

Poverty Alleviation Programs for Selected Single Parent Households: A Case Study in Baling, Kedah

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ABSTRACT

Poverty alleviation programs have been carried out in Malaysia for decades. However, poverty still exists in society and it seems to persist despite various efforts to alleviate it. The persistence of poverty among pockets of society is difficult to address. Intergenerational poverty is probably one of the reasons contributing to this scenario. Poverty is 'handed down' to the next generation and the cycle is hard to be broken. It is well documented in the literature that the incidence of poverty is more prevalent among single mother households whilst there is limited research on single father's issues. The methodology employed for this research is action research whereby an intervention will be introduced throughout the research period. The objective of this research is to develop specialized poverty alleviation programs for single parent households in Baling yet it is still in its preliminary stage. Hence, this paper provides descriptive information about the single parent respondents.

Keywords: *poverty, poverty alleviation program, single parents, single mothers*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The incidence of poverty has been exacerbated due to pandemic Covid19. A report by the Department of Statistics estimates that the number of poor households increased to 639.8 thousand in 2020 compared to 405.4 thousand in 2019. It is accompanied by an increase in absolute poverty and hard-core poverty as well. For instance, the incidence of absolute poverty in Kedah has increased from 8.8% in 2019 to 12.7% in 2020 (DOSM, 2021). The

poverty trap is difficult to escape once anybody falls into it. The vicious circle of poverty seems hard to be broken and may persist beyond a generation. It would take lots of effort from those affected and also from other stakeholders such as the government and research institutions or universities.

The persistence of poverty is somehow a baffling issue. Poverty alleviation efforts have been carried out for decades yet there are quite a number of Malaysians still living under poverty line income (PLI). In the Seventh

Malaysia Plan, the income poverty line for Peninsular Malaysia is RM425.00 per month after taking into account the increment in cost of living and basic needs (EPU, 2000). The most recently revised PLI using a new measurement methodology has come up with a PLI of RM2208 per household in 2019 as compared to RM980 in 2016 (The Star, 2020). The cost of living has increased significantly over the years and the expenses to raise children have increased as well.

The government also employs a multi-dimensional poverty measurement method which emphasises on improving the quality of life for the poor. In doing so, it is pertinent to focus on sustainable livelihood as the core of any poverty alleviation program. Hence, this is the objective of our research, proposed to be achieved through preliminary intervention programs in seven villages in Baling, Kedah. We are focusing on poor single parent households.

Poverty amongst single mother households is well documented in the literature (Md Nor et al., 2018; Md Nor et al., 2019; Mulia, 2017); yet for single father households, the research is limited. The burden of poverty is heavier for single parent households as they are usually the sole breadwinner for the family upon divorce or the passing of their spouses. As single mothers, they tend to have more responsibilities and challenges than married mothers in raising the children and fulfilling the household needs (Ghani & Hashim, 2013; Mohamad et al., 2019; Zakaria et al., 2019). If the duties are not administered well, they would be in dispute. In addition, child supports issues complicate the lives of divorced single mothers and further contribute to their hardships (Md Nor et al., 2019). Therefore, they have to learn the techniques for coping with conflicts in life.

For widows, they may have to live in poverty when the deceased husbands did not work in formal sectors that pay pension or any financial benefits upon their death. For divorced mothers, the hardship may be due to loss of income from the husband, particularly when they were homemakers during the marriage (Yusof et al., 2021). This literature supported the statistic that women are the main contributor to the world's poverty rate

(Islam et al., 2017). This record is backed by their relatively lower ability and potential of earning a higher income than men.

In Malaysian society, it seems that single fatherhood is not a concern in terms of poverty discussion as compared to single motherhood and poverty. This is probably due to the patriarchal society that we live in whereby a widower or a divorced man does not stay single for a long time before they get remarried. Moreover, they normally have proper employment and does not prone to fall into poverty once they get divorced or become a widower. In a nutshell, a widower of a government servant could be more prosperous in cases where the passing wife left a monetary reward and a pension that they are eligible to obtain as long as they live. In general, single fathers may fare better.

