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The impact of community empowerment programs: participant views on safety, well-being, and public agency collaboration

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Abstract

Following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Malaysian government implemented various initiatives to enhance the quality of life for communities affected by the crisis. One such initiative involved offering grants to associations registered with the Malaysian Registrar of Societies (ROS). These grants were offered to empower local communities, improve their living standards, and ensure their safety and well-being. This study aims to assess the benefits of these funds to the community, specifically in safety, well-being, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies. A self-administered online survey was conducted among 750 respondents who participated in programs organized by the grant-receiving associations. The questionnaire comprised five sections: demographic information, community safety, well-being, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies. Findings from the survey were analysed using descriptive analysis in SPSS Version 22. Results indicate that respondents were strongly inclined to engage in safety activities, thereby contributing to enhanced community harmony. Furthermore, motivation to adopt a healthy lifestyle and to offer mutual support among community members increased, especially during emergencies. Participants also show greater confidence, have a clearer understanding of their roles within the community, and demonstrate a strong commitment to community development. Public agencies were perceived to be cooperative, attentive to the community's needs, and prepared for long-term collaboration. Findings suggest an improvement in the overall well-being of the community that was involved in the programs organised.

Keywords: *Community empowerment, Community engagement, Community well-being, Government initiative*

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1. Introduction

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily life of the people which resulted in loss of income during the lockdown period, many people were affected. Malaysia was severely impacted due to this crisis as there was a decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 4.3% in 2019 to 3.1% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). The consequences of the pandemic left many unemployed as lockdown measures caused many closures of small businesses and declining household income (Zakaria et al., 2023). Additionally, the poverty rate also increased during this period which further exacerbates the situation for those affected. To relieve the burden on the people, various efforts were carried out by the Malaysian government during the pandemic such as the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package which aimed to protect the people, support businesses and the strengthen the economy (Prime Minister's Office, 2020) as well as providing cash aid to households earning less than RM4,000 a month (Malaysia Ministry of Finance, 2020).

Besides this, the government also carried out an initiative by providing grants to registered societies under the Registrar of Societies (ROS) to carry out activities to enhance the quality of life of those affected by the crisis. The grant was offered as one of the means to improve the well-being of the communities, empower them and ensure their safety and well-being. Societies that obtained the grant had to organise programs to increase the living-standards and well-being of their local community as well as collaborate with local agencies to ensure participation at both government and community levels. This empowerment is critical especially after the pandemic due to its long-term impact on the economy and quality of life such as loss of income, increased mental health problems, concerns over safety and security. This impact left many communities vulnerable, requiring targeted interventions to improve their well-being and security. Community empowerment programs have become an important agenda of local governments in other countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the United Kingdom (Mayo et al., 2009) that aims to increase social activities and address issues such as poverty, safety, and health among community members. Malaysia also places the same emphasis which is realized through initiatives led by the Ministry of Home Affairs namely the MyICE grant. Despite various government initiatives, such as the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package and MyICE grant, there is a need to evaluate how effectively these programs have empowered communities, especially in enhancing safety, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies, to address the ongoing challenges post-pandemic. Thus, this study aims to assess the benefits of these funds for the community, specifically in the areas of safety, well-being, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies.

2. Literature Review

The concept of community empowerment as a form of human development has become a key agenda of the United Nations under the Development Program. This approach provides opportunities for every community member to participate in the community development process. Community refers to a group of people living in a particular area

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and can assign responsibilities to individual members as well as influence the behaviour of individuals within that community (Ahmad & Talib, 2014). Meanwhile, generally the term empowerment refers to an analysis of community development, either individually or collectively, to improve well-being (Chavis, 2001). To realize and strengthen community empowerment in an area, several important elements need to be emphasized (Kamruzzaman & White, 2017). These elements include access to information, which facilitates two-way communication between the government and the people through the provision of technology and information tools. Accountability focuses on the responsibility of stakeholders such as government officials, civil servants, and other responsible parties to ensure that community members benefit from the implemented programs. Besides that, to ensure that community members can collaborate in driving the programs established by the government, capability is also crucial. Furthermore, the participation of community members in these programs can determine the success of the initiatives.

