



## Poverty eradication, government role and sustainable livelihood in rural Malaysia: An empirical study of community perception in northern Peninsular Malaysia

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### Abstract

While Malaysia is moving towards achieving a developed nation status rural poverty persists causing people and rurality to lag far behind and under-developed. Thus, one of the most important factors considered by the government is to proliferate multi-dimensional, poverty eradication programmes. This study explored the effectiveness of the poverty eradication programmes implemented by the government in rural areas in three states of northern Peninsular Malaysia. Primary data were gathered from questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews of 122 rural communities. The findings revealed that most of the programmes needed further improvement as some villagers still did not have adequate access to the programmes. Various strategies from the community up to the local authority levels were further needed to help achieve a sustainable community livelihood for the villagers. More opportunities should be given to the rural people in terms of access to the social media as this can help educate them more on the types of development programmes provided by the government and how they can apply for them. Finally, there was a need for a more holistic approach in addressing the issue of poverty in the country and how rural people can be rescued from further difficulties.

**Keywords:** government programmes, perceived poverty, poverty eradication, rural poverty, sustainable community, sustainable livelihood

### Introduction

Poverty is a situation of inequality and deprivation that happens infavourably for poor households in many developing countries. Poor household can be identified based on low income level to fulfill the basic needs, low level of education attainment, not having a property, unhealthy, lack of food and clothings, without comfortable living place and secure employment to sustain living (Nor Ghani Othman, 1984). All these affect the affordability of the poor to escape from the poverty trap if there is no assistance and support given by the relevant authorities.

It is important to obtain insight into the impact of the above changes on poverty eradication and income distribution at village level, not only in the rural economy but also to anticipate possible changes in rural economy in the future in respect to the efficacy of the programs implemented by the government. Hence, the main objective of this article is to explore the types of programs introduced in the rural villages and its impact to the life of the communities in Malaysia. Three rural areas in Parit Buntar (Northern Perak), Baling (Kedah) and Seberang Prai Utara (Penang) were chosen for this study based on the following reasons, namely, 1) Kampung Tanjung Tiandang, Kg. Kedah, Kg. Titi Serong & Kg. Simpang Empat in Parit Buntar are agricultural communities mainly relying on paddy cultivation and quite deprived; 2) Kampung Sera Ulu, Kg. Sera Baru, Kg. Dalam Wang, and Kg. Titi Teduri in Baling are

also agricultural communities with limited financial capacities and other amenities; and finally 3) Kampung Penaga, and Kampung Kuala Muda (Seberang Prai Utara) are also agricultural communities. A questionnaire survey was carried out from 20<sup>th</sup> -23<sup>rd</sup> of January, 2014 in collaboration with several kampong officials including JKK, Ketua Kampung and Welfare Department. Data on incomes from the villagers as well as off-farm works, expenses and practices, demographic characteristics were collected in the survey.

In discussing these points, a brief description of the survey and the respondents studied are presented in the second section. This will be followed by an analysis of the programmes implemented. This was made easier from the follow up informal interview with some of the selected informants from the same village. The villagers' perceptions on the programmes were deemed necessary and important to evaluate the nature of the programme, its accessibility and effectiveness to the community being studied in that area.

## **Research method**

The objective of this research is to explore the poverty incidence in the districts of the northern states particularly of Kedah, Penang and Perak. The research also aims to rectify the types of assistance programmes that are provided for the rural communities to eradicate poverty. The collection of data is in the form of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from survey done in several villages based on districts chosen that records the highest incidence of poverty in Perak, Kedah and Penang. Statistical data were obtained from the State Economic Planning Unit (UPEN). The state that records the highest poverty level is referenced as the research area. Then the selection of villages are done based on the information given by the States District Offices for the need of the research which is to identify the most deprived village. For this research, 2-4 villages are needed for each district. For each village, the researcher selected 10 villagers that are categorized as poor. This totals up the number of respondents up to 122 of them. Nevertheless, the survey was only covered in three districts for three states which is Baling, Parit Buntar, and Seberang Prai Utara.

