

The APPGM-SDG Solution Projects: Empowering Women Through Mobilising Grassroot Communities

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Abstract

In 2019, the Malaysian Parliament established the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on the Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) to offer multi-party collaborations related to the sustainable development goals (SDG). This article evaluates its key programme, the Solution Providers Projects. The article's primary objective is to showcase the work and activities of grassroots communities in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, goal 5 of the SDG. It analyses projects led by women, those exclusively benefiting women, and those substantially involving women's participation. The paper also aims to assess how these projects' outcomes contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment and assists women to pursue TVET opportunities and skills. In the Northern Region which covers several districts in Penang and Perak, 22 projects were evaluated of which nine specifically address women's needs. The study employed a qualitative approach to data collection including observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis from November 2023 to February 2024. The participants for FGD were selected among the beneficiaries of the 22 projects. The elements of empowerment-resource, agency, and achievements were evaluated by analysing six domains of APPGM-SDG model: Deep, Wide, Clear, High, SDG, and Gender. The main findings indicate that these projects with TVET opportunities and skills development foster greater economic and social inclusion while empowering women, creating opportunities that uplift them, benefit the broader community and promoting gender equality. Additionally, some projects have ensured diversity and inclusion among their targeted beneficiaries, thus achieving multiple SDGs within a single project. This comprehensive evaluation underscores the critical role of grassroots communities in advancing sustainable development and community well-being.

1. Introduction

The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future, commonly also referred to as the Brundtland Report (after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Chair of the Commission) is often cited as presenting the fundamental definition of sustainable development, which is, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland

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Report: 1987, Chapter 2, para 1). The UN Human Development Report 1991 argues that “inequalities” hinder sustainable development because it harms societies, diminishes social cohesion and people’s trust in government, institutions and each other (p.1). An important area of inequality is gender. Thus, the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment is fundamental to sustainable development. In the previous UN agenda of Millenium Development Goals (MDG), gender equality is included as goal 3. In further advancing global agenda for sustainable development, particularly through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the UN has designated SDG 5 as a goal to comprehensively achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. SDG 5 considers freedom from gender discrimination as a basic human right for women. In addition, gender equality features significantly as a multiplier across the other SDGs such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education) SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

The SDG represents a global framework designed to address the most pressing issues faced by humanity, including poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Central to achieving these goals is the concept of community engagement, which emphasizes the active participation and collaboration of local communities in driving sustainable development. Within these communities, women are one of the most vulnerable groups due to systemic discrimination, limited access to education and healthcare and economic barriers. Linking SDG with community engagement provides an opportunity to empower women and feature them as catalysts for positive change. Empowering women and achieving gender equality result in sustainable development that benefit not only women but entire communities (Kabeer, 1999).

A significant hurdle to achieving gender equality is the limited participation of grassroots individuals as agents of change. Grassroot women often find themselves excluded from decision-making processes dominated by, usually male, elite groups or larger organizations (Zulminarni, 2002). While numerous, NGOs’ work at the grassroot level and on community organising has thus far failed to transform into widespread advocacy campaigns. This has hindered progress in addressing gender inequality. Awareness raising is a fundamental strategy to enhance women’s participation and enable them to effectively contribute to community development projects (Flores and Samuel, 2019).

A grassroot approach to sustainable development emphasises a deliberate and coordinated involvement of the target groups that result in both the achievement of sustainable development for the grassroot communities as well as the sustainable impact it has on them (Syukri and Choudhury, 1996). Grassroot communities are usually led by local community leaders who are typically driven change agents and are passionate about bringing positive changes to their local communities. Engaging grassroot communities is an effective strategy for promoting inclusive government and achieving sustainable development (Moallemi et al., 2020). By actively engaging grassroot communities in policy processes, policymakers would be able to utilise their invaluable views and experiences, resulting in more equitable and impactful policies that genuinely meet the needs of society (Jayasooria, 2016).