2.1 Safety

Safety in the context of a community can be defined as a sense of protection from external deficiencies and dangers that could affect the quality of life. Generally, safety refers to being secure, well, or at peace. It also means being safeguarded from physical, social, financial, political, occupational, psychological, educational, and other issues that could cause harm or undesirable incidents. Nas (2015) defines safety as a state where individuals or communities are kept away from dangers caused by natural forces or random human errors. According to Gilling (2001), community safety represents a clear integration of concerns about crime issues and social policies, particularly related to questions of social inclusion and exclusion.

The increase in crime is one of the social issues that raises global concern (Jubit, 2020). Reducing the crime rate within society is not solely the responsibility of the government through enforcement agencies. The community itself plays a key social role in ensuring that their neighbourhoods remain free from criminal incidents, contributing to the creation of a safe city. When discussing urban community safety issues, crimes in urban areas range from minor offenses and serious crimes to civil violations such as road accidents, environmental pollution, and more (Nelson, Bromley & Thomas, 2001). The urban environment, whether in the city center or suburbs, can also provoke feelings of fear or phobia among its residents (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). It is undeniable that individuals in urban communities are highly sensitive to safety, especially when it comes to maintaining a livable urban environment (Pain & Townshend, 2002).

2.2 Well-being

The concept of community well-being has been extensively studied by researchers across various fields, such as tourism (Ibrahim, Halim & Ishak, 2019; Vidovic, Reinhardt, & Hammerton 2021), agriculture (Quested et al., 2018), and volunteerism (Bowe et al.,

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2020), among others. The purpose of community well-being research is often to identify the extent to which community members share similarities in areas such as the need for sustainable leadership, the importance of structure to ensure the community functions effectively, and having a common direction (VanderWeele, 2020).

Various indicators have been used to measure community well-being depending on the study's objectives. Murphy (2010) identified several themes of well-being, such as satisfaction with the local environment, community relationships, income sufficiency, involvement in decision-making processes, and community values. VanderWeele (2020) proposed six domains or indicators to measure community well-being: individual development, strong relationships, efficient leadership, healthy practices, satisfying communities, and a clear mission. For this study, three main indicators were identified to measure community well-being: social and economic development, quality of life, and community values. Social and economic development is based on the concept of social entrepreneurship, a process of identifying, assessing, and utilizing available opportunities through market-based commercial activities from various sources (Aquino, Lück, & Schänzel, 2018). Quality of life indicators are based on perceptions of happiness and human development, resulting from the interaction between an individual's personality and life events and circumstances. The well-known measure of quality of life from the World Health Organization (WHO) includes indicators such as physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and the environment.

Community values are based on the sense of community theory by McMillan & Chavis (1986), which defines it as a psychological feeling of communal awareness with surrounding communities that share similar views, fulfilled through mutual commitment. Several past studies have examined the relationship between community values and well-being. In Chile, a study conducted among school students found a significant relationship between community values and well-being (Villarroel et al., 2022). The emotional connection and membership dimensions were the most influential on well-being. Another study by Huang et al. (2023), conducted among elderly people in China, also found a significant and positive correlation between community values and well-being.

2.3 Leadership

Leaders play a crucial role in an organization, particularly those involving the movement of associations (Emery et al., 2016). A leader’s role goes beyond simply being in charge; they are also influential in activities that involve decision-making. Effective leadership inspires group members, mobilizes resources, creates opportunities, strategizes, and acts as a bridge between the organization and the broader community (Goodwin et al., 2007). However, leadership within an organization can only function if there are followers or members who are committed to carrying out the planned tasks and activities. According to Weber's Charismatic Leadership Theory, the relationship between the leader and followers is critical, as the leader’s charisma enhances their followers motivation and commitment, especially in uncertain environments (Gray & Stevenson, 2020; Uzelac, 2021). The charisma of the leaders fosters loyalty within the organization (Goodwin et

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al., 2007). This idea is supported by Uzelac (2021) through the Political Leadership Theory, stating that followers are more likely to be loyal, influenced, and supportive when they feel heard and when the leader takes actions that represent them. Through collaboration between leaders and organization members, they share a common vision and interests, work to resolve conflicts, solve problems, engage in discussions, and make decisions that align with the community's needs that they serve.