## **Poverty eradication and sustainable development**

Malaysia has been making robust efforts in moving towards a high-income status with rapid growth and industrialization. In this respect, significant advances have been happening in improving the standards of living, expanding the trade, capital and technology flows, thus leaving a notable progress in poverty reduction. Malaysia has indeed achieved the MDGs of alleviating poverty rate well before 2015 where the incident of poverty had declined from 52.4% in 1970 to 12.4% in 1992 and further reduced to 3.8% in 2009. This is part of the nation's objective in pursuing the new development model and various development policies that follow suit. Though various improvements in physical infrastructure and job opportunities have been evident, inequality and unevenness across regions remain where there are still pockets of poverty and social exclusions in both rural and urban areas. In terms of absolute human development and social and spatial equality, we are still behind. As has been noted in many literature, most of the Malaysia's development plans and policies have brought significant improvement in physical infrastructure such as access to road network and transportation as well as new job opportunities to both urban and peri-urban communities (see Islam, 2010). The launching of the New Economic Model by the Prime Minister in recent years is targeted to assist Malaysia in achieving a high-income country status. In order to achieve this, various strategies were taken into consideration including accessibility to higher education, proper and efficient application of the entrance to higher education institutions, accessibility to digital communication and ICT for the urban as well as the rural poor, and uplifting job opportunities of the low income poor in order to lift them out of poverty and deprivation.

The policies and program for eradicating poverty is an important issue. Conceptually, the utmost relevance of poverty is deprivation in terms of basic amenities at the individual and household level, and deprivation in terms of financial need. In the contexts of poverty in Malaysia, poverty is explained from the perspective of financial and income. Through this concept, poverty is divided into two, one is absolute poverty and the other is relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the situation whereby an individual or household who is unaffordable to fulfill his/her basic needs for a minimally comfortable and secure living. These basic needs include food, shelter, clothings, education and health. The absolute poverty is measured using the comparison between household incomes with one level - the Base Line Poverty Level (PGK). PGK is based on the population cost of living. PGK is a minimum income total that enable a household, in average, covers the need for food, clothing and basic expenditure such as rental, energy and fuel, transportation and communication, health and recreation. Meanwhile the degree of poverty is based on income level, which is received with PGK that is poor or not poor. The relative poverty concept is related to income distribution. Income distribution shows the level of individual welfare, which is done in comparing individual welfare level, which is done through comparing individual welfare level with other individual welfare level. Relative poverty will appear and is not able to be eliminated as long as there is imbalance or inequality in the income distribution. The higher the income inequality, the more serious the relative poverty problem will be, although the absolute poverty can be eliminated fully. Based on that statement, poverty that is often referred in Malaysia is absolute poverty because the household income is compared with the PGK (Norzita et al, 2014).

Table 1 shows the Base Line Poverty Level (PGK) set up by the Economic Planning Unit for rural and urban area of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. With reference to the Economic Planning Unit data, the PGK for 2009 is standardized in the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (RMK-10), which is poor and the PGK RM760 for the household. Meanwhile hardcore poor is RM460 (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2012). The PGK set up by the ministry in 2012 is in tandem with the states throughout Malaysia except for Penang whereby between the year 2009-2011, the hardcore poor is RM500 and below, in 2012 is RM600 and below and for 2013 is RM770 and below. Meanwhile the PGK for poor in Penang is RM770 and above (Implementation Coordination Unit, Penang, 2013).

**Table 1. Base Line Poverty Level (PGK)**

REGION	POOR PGK 2012		HARDCORE POOR PGK 2012	
	HOUSEHOLD	PER CAPITA	HOUSEHOLD	PERCAPITA
<b>PENINSULAR Malaysia</b>	830	210	520	130
Urban	840	220	510	130
Rural	790	190	530	120
<b>Sabah &amp; Labuan</b>	1, 090	240	660	140
Urban	1, 080	240	630	140
Rural	1, 120	240	710	150
<b>Sarawak</b>	920	230	600	140
Urban	960	230	630	150
Rural	870	220	570	140

Source: Economic Planning Unit; Office of Federal Development, Kedah, 2013

Meanwhile Table 2 shows the statistic for poverty in the districts of Kedah for the year 2011.

