

Conceptualizing Sustainable Livelihood for Single Parent Households

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ABSTRACT

Poverty rates in Malaysia are shown to decline over the years. However, the decline in poverty rates do not necessarily reflect the overall socioeconomic status of the population. Absolute poverty may have decreased substantially but relative poverty remains as an issue that needs to be addressed rigorously. Poverty and single parenting have been widely documented in international as well as local literature. Factors such as the number of dependents, employment in the informal sector, unemployment, health issues, and low education attainment contribute to the economic and financial hardship of single parent households. These situations each on its own or exist concurrently threatened the wellbeing and standard of living of the single parent households. The occurrence of single-father households is deemed to be much lower than that of single mother households though the exact numbers is officially unavailable. Therefore, obtaining a sustainable source of livelihood is of paramount importance for single parents. Amidst insufficient institutional supports and probably familial supports as well, ensuring regular and dependable income become an issue that warrant further research. Hence, the purpose of this research is to evaluate and develop sustainable livelihood programs for single parent households from the poor families in a few villages in Baling, Kedah. We would adapt the method of action research used by Collins, Morduch, Rutherford, and Ruthven (2009) for this study.

Keywords: poverty, single parents, sustainable livelihood

INTRODUCTION

Poverty alleviation is an important agenda for the Malaysian government since 1970 and it is still an ongoing effort. The poverty line in Malaysia is too low to be consistent with the cost of living in this country. With a poverty line of RM980 per month per

household, families with four members live for RM8 or less per day. Hence, it is suggested by the United Nations expert on poverty, Professor Philip Alston that the 0.4% poverty rate is inaccurate and it should be between 16-20% instead.¹ In a glance, the incidents of poverty are still rampant in our society since it has always

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24912&LangID=E>

been reported and highlighted in conventional as well as new media. Further, Malaysia's from the median income perspective, about 20% of Malaysians are deemed to be poor because 60% percent of median income in 2017 is RM3,136.²

This situation, to a certain extent, has affected the community of Malaysia especially single parent households as they are the sole breadwinner for the family upon a divorce or the passing of their spouses (Isahak, Selvaratnam & Idris, 2009). By not having a sustainable source of income, the hardship faced by single parent families could be devastated. Similar to other countries, child support payment is still considered as a critical issue for divorced mothers in Malaysia that leads to financial hardship (Md Nor, Mohamad, Vellymalay, Omar & Omar, 2019; Cook & Natalier, 2014). For widows they may have to live in poverty when the deceased husbands were not entitled to receive pensions or any financial benefits from their employment (Rusyda, Lukman, Subhi, Chong, Abdul Latiff, Hasrul, & Wan Azimah, 2011; Khosravan, Salehi, Ahmadi, & Mansoorian, 2013; Pong 1996). While single fathers may fare better due to employment as men are the main breadwinners in a family (Amato, 2000). This is different to women or single mothers as many of them have sacrificed their careers to care for the children or they have given up their job for family. This leads to financial hardship and emotional stress for unemployed single mothers as raising children is very costly. In addition, the formal support system for the single mothers as well as single fathers are still limited in our society.

According to the statistic from the Population Survey 2101, there are 13.9 million women in Malaysian population, in which 235,240 of them are single mothers (Malaysia Population and Housing Census, 2010). However, only 83,775 single mothers registered with the Women Development Department (WDD) in 2017. However, the most recent statistic is unavailable as the population survey is carried out only once in ten years. It seems that many of the single mothers are still unaware of the WDD's functions in assisting single mothers through various activities and programs that could be accessed if they have registered with WDD. The survival of single parent families are of a great concern. Therefore the objective of this paper is to conceptualize the programs that could be developed to provide sustainable livelihood for poor single parent families. Therefore, the research question would be, what are the sustainable livelihood programs that could be develop for single parents by taking into considerations their own interests, skills and existing resources. This effort will be tedious and time consuming as it will involve not only the single parent but other stakeholders (government, non-government and local society) as well.

