

Overview of Rural Youth in Malaysia

Noranifitri Md. Nor^{1*}, Saiful Farisin Md Ramlan¹, Siti Sarawati Johar¹

¹ *Jabatan Sains Sosial, Pusat Pengajian Umum dan Kokurikulum, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, MALAYSIA*

*Corresponding Author: norani@uthm.edu.my

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Abstract

Youth is an important asset in the development of a country, The existence of youth groups plays a major role in various sectors in the country covering the economic, political, and social sectors. In Malaysia, youth include those aged 15 to 30 years, with a variety of backgrounds, aspirations, and challenges they face. This article discusses the situation of Malaysian youth from the perspective of socio-economic, educational opportunities and challenges, healthcare and mental health, economic opportunities and challenges and social support and community involvement. By understanding the dynamics of youth, more inclusive and effective policies can be formulated to support their development as future leaders of the country.

1. Introduction

Rural youth in Malaysia are individuals aged between 15 and 24 years who live in rural areas. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), rural areas contribute to approximately 30 percent of the total population in the country. This population consists of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, with most of the rural youth relying on the agriculture sector and small-scale industries as their primary source of income.

Research on rural youth is becoming increasingly important in the context of national development as they often face different challenges compared to youth living in urban areas. Factors such as access to education, employment opportunities, and health well-being play a significant role in shaping their future. According to a study by the World Bank (2019), youth in rural areas tend to experience higher poverty rates compared to urban residents, with significant differences in access to basic services and human capital development opportunities.

The socio-economic context of Malaysian rural youth reflects significant differences compared to urban areas, especially in terms of access to amenities and sources of income. A study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) found that most rural residents rely on the agriculture sector, small-scale industries, and informal employment to survive. These economic differences not only affect the educational and employment opportunities of rural youth but also impact their overall well-being. A study by Kuppusamy (2017) shows that the economic imbalance between urban and rural areas is driving the increase in youth migration to urban areas in search of better opportunities, but this also creates challenges such as the loss of young workers in the rural sector and social instability due to mass migration. In addition, the Ministry of Rural Development Malaysia (2021) has implemented various initiatives to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural youth, such as vocational training programs and incentives for young entrepreneurs. However, there is an urgent need for more comprehensive policies to improve their competitiveness and overall well-being.

2. Educational Opportunities and Challenges

2.1 Access to Education

Access to quality education is a very important factor in determining the well-being of the younger generation in rural areas in Malaysia. Although the country has achieved high levels of literacy, there is a significant gap between the educational facilities available in urban and rural areas. A study conducted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2020) showed that schools in rural areas often face deficiencies in basic infrastructure, adequate teaching staff, and quality learning resources. According to Ismail et al. (2019), some of the main challenges faced by students in rural areas are a lack of school infrastructure, including science laboratories, modern libraries, and adequate technology facilities, inconsistent teaching quality due to a lack of qualified teachers in STEM fields and long distances to schools, which result in absenteeism and difficulties in participating in co-curricular activities. Addressing the issue of access to education in rural areas can be done through special initiatives such as the Rural School Transformation Program (TSLB) which provides funds for the development of school infrastructure and the provision of quality teaching staff (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020).

2.2 Academic Performance

The academic performance of adolescents in rural areas is often compared to adolescents in urban areas, where the data shows significant differences. Kuppusamy (2017) found that students from rural areas have lower average academic achievement due to several factors, including limited access to additional education such as tuition and academic guidance, lack of exposure to educational technology that can enhance the learning experience and home environment that is not conducive to the learning process due to economic pressures and family responsibilities. According to a study conducted by Aziz & Jalaluddin (2018), the integration of technology in education has the potential to reduce the academic achievement gap between rural and urban students. The introduction of digital learning and online courses can offer rural students access to more quality learning resources without having to physically attend classes in the city.

2.3 Higher Education and Vocational Training

Opportunities to pursue higher education or vocational training are important in strengthening the economic position of rural youth. In Malaysia, the government has implemented various initiatives such as the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN) which emphasizes vocational and technical training to ensure that graduates have the skills needed in the job market (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). A study by Ramli & Jamal (2018) found that only 40% of rural youth continue their education to a higher level, compared to almost 70% of urban youth. Factors contributing to this gap include financial difficulties that prevent rural students from pursuing higher education, lack of information about educational options at vocational institutions and universities and mobility constraints that make higher education less accessible to rural youth. As a solution, programs such as Rural Education Scholarships and Distance Learning Initiatives can play a significant role in helping rural youth obtain quality education without facing logistical or financial barriers (Mohamed et al., 2020).

3. Healthcare and Mental Health

3.1 Access to Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services is a crucial element in the well-being of rural youth in Malaysia. However, rural areas often face a lack of adequate healthcare facilities, including clinics, hospitals, and medical personnel. A study by the Institute for Public Health (2018) showed that rural youth tend to experience difficulties in obtaining quality medical care due to the long distance to health centers and limited facilities from their homes. According to the World Health Organization (2019), among the main challenges in accessing healthcare in rural areas include lack of specialized hospitals and clinics, which results in rural youth having to rely on very limited basic healthcare facilities, shortage of doctors and nurses, especially in certain areas of expertise such as pediatrics and psychiatry and high cost of treatment for rural youth who do not have health insurance or access to medical subsidy assistance. As a solution, the government has introduced the Mobile Clinic and Telemedicine program to provide remote health services that are accessible to rural communities and youth (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020).

