

Challenges in Strengthening Malaysia's SDGs: Insights from the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) Impact Evaluation

Yuen Beng Lee¹, Maslisa Zainuddin^{2*}, Mohd Firdaus bin Mohd Anuar²,
Nurul Hidayat Ab Rahman³, Raan Hann Tan⁴

¹ Department of Film and Performing Arts, School of Arts,
Sunway University, Bandar Sunway, 47500, MALAYSIA

² Department of Art, Design and Media, School of Arts,
Sunway University, Bandar Sunway, 47500, MALAYSIA

³ Faculty of Law,
National University of Malaysia, Bandar Baru Bangi, 43650, MALAYSIA

⁴ Institute of Malaysian and International Studies,
National University of Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author: lisaz@sunway.edu.my
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Abstract

Establishing the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) signals a robust national commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Aligned with the comprehensive principle of "Leaving No One Behind" (LNOB), this initiative follows a structured, four-phased approach of issue identification, project design, implementation, and rigorous monitoring and impact assessment. Through a multi-stage evaluation process encompassing domains such as Deep, Clear, Wide, and High, the impact of these projects was assessed, with considerations for SDG understanding and gender aspects. To ensure effective SDG implementation at the grassroots level, APPGM-SDG appoints evaluation groups to impartially evaluate the effectiveness of solution project implementations across Malaysian parliamentary constituencies. In 2023, the Central One team evaluated solution projects in Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka. This paper examines the challenges encountered by beneficiaries, solution providers, and evaluation teams during the Impact Evaluation (IE) of 18 projects in the Central One region. Beneficiaries faced hurdles in accessing follow-up learning opportunities and managing marketing and resources. Solution providers struggled with managing human interactions, while evaluators dealt with issues in communication and navigation. Improving the evaluation process and incorporating Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is imperative to address the needs of all involved parties, which will lead to more effective and sustainable development outcomes in the Central One region.

1. Introduction

The establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on the Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) signifies a strengthened national commitment to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This initiative adopts a structured, four-phased approach: issue identification, project design, implementation, and rigorous monitoring and impact assessment for the Malaysian nation. The goals of APPGM-SDG align with the comprehensive framework established by the SDGs. As a blueprint for a more equitable and ecologically sustainable future, the SDGs are guided by the principle of “Leaving No One Behind” (LNOB). LNOB signifies a transformative commitment by all UN member states to eradicate poverty in all its forms. Furthermore, it necessitates dismantling discriminatory systems and mitigating inequalities and vulnerabilities that marginalise individuals and hinder the collective potential of humanity.

To ensure that the SDG goals are implemented and achieved at the grassroots level, APPGM-SDG appoints impartial evaluation groups to evaluate the effectiveness of SDG implementations across Malaysian parliamentary constituencies. The culmination of this process is a comprehensive report that outlines the challenges encountered during the annual project implementation at the grassroots level.

This evaluation process also allows the issues faced by the solution providers, beneficiaries, and evaluation teams to be better understood. In 2023, 10 evaluation teams were appointed to achieve this objective and allow their feedback to be analysed to create better opportunities that include education and training for further SDG initiatives across Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak communities. The Central One team, comprising Sunway University and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) researchers, was appointed to evaluate Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka. The team undertook the Impact Evaluation (IE) of 18 projects implemented within the Central One Region between 2021 and 2022.

To better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the solution providers, beneficiaries and evaluators, the evaluation process examines and outputs 18 Individual Reports and one Consolidated Lead Evaluator Report. The writings of their reports were employed using a multi-stage evaluation process to assess the impact of eighteen social intervention projects using an evaluation framework. This framework encompasses four primary domains essential for a comprehensive evaluation. The first domain, Deep, focuses on assessing changes in beneficiary experience, providing insights into how interventions impact individuals on a personal level. Clear, the second domain, is dedicated to evaluating skill development and performance, ensuring that beneficiaries acquire and enhance the necessary skills for sustainable progress. The third domain, Wide, explores the impact on stakeholder relationships, examining how different stakeholders interact and collaborate as a result of the interventions. This domain is crucial for understanding the broader social and community effects of the projects. The fourth domain, High, monitors the evolution of stakeholder systems, tracking the changes and developments in the systems that support and interact with the beneficiaries. In addition to these four primary domains, the framework incorporates two key aspects, namely SDG and Gender. The SDG aspect evaluates the beneficiaries’ understanding of Sustainable Development Goals, while the Gender aspect focuses on women’s participation, highlighting the importance of gender inclusivity and empowerment. The rubric score of the six domains are as follows (See Table 1).

