and the process of urbanization have increased the pressure on agricultural resources [1]. This increased pressure on the available land resources may result in land degradation [2]. Dependable and accurate land evaluation is, therefore, indispensable to the decision-making processes involved in developing land use policies that will support sustainable rural development. If self-sufficiency in agricultural production is to be achieved in developing and transitional countries, land evaluation techniques will be required to develop models for predicting the land's suitability for different types of agriculture [3].

Multi-criteria evaluation processes are already used in some regional planning processes since they aim at “estimating the potential of land for alternative land uses; among which, the agricultural land use may be the most important area where it is applied” [4]. This method could play a key role in future land-use planning [4, 5]. Agricultural land suitability classification based on indigenous knowledge is vital to land use planning. The systematic assessment of land and water potential aims to identify and put into practice future alternative land uses that will best meet the needs of the people while at the same time safeguarding resources for the future [6].

The land evaluation method is the systematic assessment of land potential to find out the most suitable area for cultivating some specific crop. Theoretically, the potential of land suitability for agricultural use is determined by an evaluation process of the climate, soil, water resources and topographical, as well as the environmental components under the criteria given and the understanding



of the local biophysical restraints [7]. The use of GIS Multi-Criteria Decision Making (MCDM) methods allows the user to derive knowledge from different sources in order to support land use planning and management [7, 8]. One multi-attribute technique that has been incorporated into the GIS-based land use suitability procedure is the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) [9, 10]. MCDM methods, such as the AHP method, have been successfully applied to land evaluation techniques [11]. These methods, which aim to allow for a transparent decision-making base, are, however, only rarely used in developing and transitional countries such as Malaysia. We have used a GIS-based MCDM land suitability analysis method to classify the study area (Seremban District) with respect to the potential for Rubber cultivation. We assumed that this goal could effectively help agricultural insurance through the identification and separation of land-based capabilities with regards to environmental, Biophysical and Socio-economical potential.

2. Multi-criteria decision making MCDM approaches

Multi-criteria decision making MCDM approaches were developed in the 1960s in order to assist decision makers in incorporating numerous options, reflecting the opinions of concerned parties into a potential or retrospective framework. This framework is “primarily concerned with how to combine the information from several criteria to form a single index of evaluation” [10]. They were designed to define the relationship between data input and data output. The integration of the GIS and MCDM methods provides powerful spatial analysis functions [12, 13]. In the MCDM approach, GIS is best suited for handling a wide range of data criteria at multi-spatial, multi-temporal and multi-scale from different sources for a time-efficient and cost-effective analysis. Therefore, there is growing interest in incorporating the GIS capability with MCDM processes [14].

The Analytical Hierarchy Process is a well-known multi-criteria technique that has been incorporated into GIS-based suitability procedures [10]. For the classification of land suitability within our case study area in Seremban, we utilized the AHP’s ability to incorporate different types of input data, and the pairwise comparison method for comparing two parameters, simultaneously. The application of the AHP process involves several steps in order to rank Criteria or factors to the set of suitable criteria. This is usually achieved by domain and experts’ opinions: The consistency of the overall set of pairwise comparisons is assessed using its Consistency Ratio (CR).

One of the most important factors affecting the land suitability classification for cultivation is soil properties. The soil properties’ criteria consist of soil texture, surface stoniness, soil depth, pH, EC, soil phosphorus, Potassium and organic matter.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study area

Seremban city is the largest district and the capital of the Negeri Sembilan State. The study area is located between longitudes (101° 45' 0" E and 102° 6' 0" E) and latitudes (3° 0' 0" N and 2° 30' 0" N). The city occupies a total land area of approximately 935.78 sq. km. Seremban City includes the districts of Seremban, Setul, Labu, Rasah, Ampangan, Rantau, Pantai and Lenggeng (Fig. 1). Seremban is located at about 20 kilometers from Putrajaya, which is considered the national capital of Malaysia, and at about 67 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur, the economic center of Malaysia.

