Improving objectivity in assessing community empowerment grant proposals

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Abstract

Community empowerment grants is one of many initiatives by the Malaysian government to foster social change, economic development and environmental sustainability at the grassroots' level. Annually, the government through its many ministries offer such grants to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for community program implementations with a predefined aim, scope and target beneficiaries. Analysis of relevant documents, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving representatives of *Jabatan Pendaftaran Pertubuhan Malaysia* (JPPM) and local NGOs is the qualitative method used to enhance the evaluation of community program grant proposals, particularly with the aim to ensure objectivity, fairness and transparency. In this paper, preliminary studies for developing scoring rubric to address the above issue, drawing from extensive review of current practices and responses received from both the government and the NGOs. The assessment is designed around dimensions of community empowerment deliverables, measurable outcomes, implementation capacity, risk management, and program sustainability, each with their own set of indicators. Additionally, this paper also explored the challenges and potential for the application of the scoring rubric for different type of grants, projects or users. In conclusion, by providing a clear and consistent tool to evaluation community program proposals, it is believed

that the decision-making and evaluation processes for public-funded community programs, and subsequently the positive impact of such initiatives by the government can be further improved.

Keywords: Community empowerment, Government initiative, Proposal evaluation

1. Introduction

Community empowerment grants are pivotal tools for supporting grassroots initiatives aimed at improving social, economic, and environmental conditions in underprivileged areas. These grants enable local organizations to design and implement projects that directly address their communities' needs. The Malaysian government for example, has implemented many initiatives, such as community empowerment grants, to promote social transformation, economic development, and environmental sustainability at the local level. Each year, the government provides these grants to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the implementation of community programs with a predetermined goal, scope, and target audience through its numerous ministries.

The MyICE grant, also known as the Malaysian Incentive Community Empowerment grant, is an initiative given by the government to organisations registered under the Registrar of Societies (JPPM) with an allocation limit of up to RM10,000 per application. Organisations eligible to apply are from the welfare, social, security and human rights categories. This grant was created to fund programmes and capacity building aimed at improving efficiency in managing the governance of the organisation, fostering the value of volunteerism, identifying the value of leadership in the community as well as further enhancing cooperation between the community and government agencies (Zahari et al., 2024). Various programmes through the MyICE grant have been implemented to achieve the goals outlined and also to increase knowledge, skills, and networking among stakeholders (Zahari et al., 2024). Following the implementation of community empowerment programmes under the MyICE grant, there is a need on the part of the government as the funder to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme to ensure that the objectives of the MyICE grant are achieved. In this regard, this effective study is also a necessity to assess the level of compliance with the activity guidelines by organisations implementing community empowerment programmes. The findings from the subsequent assessments can be used to identify opportunities for improvement in funding policies and the necessary criteria for the selection of programmes that are able to realise the aspirations of the government.

Nevertheless, the impartiality of the process is jeopardized by the numerous ways in which the present procedures for evaluating applications for grants are prejudiced. The lack of transparency in the screening and review process also raises concerns. If applicants and communities are kept in the dark about the reasons behind their ideas' rejection or just partial funding, mistrust in the system will only increase. Lack of uniform standards leads to inconsistencies and disparities in proposal scoring; grant assessment and evaluation were mostly based on subjective judgment at the state level of organization registration prior to transferring to the federal or ministerial level. Therefore, standardizing criteria is also advised by funding organizations and policy makers to improve the efficiency and reduce the cost of grant review (OECD 2018). Some argue that to improve the reliability and reduce subjectivity of grant evaluation, the criteria should be well-defined (Abdoul et al., 2012). In conclusion, this study creates a scoring rubric with clear evaluation criteria to standardize and enhance the examination of MyICE grant applications.

2. Literature review

Community empowerment is a concept of human development that becomes one the main agenda of the United Nations under the Development Programme. It is an approach to provide opportunities for every member of the community to involved in the community development process. In foreign countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and the United Kingdom (Mayo et al., 2009), community empowerment programs have become an important agenda of local government, with the goal of increasing activities social and addressing poverty, security, and health problems among community members.

The MyICE program, which is a grant aimed at community empowerment, encourages organizations to take a more active role in managing association governance and giving back to the community. Among the successful factors for achieving the level of community empowerment are active community involvement (Holmes et al., 2019), knowledge enhancement (Lew et al., 2020), capacity sharing (Ansari et al., 2012) and resource dissemination (Adamson & Bromiley, 2013). Safety, well-being, leadership, and community cooperation with public agencies are the key element to evaluate MyICE community empowerment programmes.

The empowerment of the security community can also refer to the improvement of security skills and knowledge among the community, as well as the development of communication networks and cooperation between communities, authorities, and other security organizations. For example, according to Westall (2021), community safety programs implemented such as street volunteer patrols have improved community safety and indirectly helped increase community trust in the authorities. By empowering the security community, it has to some extent created a safer and more resilient environment,

as well as increased security awareness and preparedness of the community in facing security threats or risks.

Community empowerment through community well-being is an approach or strategy that aims to strengthen the capacity and competitiveness of the community at the community level, by providing assistance and support to improve their overall well-being and quality of life (Manaf & Abdullah, 2021). In addition, the main purpose of community empowerment through community well-being is to reduce socio-economic disparities, improve living standards, improve mental and physical well-being, and strengthen social ties within the community. It also aims to provide space and opportunities for the community to actively participate in the development process (Ariffin et al., 2020), as well as increase public awareness and understanding of social, economic, and political issues.

Leadership plays an important role in community empowerment because it helps to support and mobilize the community to achieve its desired goals. Leadership in community empowerment involves leading and directing efforts to improve the progress and well-being of the community, as well as helping to drive the ability of community members to be more active and involved in the effort (Zainuddin et al., 2021).

Communities and public agencies can work together to build mutual capacity in addressing social, health issues and various challenges faced by the community (Lanang & Hassan, 2021). Public agencies can provide training and resources to help communities improve their capacity to address these issues. Among the community cooperation programs with public agencies that can be implemented are health campaigns, hygiene campaigns, community development programs and so on.