**Table 2. Statistic of poverty for Kedah Districts, 2011**

Bil	District	Poverty Level		
		Poor	Hardcore Poor	Total
1.	Baling	1, 572	2, 113	3, 685
2.	Bandar Baharu	86	170	256
3.	Kota Setar	634	2, 067	2, 701
4.	Kuala Muda	607	1, 473	2, 080
5.	Kubang Pasu	389	877	1, 263
6.	Kulim	348	629	974
7.	Padang Terap	258	574	832
8.	Pendang	264	719	983
9.	Pokok Sena	519	662	1, 181
10.	Pulau Langkawi	109	172	281
11.	Sik	941	2, 050	2, 991
12.	Yan	349	819	1, 168
	<b>Total</b>	<b>6, 073</b>	<b>12, 322</b>	<b>18, 395</b>

Source: Economic Planning Unit, Kedah, 2011

As can be seen from Table 2, the highest poverty level is for the district of Baling with 1, 572 people and hardcore poor is 2, 113 people as compared to other districts. Meanwhile, Table 3 shows the statistic of poverty for Penang in 2011 whereas Table 4 shows the statistic of poverty for Penang in 2013. Poverty is highest in Seberang Prai Utara as compared to other districts. However, the extent of poverty in Penang is lesser than other states due to its modernization and industrialization process since the past few decades.

**Table 3. Statistic of poverty by district in Penang, 2011**

District	Hardcore Poor											
	Jan	Feb	Mac	April	Mei	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Okt	Nov	Dis
SPU	343	342	342	323	323	323	323	323	272	272	272	295
SPT	201	187	185	187	186	188	186	186	185	186	188	187
SPS	63	64	64	65	66	66	66	66	66	66	66	66
DTL	38	38	38	40	41	41	42	43	43	43	44	47
DBD	125	128	127	126	126	125	125	125	124	124	126	126
<b>Total</b>	<b>770</b>	<b>759</b>	<b>756</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>743</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>743</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>691</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>721</b>
<b>Assist Total (RM)</b>	<b>202, 435</b>	<b>199, 165</b>	<b>198, 365</b>	<b>192, 670</b>	<b>192, 670</b>	<b>188, 620</b>	<b>188, 135</b>	<b>188, 465</b>	<b>175, 685</b>	<b>176, 925</b>	<b>176, 925</b>	<b>182, 515</b>

Source: Economic Planning Unit, Penang, 2013

**Table 4. Statistic of poverty by district in Penang, 2013**

District	Poor											
	Jan	Feb	Mac	April	Mei	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Okt	Nov	Dis
SPU	396	396	397	387	387	416	426	426	434	441	-	-
SPT	185	185	181	181	181	180	179	179	178	189	-	-
SPS	60	60	60	55	55	55	64	69	69	69	-	-
DTL	68	68	55	55	57	57	57	60	65	67	-	-
DBD	116	116	114	110	110	111	111	111	114	114	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>790</b>	<b>819</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>845</b>	<b>860</b>	<b>880</b>	-	-
<b>Assist Total (RM)</b>	<b>211, 325</b>	<b>211, 025</b>	<b>203, 930</b>	<b>198, 170</b>	<b>198, 150</b>	<b>209, 911</b>	<b>219, 591</b>	<b>222, 305</b>	<b>227, 570</b>	<b>231, 250</b>	-	-

Source: Economic Planning Unit, Penang, 2013

## Program for sustainable rural community

Community development is able to help the society especially in the rural areas. Community development is important based on two aspects, which is providing a systematic framework for community development to eradicate poverty, and long-term success in the era of globalization (Shatar, 2003). The two of these are important because they involve development process that covers education, health, housing and employment. A sustainable development is therefore a development that is ongoing that is able to bring fulfillment for the community basic needs in one location (see Figure 1). In this case, the government executes the rural community development, whereby the local community involvement is vital for upgrading their quality of life (Maimunah et al., 1995).



Source: Adapted from Mohammad Shatar Sabran, 2003

**Figure 1.** *Elements in community development*

Government strategy for eradicating poverty in Malaysia is progressive in nature. Aid and funding is provided to increase income of the poor as this will have impact on other elements in life. A considerable level of income enable the community to plan their financial, expand business, invest and later purchase assets including own a house especially in urban area. This further facilitates education and economic opportunities. Government through the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW) have planned and implemented nine programs for the rural communities including Income Increment Programme (PPP), Training and Career Programme, Housing Assistance Programme (PBR), Human Mind Development Programme, Balanced Supplement Food Programme, Local Community Development Programme, Education Excellence Programme, Child-care Center Programme and ASDB-Sejahtera Programme. To what extent these programmes achieved its goals and manage to eradicate poverty in the rural areas? This will be an area for further analysis. In this paper, however, only few of these programmes will be identified and discussed. .