Table 1 Rubric score of the six domains

Domain	1	2	3	4	5
Deep	No changes	Indicated some areas of self-awareness in confidence	Some changes in self-confidence	Profound change in confidence, self-esteem	Grateful for the changes in self and become agent of change
Clear	No new skills gained	Improvement to present skills	Learn new skills	New skills can be used to improve own work	Skills can be used to generate income
Wide	Did not form any network	Identify some possible networks	Made new friends and network to enhance own work	Connected with new network after the program	Planning to cooperate with network in the future
High	No new guidelines/SOP/TOR	Indication of intent to create SOP	Starting to create Guidelines/SOP/TOR	Draft Guidelines/SOP/TOR in place	New Guidelines/SOP/TOR in place
SDG	No apparent understanding on SDGs	Some understanding of SDGs	Able to indicate clearly which SDGs	Able to prioritize SDGs relevant to their work	Apply SDGs in their work

Gender	Gender consideration is not apparent at all	Gender Consideration is apparent in at least one stage	Gender consideration is apparent in at least 2 stages	Gender Consideration in apparent in three stages	Gender Consideration is apparent in all 4 stages
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The Central One team undertook the IE of 18 projects implemented within the Central One Region between 2021 and 2022 (see Table 2). The projects varied in implementing SDGs, primarily involving women, youths, and the B40 communities.

Table 2 *Central one solution projects*

No	Project Code	Location
1.	Y22-SP091	Cheras, Kuala Lumpur
2.	Y22-SP100	
3.	Y22-SP113	
4.	Y22-SP165	
5.	Y22-SP010	
6.	Y22-SP160	Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur
7.	Y22-SP161	
8.	Y22-SP053	Batu, Kuala Lumpur
9.	Y22-SP109	Ampang, Kuala Lumpur
10.	Y22-SP006	Segambut, Kuala Lumpur
11.	Y22-SP013	Tampin, Negeri Sembilan
12.	Y22-SP014	
13.	Y22-SP015	
14.	Y22-SP035	
15.	Y22-SP089	Tangga Batu, Melaka
16.	Y22-SP104	
17.	Y22-SP107	
18.	Y22-SP037	

2. Methodology

To grasp the challenges faced by solution providers and beneficiaries, evaluators prepared two reports, namely the Individual Reports, which include project proposals, monthly reports, final reports, and the Consolidated Lead Evaluator Report, also known as the State Report. For the Individual Report, the impact of a project on beneficiaries is determined using document review (DR), Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and Site Visit (SV). The evaluators utilized the Impact Identification documents to assess the impact evaluation across various domains, including Deep, Clear, Wide, High, SDG target, and Gender, by connecting evidence in the proposals or final reports. An assessment was conducted using photos and videos in the solution provider's reports. Using a model used by Lee et al. (2023) and Nurul et al. (2022), the evaluators identified and listed the challenges faced by the solution providers. The evaluators organised six FGD sessions in Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka to better understand the beneficiaries' challenges. The projects selected for FGD were identified based on their accessibility and responses from the Service Providers (SPs). After telephone conversations or WhatsApp text exchanges, the SP secured FGD respondents from six projects for the IE. The FGDs involved only the beneficiaries and not the SP. This year, all FGDs were held face-to-face at a designated location. The evaluators drove to six locations in Cheras, Segambut, Ampang, Batu in Kuala Lumpur, Tampin, Negeri Sembilan, and Tangga Batu, Melaka. The evaluators also conducted site visits (SVs) to confirm and validate the beneficiaries' feedback during the FGDs.

At least two evaluators conducted the FGDs, serving as discussants while taking notes and photographs. All discussions adhered to the guidelines provided by the organizers. Additionally, the evaluators recorded the FGDs as audio files and uploaded all related documents to Google Drive. Subsequently, the transcription process will be carried out using the notes taken and the audio recordings. The evaluators will then incorporate the information

from the FGDs into a new section dedicated to FGDs within the pre-existing Impact Identification documents. The evaluators asked the following questions drafted based on the six domains and later were divided into three parts (see Table 3).

Table 3 *The FGD questions*

Part	Probe/Key Questions	Follow-Up Questions	Exit Questions
Duration	15 minutes	15 minutes	5 Minutes
Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you get to know about the program? 2. Why did you attend the program? 3. What skills did you acquire? 4. If yes, how are the newly acquired skills benefiting you? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What knowledge about SDG did you gain? 2. Are you using SDGs in your work? 3. Would you like to provide additional information about the above? 4. Did you develop specific procedures/structures through/ because of the program? 5. How do you feel about the program? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you maintain contact with those you met at the program?