It should be noted, however, grassroots engagement with SDGs is still, at best, in its infancy in many countries (UN, 2016). While UN State Parties collectively gave their pledge to the global agenda in 2015, it is voluntary in implementation and thus, localising the SDG is at the subnational and local levels (Yusof et al., 2022). As a government, Malaysia has pledged to nationalise and localise the framework as part of its cooperation with other nations to achieve the goals. In 2019, for the first time an All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM-SDG), in collaboration with the CSO-SDG Alliance, was established to monitor the implementation of SDG in participating parliamentary constituencies (Yusof and Sanusi, 2021).

This paper reviews the APPGM-SDG solution projects involving activities that advocate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, particularly those that respond to targets of SDG 5 but also other SDGs that include gender equality targets. Target 5.1 of SDG 5 strives to eliminate gender discrimination by ensuring a legislative framework is in place. This is consistent with Malaysia’s international legal obligation to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and therefore a strong accountability framework within the SDG projects is timely. To assess the achievement of the relevant targets of gender equality the article analyses projects that are led by women, that exclusively benefit women or that substantively include women’s participation. The article analyses whether the solution initiatives were centered on creating long-term remedies that address the root causes of inequality in communities, including resource scarcity, poverty, and knowledge transfer. It also evaluates the creation of economic possibilities, access to resources and knowledge transfer to conclude if the projects have empowered the local communities, particularly women. The article also identifies best practices in the projects that impact on the achievement of the relevant SDG targets.

1.1 TVET as Skill Development and Economic Empowerment to Achieve Gender Equality

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is crucial in promoting gender equality through empowering women and girls. It offers women an opportunity to develop practical skills, achieve economic autonomy, and challenge traditional norms (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2010). Investing in TVET can empower women to

make significant contributions to their communities, workplaces and the overall economy (Puteh and Wan Abdul Halim, 2023), resulting in economic empowerment. Women can also acquire proficiency and competencies that empower them to access enhanced employment prospects, generate a stable income, and contribute to the financial stability of their families. Moreover, by specifically targeting gender-related obstacles and implementing policy reform, it is possible to establish avenues for women to pursue TVET opportunities. This, in turn, will lead to their economic empowerment and contribute to sustainable development (Ang and Lim, 2022). In the framework of sustainable development, it is crucial to promote women's advocacy and actively listen to women's views as a means of empowering them.

It is important to note that according to the *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* report, the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. Therefore, the Malaysian government has taken the initiative to promote SDG5 and other SDG goals with gender equality targets through APPGM-SDG solution projects (Hasan et al., 2023). Achieving these goals and targets significantly requires giving attention to the level of women's involvement in development projects. Involving grassroots communities, both women and men, in policy processes fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment. This engagement also results in a stronger sense of community ownership, enhanced social cohesion, and a shared commitment to positive change.

Pradhan (2023) examines the role of self-help groups (SHGs) in India's community health interventions and self-empowerment. The study concludes that women perceive themselves as becoming more empowered through the program as well as observing improved health and wellbeing in themselves, their households and the community. In Africa, women's participation in community-based development projects is found to have been influenced by factors such as access to financial resources, level of education and training, social, cultural and traditional norms, and political context (Awuor Abila and Kisimbii, 2020 and Ekpenyong et al., 2023). Education and training enable women's full participation in community development projects (Awuor Abila and Kisimbii, 2020). In Malaysia, Baqutayan (2020) finds that women require personal, relational and environmental empowerment to promote gender equality in the country. This highlights the importance of involving women in grassroots advocacy to address women-related issues.

Some of the most effective strategies for grassroots community participation, especially in fostering gender equality advocacy programs, involve increasing the critical awareness of grassroots women regarding their social standing and position within society. This includes creating awareness about grassroots advocacy, equipping grassroots women with the necessary tools to organize their communities, developing leaders among grassroots women, and facilitating engagement between grassroots women and decision-makers, which include Members of Parliament and relevant government bodies, to advocate for women's issues (Zulminarni, 2002; Flores and Samuel, 2019).

1.2 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Gender equality and women's empowerment are closely related concepts that both aim to address inequalities and injustices based on gender. In this study, the empowerment framework by Kabeer (1999) is utilised to review and assess solution projects under the APPGM-SDG programs. The three interrelated dimensions—resources, agency, and achievement—were used by Kabeer to examine empowerment.

