

No One Left Behind: Empowerment of Marginalized Community Through APPGM-SDG Solution Provider Projects

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Abstract

Leaving no one behind is the main slogan of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is easier to say than to achieve this slogan as marginalized groups are often left behind due to multiple barriers and challenges i.e. geographical area, ethnicity, sex, socio-economic status and historical background. Through community programmes conducted by All Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM-SDG), leaving no one behind is possible yet challenging. This article examines the impacts of twenty-three (23) APPGM-SDG programs in Perlis and Kedah. Data was collected through content analysis from solution providers' proposal and reports, focus group discussions (FGD) and site visit. The findings indicate that 20 out of 23 programs delivered an impactful programs in four (4) domains- improvement in knowledge and motivation, the skills, networking and system. An important aspect of the program is that integrating of TVET into community programs is proving to be an important component in ensuring sustainable development and truly leaving no one behind.

1. Introduction

Globalization is commonly used to define the worldwide connectedness and spread of technology, production, and communication (Kyove,2021). While the globalization process continues to thrive, the inclusion of marginalized communities has been one of the major concerns. As highlighted by Muhamad Azwan Abd Rahman et al. (2023), initiatives should be taken to empower marginalized groups by tackling discrimination in terms of ethnicity and gender and reducing inequality by focusing on providing more equal access to education, developing economic opportunities, and increasing social inclusion. Conceptually, marginalized communities are those excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, and/or cultural life. Examples of marginalized populations include but are not limited to, groups excluded due to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, and/or immigration status (Sevelius et. al (2020); Abd Rahman et al 2023). Even though the marginalized groups tend to be overseen due to the small percentage they constitute in the society, there are actually thousands to millions of them. According to Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (Department of Social Welfare, JKM), which manages the Persons with Disabilities (OKU) registry, there are a total of 637537 persons with disabilities as of 31 January

2023, which is about 1.9% of the Malaysian population. The number suggested that empowering the marginalized communities alone would be equivalent to empowering half of Malaysian citizens.

Due to the significance of marginalized group empowerment, it is important to conduct impactful training programs to enable them to have a better standard of living. Hence, this research seeks to demonstrate the impact of APPGM-SDG solution providers' projects on the marginalized community, answering the research question: What are the impacts of SDG projects on the beneficiaries' self-esteem, skills, working system and network?

1.1 Literature Review

Training programs in Malaysia are tailored to the needs of different sectors and population groups. The government, through agencies such as the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), has implemented various initiatives to promote continuous learning and skills development (Rahmah, 2018). These programs range from technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to continuing education courses for various industries. A study by Abdullah et al. (2019) has shown that the Malaysian government's efforts to promote TVET have significantly improved the employability of graduates. Vocational training programs focus on equipping people with specific skills required for certain occupations. Institutions such as the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centers play a crucial role in delivering this training. The Malaysian government has promoted TVET to address the mismatch between skills supply and demand in the labor market (Abdul Aziz et al., 2017). These training programs align with the country's goal of becoming a high-income nation by 2025, as outlined in the Eleventh Malaysian Plan (2016-2020).

Becoming a high-income nation must include citizens in every part of the country, hence training programs for rural areas in Malaysia are crucial in bridging the development gap between urban and rural areas. These programs aim to equip the rural population with the necessary skills to improve their livelihoods and contribute to local economic development. Ahmad and Nor (2020) state that, rural training programs often focus on agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and traditional crafts. These programs aim to utilize the existing skills and resources in the rural areas while introducing new techniques and technologies to improve productivity of training programs in Malaysia. TVET training programs are increasingly recognized as a potent tool for poverty alleviation, particularly for marginalized segments of society (Puteh & Wan, 2023). The study highlights several factors that contribute to their effectiveness. These include a well-designed curriculum aligned with current industry needs, effective assessment methods that accurately gauge both knowledge and practical skills, strong collaboration with industries to ensure program relevance, and integration of modern technologies to equip graduates for the evolving job market (Puteh & Wan, 2023). Salleh and Sulaiman (2016) fortifies this assertion by underscoring the pivotal role of skills development within TVET programs. Their empirical analysis posits that successful TVET initiatives must not solely disseminate technical proficiency but also engender personal aptitudes such as communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Salleh and Sulaiman (2016), all of which are indispensable for maneuvering the contemporary professional landscape. By prioritizing these factors, the TVET program can furnish graduates with relevant skills and knowledge, ultimately enhancing their employability, income levels and socioeconomic mobility (Puteh & Wan, 2023). According to Salleh and Sulaiman (2016), the effectiveness of TVET programs is likely maximized when employed in conjunction with other complementary strategies. This highlights the necessity of adopting a multifaceted approach that addresses the complexities of poverty.