## Findings and discussion

Baling is one of the eleven districts in Kedah state. It covers a 152, 900.65 hectares of land and the second largest district in this state after Sik. Meanwhile Parit Buntar is located in the district of Kerian, Perak. It is about 918.83 km square feet. Penang is located in the northern state of the Peninsular in between Perak and Kedah. Respondent details were obtained from the District Office of Baling, Parit Buntar and Seberang Prai. Some other information was also gathered from the district *Penghulu* and Welfare Committee of the Kampong Safety (JKKK) through the *Ketua Kampong*. Primary data were obtained using questionnaire survey and informal interview with the respondents. Meanwhile secondary data was taken from the state authorities. Based on the poverty statistics for Kedah, Perak and Penang, we have chosen the districts that have high incidence of poverty in the respective states. Then, the selection of villages for this study was obtained from the State District Office based on the most deprived, poor and isolated ones. The study was done in fourpoverty-dominated villages whereby 10 people were selected for each village. From the survey findings, the programs for assisting the rural community for the three states are provided by the Welfare Department (JKM). These programmes include assistance for single mothers, and education/assistance for disabled (OKU). Table 5 below illustrates the programmes in Kedah, Penang and Perak and Table 6 shows the number of respondents in the three districts. Based on the survey findings, there are 122 respondents and out of this only 15 receive this aid from the government. The remaining 107 household receive financial assistance from the 1 Malaysia People’s Aid (BRIM). Most of the government aid programmes for the communities is received through the Welfare Department (JKM) such as aid for the elderly, single mothers, and institution of higher education. Majority gave the feedback on BRIM. This is as an outcome of the 2012 Budget Presentation, whereby the government announced to give out a one-off cash payment of RM500 to households with an income of less than RM3, 000 a month. This assistance is one of the various initiatives undertaken by the government to alleviate the burden of low-income earners in facing the rising cost of living. Under the JKM there are also various other government programmes which provide aid for the elderly, children, the poor and homeless, flood survivors, welfare aid and help for the disabled communities (JKM, 2013).

**Table 5. Communities ‘assistance programme in Kedah, Penang and Perak**

TYPE OF ASSISTANCE/PROGRAMME	Frequency
<b>KEDAH</b>	
Welfare Department and People’s Housing	1
Welfare Department and Single Mothers	1
<b>PERAK</b>	
1 Malaysia People’s Aid (BR1M)	107
Family, Women and Society (KWAMP)	2
Pension	1
<b>Palau Pinang</b>	
Institution of Higher Learning Aid	5
Single Mother	4
Schooling	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>122</b>

Source: Authors’ Field Study, 2014

**Table 6. Number of respondents by gender in Baling, Parit Buntar and Seberang Prai Utara**

	Gender		Total	
	Male	Female		
Age				
	<21	1	4	5
	21-30	2	6	8
	31-40	9	12	21
	41-50	8	21	29
	51-60	6	16	22
	61>	18	19	37
Total		44	78	122

The table 6. shows the number of respondents for the field survey in three districts of the state of Baling, Parit Buntar and Seberang Prai Utara. The number of female respondents out numbered the male respondents since those women were at home during the time of the interview. Most of the male households were out to work at that time, thus the selection of respondents turn out to be female dominated which is about 78 of them as compared to 44 male from the age group of between 21-61. Female respondents were mainly in the age group of 41-50 (21 of them). Whereas, the highest number of male respondents came from the age group of over 61 years old. The questions asked was on the type of financial aid given, funding program, how the funding arranged and to what extent the respondents showed their perception on the aid/program to eradicate poverty in the rural area.

**Table 7. Government Financial Aid for the rural communities**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	0	3	2.5	2.5	2.5
	Yes	46	37.7	37.7	40.2
	No	73	59.8	59.8	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0		

As can be seen from Table 7above, it is revealed thatonly 37.7% received financial aid from the government as compared to 59.9% who do not receive any aid/assistance. This is due to the reason that most of the assistance goes to the most deprived and poor with the highest number of household. The determining factor for eligibility is based on level of income, status of the head of household, disability and number of household and number of children that is still schooling.