Once the Individual Reports were completed, the evaluators prepared the Consolidated Lead Evaluator Report by analysing and discussing the data and information from the 18 Impact Identification documents. Details of the reports based on document analyses, FGDs, and SVs are found in the Individual Reports and Consolidated Lead Evaluator Report (see Table 4).

Table 4 *Methods of impact evaluation*

No	Project Code	Evaluation Method
1.	Y22-SP091	DR
2.	Y22-SP100	DR, FGD
3.	Y22-SP113	DR
4.	Y22-SP165	DR
5.	Y22-SP010	DR
6.	Y22-SP160	DR
7.	Y22-SP161	DR
8.	Y22-SP053	DR
9.	Y22-SP109	DR, FGD, SV
10.	Y22-SP006	DR
11.	Y22-SP013	DR, FGD, SV
12.	Y22-SP014	DR
13.	Y22-SP015	DR
14.	Y22-SP035	DR, FGD, SV
15.	Y22-SP089	DR, FGD, SV
16.	Y22-SP104	DR
17.	Y22-SP107	DR, FGD
18.	Y22-SP037	DR

Note: DR=Document Analysis; FGD=Focus Group Discussion; SV=Site Visit

3. Findings and Discussions

The findings show positive impacts across the domains. The "Deep" domain exhibited the most significant influence, as beneficiaries expressed empowerment and improved self-perceptions. The newly acquired skills translated into increased employment opportunities and financial independence for participants. Social media platforms facilitated networking, information sharing, and client acquisition for many beneficiaries. The evaluations also highlighted a commitment to gender equality, as many projects targeted women from diverse backgrounds and encouraged broader participation. The initiatives aligned with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as promoting gender equality (SDG 5), fostering decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing societal inequalities (SDG 10). Collaboration with various stakeholders (SDG 17) further strengthened the program's reach and effectiveness. Including youth and marginalised communities underscored the potential for continuous learning, self-development, and positive societal change across all demographics. Despite positive findings, the Central One team identified specific challenges through the Impact Evaluation exercise.

3.1 Challenges Faced by Beneficiaries

There were no significant challenges regarding human factors and infrastructure. Human factors include elements such as the beneficiaries' engagement, motivation, and the effectiveness of communication and training methods. Infrastructure refers to the physical and organizational structures needed for the operation of the projects, such as facilities, equipment, and logistical support. Evidence supporting the absence of significant issues includes high attendance rates, positive feedback on the training sessions, and the adequate availability and functionality of facilities and resources. Beneficiaries consistently reported that the environment was conducive to learning and that the support systems in place were efficient and reliable. For procedures, the beneficiaries faced challenges regarding the project depth. Project depth means that most beneficiaries felt that they had benefited from the projects but could have learned more should there have been more resources and a follow-up phase of the project. In other words, there was a strong desire among beneficiaries for a second phase of the project to further enhance their skills and knowledge, indicating that while the initial phase was successful, it left many participants eager for continued learning opportunities. This request for follow-up or advanced classes was mentioned by beneficiaries from SP109 and said during the FGD and SV sessions for Y22-SP013, Y22-SP035, Y22-SP089, and Y22-SP107. Most beneficiaries reported that they learned a great deal from the solution providers and the programs organized but felt disappointed that they could not further develop their skills and knowledge in their respective fields. They expressed a desire for more in-depth training and additional phases to build on what they had already learned. In addition, Y22-SP100 beneficiaries also highlighted the importance of expanding their professional networks. They mentioned that having more contacts would help them broaden their expertise and more effectively address the issues of overdevelopment. For example, several participants emphasized the need for specialized legal support.

The Y22-SP089 beneficiaries stated that the time allocated for group discussions during training sessions needs to be extended to allow participants more opportunity to discuss their well-being and share insights. Besides that, additional time would enable a deeper exploration of topics and enhance the overall learning experience. For instances, the beneficiaries felt that some aspects of the program, specifically the activities and scheduling, could be improved to better support their learning. For example, they expressed concerns about one particular activity in Module 4, known as "Pop the Balloon." This activity, intended to be engaging, caused discomfort for a few participants due to their fear of the sound of balloons popping. As a result, they suggested that the activity be modified or replaced with a different approach that would be more comfortable for everyone. They also recommended shortening the intervals between the different phases of the program, referred to as Series 1, 2, and 3 as a shorter time between these phases would enhance the learning experience by maintaining continuity and keeping participants more engaged. These changes aim to create a more effective and supportive learning environment for all participants.

