The impact of community empowerment programs on achieving sustainable development goals in local communities

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Abstract

The government in any country holds responsibility for the governance and administration. However, to enable the successful implementation of all policies at the local level, the government requires a mechanism that aligns with its objectives. Hence, civil society has a crucial role in assisting the government in disseminating precise information and executing initiatives for the community. The objectives of this study are to identify the activities executed under the MyICE Grant and assess their potential impact on the community, in accordance with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This study has utilized two methodologies, specifically Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interview. A total of 15 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted, consisting of 214 participants from diverse groups who had successfully obtained MyICE grants from the Registrar of Society, Malaysia. There are a total of 124 community empowerment programs that have been mapped with the SDG. It was noted that the programs are designed specifically for the local community and have potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDG. These programs enable the effective implementation of government initiatives aimed at improving community well-being. Collaboration with other government agencies and organizations to deliver community programs is crucial to improving information transmission and community awareness through increased involvement. However, due to the program being executed as one-off activities, the effectiveness of the program's was not conclusive. Therefore, research on community program achievements should be conducted to assess the impact of the implemented program. This

evaluation should not only focus on the successful implementation of the program but also consider the program's output and outcome.

1. Introduction

Civil society has a significant impact on a community. Civil society is formed due to the presence of common interests, shared interests, purposes, and values. It is not based solely on common beliefs but, more importantly, on shared emotions and experiences. According to Thania (2015), it is not exclusively founded on commonly held beliefs but rather on shared feelings and experiences. They become government machinery and have a positive impact on the community. Civil society often consists of voluntary groups and includes non-governmental organizations and associations that are not solely motivated by private or economic goals. These entities are independently structured, typically demonstrate civic virtue, and engage in interactions with the public. The cluster of civil society can be categorized into various groups such as trade unions, professional associations, faith-based organizations, traditional and community groups, research institutions, humanitarian and development NGO, conflict and peacebuilding groups, social and political movements, and business categories (Thania, 2015). Due to their strong feeling of duty towards community development, civil society implements a range of initiatives tailored to address the specific requirements of the community (Usadolo & Caldwel, 2016).

Civil society plays a crucial role in promoting community empowerment through facilitating participation, encouraging changes, and allowing those who are excluded and left behind to voice their rights and needs (Khair et al., 2020). This involvement enhances social cohesion and fosters accountability and openness. Furthermore, civil society frequently acts as intermediaries between communities and government. These groups allocate resources, provide vital services, and create spaces for interaction, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable community. Moreover, they play a vital role in educating communities about their responsibilities and rights, as well as enabling them to take action and participate in the governance of their community. This empowerment cultivates a sense of responsibility in individuals, motivating them to engage actively in the community and promote systemic change. This active engagement not only improves relationship and sense of belonging but

also fosters a culture of collaboration and mutual respect across different groups, facilitating innovative solutions to complicated societal issues (Abdul Aziz, 2019). Moreover, while these organizations enhance communities connections, they also promote collaborations among many stakeholders, including governmental bodies, commercial sectors, and civil society, assuring the incorporation of varied viewpoints into decision-making processes. This collaborative method enhances discussions on community while fostering trust and accountability, which are vital for sustainable development and social cohesion. Such collaborations can enhance resource allocation and facilitate the execution of initiatives that directly meet community needs, ultimately cultivating a sense of ownership and empowerment among locals. By involving communities in the planning process, organizations can leverage local knowledge and experience, ensuring that programs are both pertinent and culturally connected, gaining higher support (Adamson & Bromiley, 2013; Norhayati Ab Manaf & Abdullah, 2021). Besides that, civil society may facilitate development, empower individuals, strengthen local communities, and advocate for inclusive policies to ensure no one is left behind, thereby promoting sustainable progress aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) principles.

2. Literature Review

Civil society promotes initiatives focused on community participation, awareness, development, and capacity building, among other objectives (Kasmel & Andersen, 2011; Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001; Rolfe, 2016). As most societies are Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), there is no dedicated funding allotted for program implementation. Funds are acquired through the collection of donation funds, as well as through corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions and government grants.