According to Ahmad, S. R. et al. (2023) contemporary landscape of education, fostering graduates' employability has emerged as a vital concern for educational institutions and policymakers, particularly within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG8). To sustain employability and empowerment, elements that emphasize the desire for continuous learning and skill acquisition, mastery of technical competencies, and effective communication skills can stand as the principal factors shaping graduate employability. These attributes resonated well with SDG4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education (Ahmad, S. R. et al. 2023). Therefore, inclusive and equitable quality education as developed by All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) with solution providers project program since 2019, will continue to see improvements to rural socioeconomic development in the coming years to ensure there is no one left behind in Sabah It has been studied that finances and monetary resources are regarded to be the most crucial characteristics of the marginalized communities towards empowerment (Hasan, Rahman & Joko (2023). As such, increasing an income and linking the poor to skills is also a mean to empowering women and marginalized women and their families (Rahman et al., 2023. SDG 1's intention is to eradicate poverty by ensuring everyone, particularly the disadvantaged and vulnerable, has access to economic resources, services, property and technologies. Poverty worsens inequality, which deters economic improvement (Rahman et al., 2023). In achieving gender equality and empowering women (SDG 5), some initiatives are increasing the investment in infrastructure and services and creating more economic opportunities that empower women to lead better lives. Therefore, using empowering strategies, it will help women increase their bargaining power, confidence, and decision-making autonomy and give them choices in life (Hasan et al., 2023).

According to Ahmad, S. R. et al. (2023) the institution can contribute to SDG8's objectives by empowering graduates with the multidimensional proficiencies necessary to excel in a rapidly evolving job landscape. This multifaceted approach not only empowers graduates but also equips them to positively impact their communities and contribute to sustainable economic growth, aligning with the broader global agenda outlined by the United Nations through the SDGs. Ahmad, S. R. et al. (2023) also recommended crafting a training milieu that faithfully replicates industry settings, students are afforded the invaluable opportunity to apply their acquired skills within tangible scenarios. The integration of apprenticeship programs, coupled with knowledge gained from seasoned industry practitioners increases training effectiveness many times over. This comprehensive approach not only bolsters technical acumen through immersive, hands-on methodologies, but also exposes students to the gamut of essential soft skills in high demand within the contemporary labor market (Ahmad, S. R. et al. 2023).



Fig. 1 APPGM-SDG Meta-Integral framework

Source: Meta-integral (2020), Rashila & Sity (2023)

The underpinning theory is the APPGM-SDG Meta-Integral Framework (Meta-integral, 2020; Rashila & Sity, 2023). The framework is made up of four dimensions which are deep impact, clear impact, wide impact and high impact. Deep impact speaks about the change in the stakeholder experience such as the change of the behaviour, cognition and emotion of the stakeholder. Examples of the deep impact are the increase in knowledge or the feeling of happiness. Next is the clear impact which refers to the changes in the stakeholder performance such as the skill obtained by the beneficiaries. Examples of the skill obtained is the online marketing skill by using social media. The third is high impact, which refers to an upgrade of the practice system. Examples of the high impact are the replication of new standard operating procedure by the beneficiaries to maintain the quality of service or product. The fourth dimension is wide impact which refers to the improvement in engagement or collaboration of beneficiaries. Examples of the engagement are the new collaboration between beneficiaries and a new stakeholder such as Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority (FAMA). In this research, the evaluators rated all four dimensions of the impact on beneficiaries.