The concepts of power, agency, control, and decision-making are frequently mentioned in the literature on empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002;). Pradhan (2023) argued that numerous studies highlight the crucial role of gender equality and women's empowerment in driving social and economic progress. Similarly, Cornwall and Edwards (2014) describe empowerment as an individual's or group's capacity to make informed decisions and effectively translate them into meaningful actions and outcomes. Kabeer (1999) defines the concept as 'the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability' (p. 13). This ability is exercised to acquire resources that encompass social and human resources as well as material resources, all of which improve one's capacity for decision-making (Kabeer, 1999). Resources are therefore the means through which agency is exercised. "Agency" is a person's capacity to set and carry out objectives. Another component of empowerment is achievement, which is the realisation of one's capacity for leading the life one desires or its failure. Finally, women's empowerment and gender equality are related ideas that are critical to establishing a just and equitable society where opportunities are given to all persons, regardless of gender, to reach their full potential.

2. Methodology

This article is based on data collected from the 22 community projects involved five parliamentary constituencies in Penang (Permatang Pauh, Batu Kawan, Bagan, Bukit Gelugor and Bukit Mertajam) and five in Perak: Ipoh Barat, Taiping, Parit Buntar, Bagan Serai and Sungai Siput. They were part of the APPGM-SDG Solution Providers project that aimed to reduce multidimensional inequality. Penang and Perak are two states located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Penang is known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse population, and thriving economy.

Perak, too, has a diverse population, with Malays, Chinese, and Indians contributing to the state's vibrant social fabric. Penang's economy is driven by a robust manufacturing sector, particularly in electronics, and is also a key player in tourism. In contrast, Perak's economy is diverse, encompassing agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and tourism. Penang places a strong emphasis on environmental conservation, with initiatives to protect its natural resources, such as beaches, hillsides, and mangrove forests. The state actively promotes eco-tourism and green initiatives, aiming for sustainable development. Meanwhile Perak is renowned for its natural beauty, with wonderful landscapes, caves, and rivers. The state is also committed to environmental conservation, with measures to preserve its ecosystems. The details of the 22 projects are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 *The list of the project evaluated in Penang and Perak*

No	Code Project	Location
1.	Y22-SP056	Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang
2.	Y22-SP002	Ipoh Barat, Perak
3.	Y22-SP163	Ipoh Barat, Perak
4.	Y22-SP003	Batu Kawan, Pulau Pinang
5.	Y22-SP011	Parit Buntar, Perak
6.	Y22-SP012*	Parit Buntar, Perak
7.	Y22-SP021	Batu Kawan, Pulau Pinang
8.	Y22-SP029*	Batu Kawan, Pulau Pinang
9.	Y22-SP030	Taiping, Perak
10.	Y22-SP001	Batu Kawan, Pulau Pinang
11.	Y22-SP082*	Ipoh Barat, Perak
12.	Y22-SP093*	Ipoh Barat, Perak
13.	Y22-SP108	Bukit Gelugor, Pulau Pinang
14.	Y22-SP115*	Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang
15.	Y22-SP136*	Bagan Serai, Perak
16.	Y22-SP142	Bagan, Pulau Pinang
17.	Y22-SP143	Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang
18.	Y22-SP154	Batu Kawan, Pulau Pinang
19.	Y22-SP157	Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang
20.	Y22-SP159*	Ipoh Barat, Perak
21.	Y22-SP173*	Sungai Siput, Perak
22.	Y22-SP180*	Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang

Note: These projects * are women targeted.

Source: APPGM 2023 Northern 2 Regional fieldwork

Out of a total of 22 projects, nine are specifically tailored to address the needs of women which are Y22-SP012, Y22-SP029, Y22-SP082, Y22-SP093, Y22-SP115, Y22-SP136, Y22-SP159, Y22-SP173 and Y22-SP180 as indicated by * in Table 1. Some initiatives provide training in gender-related skills that are accessible to both men and women, with both genders actively involved in all project phases from inception to completion. On the other hand, certain projects assign skills based on gender, segregating them between male and female participants. Despite these variations, the overall assessment indicates that the projects significantly contribute to the realization of SDG 5 on gender equality, empowering individuals of all genders to actively engage in sustainable development endeavours.