In this regard, this effective study is a necessity to assess the level of compliance with the activity guidelines by organisations implementing community empowerment programmes. The findings from the subsequent assessments can be used to identify opportunities for improvement in funding policies and the necessary criteria for the selection of programmes that are able to realise the aspirations of the government.

For example, evaluation can be done by calculating the Community Satisfaction Index of the program being run (Priambada et al., 2020). Other than that, some study applied semi-systematic review (narrative review approach) to synthesize the existing literature on community empowerment for transformations towards sustainability and resilience (Dushkova et al., 2024). In Marten (2018) study, a rubric was selected as the tool for strategy comparison because of its ability to quantify complex outcome metrics, simplicity of use, and ease of transferability from one community to another. Therefore, an evaluation assessment or rubric should be established to improve the effectiveness and objectivity of the community empowerment proposal grant.

3. Method

The methodology explains the method of collecting study data that is suitable for research by determining effective procedures to answer research problems (Sarah, 2015). This study was carried out using qualitative methods. The qualitative method involves several activities such as document analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Document analysis in research is used to generate evidence, support or reject hypotheses, identify critical issues, and build new knowledge about a topic or area of study. The steps involved in document analysis include document identification, document screening, data collection, data review and interpretation, and the production of summaries for the documents. For this study, the documents that were identified were:

1. MyICE grant application guidelines
2. community empowerment program proposal papers submitted by organizations
3. JPPM's policy and criteria for selecting fund recipients
4. MyICE community empowerment program final report
5. Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025

The purpose and expected findings of the document analysis listed above are as in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Expected findings of document analysis related to this study

NO.	DOCUMENT	PURPOSE	EXPECTED RESULTS
1.	MyICE grant application guidelines	Identify and review eligibility requirements, application process, documents to be submitted, monitoring and reporting procedures.	• Organizations eligible/ineligible to apply • Programs eligible/ineligible to be considered • Program scope
2.	Community empowerment program proposal paper submitted by organizations	Identify program objectives, program implementation proposals, target groups, implementation methods, financial implications and program benefits	Level of organization compliance with grant application guidelines
3.	Policy and criteria for selecting fund recipients by JPPM	Identify and review existing policies and methods and criteria for selecting fund recipients by JPPM.	Level of JPPM compliance with the established criteria.
4.	Final report of the MyICE	Review program achievements and	Level of program success.

	community empowerment program	compliance with the established criteria.	
5.	Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025	Research and review the thrust and strategies related to community and organization empowerment outlined in the MOHA Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025.	The alignment of MyICE guidelines with the targets outlined in the MOHA Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025.

Focus group discussions are a methodology for obtaining in-depth views, opinions, and experiences of participants in the context of a study. This method is used to obtain a qualitative perspective and allows researchers to understand the beliefs, values, and views of participants and see multiple perspectives on the issue being studied. Focus group discussions are usually conducted by involving a group of participants consisting of five to 20 individuals, where the selected participants are ensured to have experience, knowledge, or views relevant to the research topic. These discussion sessions are led by a facilitator who manages the flow of the discussion, encourages participants to share their views, and ensures that all participants have an opportunity to speak. On the advice of the JPPM, a total of 15 organisations were invited for each FGD session in each state. Thus, the number of organisations invited for each state is 30 organisations (successful and unsuccessful in MyICE grant applications) except for the Federal Territories of Labuan and Sabah where FGD sessions are combined. The questions asked during these sessions were identified through literature highlights and preliminary analysis of documents related to MyICE grants obtained from JPPM. The list of questions asked for the FGD session is related to grant management.

The data collection method using in-depth interviews in qualitative research provides researchers with qualitative data that is full of information and very detailed where participants (interviewees) describe information about experiences, and the implicit meanings of the experiences of individuals, organizations or social institutions. In collecting data, research questions play a very important role in guiding researchers in achieving the objectives of the study (Kross & Giust, 2019; Meyer, 2001). An in-depth interview was conducted with representatives from the JPPM management who were directly involved in managing the MyICE grant and assessment of the grant's application to confirm the findings from the FGDs. As a result of these interviews, issues and challenges were identified and subsequently cross-checked findings was carried out for the preparation of policy improvement proposals, evaluation processes and grant management in the future by JPPM.

Triangulation is a general approach to obtaining the validity of findings and increasing the effectiveness of a study. It is used to describe the process of comparing the

findings of studies that have been collected (O'Cathain et al., 2010). This method involves collecting and analysing findings from several different sources, methods, or perspectives to confirm and support the conclusions obtained, where the validity of a conclusion can be increased if different approaches produce findings that focus on a single result (Denzin, 2017). In this study, triangulation was used to analyse and confirm the findings from document analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with participants in community empowerment programs, organizations that organized these programs, organizations that were unsuccessful in applying for MyICE grants in 2022, and JPPM as the public agency that manages the MyICE grants.

4. Findings

This study has applied several methods to collect data from organizations, program participants, and also from the JPPM. The first method implemented was a focus group discussion with representatives of organisations that had applied for MyICE grants in 2022, including those who were unsuccessful in their applications. An in-depth interview session was also held with representatives from the JPPM management to get the Department's perspective on the management of MyICE grants. Document analysis was carried out by comparing the important documents for the MyICE grant and this study, including the MyICE grant application and programme report submitted by the organisation, the activity guidelines gazetted by the JPPM, as well as the MOHA Strategic Plan 2021–2025 document. Following up on data collection and analysis activities, the triangulation method is adopted to identify themes or topics that are a priority among all stakeholders. All findings from the activities are discussed in this section.