Obtaining funding is a challenging task (Donessouné et al., (2023). A high level of trust from the funder is necessary prior to disbursing funds to civil society for program implementation (Joseph & Mulvihill, 2000). Nonetheless, there are instances where the acquired finances are inadequate, necessitating the execution of planned activities, resulting in some initiatives having a lessened impact on the community. Assessing the program's impact on the community could be difficult due to the various backgrounds of those involved and their differing levels of acceptance and understanding of the program (Madon et al., 2021). Moreover, if a program is implemented as only one occurrence, evaluating its impact would be more difficult.

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the program. Moreover, if a program is implemented as only one occurrence, evaluating its impact would be more difficult. Regardless of the rationale, an established program requires assessment. This assessment is crucial for determining whether the community benefiting from this program experiences a direct or indirect impact in ensuring that no one in a community is left behind. Consequently, there is a necessity for a metric or indicator that assesses the success of a program, ensuring that the measurements correspond with the program's objectives. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can serve as a critical performance indicator, particularly in the execution of community empowerment programs.

In Malaysia, it is possible to establish societies in accordance with the Societies Act of 1966. This legislation governs the formation, enrollment, and functioning of non-profit societies, encompassing associations, clubs, and other similar entities (Abdul Aziz, 2019). According to the Societies Act 1966, it is mandatory for all societies to be registered with the Malaysian Societies Registration Department, which operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Additionally, it sets forth norms pertaining to the governance, financial matters, and obligations of the organization. Registrar of Society is the agency that has the responsibility of registering and regulating non-profit organizations. Registration can be done under different categories, including Welfare and Social Organizations, Sports and Recreation, Religion, Professional, Economy and Trade, Education, Culture and Arts, Security, Socio-Economic, and Politics (Abdul Aziz, 2019). This society must be proactive and implement initiatives based on the designated categories. Given that some of these groups lack the financial capacity to execute community programming, Registrar of Society has introduced financial awards to incentivize organizations to engage in such activities. From 2013 to 2019, Registrar of Society has implemented a strategy to enhance the capabilities of organizations in community development by providing Community Grants (G-Kom) (Norhayati Rafida et al., 2021). Different from G-Kom, the allocation of Malaysian Incentive Community Empowerment (MyICE) Grant in 2022 funding is specifically targeted towards groups that fall under the areas of Welfare, Social, Security, and Basic Rights (Zahari et al., 2023).

The allocation of this grant has been executed for a duration of 10 years; however, it has been stated that no assessment has been conducted about the program's impact on the community. Hence, this study was conducted to investigate the initiatives executed under the MyICE Grant by the society and assess their potential impact on the community, aligning with the SDG criteria. The program's impact will be assessed by measuring the indicators outlined in the SDG, with the aim of ensuring that no one is left behind (Sénit, 2020).

3. Methods

This study comprised of two methodologies, namely Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Interview. FGD is a systematic approach used to gather comprehensive insights, perspectives, and firsthand information from participants within the scope of a study (van Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017). This approach is employed to acquire a qualitative outlook, enabling researchers to comprehend the beliefs, values, and perspectives of the participants and to explore diverse viewpoints on the issues examined inside the research topic. According to Adekola & Olumati, (2023), FGD strategy prioritizes a bottom-up, community-driven approach. The discussion session is facilitated by the project leader, who oversees the discussion process, motivates participants to express their opinions, and ensures that all participants have the chance to speak. A total of 15 FGD sessions were conducted, encompassing 214 participants from various societies representing each state of Malaysia who has received MyICE Grant. Each FGD session was conducted in person and took around two to two and a half hours. The purpose of this FGD was to gather input from civil society regarding their experiences with implementing the program and the impact on the local community. The group approach was seen as the most effective and efficient way to engage the civil societies, as it allowed for collective discussion. The FGD provided an opportunity for two-way communication and enhanced the likelihood of participants comprehending the program's aim. Furthermore, the group format facilitated the pooling of shared resources, which are vital for discussing community empowerment programs.