The fully qualitative approach consisted of collection of primary and secondary data, which involved two phases. For the first phase the data was analysed through three primary documents: a) The project proposal, b) monthly reports, and c) final reports. For the second phase, data was collected based on focus group discussions (FGD), and site visits (SV) on eight selected projects. The purpose of the FGDs is to gather further information regarding the projects, to validate the feedback and gather narratives from the beneficiaries. Seven projects (Y22-SP030, Y22-SP001, Y22-SP108, Y22-SP115, Y22-SP029, Y22-SP030, Y22-SP093, and Y22-SP159) were selected for focus group discussions (FGDs). Among these, four projects specifically address the needs of female beneficiaries (Y22-SP029, Y22-SP093, Y22-SP115 and Y22-SP159).

The selection of the FGDs was established on two conditions: (i) responses and accessibility from the person in charge of the service providers, and (ii) the types of projects and documents available in the folder. All FGDs were conducted face-to-face at a chosen location by Solution Providers (SP). Two FGDs were managed with a

minimum of two researchers present; one researcher engaged directly with the beneficiaries while the other took notes and photographs. Conversations were conducted in both Malay and English depending on the preferences of the participants. Additionally, all FGDs were audio recorded and later transcribed. For the FGD, the questions were asked based on the six domains: 1) deep; 2) clear; 3) wide; 4) high; 5) Gender and 6) SDG of the APPGM Module. In this paper, Kabeer's three dimensions of empowerment are analysed based on these six domains.

3. Discussion

3.1. Empowering Women Through Solutions Projects

The success of SDG programs targeting women's empowerment was analysed using Kabeer's three interrelated concepts of empowerment: resources, agency, and achievements. Based on the qualitative analysis, the evaluators identified and located the three concepts of empowerment within the six domains which deep, wide, clear, high, SDG, and gender, which can be referred to in the table 2 below. The impactful domains were evaluated by calculating the mean value for each six domains. Table 2 only highlights the domains with the highest ratings for each project.

Table 2 *Impacts of the APPGM-SDG project on women's empowerment*

Code Projects	Concepts of Empowerment	Domains	Impact
Y22-SP012	Resource	Clear	The participants learned to prepare cookies, cakes and pastries, enhancing product quality and marketability. The project boosted their confidence and enabled them to take orders and generate income. The skills have helped them to improve the quality, efficiency and productivity of their work, and allowed them to produce more or higher-quality goods and services that resulted in higher prices..
Y22-SP029	Resource Agency	Clear	The women participated in 10 training modules led by a certified trainer, on body massage techniques, proper sequencing, and basic yoga movements. They also completed a basic business course on marketing. Both trainings enable them to start businesses or enhance existing businesses. Teamwork and network inculcated through training increased their business opportunities, resulting in stable monthly earnings. They found their confidence have also increased, enabling them to negotiate better prices for their service.
Y22-SP082	Achievement	Gender	The project presents opportunities for both women and men on a generally equal basis, with the potential to expand economic space for women in sectors traditionally dominated by men. However, the design of the project still reflects gender stereotypes, differentiating types of knowledge and skills based on cultural gender norms. As a result, bubu-making and boat maintenance workshops were exclusively provided for male youths, while food production and handicraft workshops were for women. Nevertheless, the opportunity to be part of the project that provides women with new skills boost their self-confidence and self-esteem.
Y22-SP093	Resource Agency & Achievement	Wide Deep	The participants were able to develop new networks through the project. They felt that engaging with other stakeholders and local leaders boosted their self-confidence and simultaneously unfolded new economic opportunities. The women noticed significant personal growth and became more confident in their ability to achieve economic independence. They felt empowered to take control of their lives. This project successfully heightened self-awareness amongst the women about the importance of generating income and taking proactive steps for personal well-being.
Y22-SP115	Resource	Wide	The women valued the ongoing guidance and communication provided by the SP, even beyond the project's duration. This included opportunities for them to exhibit and sold their products at a