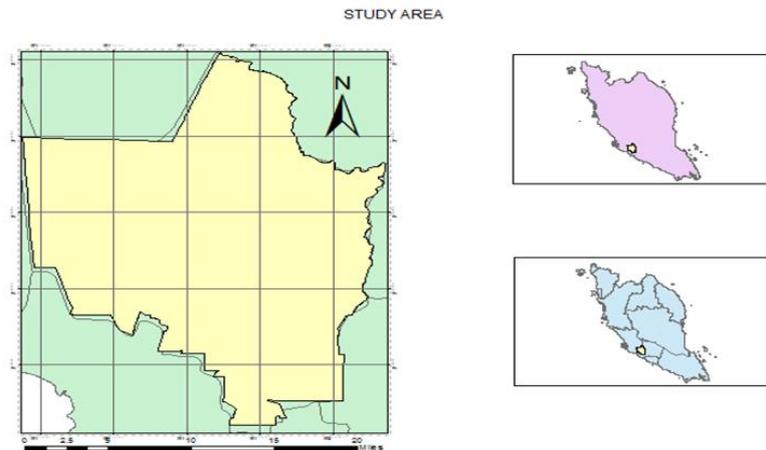


Figure 1. Location of the study area, Seremban district.

3.2 Methodology

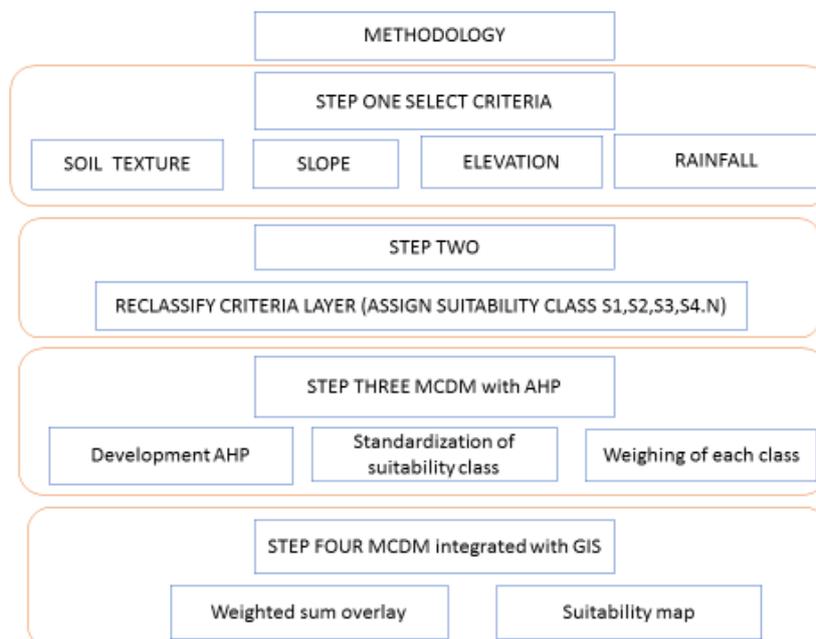


Figure 2. Flowchart of methodology.

3.3 Data collection and preparation using GIS

For the Data Preparation for the Spatial Analysis, geographical, climatic, proximity and socioeconomic factors that influence land suitability for agricultural uses were aggregated in this study [15]. All these factors constitute the criterion maps; and, the maps were projected to the same scale, boundary extent, resolution and spatial reference before they were standardized to a cell size of 300 m and UTM Zone 47N projection.

3.3.1 Soil

Landform data for the study area were derived from the 1:50 000 topographic map of Peninsular Malaysia (JUPEM, 2010). The soil characteristic was acquired from the data supplied by the Malaysian department of Agriculture (2010). The original landform and soil data were obtained in vector format and were converted into 300m raster data after they were clipped to the boundary of the study area.

3.3.2 Slope

The slope data were derived from the 1:50 000 contour data using the method described by (Deng, 2011). The slope dataset was re-classified based on the NPP classification sequence to represent different suitability situations.

3.3.3 Climatic factor

Climate variables were aggregated based on the annual averages. Kriging interpolation was used to determine the spatial approximations and to calculate the value of the variables for each grid.

4. Suitability Classification

This study used the four levels of (Table 2) [highly suitable (S1), moderately suitable (S2), marginally suitable (S3) and unsuitable (N)] suitability classes commonly used by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 1976)[16]. A complex decision problem was decomposed into its constituent criteria. The criteria were, therefore, prioritized according to their relative importance within each level.