Following that, the data from the FGD revealed various impacts of the community empowerment programs. This finding was subsequently utilized to guide the interview session with the Registrar of Society who were directly involved in managing MyICE grant. To ensure that information is obtained accurately and systematically, an interview protocol was developed involving the following phases (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Phase 1 : Ensure the information that will be obtained through interview questions in line with the research question

Phase 2 : Construct interview questions

Phase 3 : Getting feedback on interview questions

Phase 4 : Conducting interviews

Using the developed protocol, purposeful sampling in-depth interviews were conducted with three representatives from the Registrar of Society who involved directly managing MyICE grant. Here, the open-ended questions are used to explore in-depth the programs

funded under MyICE in order to understand the processes. An interview guide was developed to address the research objectives (Kross & Giust, 2019; Meyer, 2001). The interview session also aimed to explore the funder's perspective of the program's implementation and its perceived impact on the community.

Next the data obtained from FGD and interview were transcribed. The researcher has identified recurring text and patterns. From there researchers assign codes to data segments that capture the meaning of each text and phrases to make sense from it . From there the codes were translated into themes. Thematic analysis was employed to extract insights from the data collected. The frequent occurrence of themes such as *impact, benefit, continuous programs* and *engagement* indicates significance of the phenomenon being studied.

4. Results and Discussion

Civil societies that received MyICE have implemented 124 programs, as indicated in Table 1. The program implemented is designed specifically for the local community. The response and presence of the participants were really encouraging. The program was also joined by Government Agencies, like the Fire Department, which increased community attendance. The participants come from diverse origins and span across different age groups. The civil societies stated that no performance measurement was conducted for each program. However, a final report was sent to Registrar of Society to verify the successful implementation of the program. Furthermore, during the FGD, societies emphasized the necessity of providing continued funds for programs that have proven to be highly advantageous to community participants.

There are civil societies that conduct out outreach activities targeting communities lacking formal education and health concern. This program aims to raise awareness throughout the community, prompting individuals to be more vigilant and conscious on their health focusing on breast cancer awareness.

"Residents living in the rural area of Kota Belud face restricted availability of Health Clinics as a result of the clinics' remote locations and the remoteness of the areas they serve. The implemented program has offered awareness and conducted breast examination and screening for the rural inhabitants of Kota Belud, focusing on breast cancer. Due to limited road access, rural residents face challenges in transportation. Therefore, a greater number of residents can benefit if we personally travel to the rural areas". (Representatives of Kinabalu Breast Cancer Support Association)

The community in Sabah lives in rural areas, with the nearest fire station situated 18 kilometers away. The Sabah Former Fire and Rescue Association believes that community fire response programs will enable residents to act as first responders while awaiting the arrival of the fire service.

"The implementation of the Pegalan Kusob community fire response training program aims to create communities that are capable of promptly and effectively responding to fires, thereby becoming the first line of defense in case of a fire outbreak in their village. The fire's distant location and lack of road access will impede the Fire Department's ability to promptly respond to the incident. Thus, via community training, the impact of fire can be minimised." (Representative of the Sabah Former Fire and Rescue Association)

Additionally, there are initiatives that address the issue of abandoned animals, which might potentially have an adverse effect on the community by spreading diseases.

"Abandoned cats and dogs pose a risk to the community due to the transmission of diseases and the potential for human abuse…many do not care about this type of animal, if it is not controlled it will disturb and pose a threat to the community". (*Representatives of The Society for The Prevention Of Cruelty To Animals*)

Some locals are stateless and have not been properly exposed on education. Nur Ikhlas Charity has initiated an educational awareness program.

"The purpose of the program we are organizing is to provide Bajau Laut children with an opportunity to gain awareness of the importance of education. Typically, these children do not receive formal schooling. Furthermore, in order to mitigate social activities and criminal behavior, we strive to provide these children with educational opportunities and skills aimed at enhancing their socioeconomic status." (Representatives of Nur Ikhlas Charity)

On the other hand, it was discovered that there were several challenges encountered related to the sustainability of the community empowerment program.