4.1. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

A total of 15 FGD sessions were conducted involving 214 respondents from various organizations nationwide. These FGDs were conducted to collect information from organizations regarding their experiences in applying for MyICE grants, program implementation and the role of organizations in ensuring that organizations remain active and can contribute to the community. The themes formed through the FGDs identified are as listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes identified through FGDs

Series	Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency of Phrase Usage
1.	MyICE Grant Management	Grant opening announcement	1. Email 2. JPPM website 3. Facebook 4. Information at the JPPM

			State counter
		MyICE Grant Application via the (Registry of Societies Electronic System (eROSES)	1. System problems 2. Missing information 3. Not user friendly 4. Inefficiency
		Assessment and evaluation of grant	1.Subjective between state
2.	Implementation of the Program	Collaboration with other Agencies and Organizations	1. Collaboration with other Agencies
		Delays in receiving grant approval notification	1. No notification 2. Implementation of a short program
		Insufficient Funds	1. Expenses increase
		Program Impact	1. Satisfied 2. Increased knowledge
3.	Organization governance	Superior leadership	1. Advance planning 2. Collaborate 3. Leadership
		Volunteerism	1. Similar interests 2. Stay persistent with organizations
		Good governance	1. Joint decision 2. Program implementation 3. Presentation of program results (postmortem)

Focus group discussions (FGD) with the implemented organizations revealed that their lack of trust in the system and the eROSES facility's severe unfriendliness were the reasons behind their dissatisfaction.

4.2. In-depth Interview

Following the focus group discussions (FGDs) with representatives of organisations that have applied for MyICE grants in 2022, the last activity for data collection was through an in-depth interview session with representatives of the JPPM itself. As described in method section, an in-depth interview is a qualitative method that involves obtaining detailed testimony from respondents regarding the experiences of the individuals and organizations of interest themselves.

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain JPPM's views and experiences on three main topics that have been identified in line with the objectives of the study, namely: (1) the management of MyICE grants by JPPM, (2) the achievements

of MyICE in support of the Home Ministry Strategic Plan 2021-2025, and (3) the issues and challenges identified by JPPM in managing MyICE grants. In addition, through this interview, JPPM's perspective was also obtained for the issues and suggestions that were shared by the organisations during the FGD session. For this in-depth interview session, two (2) representatives from the top management of JPPM and from the Organisation Management Division were interviewed by the research group. As a result of the examination of the recordings and interview notes, the findings obtained can be divided into categories as shown in Figure 1.
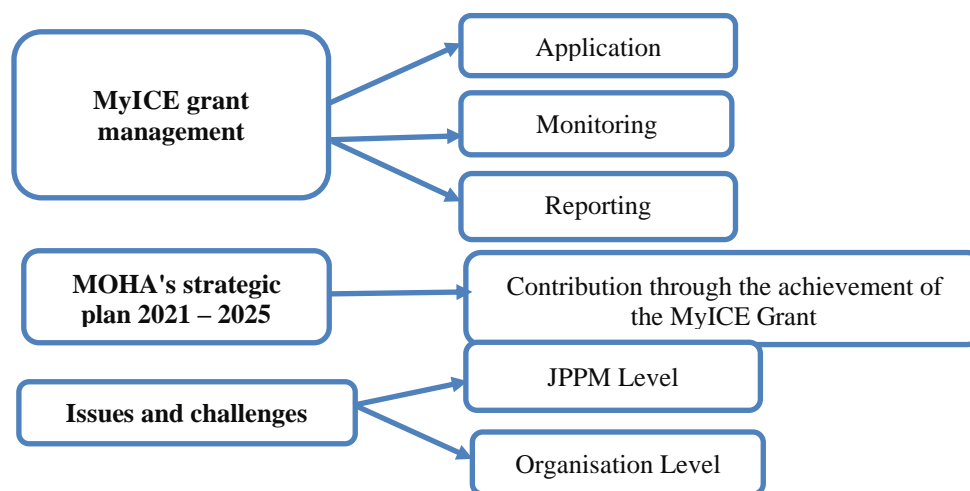

Figure 1. Category of findings from an in-depth interview session with JPPM

The findings from in-depth interviews, which revealed that the assessment and evaluation of grants was somewhat subjective depending on the state, were supported by the findings of the focus group discussion (FGD). Moreover, the unsuccessful organizations' comments indicated that they thought the eROSES system's inefficiency might have played a role in their failure to be awarded the MyICE grant.

4.2.1. *MyICE grant management*

Table 3 shows three main stages in MyICe grants management as well as the issues that arise as explored through FGDs and the initiatives taken to address these issues by stakeholders.

Table 3. MyICE grants management, issues and initiatives

MYICE GRANT MANAGEMENT	ISSUES	INITIATIVES

Applications and Evaluation Process	• use of the eROSES system which has reached the end of its service period • constraints among organisations when this online approach is used mainly for organisations in small urban or rural areas, where the level of digital literacy is still low • existing eROSES system is also constrained by various technical issues	• JPPM at the state level where an engagement briefing session and grant application was held to facilitate grant applications by organisations • to ensure the fairness of the distribution of MyICE allocations to organisations nationwide, the master fund is allocated to each state through its own quota based on the total population of organisations and residents in the state • various promotions through emails, face-to-face briefings as well as advertisements on various electronic and social media such as Facebook and YouTube pages are carried out by JPPM
Monitor the implementation of programmes	• ensuring that the implementation of the program is really in line with the applications submitted and approved. • organisations that have implemented programmes other than those proposed in the application	• inspections are conducted through on-site and non-notice monitoring, evaluation of program reports, and monitoring of the organization's activity level • JPPM gives flexibility and permission for the organisation to make changes to the programme as long as the justification given by the organisation is reasonable, no additional allocation is required for the implementation of the programme, and reporting is still done accordingly.
Reporting	• grant period is in the third and fourth quarters of the year • organisations found to have failed to comply with the grant requirements during monitoring	• flexibility is given to organisations to report until 2023 • a sample report and a checklist are also provided by the Department to facilitate these processes on the part of the organisation • blacklisted for a period of two years. • a social media portal, My Society, is also provided by JPPM as a sharing platform for organisations

JPPM takes an open and transparent approach on the criteria used to evaluate the applications received from these organisations. The selection and evaluation criteria for applications are based on publicly shared MyICE grant guidelines whereby the proposed program must:

a. Empowering organisations through capacity building and governance.
b. Fostering the value of volunteerism.
c. Enhance cooperation between government agencies and the community.
d. Providing benefits through 4 categories of organisations, namely welfare, social, security and human rights.