In the situation whereby the researchers will be actively involved with the single parent participants, an action research is the methodology that will be conducted. We will adapt the method used by Collins, Morduch, Rutherford, and Ruthven (2009) for this study. We will have our research representatives to collect the data from the participants before analysing the data to be used in developing the sustainable livelihood programs. The research will be conducted over a two-year

² <https://www.msn.com/en-my/news/national/poor-malaysians-stay-poor-and-thats-a-fact/ar-BB10VoI5?li=BBr8Hnu>

period in a few selected villages in Baling, Kedah. The programs will be developed, evaluated and revised if necessary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty has become a social and economic issue all over the world, particularly in developing and third world nations. From an economic perspective, poverty is defined as a situation that shows disability from minimum income to buy groceries, plan and prepare meals, and to provide basic infrastructure and care for the children (Idris & Selvaratnam, 2012; Abdullah, Paim & Abdul Rahim, 2010). Poverty and single parenthood have been widely discussed in the literature. Life as a single parent is often associated with great demand, challenges and financial hardship (Abdullah et. al., 2010; Youngblut, Brady, Brooten & Thomas, 2010; Syed Ibrahim, Yusof, Khalid & Syed Hussain, 2012). This even worse as many single parents have low paying jobs. In some divorce cases, the fathers are undue to insufficient (Huang, Mincy & Garfinkel, 2005). Therefore, the trigger for stress among single parents is usually related to financial related issues and employment issues (Hashim, Azman & Endut, 2015; Mulia, 2017; Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012). Another pressing issue is the childcare and childcare expenses. Single parents need to have reliable childcare arrangement to enable them to enter proper employment (Connelly & Kimmel, 2003). Therefore, improving the sources of income to support single parents and the children are important to be addressed in Malaysian studies.

Apart from financial issues, the single parents have to face emotional and psychological issue as well as social stigma

in the community. The negative stigma received from the surrounding community will worsen the situation and exacerbate emotional stress for single parents (Rusyda et al., 2011; Dowd, 1995; Gingrich, 2010). As a result, their physical and mental health could be compromised. Many single parents - single mothers especially, experience anxiety, depression and loneliness after divorcing their spouse. They experience more chronic life stress and episodes of depression than married mothers (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2007; Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003; Zakaria & Md Akhir, 2018).

Sustainability Livelihood Development Program

The policies and programs for eradicating poverty of the general population has been emphasized since decades ago. The formation of Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), Tabung Ekonomi Kumpulan Usahawan Nasional (TEKUN), and Lembaga Kemajuan Ikan Malaysia (LKIM) have been formed to lessen economic vulnerability and poverty by providing micro-credit and training programs for low-income households to generate income according to their skills. Undeniably, micro-credit facilities and training programs are important tools for poverty eradication in Malaysia, particularly among single parent households. For example, Isahak et al. (2009) noted that the credit line provided to poor single parents has three main objectives - to help create small businesses, increase opportunities for women as entrepreneurs and provide the best alternative to address debt problems with money lenders. The government has also introduced the Single Mother Action Plan (2015-2020) under the Ministry for Women and Society Development.³ The

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<https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files>

/Dokumen/BUKU%20PELAN%20TINDAKAN%20PEMERKASAAN%20IBU%20TUNGGAL.pdf

plan sets out which set out three main objectives: to raise awareness and stakeholder commitment to empower the single mother's economy; to improving the social wellbeing of single mothers and; to enhance research and development.

In Malaysia, many programs for single mothers have been introduced to facilitate single mothers' involvement in activities to generate income. Programs such as *Inkubator Kemahiran Ibu Tunggal (I-KIT)* have been identified to enhance their skills through seven identified skills areas such as sewing, handicraft, tourism, beauty therapy, business, entrepreneurship and childcare (Ramli, 2015). Besides, the I-KIT program has become one of the core programs to help reduce poverty and improve the quality of life and a capacity building for single mothers to enable them to generate income (Isa, 2012).

It seems that government programs and initiatives to improve the livelihood of the poor geared more towards single mothers as compared to single fathers. Albeit various initiatives have been formed to help the single parent households, the question remain as the government programs may not successfully reach some single parents in remote villages. And if it does, the impact on creating sustainable livelihood may not

be achieved as Idris and Selvaratnam (2012) revealed that some programs were not age-appropriate and insufficient time was allocated to convey the information to the participants. As a result, the success rate of the programs was deemed to be low.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Currently, there are various programs and initiatives provided by the government to help single parents to improve their living standard. Yet, the study on program evaluation is still lacking, particularly for the Malaysian context. The effectiveness and capability of a single parents-assisting program cannot be precisely ascertained for evaluation and improvement purposes. Following the book 'Portfolios of the Poor' by Collins, Morduch, Rutherford, and Ruthven (2009), we would embark on the quest to develop sustainable livelihood programs for single parents, starting in a few villages in Baling, Kedah. We would be assisted by some government agencies and collaborators from other universities. Through this research, we could also put the theories into practice and evaluate their compatibility in real environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research is supported by a grant from The Yunus Center, Albukhary International University [304/PJIAUH/6501085/A128].

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