2. Methodology

This multi-pronged approach ensures a holistic understanding of the program's impact, encompassing its stated goals and real-world effects on the intended beneficiaries. The evaluation strengthens validity and reliability by

triangulating data from documents, direct feedback, and first-hand observation. Based on the individual reports, evaluators applied impact evaluations based on six (6) domains: personal, skills, networks, systems, SDG targets and gender dimensions. Furthermore, experts’ assessments are conducted to ensure the content validity of the interview questions and scoring rubric. This is consistent with the recommendation from Salleh, Sulaiman and Gloeckner (2023).

The first stage of data analysis involved the document analysis. The impact of 23 projects in the Northern 1 region underwent rigorous evaluation. The evaluation was conducted through the documents provided by the solution providers including proposals, progress reports, financial statements and evidences such as program photographs. The Return on Value (ROV) assessment is a holistic approach that goes beyond mere financial aspects. It considers various dimensions crucial to evaluating the real impact of a project on society and the environment. Through the analysis of key documents such as proposals, monthly reports, and final reports, including videos and images, as well as site visits, ROV observes essential aspects such as beneficiary satisfaction, acquisition of new skills, established processes and procedures, and the establishment of extensive networks or connections. The range of the mean value and its interpretation are shown in Table 5. The summary of the mean score for all projects is shown in Table 6.

In the context of ROV, consideration of dimensions such as Personal (DEEP), which assesses the depth of impact the Project has on the feelings and attitudes of beneficiaries; Skill (CLEAR), which evaluates the new skills acquired by beneficiaries; Network (WIDE), which assesses the formation of relationships and extensive networks; System (High), referring to the processes or procedures developed to enhance systematic culture; gender considerations (Gender); and long-term sustainability (SDG) are crucial. Gender considerations go beyond the disparity in the number of men and women involved in the Project; they also encompass knowledge and potential actions to improve access to resources and opportunities, especially for marginalized groups. By integrating these aspects, ROV ensures that the effectiveness of the Project is comprehensively evaluated and allocates practical improvements in various aspects for the overall benefit of society and the environment.

The second stage in data collection and analysis involved Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Northern One evaluator's team has conducted four (4) FGD sessions involving seven (7) projects. FGDs for 4 Projects were held in Alor Setar, while FGDs for the remaining three (3) projects were conducted alongside Site Visits to the Solution Provider's locations. The FGDs were carried out to gain a deeper understanding of beneficiaries' issues and challenges. The selection of projects for site visit and FGD are selected through the initial rigorous process of document analysis to identify projects with documented progress with outcomes recorded. For the FGD process, the evaluators contacted the service provider and requested that they provide a list of beneficiaries for the FGD sessions. These sessions exclusively involved the evaluator-beneficiaries, and service providers were not allowed to participate alongside beneficiaries to ensure fairness in the FGD sessions with beneficiaries and to prevent discussions from being influenced by service providers. These FGD sessions typically lasted for 30-45 minutes for each group.

3. Findings and Discussion

To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation of data is made through qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussion and scores of ROV analysis obtained from the document analysis. Based on the summary of mean ROV scores for all projects, all projects are considered high because they are in the range of 3.50 to 5.00, except for the wide domain, which is moderate.

Table 1 Summary of mean score for impact domains

No	Domain	Score	Mean
1	Deep	99	4.35
2	Clear	94	4.09
3	SDG	86	3.74
4	Gender	84	3.65
5	High	83	3.61
6	Wide	78	3.39

3.1 Esteem and Motivation

While marginalised groups are acknowledged to have less access to opportunities and resources, they also tend to stay in the same position due to the lack of soft skills, which results in inability to secure better career opportunities. Among the issues encountered by them include the lack of motivation, self-esteem and optimism.

Overall, SDG projects have achieved significant impacts in encountering these issues. Among the six domains, the highest is is Deep (Esteem and Motivation) with a score of 99. The mean ROV score for Deep is 4.35. A large counterpart of the programs manages to score 4 to 5 out of 5, indicating exceptionally high impact of the program

on the beneficiary's well-being, confidence, and motivation. The score is also consistent with the narratives collected from the focus group discussion.