Table 1. Classes of suitability *Source*[16].

| Code | Class | Description |
|------|---------------------|---|
| S1 | Highly suitable | land having no significant limitation for agricultural productivity |
| S2 | Moderately suitable | land having some limitations that are severe for sustained productivity |
| S3 | Marginally suitable | land with major limitations for sustained agricultural productivity |
| N | Unsuitable | land with extreme limitations for sustained agricultural productivity |

4.1. Generation of the Criterion Maps

The criterion maps were classified into four classes (Table 1). Raster layers have numerical values 4, 3, 2 or 1, which represent S1 (highly suitable), S2 (moderately suitable), S3 (marginally suitable) and N (not suitable).

4.2. Standardization of the criteria

The process of setting the relative importance of each criterion is known as the standardization of the criteria [10]. In this process, scales of 0 to 1, 0 to 10 or 0 to 100 (etc.) are normally used for the criteria standardization. A pairwise comparison technique is typically used for rating and standardizing the ordinal values. In order to compare the criteria with each other, all values needed to be transformed to the same unit of measurement scale (from 0 to 1).

Table 2. Scales for the pairwise AHP comparisons[10] .

| Intensity of importance | Description |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | Equal importance |
| 3 | Moderate importance |
| 5 | Strong or essential importance |
| 7 | Very strong or demonstrated importance |
| 9 | Extreme importance |
| 2,4,6,8 | Intermediate values |
| Reciprocals | Values for inverse comparison |

4.3. Selection of the Criteria

Four criteria were selected for evaluating the agricultural land suitability in the study area (Table 3). These criteria were selected based on an extensive literature review of potential factors affecting agricultural land use and a review of the recommendations of the Malaysian National Physical Plan[15] .

Table 3. Weighting matrix for the main criteria and sub criteria for rubber.

| No. | Criteria | Weight |
|-------|----------------|--------|
| 1 | Soil texture | 0.845 |
| 2 | Rainfall index | 0.049 |
| 3 | Elevation | 0.059 |
| 4 | Slope | 0.048 |
| Total | - | 1 |

4.4. Weighing of the criteria

Criterion weights are the weights assigned to the objective and attribute maps. Deriving weights for the selected map criteria (land characteristic map layers) is a fundamental requirement for applying the AHP method. For determining the relative importance of the criteria, the pairwise comparison matrix using Saaty's nine-point weighing scale was applied (Table 2).

Table 4. Rubber requirement.

| Agro-suit classes | S1 | S2 | S3 | N |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Annual Rainfall (mm/yr) | 2500 - 4000 | >4000 | 2000 – 5000 | <1500 |
| Dry month | <1 | <1 | 2 | >2 |
| Land drainage | Well | Somewhat excessive Moderately well | Somewhat excessive | Very poor, poor Excess drain |
| Texture | SaL , L, SaCL, SiL, CL, Si, SicL | Lsa, SaC | C, SiC | Gravel, sand, massive clay, peat |
| Soil depth | >200 | 130 – 120 | 80 – 130 | <80 |
| Slope % | < 10 | 10 – 37 | 37 – 47 | >47 |