At the state level, the state JPPM conducts an initial screening to ensure that grants can be given in a more inclusive, fair manner and to truly legal organisations. The evaluation committee at the JPPM headquarters will conduct further screening based on the list of recommendations and non-recommendations from the state JPPM. To give encouragement, especially to younger and smaller organisations, JPPM has indeed given priority to organisations that have never received grants from the Department in previous years. However, the JPPM stressed that the Department has no obstacle for truly active organisations to also be considered and given allocations even though the organisations have received grants from the JPPM in 2021.

4.2.2. MyICE achievements to support the MOHA's strategic plan 2021–2025

The second topic of the interview session was on the achievement of the MOHA Strategic Plan 2021–2025, and the extent to which the MyICE grants given to organisations through JPPM contributed to the achievement of this plan. As a result of the interviews, the research group obtained two different opinions on this topic, the first of which was that the grant did not contribute to the achievements outlined in the strategic plan. While the second opinion is; This grant has been successful in helping to achieve the goals outlined in the plan.

As for the first opinion, it was made based on the targets outlined specifically for the JPPM in the plan, namely related to the strengthening and improvement of the registration of societies in the country. Through this perspective, the JPPM is of the opinion that there is a discrepancy in the broader and general MyICE grant target, compared to the targets and objectives that need to be achieved by the JPPM either in the MOHA Strategic Plan or through the department's vision which is more geared towards aspects of security, corporate governance and civil society production. The grants given by the government through the JPPM are also advised not to be used as one of the indicators of the achievement of the MOHA's Strategic Plan as this effort is considered to contradict the government's target to create self-sustaining organisations, and no longer rely on financial assistance from the government to empower organisations and communities.

As for the second opinion, it was made based on the general target of the strategic plan, which is to address the security issues and challenges faced by the country this decade. JPPM is seen as able to assist in the achievement of the Home Ministry Strategic Plan through grants such as MyICE by strengthening the governance of the organisation, and this organisation in turn assists the government and the country in strengthening the

security aspect in the community. The MyICE grant is also seen as a continuation of previous grants that aim to achieve the status of Safe Cities and Safe Communities.

When these two opinions are compared, perspective is identified as a significant factor in this issue. From the perspective of the Department individually and in particular, the MyICE grant does not contribute to the achievements and targets outlined at the Departmental level that are geared towards the management and regulation of the organization. However, if a more general perspective is taken, the MyICE grant and other grants channelled by the government through the JPPM can contribute to the achievement of the Home Ministry's Strategic Plan through the empowerment of organisations and the local community. A safer community and therefore a safer nation will only result from empowerment implemented in a sustainable manner, and organisations as implementers have the ability to facilitate and assist the government in achieving this target.

4.2.3. Issues and challenges from in-depth interviews

As for the issues and challenges that have been identified and discussed during this interview session, they can be divided into issues and challenges on the side of the JPPM or those on the side of the organisation. On behalf of JPPM, several issues and challenges were identified for different levels of grant management including at the application, evaluation and monitoring stages of the programme.

Grant management is generally a challenge for JPPM as the Department is essentially a department that functions to regulate registration, manage monitoring and strengthen the governance of the organisation. However, when grants for establishments are placed under the JPPM, there are constraints in ensuring that management can be carried out effectively. The total number of registered societies in Malaysia is more than 189,000 societies under 10 different categories (apart from the political category) and this means that managing grants and societies is not an easy matter. In addition, there is no specific division in the JPPM that is responsible for managing grants such as MyICE, and this contributes to delays in the management of grants.

Looking at the stages in the management of MyICE grants, issues arise at the application stage when the eROSES system, which has reached the end of its life cycle, causes various technical issues such as being stuck during filling in application information, information is not stored after being sent by the applicant, and there are also cases where the system automatically approves the application. Following this technical issue, the application approval process had to be done manually due to system problems, which in turn resulted in a delay on the part of the JPPM to inform the applicants of the status of the application. Apart from issues related to this system, the delay in evaluating applications is also due to various factors such as the need to determine the validity of the proposed programme, and filter out applications that are found to be plagiarized from

organisations. In the process of obtaining this application, another challenge faced by JPPM not only for MyICE grants, but also for other grants is to obtain applications from organisations, despite various efforts to provide publicity and encouragement to organisations.

The above issues and challenges that resulted in the delay in the application evaluation process were acknowledged by the JPPM leading to a delay in the approval process and distribution of allocations. For some states, this delay is further exacerbated when there is a need for these recipient organizations to register as suppliers with the correct field code with the government. This is an additional process required by the State Accountant Department and also contributes to the delay in the management of MyICE grants.

Since the issues that resulted in these delays arose from the early stages of MyICE grant management, it resulted in a double impact especially in the late stages of MyICE grants. The impact assessment and achievement of the MyICE grant, for example, has not yet been completed as there are still organisations that have not submitted programme reports as of Q3 2023. The assessment through the scrutiny of application documents and reports received from organisations is also constrained by the capacity of the workforce at JPPM, as well as the workload to manage the new grants offered through JPPM in 2023 (GPPK).

As for the assessment of the impact of the grant, apart from the difficulties due to the lack of documents above, the impact of the MyICE grant is difficult for JPPM to assess as there is no continuity between grants from one year to the next. For example, the previous grant, the Community Grant (GKom) offered in 2019, was open to residents' associations only. Grants for these establishments were then temporarily suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2022 (MyICE) it was opened to various categories of establishments. For 2023, the GPPK grant was introduced, and it is back with a smaller scope, which is focused on residents' associations only.