Specifically, SDG projects have empowered the group of women in rural areas. The training program provides new skills, which results in the women feeling more competent and reducing their insecurities. They also experienced a shift in motivation from self-centred to prosocial.

"I am now more confident and I am so eager to give back more to the community, especially to my fellow housewives."

(Focus Group Discussion SP039, 14 January 2024)

Furthermore, the project conducted by AADK Kuala Muda has helped to promote a sense of purpose and accomplishment among former drug addicts. They are rarely given the chance to conduct beneficial projects and even when they do, the programs are unsuitable for their impaired cognitive and physical abilities. That is not the case for this SDG project, as the beneficiaries are able to master the skill of lime plantation and genuinely express their feeling of accomplishment.

"I am happy to come here and work with the plants. It helps me sweat and get satisfyingly tired. I can see the fruit of my hard work. I forgot all my problems when I came here. For a few hours, at least, I am not disturbed by ridiculous thoughts. It helps to reduce my addiction symptoms."

(Site Visit AADK Kuala Muda, 13 January 2024)

"I am happy to have something to look forward to. It is nice to wake up and have something to do. It is satisfying. At least I come here, get to do something and earn some money."

(Site Visit AADK Kuala Muda, 13 January 2024)

It can be inferred that the beneficiaries managed to reclaim their sense of purpose in life through the programs and in the long run, developed prosocial motivation. This is very important as there is a pivotal need to develop socially useful manpower in every industry of the country (Salleh & Sulaiman, 2016). As for the beneficiaries with substance abuse issues, the training program even assisted with their withdrawal syndrome by keeping them occupied and making them feel beneficial to the community.

3.2 Skills

Most of the projects focused on skills that would assist the marginalized group in income generation which would result in poverty alleviation, as recommended by Puteh & Wan (2023). With a total score of 94 and a mean of 4.09, this domain is ranked second out of six domains. Most programs scored 4 to 5 out of 5, indicating a remarkable impact experienced by the beneficiaries.

Training that suit beneficiaries' potential and passion managed to produce sustainable outcomes. They could continue applying the skills after the training, generate better income and break the cycle of poverty. This is evident from the achievement of rural women in Kedah who managed to gain the ability to create various types of stitches, including women's and men's clothing, as well as unique items such as prayer garments (*telekung*) and soft toys. The solution provider also provides opportunities for participants to enhance their sewing skills through training that focuses on the latest techniques and encourages their participants to receive orders from schools, kindergartens, and government agencies such as RISDA.

.. I now managed to get orders from schools, kindergarten, private agencies and government offices such as RISDA."

"... for instance, I learnt new skills such as how to make ready-made children attires, how to choose fabric, costing, appropriate fashion for kids, how to cut and sew, how to market the clothes I have made"

(Focus Group Discussion SP039, Alor Setar, Kedah, 14 January 2024)

They are not only good at making products, but they are also empowered with new skills in digital marketing. They managed to save money by utilising their current smartphones for content creation tools and customer service. This is especially beneficial for rural communities to grow their businesses and reach new markets in other parts of the country.

The second group empowered through the SDG project is fishermen from rural areas. They learnt boat maintenance and repair skills, directly opening new opportunities for fishermen to get additional sources of income in addition to opening job opportunities among the younger generation. Not only can they experience poverty alleviation, but this project also fosters rural development and reduces the gap in income generation between rural and urban areas.

Next, the projects managed to empower the disabled community through the upskilling of caregivers in the centre for the disabled community. Many of the disabled are struggling to learn basic self-management such as changing their clothes, communicating their needs for the toilet and eating properly on their own. Many of their parents could not afford private therapists and lack training skills. Hence, their only option is to send their children to public centres for disabled communities. Here, they are coming daily for basic self-management training so that they can fulfil the requirement to enter public schools. However, many of the caregivers are not equipped with relevant therapy skills, and this hinders the disabled children from progressing. The SDG project taught them about art therapies and even primary sign language to help them communicate the activities to their clients. As a result, the disabled children demonstrated improved emotional regulation and fine motor skills.