	Agency		carnival, enabled them to expand their networks and attract new customers. The project offered women better planning and strategic skills and enhanced their abilities to advance their businesses. Many participants were already engaged in their own small businesses such as selling frozen food or offering tailoring services. This initiative provided them with additional avenues to expand their entrepreneurial strategies.
Y22-SP136	Resource Agency Achievement	Deep, Clear, Wide	Women experienced empowerment through the acquisition of knowledge about business and marketing methods, aligning with Kabeer's concept of empowerment that access to resources is necessary for agency and achievement. This newfound knowledge enabled them to develop their potential, fostering confidence in navigating the complexities of the business world. Additionally, the program facilitated the expansion of their networks, enhancing their opportunities for collaboration and growth.
Y22-SP159	Resource, Agency and Achievement	Deep, Clear and Wide	Through the project, women gain deep knowledge (resource) in pastry-making and entrepreneurship, reflected in their high confidence levels. It enhances their agency—the ability to make informed decisions and act—by equipping them with the skills to produce quality baked goods for income generation. Moreover, the wide network dimension fosters social connections and support systems, providing additional resources for women to leverage in their entrepreneurial endeavours. Ultimately, the project empowers women by providing them with the resources, agency, and opportunities to achieve economic independence and personal fulfilment in the bakery and pastry industry.
Y22-SP180	Resource, Agency and Achievement	Deep, Clear and Wide	The project has had a significant positive impact on women, reflecting Naila Kabeer's concept of empowerment across multiple dimensions. In the deep personal dimension, the project has empowered beneficiaries to understand and enhance their health and well-being. This empowerment extends beyond physical health to boost women's self-confidence and self-esteem. Participants' enthusiasm for the program highlights their belief in its efficacy and their desire for further opportunities. Women benefit significantly from the project, which places a strong emphasis on acquiring new skills. This empowers participants to create additional income streams, thus enhancing their financial independence, opportunities for economic growth and the ability to improve their social and economic conditions.

Based on these nine projects, it can be concluded that the SDGs programs targeting women's empowerment have demonstrated significant success, particularly in enhancing their economic income, empowerment, social well-being, and self-confidence. These initiatives have been instrumental in providing women with relevant skills and knowledge, enabling them to either kick-start new businesses or expand existing entrepreneurial activities. By focusing on skills development, these programs have not only facilitated economic growth but also fostered a sense of self-reliance among women. Participants have reported increased confidence and a greater sense of community, as they engage in activities that promote both personal and professional growth. The comprehensive approach of combining economic empowerment with social support has proven to be effective in driving sustainable development and fostering gender equality.

SDG programs have significantly boosted women's access to both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible resources include financial capital, tools, and materials necessary for starting or expanding businesses. One of the participants shared,

Yes, I'm happy because, usually before this we depend on our husband's money. At least now, we don't always ask for money. At least now, I don't have to always ask my husband for money. I save the money I earn and will use it for my kids' stuff. Sometimes I can earn up to RM400 per month. (029a, FGD 4, 7 January 2024)

Intangible resources encompass knowledge, skills, and training provided through these programs in which women have been equipped with the competencies required to run the business, manage finances, and utilise technology, thereby enhancing their economic potential. This access to resources is fundamental as it lays the groundwork for empowerment by providing the means through which women can achieve greater economic stability and independence. As claimed by one of the participants, (029b, FGD 4, 7 January 2024), in the project, they acquired proficiency in body massage techniques, including the correct sequence and basic yoga movements. Each module culminated in an assessment, followed by supplementary sessions for module review.

I learned the skills of body massaging, the proper technique of body massage, and some basic yoga movements. The modules conclude with a test, and additional classes are given to review the module. I also attended a basic business course, particularly in marketing. I used these skills to get more income.... (029b, FGD 4, 7 January 2024)

Additionally, they participated in a foundational business course, focusing primarily on marketing strategies. Nevertheless, female participants must exert additional effort to promote their skills and expand their professional network. Balancing domestic responsibilities and a lack of marketing expertise presented challenges for the beneficiaries in fully leveraging their acquired skills. It is also important to note that one of the challenges involving marginalised communities in entrepreneurial endeavours is due to factors like limited education, confidence, and resources. In order to ensure consistent engagement and interest in the program may have necessitated extra effort and creative methods. Female participants, particularly those facing economic hardships, encountered challenges in consistently attending meetings or engaging with the program due to domestic responsibilities. They also encountered obstacles associated with digital literacy using various social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Thus, it is essential to equip them with skills to utilise these platforms for marketing and sales effectively.