Apart from the above issues, among the other issues identified through the interview session was the distribution of grant allocations among organisations such as residents' associations which were found to be ineffective and could not target organisations in need. This is because grants such as MyICE are open to the public and many residents' associations in large urban areas have also applied for the funds offered. This in turn reduces opportunities for people in rural areas or who really need assistance with public funds such as MyICE. JPPM notes that as there are various grants and funds offered for organisations from other ministries and departments in Malaysia, the probability of an organisation applying for and receiving more than one grant at a time is high, especially for organisations in urban areas. However, the JPPM does not have the ability to monitor all types of allocations received by the organisations, especially when the grants are not

channelled through the JPPM, nor are they notified to the JPPM by the other ministries and departments. Furthermore, in relation to this issue, for some programmes/projects implemented using MyICE grants, conflicts arise between the JPPM and other government agencies/departments when the programmes/projects are found to be in violation of the laws, regulations and/or jurisdiction of the agency/department.

As a result of the interviews held, several issues on the part of the organisation were also discussed with the JPPM. Among them is the MyICE grant application, where although filling out the application online is considered convenient for all parties, it is also a constraint and obstacle for some organisations, especially those whose members are older and less digitally literate. Grant applications were found to be more active among organisations with non-Bumiputera members, while for some other areas, the distribution of grants could not be implemented well as the applications did not receive an encouraging response among organisations in those areas. For such areas, JPPM found that the recipients of grants are limited to organisations based on a race or category only. Another challenge among organisations in relation to grant applications is the organisation's understanding and interpretation of the grant targets and scope which subsequently becomes a contributing factor to the unsuccessful application. Acknowledged as one of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, most applications from organizations are to deliver humanitarian aid, rather than for the empowerment of organizations or communities as targeted by MyICE grants.

Among the successful applicants, issues arose including that the registered contact information was not updated appropriately. This makes the process of managing grants and managing establishments by JPPM difficult. For some other organisations, the disbursement process is delayed when the organisation's account is found to be inactive, or the active period is less than 6 months. This requires follow-up action by the organisation to enable the MyICE funds to be channelled properly. Generally, the impact of MyICE grants is considered insignificant as many successful programmes spend most of their funds on the preparation of participants' meals alone. For some other organisations, the breakdown of grant funds is also focused on the purchase of non-critical items such as programme t-shirts, apart from the preparation of food meals.

4.3. Document Analysis

The MyICE Grant 2022 Application Form and MyICE Grant Implementation Report 2022 are collected from the Registrar of Societies (JPPM) to identify the level of compliance of organisations based on the category and Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the level of programme achievement under the MyICE grant.

Based on the analysis of the documents, the application form from the Pahang State JPPM and the implementation report for the Federal Territory of Labuan were not uploaded. This makes the overall document analysis process difficult. The document review process found that the MyICE Grant application form was non-specific and did not state the category of the establishment. As for the MyICE Grant 2022 implementation report document, most states do not provide a template and checklist for reporting submission. Only the states of Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan provided a reporting guide template to recipients while the state of Terengganu provided a checklist to facilitate MyICE Grant 2022 recipients to prepare implementation reports. The findings from the analysis of the document for the assessment of the compliance of establishments by category of establishments and also on the Ministry of Home Affairs Strategic Plan 2021-2025 can be referred to in Appendix.

Level of program achievement under the MyICE grant

Referring to the analysis of the document as a whole, the level of compliance of the organisation to the Ministry of Home Affairs Strategic Plan 2021-2025 is low. Only some organisations, especially for the Security Category, carry out programmes involving agencies guided by Thrust 1, which is to strengthen public safety and order. The organisation runs programmes that enhance crime-fighting efforts and strengthen crime prevention efforts with strategic partners and communities.

In addition, the programme organised is also enshrined in Thrust 3, which is to eradicate the symptoms of drugs and substances through programmes that involve strategies in empowering drug and substance prevention education programmes that increase the involvement of strategic partners, communities and the media in efforts to strengthen drug prevention programmes for each target group. Based on the analysis of the documents, the level of achievement of the program under the MyICE grant is good and achieves the objectives of MyICE in empowering the organization through good corporate governance, fostering the value of volunteerism through the organization, superior leadership and ensuring the safety and well-being of the people.

4.4. Triangulation of study findings

The analysis of the findings was carried out on all three data collection methods, namely focus group discussions, interviews, and document analysis. Through this analysis, several themes for the issues and challenges faced in the management of MyICE grants have been identified.

4.4.1 Organisational response to MyICE grants

JPPM has used various methods to ensure that the announcement of the MyICE grant is received by the organisations targeted by the grant. These methods include through email, eROSES system, JPPM website, social media and mass media. However, the response from organisations to the MyICE grant was found to be less favourable based on the number of applications received by JPPM. Following that, the JPPM at the state level has taken various initiatives to encourage organisations to apply for MyICE grants such as contacting organisation representatives, organising a MyICE grant governance briefing and offering assistance services to fill out the application form. One of the main factors that has been identified as a result of the FGD, this issue arises because on the part of the organisation, they feel that the eROSES application system is not user-friendly and often suffers from technical problems.

4.4.2. Application process

For the MyICE grant in 2022, the application process is conducted online where organisations are required to upload applications and supporting documents into the eROSES system. This method is intended to simplify the application process compared to the manual method used for grants in previous years, especially for establishments located in rural areas. Although filling out the application online is considered to be convenient for all parties, it is also a constraint and obstacle for some organisations, especially those whose members are older and less literate in information technology.

In addition, the organisation also faced system problems including difficulty in logging in, the information entered was not stored in the system and the system was stuck during the application process. The organisation also did not receive a notification of receipt of the application from the eROSES system. On the other hand, the eROSES system used is acknowledged to be nearing the end of the system's life cycle. Therefore, various problems arise that affect the application management process such as the system getting stuck, the system approving the application automatically and the application information disappearing in the system. To address this problem, JPPM is currently in the process of developing a new efficient and user-friendly system which is expected to be completed in 2025.