The concept of poverty and its alleviation program is well explained in the Theory of the Vicious Circle of Poverty introduced by Nurkse (1952). According to this theory, poverty in a country exists due to financial imbalances and underdevelopment. Even though there are many efforts taken by the government of Malaysia to eradicate poverty, people still live in poverty especially those in rural areas.

2.0 SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

In the context of our current research, the scope is quite limited as all of our potential participants live in rural areas in Baling. They come from seven villages and mostly work in informal sectors and self-employment. Single parents in these seven villages are the population of our study and those who fulfil the inclusion criteria will be the participants of our research programs. The Inclusion criteria for the single parent must be:

- a widow/widower/divorcee or permanently separated person
- in good health and willing to participate
- a Malaysian who lives in seven villages in Mukim Bongor, Baling, Kedah

The exclusion criteria include respondents that do not comply with all the requirements for inclusion criteria and if the respondent is unwilling to participate.

The nature of current research is different from other studies as it involves many research clusters working together in achieving the research goals. Each cluster has its tasks and its outputs become the inputs for other research groups. Due to the pandemic Covid19, the progress of this research has been hampered, in particular, the data collection part as our researchers have to halt altogether during the movement control order (MCO) and has since resumed gradually based on official movement orders in place and SOP requirements. The particular research programs for our group have not started yet. We have the initial data of 42 single parents from the seven villages namely, Kampung Padang, Kampung Padang Cicar, Kampung Rambong, Kampung Teluk Sanau, Kampung Kaki Bukit, Kampung Simpang Empat, and Kampung Carok Juan.

2.1 Methodology

The methodology that we employ is action research in which the researcher intervenes in and during the research. We adapt the method used by Collins, Morduch, Rutherford, and Ruthven (2009) for this study. Action research may bring about positive change and knowledge, and theory could be generated. We are assigned to develop specific sustainable livelihood programs for selected participants in selected villages in Baling, Kedah. The livelihood programs will be tailored to each participant by utilizing their existing skills and capital. We have presented the conceptual discussion of sustainable livelihood framework for this research in Md Nor et al. (2020).

3.0 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

In this section, we present the descriptive statistics and discuss the population and sample of this research program.

3.1 Research Population

We have tabulated the initial data of all the single parent populations of this study in Table 1. There are 42 single parent households altogether. The death of a spouse is the main reason for being a single parent. Only 5 divorcees and 1 permanently separated single parents from the population.

TABLE 1
Single parent population (N=42)

Kg Padang (n=8)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
F	77	W	Grocery store owner
F	77	W	Unemployed
F	53	W	Rubber tapper
F	53	W	Unemployed
F	39	D	Waitress
F	61	W	Raising chicken
F	71	W	Rubber tapper
M	39	D	Lorry driver
Kg Padang Cicar (n=14)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
F	83	W	Unemployed
F	52	W	Online business
F	42	W	Online business
F	59	W	Banana grower
F	71	W	On welfare
F	84	W	Unemployed
F	42	W	Unemployed
F	78	W	Rearing chicken
F	61	D	Babysitter
F	50	W	Rubber tapper
F	59	D	Rubber tapper/ Making banana chips
F	40	W	Tailor
M	58	S	Farmer
F	64	W	Rubber tapper/ rearing chicken
Kg Rambong (n=6)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
F	73	W	Making <i>kuih</i> (cakes)
F	76	W	Unemployed
F	66	W	Rearing chicken
F	78	W	On welfare
F	79	W	Selling local fruits
F	88	W	Unemployed

Kg Teluk Sanau (n=5)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
M	55	D	Unemployed
F	61	W	Babysitter
M	67	W	Unemployed
F	54	W	Rubber tapper
F	76	W	On welfare
Kg Kaki Bukit (n=4)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
M	84	W	Unemployed
F	81	W	Unemployed
F	59	W	Rearing goats
F	72	W	Rubber tapper/ selling chicken rice
Kg Simpang Empat (n=2)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
M	87	W	Unemployed
F	78	W	Making <i>asam keping</i>
Kg Caruk Juan (n=3)			
Sex	Age	MS	Employment
F	54	W	Making <i>kuih</i> (cakes)
F	87	W	On welfare
F	70	W	Banana/lemongrass grower

Note: F - female; M - male; MS - marital status; W - widow/widower; D - divorcee; S - Permanently separated

As we have expected, the number of female single parents will be much higher than male single parents. 36 or 86 per cent of the total population are female and only 6 or 16 per cent are male (Figure 1).