“As a beneficiary who attended the workshop series, I feel really lucky to learn new skills for us to apply in our PDK. Through this program, we could help disabled clients by providing appropriate therapy for their emotional regulation and healthy behaviours.”

(Focus Group Discussion SP039, Alor Setar, Kedah, 14 January 2024)

Solution providers were able to identify and provide training training that matched the beneficiaries' needs and the practicality of their skills for them. For example, sewing courses are provided to rural women with smartphones and fishing courses are provided to the community near fishing areas. Hence, it is evident from the testimonial that beneficiaries managed to practice and benefit from the trainings.

3.3 Network

As the dynamic of international trade experienced a rapid shift, it is important to secure the local economy (Abd Rahman, 2019). This calls for strong access to networks across industries. The wide domain is moderate, with a 78 and 3.39 mean score. The average Wide (network) dimension score was 3.39, which implies a moderate score. The wide domain also got the lowest score compared to other domains. This indicates that the beneficiaries can connect with new networks after completing the programs but are limited to the participant and service provider only.

For marginalised communities, their lag in development is rooted in their limited access to opportunities. Hence, one of the key factors in improving their access to opportunities is a quality network. Graduates with connections with people in their field possess an advantage to know about new openings and even a chance to get head-hunted.

Some exemplary projects that scored 4 or 5 out of 5 demonstrated a vast network for the women in rural communities. The housewives, who initially only knew people in their village in Kangar constituency, were introduced to local agencies, who ordered their corporate uniforms from them. This way, they have extended their area of proximity for their business.

“We are like siblings. We share problem, knowledge and skill. Now it feels like we are training our younger siblings.”

“We managed to get orders from schools, kindergardens and government bodies such as RISDA to produce clothes for them.”

(Focus Group Discussion, Alor Setar, Kedah, 14 January 2024)

The beneficiaries' testimonials are synchronized with the scores attained in document analysis, indicating that a thorough and transparent evaluation process has successfully taken place. Programs rated with moderate scores are due to networking involving the beneficiaries and their solution providers.

3.4 System

The total score for the High (system) dimension was 83, with an average score of 3.61, which implies a moderate score. This indicates that the beneficiaries can learn a new work system; however, some are still unable to fully apply the new system in their daily routine.

The former drug addicts in Kuala Muda secured a proper system on a medium-scale lime plantation, large enough for them to start a small business. They are well-trained to begin planting a lime tree from scratch.

Additionally, they have prepared a fertilization and tree care schedule to ensure tree management becomes more manageable.

... every plant must have adequate space from each other, then only they can survive longer (show the evaluator how much the gap between one plant to another plant) -

"We installed a water pump to water plant according to specific time slots."

(Focus Group Discussion, 14 January 2024)

They also keep in touch with the AADK officers to ensure they have a point of reference in the future, should they start their own business, work for other entrepreneurs, or need a guide on which path to choose after the training.

Apart from former drug addicts, another SDG project has focused on the rural women's community. One of the major struggles among rural businesses is limited capital. This is because they do not have big funds on their own and yet are unable to receive grants and loans due to a lack of proper documentation. Thus, the SDG project has assisted them in registering their businesses and preparing business documentation.

This helped them become more legitimate businesses and access new opportunities such as government grants and loans. Furthermore, they managed to enhance their documentation and accounting process, which allowed them to make more well-informed business decisions. Consequently, they are more confident taking online orders due to better risk management and cost estimation.

"Now we are more confident to take online orders. Before this, we just take orders from nearby residents. With the new system, I let customers order through digital platform. They provide me their measurements and I will post the ready-to-wear clothes once it is done. "

(Focus Group Discussion SP039, 14 January 2024)

4. Limitations

The research encountered several limitations that highlight the areas for improvement. Firstly, data availability was constrained due to the absence of final reports for several projects, resulting in a limited understanding of project progress and outcomes. Consequently, the establishment of robust accountability and strategic decision-making were hindered. Secondly, resource constraints were prevalent across projects, with limited budgets and personnel potentially impeding the full implementation of project initiatives and compromising their ability to address beneficiary needs.