**Table 8. Limited Government Aid to eradicate poverty**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	0	2	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Strongly Disagree	5	4.1	4.1	5.7
	Disagree	20	16.4	16.4	22.1
	Not Sure	11	9.0	9.0	31.1
	Agree	76	62.3	62.3	93.4
	Strongly Agree	8	6.6	6.6	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0		

Table 8. shows the level of satisfaction amongst the respondents from the scale as stated above. About 76 respondents agree that government aid is limited in eradicating poverty whereas 20 respondents disagree with the statement. The number of those that strongly disagree with‘the government aid is limited’ is very fewbecause there are many channels whereby the communities can benefit from the aid and assistance to overcome poverty incidence. However the access to information amongst the villagers is

limited. Opportunities to apply for aid/assistance whether for short or long term usually goes through the *Ketua Kampong* (Head of Village). In fact the villagers are unaware of the channels that they should go for applying aid, and to whom they should approach, and there is no access for transportation especially for those who are elderly and ill. Their hope is to depend on the *Ketua Kampong* to help them for retrieving the aid properly. In some cases as noted in the district of Parit Buntar, respondent AC has commented that the knowledgability and access to government assistance programmes and aid is very much dependent on the favoring of the *Ketua Kampong* towards few selected villagers instead of others.

**Table 9. Limited Financial Aid**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	3	2.5	2.5	2.5
Strongly Disagree	8	6.6	6.6	9.0
Disagree	29	23.8	23.8	32.8
Not Sure	7	5.7	5.7	38.5
Agree	64	52.5	52.5	91.0
Strongly agree	11	9.0	9.0	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

Table 9. reveals that there are some villagers who agree that the aid given by government is inadequate whereby about 64 people (52%) in the three districts agree with the statement. The financial aid given is based on the number of household in a family. If the number of household is 4, the financial aid given is RM450 and if the number of household is 2, the total aid is RM200 (Telephone Interview, Welfare Department of Kerian District, 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2014).

**Table 10. Financial Aid Able to Eleviate Poverty Level**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	4	3.3	3.3	3.3
Strongly Disagree	7	5.7	5.7	9.0
Disagree	20	16.4	16.4	25.4
Not Sure	9	7.4	7.4	32.8
Agree	69	56.6	56.6	89.3
Strongly Agree	13	10.7	10.7	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	

Meanwhile, in terms of ‘the financial aid able to elevate poverty level’, about 69 people agree with this statement (see Table 10) and only 20 people disagree with this. They felt that the aid provided by the

**Table 11. Types of aid received**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
None	77	63.1	63.1	63.1
Welfare Department	13	10.7	10.7	73.8
People’s Housing Scheme	4	3.3	3.3	77.0
Single Mother Program	4	3.3	3.3	80.3
Education Program	9	7.4	7.4	87.7
Higher Institution Program	8	6.6	6.6	94.3
Program for the Disabled	2	1.6	1.6	95.9
More than one program	5	4.1	4.1	100.0
Total	122	100.0	100.0	



government is effective to elevate poverty level among the villagers but can only help to ease their financial problem for short term. According to Encik AZ, an informant from Parit Buntar, the financial aid is not enough for his huge household. And most of this aid is basically for education and higher institution financial aid which is seasonal (Informal Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> of July 2014). The table below gives more detail on this.

The Table 11. shows the type of aid received by the villagers. Out of 122 people, 77 did not receive any aid from the government. However this total shows that most of them receive the BR1M financial aid.

## Conclusion

This research aims to explore the response of the rural communities in the northern states of the Peninsular Malaysia towards government assistance programme to eradicate poverty level. There are various programmes being implemented to help the rural villagers in the form of financial support, programmes for education, housing and others. The level of accessibility towards the programmes, and the effectiveness of the programmes have actually helped to bring out some of the communities from poverty trap. However there are also some villagers who do not receive enough aid/assistance due to some underlying factors as discussed above. At the same time, some villagers are in the opinion that the aid is not enough to cover their living cost. Nevertheless, many of the villagers have taken the opportunities given by the government to improve and upgrade their life from the assistance given. It is anticipated that in the long run, more programmes can be effectively implemented and more thoroughly evaluated and monitored programmes based on the eligibility and condition of the rural people need to be executed from the authorities involved. The findings also revealed that the level of access to information needs to be examined and improved especially in terms of the relationship between the Kampong Head and the villagers. More opportunities should be given for the rural people in terms of having access to social media and how this can help educate them more on the types of programmes provided by the government and how they can apply for it. There is a need for a more holistic nature in approaching the issue of poverty and how the rural people can be helped out and rescued from further difficulties. It is more of a concerted effort from the government and other bodies as well as the villagers in order to fulfill the need of the rurality and for achieving a more sustainable community in the long term.

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