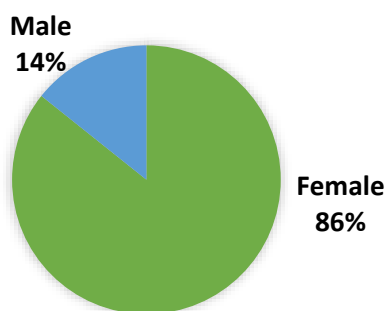


FIGURE 1
Female and male single parents of the research population

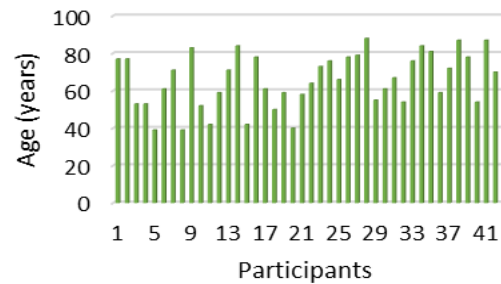


FIGURE 2
Age of single parent population

Table 1 and figure 2 show that many of the single parent population are above 70 years of age. This poses a question about their ability to participate in the proposed sustainable livelihood programs that we are going to design for them.

Employment characteristics play important roles in determining the wellbeing of a person and his/her family. Job security and regular income provide a sense of security and stability to the family (Md Nor, 2022). Moreover, those working in the formal sector have the extra benefits of receiving pension payments or other retirement benefits that will support their life and lifestyle beyond retirement age. This seems to be lacking among the population of single parents in our research areas.

Table 1 also shows the employment types of single parents. It is important to note that none of the respondents is in formal employment except for a divorced single father who is a lorry driver. Data show that 11 of them are unemployed and most of them are between 65 to 84 years of age. Age and health factors may cause them to no longer be able to earn income. 5 of them earn income as rubber tappers in a landlord rubber estate. Some of them earn income by doing village works such as farming, selling local fruits, babysitting, and rearing chickens or goats. Only two respondents, aged 42 and 52 are doing online business selling pressure cookers and pillows. However, we find that some of the potential participants own lands that can be utilized for the intended livelihood programs. Many are also living a self-sustained lifestyle by rearing chickens and gardening around their houses. Therefore, they can be regarded as having

precarious employment with unstable and/or irregular income flow.

3.2 Research Sample

We have selected suitable participants from the population and 22 single parents will be included in the research programs. The remaining 20 participants are excluded as they do not fulfil the inclusion criteria of this research (Table 2). The main reasons are that they are too old and have some kind of illness. These single parents are usually supported by their adult children and other close family members that they do not need to participate in sustainable livelihood programs anymore.

TABLE 2

Research Participants and Non-Participants

Item	Female	Male	Total
Participants	19 (86.4%)	3 (13.6%)	22 (100%)
Non-participants	17 (85.0%)	3 (15.0%)	20 (100%)

N=42

The sample of this research is just slightly half of the population. This is a huge number considering the nature of action research whereby the intervention process will take a considerable amount of time and effort on both sides – the participants and the researchers. The monitoring and evaluation of the programs will be carried out as well.

4.0 SUMMARY

This research program is still in its preliminary stage. One of the key things in action research is to gain the trust of the participants and the community involved. Sensitive data on income and family matters, for instance, may require a few visits from the researchers before the actual and reliable data can be obtained from the participants. It is also important to note that this research has begun just before the pandemic Covid-19 and it has a significant impact on the progress of the research.

We believe that is research effort can be the impetus for many more poverty alleviation research programs that can be

expanded to other areas in Kedah and elsewhere in Malaysia. We are hoping to loosen and further break the poverty circle such that it will not be transferred to the next generation. This is indeed a noble effort to put an end to intergenerational poverty.

5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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