2.4 Collaboration with public agencies

In the process of community development, public agencies, social organizations, and the target community need to collaborate to build capacity in addressing social, health, and other challenges faced by the community. Social organizations, either through direct collaboration with public agencies or independently, generally aim for sustainable community development through empowerment and capacity-building activities (Abiddin et al., 2022). Communities that are succesfully empowered have a balance of power and influence between the government and the community, high confidence among community members in decision-making, as well as a strong trust between the community and public agencies (Audit Scotland, 2019). Social organizations fulfill their role and foster collaboration with public agencies through three main types of activities: providing direct welfare services, such as for marginalized populations, offering educational services like environmental awareness campaigns, and advocating for policies and public rights (Stromquist, 2002).

Although there are were several studies that explores the economic impact of the pandemic on the locals in Malaysia specifically in tourism (Kunjuraman, 2023; Harun et al., 2023), family development (Nur Faezah, 2021) and financial institution support (Othman & Mat Nor, 2021), there is insufficient studies that assess the impact of government community empowerment programs. Furthermore, while community empowerment is recognized as a key approach in human development, there is insufficient analysis of how elements such as well-being, safety, leadership and collaboration with public agencies. These gaps indicate the need for further empirical research to provide a more holistic understanding of government funded community-based programs and initiatives.

3. Method

A cross-sectional study was applied for this study using a questionnaire designed to measure respondents' perceptions of safety, well-being, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies. The study's respondents consisted of participants from across Malaysia who attended these community empowerment programs organised by the organisations or soceities that received the MyICE grant. Questions in the survey were selected based on their relevance to the objectives and scope of the study, while the reliability of the developed instrument was tested through a pilot study.

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Due to time constraints, the pilot study was conducted in three nearby states: Negeri Sembilan, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor. The selection of respondents for the pilot study used the systematic random sampling method. A total of 44 respondents participated in the pilot study, and they were excluded from the actual survey sample. Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29, the Cronbach's Alpha analysis for the pilot study indicated that all aspects—community safety, well-being, leadership, and collaboration with public agencies were acceptable, with a Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.9. (Sekaran, 2000 and Haslinda, 2019).

As for the determination of the sample size, the cluster sampling method was used to ensure all respondents were selected fairly. Respondents were chosen from the list of participants of community empowerment programs funded by the MyICE grant in 13 states and federal territories throughout Malaysia. The list of approved programs was organized by state, and respondents were selected based on systematically random programs, with every fifth program being chosen. The sample size calculation was based on the total number of MyICE grant recipients, which amounted to 2,163 organizations. Since exact participant numbers for each program were unavailable, the study estimated that each program had around 10 participants, making the total population for the study approximately 21,630 participants**.**

Based on the estimated population, the sample size for this study was determined to be 377 respondents**.** However, to ensure the sample size from each state was sufficiently large to produce more accurate data (Andrade, 2020), the original sample size was multiplied by 10, resulting in a new sample size of 3,770 respondents**.** Subsequently, the sample size for each state was calculated using the proportionate sampling method, based on the following formula:

$$nh = (Nh / N) * n$$

Where:
nh = sampel size in each state
Nh = population of participants in each state
N = total population
n = total sample size required

After the data collection, only a total sample of 750 questionnaires were received after distribution via email to the respondents with a response rate of approximately 20%. This low rate was primarily due to challenges in distributing the survey via email, as identifying the study participants proved difficult. Additionally, the study was conducted nearly a year after the grant was awarded, requiring the researchers to reach out to the grant recipients for assistance in distributing the survey. Time constraints also played a role, as the study needed to be completed within six months. However, the total response of 750 obtained was higher than initial sample size calculated which was 384. Therefore, even with low response rate, the study should be evaluated based on its merits as it yielded a good amount respondent for the study (Wu, Zhao and Fils-Aime, 2022; Morton et al., 2012). As for the instrumentation in this study, a total of 58 questions were prepared in

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the survey form, including respondent's demographic information with a total of six sections and its indicators.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Respondents background

Based on Table 4.1 below, the state with the highest number of respondents is Selangor (19.6%), followed by Sabah (10.3%) and Pahang (9.5%). Half of the respondents are male (51.3%) and majority of respondents were aged between 40 and 49 years (30.9%) and 50 to 59 years (23.5%). The highest educational level attained by respondents is upper secondary school (36.7%), and most of the respondents are employed in the government sector (32.3%) and private sector (24.0%).