The second challenge they faced was related to the availability and utilization of resources. Beneficiaries expressed a need for more support in areas such as marketing and economic skills. For example, at SP013, the beneficiaries struggled with marketing efforts despite undertaking a marketing course. The product packaging remained unlabelled, and they only used standard packaging. During the FGDs and SV, evaluators addressed these challenges by sharing specific strategies to enhance the visibility and marketing of their products. This included recommendations for improving packaging, branding, and marketing techniques to better support beneficiaries in effectively promoting their products and reaching a broader audience. One example of the challenges faced was the lack of adequate signage, which made it difficult for the evaluators to locate the project site. Beneficiaries reported similar challenges, noting that the absence of clear signposts hindered their ability to attract potential customers and business partners. The lack of proper signage also affected their visibility and accessibility, which are crucial for business growth. Additionally, beneficiaries struggled with product branding due to insufficient knowledge and resources. They found that their product packaging remained unlabelled and used only standard

materials, which did not effectively differentiate their products in the market. This lack of distinctive branding made it harder for their products to stand out and appeal to consumers.

The evaluators addressed these challenges by providing specific strategies to improve the beneficiaries' situation. They recommended installing clear signposts to enhance the visibility of the business location and attract more customers. They also suggested creating a unique logo to strengthen product branding and make it more recognizable. Beneficiaries responded positively to these suggestions, acknowledging that improved signage and branding could significantly impact their business opportunities and market presence.

The beneficiaries of Y22-SP035 faced significant challenges with the supply and demand of their products. While the demand for fresh mushrooms was high, their production capacity could not meet the market needs due to the limited size of the mushroom houses. This mismatch between demand and supply led to difficulties in fulfilling orders and capturing market opportunities. During the FGD and SV, the beneficiaries mentioned how they would like to learn new skills in dealing with the mushrooms damaged due to diseases or unfavourable conditions. The economic impact of damaged crops was substantial, as these losses reduced both costs and profits. The beneficiaries expressed a need for new skills to address these issues, such as methods for turning damaged crops into fertilizer or preventing crop damage in the first place. Furthermore, they indicated that a larger workforce would be beneficial for handling various tasks, including plant care, harvesting, packaging, and transportation. Increased manpower would help improve efficiency and reduce costs associated with these activities. Overall, addressing these challenges would enhance their ability to meet market demand and optimize production processes.

3.2 Challenges Faced by Solution Providers

There were no significant challenges regarding procedures, resources, and infrastructure for the SP. However, they only encountered challenges related to human factors. One major issue was the lack of motivation and commitment among participants. For instance, in Y22-SP053, participants showed limited interest in the theoretical aspects of entrepreneurship, including complex business acumen tools that are demanding for those without prior experience. This disinterest extended to practical aspects as well, with participants being reluctant to register their businesses. Additionally, there was a noticeable reluctance to cooperate as a unified group, which may have stemmed from previous collaborative experiences. This lack of engagement made it challenging for the SP to maintain interest in essential entrepreneurial concepts and business skills. In another example, the SP of Y22-SP037 faced a similar issue when a key beneficiary withdrew from the project, leading to decreased interest and motivation among the remaining participants. This withdrawal highlighted the need for sustained support and engagement strategies to keep participants invested in their entrepreneurial ventures. The challenge was not only in addressing the participants' immediate lack of interest but also in finding ways to re-engage them and ensure continued progress in the project.

Consequently, the assigned SPs also had to invest additional time and resources to find new participants and sites for projects' implementation. In example, finding constructing mushroom houses and needed to retrain the new community members for the launched project. Similarly, in SP165, the SP reported challenges with beneficiary commitment. Despite offering free workshops, some beneficiaries who registered did not attend. This lack of attendance reflected a broader challenge in sustaining participant engagement, though the specific reasons behind this disengagement were not detailed in the feedback. In Y22-SP109, the SP encountered difficulties in maintaining students' interest and focus, fostering cooperation, and managing interpersonal differences among participants. These issues underscored the broader challenge of keeping participants engaged and motivated throughout the project, which was compounded by difficulties in achieving a cohesive group dynamic.

The second human factor challenge faced by the SPs involved managing relationships with external parties, including local authorities. Y22-SP100 reported the difficulty in engaging with key governmental representatives, who were often unable to attend or commit to project meetings. This lack of participation from important stakeholders hindered the project's progress and support. Additionally, challenge faced by Y22-SP091 involved building a productive working relationship with a local authority that had existing connections with the SPs. Establishing a partnership with another agency proved difficult due to differing perceptions of the project's goals and priorities. While the SPs focused on the overall impact and outcomes, the agency emphasized specific work activities and procedural details. This divergence in focus created obstacles in aligning the project's objectives with the agency's expectations and securing their full support.