The SDG programs have fostered agency by encouraging women to make decisions about their businesses and personal lives. The women have developed greater self-confidence and assertiveness. They are now more capable of articulating their needs, negotiating better terms for their businesses, and influencing their communities. A participant from project Y22-SP115 indicated,

And I think this bakery idea is suitable; it fits well. Then, I have this plan. In about five years, I want to open a café... We must be ambitious, right? We must aim high (115a). We learn here (by joining the programme), we see the opportunities (115g). Previously, we weren't clear about it. Now, we see the opportunities much more broadly. So, it means that what we are doing now seems sustainable. It seems like it can continue and possibly support the family. With... with just this project alone. (115a and 115g, FGD 5, 7 January 2024)

By engaging in decision-making processes and leadership roles, women have gained a stronger sense of control over their lives, which is a critical aspect of empowerment. Besides, the impact of SDG programs is evident in the substantial improvements in women's economic income and social well-being. Women who participated in these programs often reported higher levels of economic independence, improved social status, and greater self-esteem. A participant (093a, FGD 4, 9 January 2024) openly stated that she was experiencing a period of depression when she initially enrolled in the program following her son's passing earlier. However, engaging in the program helped her regain emotional stability. Another participant asserted that,

So, usually, I depend on my son {for financial support}. I didn't feel good about it, so I wanted to find my own income as well, which I managed to do... [stopped working since the lockdown?] Yes, but I did have some savings. I had some money saved up. So, when I was offered the chance to join this programme, I accepted it to generate some income. In addition, I could take on this project to help others as well. [...] to help the community. (115d, FGD 5, 7 January 2024).

By fostering a sense of self-reliance and community among participants, these programs contribute to women's achievements in both personal and professional spheres. The narratives in this study support the finding by Rahman et. al. (2023) who claimed that the APPGM-SDG projects promote gender equality and empowerment of women. Thus, it is imperative for Malaysia to implement strategies to ensure skills development in TVET for women and marginalised groups especially from B40 to remain relevant, quality-driven and adaptable (Salleh et. al., 2023) human capital for their survival. The way solution projects have been designed by the APPGM-SDG with a TVET focus can act as a foundation for skill development and economic advancement among participants (Muhammad Azwan, 2023). As mentioned by Sharifah et. al. (2023) that the skills transferred in the projects improved of receivers' hands-on hard skills/living skills related to their interest and techniques needed for their solution projects. In summary, SDG programs targeting women's empowerment effectively align with Kabeer's three concepts by enhancing women's access to resources, promoting their agency, and facilitating their achievements. Through a comprehensive approach that combines economic empowerment with social support, these initiatives drive sustainable development and foster gender equality. The APPGM-SDG initiatives are designed with the overarching goal of fostering greater economic and social inclusion while simultaneously empowering women. It achieves this by tapping into the unique

capabilities and potential of women, thereby creating opportunities that not only uplift them but also contribute to the overall welfare of the local community. As expressed by a Solution Provider,

I would like to express my gratitude to the SDG team (APPGM-SDG). The programme they have initiated has helped us kickstart activities and identify many talented participants. (159, FGD 7,10 January 2024)

Additionally, the projects place emphasis on skill and capacity building within the community, aiming to enhance the quality of life and well-being by facilitating access to financial support and essential financial services for all members.

3.2. Drawing Insights from the Best Practices of APPGM-SDG Solution Projects

Sustainability of actions and responses to gender equality and women's empowerment in the projects may be created through learning the best practices that emerged from them. These may be observed from the way that the SPs implement their projects and the emerging responses and behavioural change in the beneficiaries and surrounding communities.