3.2 Physical Health Issues

The physical health of young people in rural areas is often influenced by their socio-economic circumstances. A study by Rashid et al. (2018) found that the main health issues faced by rural youth include malnutrition, which results from an unbalanced diet due to economic constraints, infectious diseases, such as dengue fever and respiratory infections, which are more prevalent in rural areas and work-related injuries, especially for youth working in the agricultural and heavy industry sectors. According to the Ministry of Health Malaysia (2021), preventive measures such as nutrition awareness programs and regular health check-ups can help reduce the risk of physical health problems among rural youth.

3.3 Mental Health

Mental health is a very important but often neglected aspect among rural youth. Various factors, including economic stress, lack of access to psychological services, and social isolation, contribute to the rise in mental health issues. A study by Norhaini et al. (2020) showed that youth in rural areas experience higher levels of stress and anxiety than their urban peers. Some of the key factors affecting the mental health of rural youth are lack of awareness about mental health, which leads to stigma around psychological issues, lack of psychiatrists and counselors, especially in rural areas and social isolation, which can increase the risk of depression and anxiety. Research by Arshad et al. (2019) suggests the need for community support programs such as free counseling, early intervention centers, and more active mental health awareness initiatives to help rural youth cope with these challenges.

4. Economic Opportunities and Challenges

4.1 Employment Opportunities

Employment opportunities play a significant role in shaping the well-being of rural youth in Malaysia. However, the employment sector in rural areas often does not provide economic prospects equivalent to those in urban areas. According to Ramli & Jamal (2018), most of the rural youth still rely on employment in the agriculture, fisheries, and small-scale industries as their main source of income. Some of the main challenges in the rural employment sector are as follows unstable income, especially for youth working in the informal industry, lack of high-skilled job opportunities, which has forced many youths to migrate to cities and increasing automation in the agricultural sector, which reduces the need for human labor. A study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) shows that the unemployment rate among rural youth is higher compared to urban youth, with rural youth unemployment recording around 6.5% compared to 3.2% in urban areas. As a solution, the Malaysian government has introduced several initiatives such as the Rural Youth Skills Enhancement Programme which provides vocational and technical training to increase the marketability of the young workforce (Ministry of Rural Development Malaysia, 2021).

4.2 Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Entrepreneurship has the potential to be a key driver for rural economic development, providing rural youth with opportunities to generate income without being completely dependent on conventional employment. A study by Mohamed et al. (2020) shows that rural youth involved in small businesses and business start-ups have higher economic growth potential than those who rely solely on traditional employment.

Some of the key factors that support the success of rural entrepreneurship include access to digital technology that allows rural youth to market their products online, government support and micro-financing, such as the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme (RYES) which provides financial assistance to young rural entrepreneurs (Ministry of Rural Development Malaysia, 2021) and development of a rural business ecosystem, including innovation centres and mentoring programmes. However, a study by Khoo (2016) found that lack of knowledge in business management as well as limited capital and access to markets are still major challenges hindering the success of rural entrepreneurs. Therefore, entrepreneurship education and business guidance programs need to be strengthened to ensure that rural youth can develop their economic potential.

4.3 Migration to Urban Areas

The phenomenon of rural youth migration to urban areas has been increasing in the last decade. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), almost 50% of rural youth choose to move to urban areas to obtain better employment and education opportunities. Although this migration offers youth opportunities to improve their standard of living, it also leads to several negative implications such as depopulation of rural areas, which results in a shortage of labor in the local agricultural and industrial sectors, changes in demographic structure, with a decrease in the number of youth who have the potential to contribute to rural economic development and increased cost of living in cities, which has the potential to trigger social instability for rural migrants. A study by Rashid & Chong (2021) suggests that more holistic rural development policies are needed to reduce the rate of rural youth migration. This includes the provision of better local employment opportunities, improved educational and economic infrastructure, and incentives for rural youth to remain in their areas.

5. Social Support and Community Involvement

5.1 The Role of Family and Community

Family and community play an important role in shaping the well-being of rural youth. According to Arshad et al. (2019), close family relationships and strong social support can provide emotional and psychological stability to rural youth. Studies show that youth with strong family support are more likely to achieve academic and professional success than those who lack social support. In addition, rural communities are often associated with high family values, where social ties between residents are closer than in urban areas (Mohamed et al., 2020). Positive social interactions in the community can help rural youth in the following aspects that is increased psychological resilience, with the presence of emotional support from family and community, opportunities for self-development, through mentors in the community such as teachers, religious leaders, and experienced community members and increased social involvement, which reduces the risk of youth experiencing social isolation or mental health problems.