These challenges underscore the complexities of collaborating with external entities, where mismatched priorities and expectations can affect project effectiveness and progress. Effective communication and alignment of goals are crucial for overcoming these issues and ensuring successful partnerships.

The second challenge was in dealing with contractors appointed in the project. As example, the SP for Y22-SP035 reported how finding contractors for the mushroom house construction became challenging when the contractors provided high quotations and were reluctant to lower prices. This shortcoming led to the idea for the community to construct the facilities themselves, but they were restricted due to payment regulations. Therefore,

they needed to continue looking for contractors offering reasonable prices. In another example of dealing with contractors, Y22-SP037 reported that the construction of mushroom houses took longer than anticipated due to a lack of interest from contractors, who were unwilling to undertake the project within the specified budget.

3.3 Challenges Faced by Evaluators

There were no significant challenges regarding human factors, procedures and resources, however the evaluators faced several challenges related to navigation obstacles during the FGD sessions. During the planning phase of the FGDs, they encountered some roadblocks regarding communication when trying to contact the right individuals for the sessions. Once this was sorted, most of the document evaluation went smoothly. A notable example of a communication-related challenge involved navigation obstacles. When trying to reach a project site in Melaka, the evaluators had trouble locating it using the address provided by the SP. Despite relying on navigation tools like Waze and Google Maps, they were repeatedly directed to a Muslim cemetery. They eventually sought assistance from a local food stall vendor and found the site just under a kilometer away from their location. Similarly, in Negeri Sembilan, the Evaluators initially struggled to find the project site but were able to reach it after a phone call with the SP. They noted the absence of signposts to guide visitors to the site. These challenges highlight the importance of effective communication and accurate navigation in ensuring the successful execution of project evaluations. Addressing these human factors is crucial for achieving the objectives of this paper, which include identifying and overcoming obstacles to enhance project effectiveness and support.

4. Conclusion

The evaluation for 2022 was successful and ran smoothly despite several challenges. Evaluators were highly cooperative and dedicated, contributing their time and expertise to enhance the projects and benefit society. The Central One evaluation was completed effectively and yielded positive results. Based on the eighteen programs underwent evaluation, resulting in the creation of 18 impact identification documents, with six of them incorporating information from FGDs and SVs. The projects are mainly aimed at uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the B40 communities. 50% of the projects were aimed at income generation and poverty, empowering individuals with financial, marketing, communication, design, and soft skills to earn a more sustainable income. The addition of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) could also benefit future beneficiaries. This form of training is essential because in Malaysia, many undergraduates lack the initiative to improve their knowledge and skills. As mentioned by employers, undergraduates have an issue of upskilling additional skills in addition to the technical and generic skills learned at universities (Kahirool et al., 2016). As such, many graduates remain unemployed due to this lack of initiative and skills, which is prevalent in TVET. To produce individuals with the right qualities and high job performance, TVET education has essentially become a form of education providing capable and competent graduates equipped with technical and vocational expertise (Kahirool & Nor Lisa, 2015). TVET education develops worker characters and helps develop the economy through TVET training programmes and curricula that develop sustainable characters that will produce competent, dynamic and competitive human capital, and therefore could be adopted by solution providers to produce more exemplary APPGM-SDG projects.

Two community-based projects that were identified as exemplary projects are SP100 and SP107. Many projects target SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 1 (No Poverty), and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This year, the impact evaluation of these projects also discussed projects aimed at creating sustainable cities and communities to create living spaces that provide a better quality of life and are against overdevelopment.

This paper will provide better insights to the APPGM-SDG, parliamentarians, solution providers, and other stakeholders on the strengths and weaknesses of these projects. This paper would allow for better regulation of solution projects and provide policymakers and decision-makers with more feasible strategies and goals. It advocates for projects to receive enhanced ratings, reviews, reports, and feasibility assessments. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of targeting more SDG goals, particularly those that have been side-lined, to ensure that communities reap their benefits.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Yuen Beng Lee; **data collection:** Mohd Firdaus Mohd Anuar, Maslisa Zainuddin, Yuen Beng Lee, Nurul Hidayat Ab Rahman, Tan Raan Hann; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Mohd Firdaus Mohd Anuar, Maslisa Zainuddin, Yuen Beng Lee, Nurul Hidayat Ab Rahman, Tan Raan Hann; **draft manuscript preparation:** Mohd Firdaus Mohd Anuar, Maslisa Zainuddin, Yuen Beng Lee, Nurul Hidayat Ab Rahman, Tan Raan Hann. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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