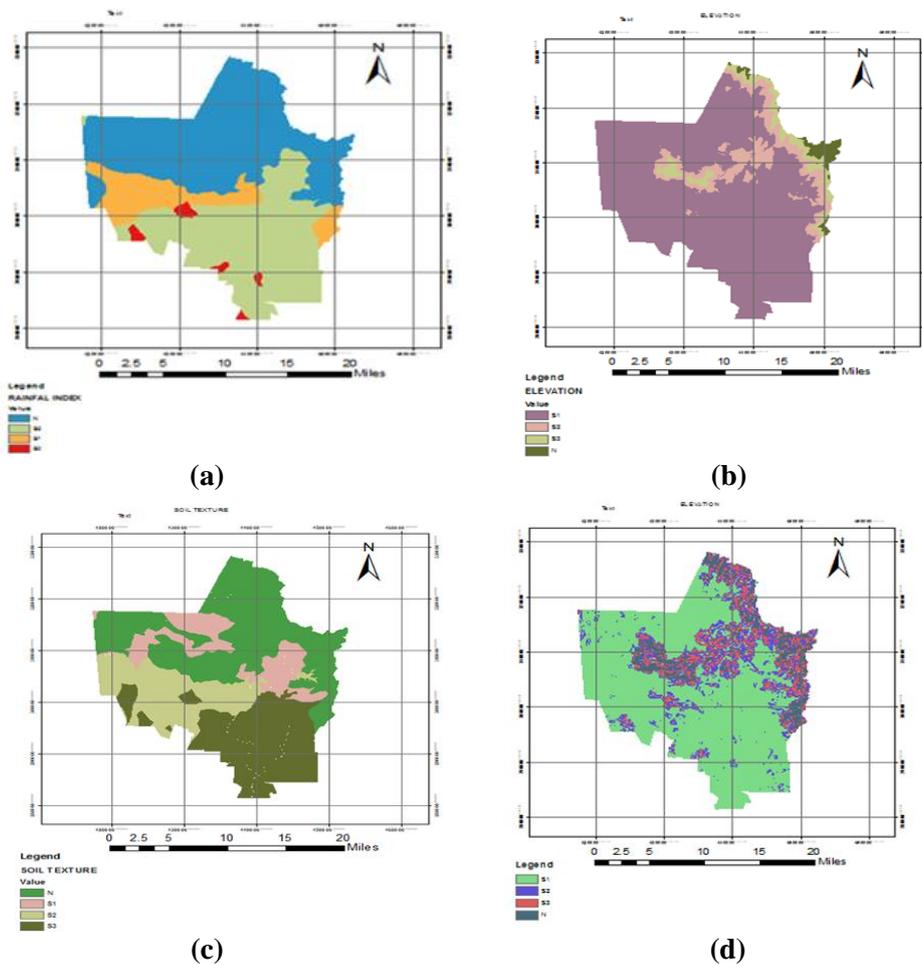


Figure 3. (a) Rainfall (b) Elevation (c) Soil texture (d) Slope.

4.5. Overlaying map layers

The weighted overlay is a technique for applying a common scale of values to diverse and dissimilar input data to create an integrated analysis. After weighing of the criteria, regarding their importance for the land suitability analysis, all the criteria maps were overlaid using a suitability index.

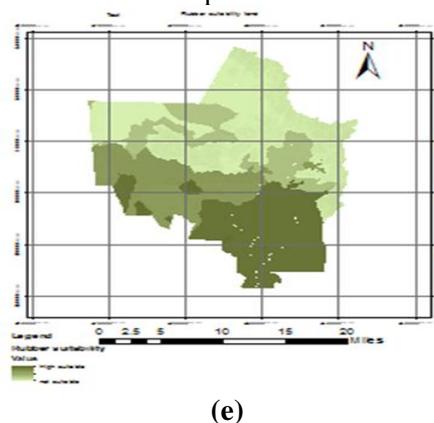


Figure 4. (e) Rubber land suitability in the study area.

5. Results & Discussion

The weight was derived for each of the independent variables as obtained from the analytical hierarchical process (AHP) presented in Table 3 and Figure 4. From the table, Soil texture was the most important factor affecting agricultural land suitability; whereas, slope had less weight, and elevation and rainfall had an equal effect on rubber in the study area.

The North-western and South-western (Nilai, Labu, Mambau and Rantau) parts of the district are the most suitable locations for cultivating rubber; whereas, the central parts (Mantin, Labu) have been found to be less suitable for rubber. The North-western and South-western parts (Lenggeng, Pantai and Senawang) of the district are not suitable for rubber cultivation (Figure 4). This shows the potential of such areas being over exploited for agricultural purposes and the impending environmental implications of this practice. This study showed the potentially sustainable agricultural land use in the study area after the exclusion of locations that are prone to topsoil erosion. The analysis of the current agricultural land use in Selangor, Malaysia indicated that land is mostly being used for what it is exactly suited for. However, there exists some challenges in the future agricultural land use in the district. For instance, the land that has been shown as less suitable and not suitable for rubber cultivation might be suitable for different crops, such as oil palm, in the Seremban district.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed the potential agricultural land in Seremban, Malaysia. Unfortunately, available evidence showed that some of these agricultural lands are being taken up by non – agricultural uses and this has a potential of negatively affecting the country's economics. On the other hand, the scenario could create a situation where the country may be achieving its food security at greater economical and environmental costs. For crops to be matched with the biophysical conditions, the biophysical variables (climatic, geomorphological, number of rainy days, average temperature, and relative humidity) of the study area were collected to enable the interpretation of the climatic variables with reference to their suitability for specific crop production. The climatic adaptability of crops forms the basis of defining the crop-climatic requirements.

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