5.2 Community Programs and Initiatives

Community programs play a significant role in supporting rural youth to develop and integrate more effectively into society. The Ministry of Rural Development Malaysia (2021) has introduced various youth development programs such as the Rural Youth Club, which aims to enhance social engagement and build leadership among young people. A study by Mohamed et al. (2020) shows that participation in community activities can have a positive impact on the social development of rural youth. Programs such as sports, arts, and volunteer activities play a role in helping youth form wider social networks and improve their soft skills. However, there are various challenges in implementing community programs in rural areas, including the limited financial resources, which causes youth programs to lack sufficient support, lack of youth participation, due to time constraints and lack of awareness of the benefits of the programs and logistical difficulties, including travel distances and lack of infrastructure to carry out social activities. According to Rashid & Chong (2021), solutions to this problem include increasing financial allocations for community programs, developing more youth centers, and integrating technology into social activities to attract more rural youth.

5.3 Challenges in Social Integration

One of the main challenges faced by rural youth is the problem of social integration, especially in their transition to the world of work and adult life. Rural youth often face difficulties in adapting to urban culture when they migrate to further their education or find jobs in cities. (Khoo, 2016). The main challenges in the social integration of rural youth include the cultural alienation, where rural youth face difficulties in adapting to a more individualistic urban environment, lack of social infrastructure, such as gathering places or community centers that help youth interact with the local community and difficulty in building social networks, due to socio-economic differences that cause social gaps between rural and urban youth. A study by Rashid & Chong (2021) suggests that rural youth need stronger support systems in their transition to adulthood, including mentoring programs and social networks that can help them better integrate into urban society.

6. Policy Recommendations & Future Directions

6.1 Increasing Access to Education

Access to quality education in rural areas needs to be strengthened to ensure that rural youth have the same opportunities as their urban peers. According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2020), the imbalance of educational resources remains a major issue in rural human capital development. Some policy recommendations to increase access to education include the investment in rural school infrastructure, including the construction of laboratories, modern libraries, and access to high-speed internet (Kuppusamy, 2017), intensive training for teaching staff, to ensure they have relevant skills in educating rural students (Aziz & Jalaluddin, 2018) and scholarship and financial assistance programs, to reduce the financial burden of rural students in pursuing higher education (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). According to Mohamed et al. (2020), improvements in the rural education system will increase the enrolment rate in higher education, thus reducing the educational gap between urban and rural students.

6.2 Improving Healthcare Services

Health services in rural areas need to be expanded to ensure that rural youth have access to quality medical care. A study by the Institute for Public Health (2018) showed that the lack of health facilities in rural areas contributes to higher rates of illness among rural youth. Policy recommendations to improve rural health services include the introduction of telemedicine systems, to enable rural youth to obtain medical consultations online without having to travel long distances (World Health Organization, 2019), addition of mobile clinics, to provide health services to remote areas (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021) and mental health awareness programs, to help rural youth recognize and address mental health issues such as stress and depression (Norhaini et al., 2020). According to a study by Arshad et al. (2019), increasing access to health services will have a positive impact on the well-being of rural youth, thus increasing their productivity and competitiveness in the national economy.

6.3 Promoting Economic Opportunities

Economic opportunities for rural youth need to be expanded so that they can achieve financial stability without having to migrate to cities. The Ministry of Rural Development Malaysia (2021) suggests that rural economic development should focus on modernizing the agricultural sector and increasing youth entrepreneurship. Some of the measures that can be taken include development of vocational training centers, to improve the technical skills of rural youth so that they are more competitive in the job market (Ramli & Jamal, 2018), incentives for young rural entrepreneurs, to encourage more youth to start their own businesses with financial support and guidance (Mohamed et al., 2020) and diversification of employment opportunities, through the development of creative industries and the digital economy in rural areas (Khoo, 2016). According to a study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), strengthening rural economic opportunities will help reduce the rate of youth migration to cities, thus retaining the young workforce in rural areas.

6.4 Strengthening Social Support Systems

Social support and community development need to be strengthened to ensure that rural youth receive adequate support in building their future. A study by Rashid & Chong (2021) shows that strengthening social support systems can improve the mental and social well-being of rural youth. Policy recommendations to strengthen social support include development of youth community centers, which aim to provide spaces for social activities, education, and self-development (Mohamed et al., 2020), guidance and counseling programs, which are designed to help rural youth face various life challenges and build a wider social network (Arshad et al., 2019) and implementation of social interaction projects, such as cultural exchange programs and volunteering activities, to enhance the social integration of rural youth with the wider community (Rashid & Chong, 2021). According to a study by Khoo (2016), rural youth who receive adequate social support are more likely to achieve success in academic, economic, and social fields.

Conclusion

The well-being of rural youth in Malaysia is a complex issue that requires a multi-dimensional approach to its solution. Improvements in education, health, economy, and social support will help improve the living standards of rural youth and ensure that they have the same opportunities as urban youth.

More comprehensive and inclusive policies are needed to ensure that every rural youth can access quality education, good health, and stable employment opportunities. With effective policy implementation, Malaysia's rural youth can thrive and contribute to the country's development in a more sustainable way.

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