Collaboration with other Agencies and Organizations

The civil societies have implemented multiple activities to engage the community and encourage their attendance and participation in the program funded by the MyICE. Societies have partnered with agencies to deliver programs to the community in order to enhance the dissemination of information and community understanding. It is observed that the program has the ability to attract a larger number of participants.

Insufficient funds

Funding is crucial for the society to sustain its operations and carry out activities aimed at empowering the community. The budget is allocated for the purpose of overseeing the administrative operations of the societies, providing necessary infrastructure and facilities, and carrying out activities that align with the requirements of the community being served. The societies acquire finances from several sources, including regular contributions from members, donations from charitable organizations and influential individuals, as well as grants from the government. The allocation for the implementation of the MyICE program has been restricted to RM10 thousand, contingent upon the society's capacity to strategize the program in accordance with the permitted amount by the Registrar of Society. The society reports that the funds provided are insufficient to sustain high-impact initiatives. Some groups conduct programs by using their own cash, while others gain additional funding through contributions. Some societies also collaborate with other societies that have successfully received MyICE grants to implement their initiatives program. However, some societies believe that the funds provided are inadequate because they are necessary not only for program implementation but also for administrative expenses such as committee member salaries, utility bills, office rent, and printing services.

Program impact

Civil society has the ability to operate as government machinery to enhance community empowerment. Societies serve as intermediaries between the government and the community to ensure the effective implementation of government initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being of the community, in accordance with the government's objectives. Organizations are collectives or entities in close proximity to the community that possess the ability to recognize and address the issues and challenges encountered by the community.

Table 1: List of Community Programs

Ser		No. of Program.	Sustainable Development Goals																
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Community health program	**15**			√														
2	Upgrading Skills and household income	**78**	√							√									
3	Community welfare and well-being	**13**	√															√	
4	Women empowerment	**4**	√				√			√		√						√	
5	Volunteerism	**3**																	
6	Food bank	**5**	√	√															√
7	Animal abuse	**6**															√		

A comparison can be seen on community programs implemented by societies in the states of Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak where the programs implemented are social and community in nature. In contrast to societies in the state of Sabah, the programs implemented are more aimed at communities in rural areas that lack access to information and have limited knowledge. Here it can also be seen that societies in the state of Sabah can produce programs that have a high impact on communities in need. In addition, the societies also suggested that future grants need to have a greater program impact measurement.

Through the implemented program, it was found that the organization only focused on the progress of the program, but there were weaknesses in terms of re-reporting, for example, getting feedback from a small number of communities who thought that they were not interested in the implemented program.

The community empowerment program demonstrates the influence of civil society in shaping and enriching the communities under its responsibility while also significantly impacting those communities. However, the efficacy of this program is lacking in terms of measuring the outcomes. Aligned with the government's aim to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is clear that the majority of implemented programs have the potential to have a positive impact in achieving the SDGs. Despite 124 implemented programs having achieved 9 of the 17 SDGs, there is a need for more careful measurement and evaluation to better understand their impact on society. This should be followed by an analysis of how the program improves welfare and improves the quality of life of the community as a whole.

5. Conclusion

The programs implemented by the society have a lot of impact on the community, although in principle it is not measured systematically. It can be seen through this study that SDG has been used as an achievement measurement even though it is not the most appropriate measurement but it can be seen as an achievement indicator. If the program is implemented holistically, it is certain that the community can be involved in various programs that are more beneficial, indirectly the desire of no one left behind can be achieved. In addition, the achievement of a program can only be seen when the community takes away lessons and knowledge from the program it participates in and is able to apply what has been learned in accordance with the needs. In order to have a better impact, the implemented program should not be implemented as a one-off and the need for continuous programs. Therefore, it is also recommended that each program conducted should include measurement, for instance Social

Return on Investment (SROI) which quantifies the program outcome and measurable benefits to the communities. Based on these results, a decision can be made regarding the continuation or replacement with a more beneficial program. For future studies, it is suggested that community program achievement studies should be conducted to measure achievement from an impact point of view so that the implemented program is not only evaluated from the point of view of successful implementation of the program but also evaluated from the point of view of output and outcome of the program.

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