4.2 Safety

The benefits of the MyICE program from the aspect of community safety in this study have been measured based on the level of satisfaction regarding physical safety, protection from dangers such as crime threats and infectious diseases, awareness of the frequency of hazardous incidents, and direct involvement in community safety activities. The overall average score for the aspect of community safety is at a moderate level (3.74). It was found that respondents are more inclined to engage in community safety activities and believe that harmony within the community has increased, as well as being more active in safety activities after attending the MyICE-sponsored program. Furthermore, respondents also feel that the program they attended has overall improved their personal safety, as well as that of their families and communities. However, the slightly lower score compared to other factors in this study may be attributed to the organizers not fully addressing local safety concerns and the limited resources available for implementation. Overall, the program had a beneficial impact on the safety of the communities involved as they have enhanced harmony and awareness of the importance of safety within the community. This aspect of safety can ensure that the communities involved in the program take proactive measures to address crime issues and reduce negative and long-lasting social impacts within their own communities.

4.3 Well-being

The average score for the aspect of community well-being is reported to be at a high level (4.06). After attending the programs organized by the association, respondents believe that community members are more willing to help each other in emergencies and are more motivated to adopt positive lifestyles. Additionally, by attending the programs, the respondents believe that their knowledge and skills were enhanced. Besides that, the programs increased their sense of community as it fosters easier collaboration with other community members, strengthens friendships, and creates a sense of belonging within the community. This results show that the programs implemented under the MyICE grant have provided significant benefits to the involved communities by enhancing various

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aspects of well-being, which in turn positively impacts the quality of life and community values.

4.4 Leadership

Leadership factors such as the role of a leader, decision-making, transparency, and confidence was assessed. Overall, the aspect of community leadership was reported to be at a high level (4.21) after attending the programs conducted by the associations. Respondents believe there has been an increase in their confidence to engage in community activities, understand their roles within the community, and commit to developing their community while striving to be transparent and open with it. Additionally, respondents are more confident in participating in decision-making for the community, leading the community, and encouraging community member participation. The results of this analysis indicate that the programs implemented significantly benefited community leadership by enhancing respondents' motivation in decision-making, commitment, transparency, and active involvement with their communities.

4.5 Collaboration with public agencies

The aspect of community cooperation with public agencies has been assessed for its benefits through various items as indicators, such as the level of cooperation and involvement of public agencies in the organized programs. Overall, respondents believe that cooperation with public agencies is high (4.33), and the agencies involved provide strong support for the successful execution of the programs. Additionally, respondents feel that the agencies understand the needs of the community, appreciate the contributions made by the community, are interested in long-term collaboration, and are willing to address the issues faced by the community. Based on the results of this analysis, there are clear benefits in the aspect of community cooperation with public agencies for programs under the MyICE grant, as the involved agencies can contribute to the community. This, in turn, empowers the community by fostering good relationships among all stakeholders, characterized by mutual trust, openness, and transparency.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was found that the programs funded by the MyICE grants carried out by the associations and organisations had a positive impact on the communities involved. Aspects such as well-being, leadership and collaboration with agencies were found to be at a high level except for safety which scored slightly lower than the others. This may be due to the nature of the programs as most of them did not really focus on the aspect of safety. Most of the programs emphasised on the well-being of the communities involved as well as collaboration with agencies. Leadership values were instilled through the implementation of the programs as the communities were directly involved during the planning of the programs. This in turn encouraged the aspects of leadership in those involved. Considering the findings from this study, future programs should prioritise on enhancing safety-related by addressing both physical and social

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safety concerns by collaborating with local enforcement agencies. By strengthening partnerships with local authorities and agencies through regular communication, it can ensure resources are properly aligned with local needs ensuring a more empowered community. Besides that, successfully implemented programs can be shared with others which fosters peer-to-peer learning fostering an environment of continuous improvement and resilience-building across different areas. Thus, funds like the MyICE have an important role in empowering the communities which in return develops the community. Empowered communities can contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals as it is inclusive and involves participation at all levels of society. Besides that, empowered communities can reduce the incidence of poverty through improved economic conditions and builds resilience to overcome crises such as the global pandemic, disasters, political instability and economic crises. Programs that address well-being and fosters leadership can help communities adapt to and mitigate the impacts of global challenges, aligning with broader sustainable development goals.

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