Additionally, several projects grappled with addressing beneficiary commitment and skill levels. This underscores the need for tailored interventions and support mechanisms to ensure program effectiveness. Furthermore, inadequate basic infrastructure, such as internet access and computers, exacerbated disparities in access, potentially hindering program participation and ultimately limiting beneficiary skill development. Lastly, the combined constraints of limited timeframes and financial resources underscored the critical need for strategic resource allocation and efficient project management practices. Optimizing impact within these constraints require innovative solutions and a data-driven approach to prioritize resources where they are most effective, ultimately enhancing the program's sustainability.

In addition to these project-specific limitations, the evaluation process itself encountered limitations. The need for a final report at the outset of the evaluation proved impractical, as the report was only received after the initial evaluation and review were completed, necessitating a time-consuming re-evaluation. Furthermore, inconsistencies within reports from some solution providers, such as discrepancies between monthly and final reports, undermined data reliability and necessitated clarification, potentially compromising data integrity. In conclusion, while this research offers valuable insights, the abovementioned limitations warrant consideration when interpreting the findings. To address these limitations, future research in this area should focus on three key areas: improved reporting practices, strategic resource allocation, and tailored interventions. These improvements would pave the way for enhanced efficacy and sustainability of initiatives empowering marginalized communities.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The research investigates the impact of the APPGM-SDG program's Solution Provider (SP) projects in the Northern region, focusing specifically on their effects in empowering marginalized communities. The research thoroughly evaluates the accomplishments and challenges of the projects, offering valuable policy recommendations to maximize the program's effectiveness. The analysis underlines the value of a multi-faceted approach in addressing social issues encountered by marginalized communities. Noteworthy projects such as SP79, SP080 and SP141 demonstrate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts from schools, communities, and healthcare providers in addressing drug addiction. This approach, when complemented with sustained research funding for data-driven

interventions, can serve as a model for addressing other social issues such as sexual harassment prevention (SP131) and extending educational support to underprivileged children (SP019, SP064) and individuals with disabilities (SP167).

Economic empowerment also emerges as a pivotal aspect in uplifting marginalized communities. The SP projects focusing on skill development (SP039, SP092, SP134, etc.) and business start-ups (SP119, SP033, SP156, etc.) offer promising pathways. Nevertheless, the research identifies an existing gap in government programs. While grants and financial aid are valuable, marginalized groups, particularly rural women and single mothers, require sustained support beyond the initial assistance. Therefore, the research underscores the need for continuous mentoring, monitoring and establishing support networks as crucial elements in addressing these gaps. As evidenced by the SP projects, these community-based approaches effectively empower small entrepreneurs with the necessary tools and knowledge to adapt and thrive. These initiatives must be supported by policymakers to develop regulations that promote ethical behaviour and transparency, which would result in a conducive environment for businesses to thrive (Manoharan et. al, 2024).

Finally, the research underscores the importance of selecting impactful social projects. The APPGM-SDG program has the potential to enhance project selection by giving priority to a comprehensive evaluation of social project proposals. This evaluation should encompass the background and experience of the SP candidate alongside scrutinizing the targeted outcomes of the project targeted outcomes. Critically evaluating the beneficiaries of the project and its long-term sustainability within the specific area is imperative. Drawing insights from projects such as SP105 (technology drone) and SP112 (jewellery making) that encountered challenges and SP1134 (sexual harassment prevention) that faced delays can inform future project selection processes.

In conclusion, this research underscores the significance of a data-driven, multi-faceted approach to empowering marginalized communities within the Northern region. By continuously evaluating and refining the program based on project analysis, the APPGM-SDG program can ensure the effectiveness of its interventions to address the most pressing needs of these communities. The recommendations outlined in this research, centring on evidence-based social strategies, comprehensive economic empowerment initiatives and a stringent project selection process, pave the way for the APPGM-SDG program to prominently uplift marginalized communities in the Northern region.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

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