A few of the projects have ensured diversity and inclusion in their targeted beneficiaries, thus, allowing for the achievements of more than one SDGs within a singular project. In the context of gender equality, not leaving women and girls behind in designing programme activities is a crucial step in achieving the targets of SDG 5. Project SP082, for example, has the objective of building and improving the economic capacity of a coastal fishing community while conserving the community's traditional knowledge and its environment. The project has strategically implemented concurrent knowledge and skills development programmes for two key groups: young fishermen and community women. Workshop series to teach participants maintenance and repair of boat engines as well as to make traditional fishing traps (bubu) were targeted at young fishermen and women. In fact, women were engaged in food production and handicraft workshops. The provision of knowledge and skills education for both women and men has affirmed the important roles of both sexes in preserving local knowledge and environment. It should be noted, however, there is still a gendered approach to knowledge dissemination in the form of separating forms of knowledge for women and men. Since fishing activities are mainly seen as men's domains, boat engine maintenance and repair and bubu making courses were restricted to men. Project SP115, on the other hand, trains community beneficiaries with knowledge and skills on baking and on starting and running a bakery. While this project predictably attracted mostly women, the SP has also ensured spaces are allocated for male beneficiaries.

A few SPs in this study have shown an admirable effort to educate beneficiaries with the SDG knowledge base. SP180 has displayed a large info graphical poster of SDG information on one of the walls of the salon where the beneficiaries attended their sinus therapy classes. Beneficiaries were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the SDGs and relate their own work and activities to the 17 SDGs. This practice can potentially be replicated in other projects and by the government when engaging with different communities.

In economic empowerment projects, three projects for example have shown how the SPs have been visionary in planning comprehensive outcomes for the beneficiaries. The SPs not only focus on knowledge and skills acquisition for the beneficiaries but also helped them plan their sales strategies, established business network for them and planned potential future projects to ensure the sustainability of the capacity building of the targeted groups of beneficiaries. The projects include TVET opportunities and skills which enabling women to become more independent economically and manage their own businesses successfully. In project SP108, the SP trained young people with disabilities (PWD) to make soaps, candles and stuffed dolls for sale so that they would be able to create work and earnings for themselves. The SP has shown that they intensely researched and developed the skills before teaching them to the beneficiaries, developed business network for them by showcasing their products to government agencies and industries, facilitated bulk sales of their products to these organisations, created a profit-sharing system that benefited the PWDs and develop proposals for future grants. The SP in project SP180 offered hands-on classes to the beneficiaries, include them in her own client-seeking activities, engage them to assist her in her provision of services to her clients so that they were able to practice their learnt skills and establish an informal profit-sharing system with the beneficiaries. She was also planning to establish a cooperative organisation that would benefit the beneficiaries and women in similar small businesses. Other than providing skills-building training, project SP115 helped its beneficiaries to showcase their products and assisted them to use social media platforms to market their products. The SP has also provided continuous moral support and indirect guidance beyond the period of the project.

In the end analysis, achieving the goals of sustainable development requires more than a one-dimensional approach. Best practices in ensuring the success of SDG-driven projects, in this context, of SDG5, must connect at least the triple helix of community, industry and government. Best practices may also be enhanced through research that may be contributed by academia.

4. Conclusion

Providers projects on women is substantial, especially in terms of improving their economic and social conditions. By focusing on income-generating activities, these initiatives are empowering women within vulnerable groups, enabling them to take greater control of their lives and enhance their socio-economic status. These projects employ a range of strategies to uplift women and contribute to sustainable development at the local level. However, they face challenges that sometimes limit their effectiveness. To maximize the positive outcomes for women, it is crucial to address these hurdles and explore new ways to track the progress of any projects from inception to completion. Ultimately, by refining these approaches, we can ensure that the benefits of these projects reach their fullest potential, leading to lasting change in the lives of women and their communities.

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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:** Noraida Endut, Zaireeni Azmi and Nor Hafizah Selamat; **methodology:** Zaireeni Azmi; **data collection, data analysis and interpretation of results, and draft manuscript preparation:** Zaireeni Azmi, Nor Hafizah Selamat and Noraida Endut. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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