4.4.3. Delays in the processing of MyICE grants

Another major issue identified was the delays that occurred throughout the administration of MyICE grants. This issue arises due to various factors which in turn cause delays at various levels of grant management and implementation. Based on the analysis of the findings of the study, delays occurred at the management level of MyICE grants and had an impact on the implementation of programmes by organisations. The delay factors at each stage of management and subsequent impacts in the implementation of the programme are as listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Issues related to delays in the management of MyICE grants were identified through triangulation of study findings

NO	STAGE	FACTORS THAT CAUSE DELAYS	IMPACT
1.	Application	Online application system introduced for MyICE grants	Poor response from organisations
		Low number of applications received by JPPM	Extension of grant application period until the third quarter (Q3) of 2022
			Delayed screening and disbursement process
2.	Implementation	Approval of applications and distribution of funds is valid until the fourth quarter of 2022	Programme implementation postponed until the end of the year
			The planned programme had to be amended from the original application and target
		The program is implemented at the end of the year	Community participation is less
			Reporting cannot be submitted according to the set timeline
3.	Reporting	Programme reporting by the organisation after the year of programme implementation	There are organizations that do not submit the final report of the program
			The impact of the effectiveness of the programme cannot be properly assessed

Additionally, it was found by looking through documents related to the grant application process that the following issues and challenges applicants had during the present proposal evaluation process, as presented in the Table 5.

Table 5. Issues and challenges related to the applicants

FREQUENT ISSUES IN PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS	INFLUENCES	IMPACT
Subjectivity and Bias	• Favouritism (geography, project type preferences, or personal ties to candidates)	• Proposal approved using stronger language, even do not significantly affect the community
Insufficient Standardized Standards	• Rapid Technological Advancements	• Inconsistencies and variances in proposal scoring result from

	• Resistance to Change • Lack of Coordination Between Standardization Bodies	the lack of consistent standards • prolongs the evaluation process from the state level of organization registration depart to the federal or ministerial level.

Limited Transparency	• Lack of Oversight
	• Lack of Emphasis on Accountability
		• Delays and Inefficiency
		  • Reduced Participation of Stakeholders
		  • Mistrust in the system

5. Discussion and Recommendations

After discussions with the JPPM and other activities carried out during the research phase, the following suggestions for enhancement were given for consideration and implementation in the future.

5.1. Proposed Framework for Enhancing Objectivity of the MyICE grant Assessment

To enhance the objectivity of MyICE grant assessment, a well-structured framework is essential. This framework should aim to minimize bias, ensure consistency, and provide a clear basis for evaluating performance. This study suggests an organized, evidence-based approach with multiple essential components to solve the issues of enhancing the objectivity of the assessment. Some examples of mechanism to enhance objectivity are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Frameworks and mechanism to enhance objectivity

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS		
	MECHANISM	**DESCRIPTION**	**STRENGTH**
Issues related to MyICE grants assessment process	Metrics for Standardized Evaluation (Miller, 2019)	Establishing a standardized and precise set of evaluation metrics is essential. These metrics should assess proposals based on the following criteria: A) Community Need: To what extent does the proposal resolve a pressing matter for the community? B) Feasibility: Is the proposed project realistically attainable	• Reduction of Subjectivity and Bias • Improved Comparability Across Proposals • Focus on Key Areas of Importance • Increased Fairness

	within the specified timeline and resources? C) Sustainability: Is there a strategy in place for the project's continued success once the grant period expires? D) Impact Potential: To what extent is the initiative expected to bring about the beneficial change that is anticipated? E) Innovation: Does the plan present fresh concepts or techniques that could act as role models for other communities? Depending on the strategic goals of the grant program, each of these measures should have a different weighting.	• Enhanced Accountability and Justifiability • Improved Feedback to Applicants
Data-Driven Decision Making (Anderson, 2020)	Using data to analyse concepts can significantly improve the assessment's objectivity. Assessments of community needs, past grant data, and effect evaluation studies should have all been included during the proposal review process. This enables the assurance that funds are allocated to initiatives that meet the most pressing needs and have a strong likelihood of success.	• Improved Accuracy and Precision • Increased Efficiency • Scalability and Adaptability • Predictive Power • Better Resource Allocation • Enhanced Accountability and Transparency • Informed Strategic Planning • Improved Customer Understanding and Satisfaction • Increased Innovation • Supports a Culture of Continuous Improvement
Blind Review Method (Johnson & Wilson, 2019)	A blind review process can lead to lessened personal prejudice. Reviewers can focus exclusively on the project's merits, rather than the applicants' histories or	• Promotes Fairness and Equity • Improved Reviewer Accountability • Encourages Diverse Perspectives

	reputations, because applications are anonymous	• Increased Transparency and Trust in the Process • Alignment with Best Practices in Peer Review • Encourages Focus on the Proposal's Content and Methodology • Avoids Conflicts of Interest • Supports Objective Data-Driven Evaluation
Diverse and Inclusive Review Committees (Smith and Jones, 2018)	Diverse review panels of members from various professional, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds might mitigate bias. A more comprehensive assessment of ideas is facilitated by the diverse perspectives of evaluators with different experiences.	• Promotes Fairness and Equity • Enhanced Cultural Competency and Sensitivity • Increased Transparency and Trust • Reduction of Groupthink • Alignment with Broader Organizational and Societal Goals • Mitigation of Systemic Inequities • Fosters Holistic and Inclusive Evaluation • Reduction of Confirmation Bias • Encourages Long-Term Systemic Change
Discreet Feedback Systems	To build trust, applicants should receive in-depth comments on the benefits and drawbacks of their proposals. Candidates may more easily understand why their proposal worked or didn't work using an open feedback system, allowing them to make improvements for the next time.	• Reduction of Pressure • Encourages Honest and Constructive Criticism • Enhanced Objectivity • Mitigation of Groupthink

	• Increased Fairness for Applicants
	• Promotes Accountability
	• Increased Reviewer Participation
	• Facilitates Consistency and Comparability
	• Reduces Conflict of Interest
	• Encourages Reflective Review
	• Facilitates Future Improvements for Applicants

4.2. Tools for Objective MyICE grants management

Using the appropriate tools is essential to ensuring an unbiased evaluation of proposals, monitoring the implementation and reporting of the programme. These methods aid in reducing biases, producing consistent results, and methodically assessing ideas against predetermined criteria. The following approach (Table 7) can be used to reduce the challenges in MyICE grant management.

Table 7. Approaches to anticipate challenges

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATION		
	APPROACH	**DESCRIPTIONS**	**STRENGTH**
Issues related to MyICE grants management	Scoring Rubrics (Thomas and Zhang, 2023)	All reviewers can score documents more consistently and objectively when the scoring rubrics are in line with the standardized evaluation standards. These rubrics ought to specify the low, medium, and high scores as well as offer criteria for every statistic.	• Minimizes Reviewer Fatigue • Improves Feedback for Applicants • Encourages Focus on Key Proposal Elements • Data-Driven Decision-Making • Encourages Holistic Assessment • Facilitates Reviewer Efficiency • Clear Expectations and Feedback
	Digital Evaluation Platforms	To further improve objectivity, digital channels should be used for both proposal submission and	• Encourages Diversity and Inclusivity in Reviews • Supports Multi-Round Review Processes

(Thompson, 2020)	review. These platforms offer the ability to automate essential elements of the evaluation process, highlighting inconsistencies or missing data. Digital platforms can also make it easier to conduct anonymous evaluations and gather comments.	• Eco-Friendly and Cost-Effective • Enhanced Security and Confidentiality • Customizable and Flexible Evaluation Tools • Centralized Data Management
Impact Prediction Models (Zhang, 2021)	A project's potential success can also be objectively assessed by evaluators by including impact prediction models into the review procedure. These models provide evaluators data-driven insights to support their recommendations by analysing related projects and their outcomes.	• Focus on Long-Term Benefits • Risk Assessment and Mitigation • Better Allocation of Resources • Predicting Measurable Outcomes • Scenario Analysis and Flexibility • Encourages Innovation and Ambition • Alignment with Organizational Goals • Integration of Cross-Sector Impacts

Considering the provided example, an objective approach—such as the application of rubrics—is recommended for the grant of applications as opposed to the more arbitrary current screening procedure. Well-defined criteria and indicators may guarantee the constancy of the quality of applications submitted and motivate organizations to apply for the money being awarded, in addition to simplifying the JPPM grant management process. Additionally, a more systematic process for program monitoring is recommended, involving the use of scoring systems, evaluation rubrics, and an extensive and user-friendly reporting system. Clear criteria and indicators will not only facilitate the evaluation process by the JPPM, but may also help in motivating organisations to apply for the grants offered, as well as ensuring the uniformity of the quality of applications submitted.

Establishing best practices and using benchmarking are necessary for agencies to examine proposals more impartially and fairly. This means creating standardized practices and benchmarks that serve as a framework for assessing the value and potential significance of concepts.

6. Conclusions

Enhancing objectivity and fairness in the grant allocation process requires benchmarking and the development of optimal criteria for proposal evaluation. The effectiveness and equity of grant programs can be increased by agencies through the adoption of uniform measures, training of reviewers, and maintenance of transparency. As a result, the beneficial effects on communities are maximized, and the grant-making process is trusted.

A benchmarking strategy is one that agencies can use when evaluating proposals. Benchmarking is the process of comparing the evaluation procedure to accepted norms or industry best practices. Evaluations are therefore more likely to be unbiased, trustworthy, and compliant with industry standards. The following best practices that can be used by agencies as a gauge for themselves:

- Identify principal Models: Examine and research the principal models that reputable grant-making organizations employ to ascertain what works best for proposal evaluation.
- Analyse projects that have successfully met their objectives, and the criteria and processes used in their selection. This type of analysis is called success story analysis.
- Learn from Failures: Understanding the causes of some projects' failures may assist in determining which evaluation criteria need to be revised.

Additionally, research should aim to create dynamic assessment frameworks that adapt to changing community needs, integrate equity-focused criteria to prioritize inclusivity, and assess the long-term impact of funded projects to refine evaluation practices. Studying the effectiveness of peer review in proposal assessment and the impact of targeted assessor training programs can also contribute to a more objective and fairer grant-making process.

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Appendix

Samples of a Suggested Grant Evaluation Rubric

Sample 1

ITEM/ MARKS	1	2	3
COMMUNITY NEEDS	The recommendations provide limited evidence of community needs for programs.	The proposal provides limited data and research to identify community needs for the program.	The proposal provides extensive data and research to identify community needs for programs.
IMPACT	The proposed program will have a limited long-term impact on the community	The proposed programme will have a medium-term impact on the community	The proposed programme will have a significant impact on the community
PROGRAM DESIGN	The project is repeated with other community programs.	Projects offer a number of unique services or meet the unique needs of residents.	Projects target specific populations with unique services that are not offered to other communities

MAXIMIZING RESOURCES	The project duplicates the efforts of other communities without involving collaboration with agencies.	The project recognizes others who offer similar services or serve the same community. The project aims to reduce or limit duplication of services through dialogue and collaboration with local agencies.	The project works proactively to reduce duplication of services. The project engages with other providers to improve the services offered. The project promotes partnerships and collaborations between two or more local agencies.
BUDGET	Limited financial supervision. Documentation is limited. The financial request is not clearly described or appropriate to the proposed activity	The project has clear financial oversight. The documentation provided is sufficient. The financial request is clear and appropriate for the proposed activity.	The project has clear financial oversight. The documentation provided is good. Financial requests are clear and comprehensive; The request corresponds to the proposed activity.
MEASUREMENT	The project does not have a mechanism to measure the effectiveness of the program.	The project has a limited mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of the program.	The project has a clear mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of the program.

Sample 2

ITEM	YES	NO
Are organisations registered		(yellow)
Do organisation is an active organisation?		(yellow)
Does the organisation send the latest complete annual financial statements?		(yellow)
Is this applicant organisation currently implementing programmes/projects through allocations/grants from JPPM and/or any other government agencies?	(yellow)	

* If the answer to one of the above questions is in a yellow cell, the application may be rejected.

No. / Marks	1	3	5
PROGRAM/PROJECT BACKGROUND			
1.	Program requirements are identified but no data supporting program requirements are available.	Program requirements are identified, but only supported by national-level data with no local context, or no reference (where/when data are obtained).	Program requirements are identified, and supported by data with local context along with clear/correct reference sources.
2.	Targeted outputs are not directly related to program requirements; needs and outcomes at different levels (needs are at the community level, the outcome is community	The requirements and outcomes are at the same level, but it is unclear whether the outcomes will address the needs of the program directly.	The results directly address the needs of the program and are at the same level.
3.	Participant engagement plans were not mentioned or underdeveloped.	Engagement plans are fleeting or completely unthought-out. The applicant may not be able to get enough participants; The plan relies on false assumptions, or there is only one strategy proposed and no backup is advanced if that strategy fails.	Planning for participant engagement is sufficient to produce a robust and successful program.
4.	The number of communities involved is completely unreasonable based on the cost or description of the program. The program aims to serve many without the resources to support significant change for this large group. Or the expected number of people/families'/ communities is too small for the investment put into the program.	The number of people/families/communities expected to be involved is less	The program anticipates a reasonable number of people/families/communities involved based on the estimate/intensity required to make a major difference to the community.

5.	Little to no mention of how these programs can be developed/modified over time.	Mentions that the organization will develop or modify the program from time to time as needed, but does not clearly explain how or what the organization may do to ensure program implementation.	A clear description of how the program can be developed/modified over time. Demonstrate that the establishment is open to being as flexible as necessary and understand which program components may be modified.
6.	Little or no explanation of how the sustainability of the program will be ensured. The program is highly dependent on the knowledge of the secretariat and participants of a particular program., or not all organizations will be directly involved.	There is a good explanation of how the sustainability of the programme will be ensured, but the direct involvement of all members of the organisation in the programme is still vague.	A clear explanation of how the leadership of the program will ensure the sustainability of the program over time and the direct involvement of members of the organization.
7.	Little or no description of the program components.	There is a description of the main program components, but some things are incomplete based on what the organization aims to achieve.	Clearly describe the main components of program setup. Evaluators can easily understand the logic of how the program works and how those actions can lead to changes to the community.
8.	Little or no explanation of the program's exposure/frequency/duration or the program is highly dependent on the organization or the participant's wishes.	There is a description, but some details are incomplete and whether the understanding of the program will be the same for all participants.	Full description of the program/frequency/duration. This may be sufficient to influence the desired understanding in the participants.
PROGRAM THEORY STATEMENT			
1.	Statements are nonsensical, vague, or focus on the need for the program rather than on the potential effectiveness of the program.	The statement focuses on the potential effectiveness of the program but does not clearly explain how key program elements are linked to the intended outcome.	The statement provides a clear and compelling argument that the programme that the organisation intends to implement achieves the expected results.
2.	The program is not meeting the needs of the community	The programme caters to some of the needs of the community.	Programmes are relevant and meet the needs of the community.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PLAN AND TIMELINE			
1.	Little or no details are provided on the program timeline; What is provided is not made as described in the project.	The timeline seems realistic, but there are some doubts about the missing details or some unreasonable things	The timeline seems to be very realistic based on the program description. The plan and timeline are clear and well thought out.
2.	Little or no detailed details are provided about the establishment and resources that will be used for the program; what is provided makes no sense.	Some details are provided on the establishments and resources that will be used, but there are concerns about the ability to implement programs based on description.	Including an accurate description of the establishment and the resources needed to implement the program.
3.	Little or no details are given to the establishment that will manage the project; It is unclear who will manage the project.	It is clear who will manage the project and their qualifications are provided, but their qualifications or capacity may not meet the project requirements.	Staffing planning indicates that the organizations involved have sufficient qualifications and time too. It is appropriate to implement the project.
PROJECT DURATION			
1.	It is very unclear how long the organization intends to carry out the project or whether/how the leadership plans to review the project timeline during implementation.	The length of the project in question is quite self-explanatory, but it may not make sense given the chosen outcome, project description, or management plan.	The plan for the project length in question is very clear and makes sense considering the outcome, the project description and the management plan. If the plan is to reconsider the length of the project based on success, the process for doing so is clearly outlined.
2.	Short-term: little or no explanation of how the lessons learned will be applied.	Short-term: the description states that the agency will use the lessons learned in the future, but does not explain how they plan to do so	Short-term project: plan to incorporate the lessons learned into future programming clearly and make sense.

3.	OR Long-term: plans for long-term financing and management are either too vague or very unrealistic.	OR Long-term projects: at least some details for long-term financing and management are provided and reasonable, but there are. Some are worried about how realistic they are.	OR Long-term projects: plans for long-term financing and management make sense.
BUDGET TEMPLATE			
1.	This project is completely unrealistic given the proposed budget.	The budget seems a bit unrealistic, or missing important items that will be needed for the project.	The project described is realistic and affordable within budget constraints.
2.	Item does not match project description or management plan.	Items appear to be mostly proportional to the work described in the project description.	Items proportionate to the work are described in the program/project description.
OVERALL			
1.	This project is not general enough to produce lessons that will apply to any other network agency.	Lessons learned from this project may be applicable to an agency or two, but not widely applicable across the network.	This project can provide valuable lessons for the network, i.e. what these agencies learn from the project can be adapted to other agencies.
2.	This application is not interesting. It seems that the organization sees this as a way to bring in funding and not as a way to have an effective program.	This application is well done, but doesn't really have the 'wow' factor. It seems that this project is only "more or less the same."	This application has a 'wow' factor; It is well thought out, well presented and likely to make a big impact for the community
3.	The agency sounded either hesitant to work with an external implementation evaluator or sounded as if they might be resistant to making changes that the evaluator could make.	The agency appears wary or uncertain about working with external implementation evaluators. .	The agency seems open and excited to work with evaluators to collect data and work through a continuous improvement process with the program.