Assessing the Challenges of Local Leaders in Rural Community Development: A Qualitative Study in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the ongoing reform at the local government level continues to shape the role of local leaders in rural development. This study aims to identify several challenges faced by rural community leaders and to suggest some ways in which rural leaders can weather and benefit from them. This qualitative study, which used content analysis, employed purposive sampling to firstly select the interviewee, and then was sustained throughout until data saturation. The respondents were from a 60-member cohort from Malaysia's Villages Development and Safety Committee who held the positions of chairpersons and ordinary members. For data collection and analysis, this study used semi-structured interviews and an inductive approach respectively. The data analysis led to the development of eight main themes of "difficulty in decision making", "strengthening external network", "disseminating the precise information", "Comprehensive participation of the community members", "preparing an efficient work plan", "overlapping functions of government agencies", "political control", and "the lack of facilities and infrastructure". Identifying these challenges for rural community leaders will help the local government take proactive action on community leadership in terms of social capital, networking, communication, trust creation, and leadership qualities. Going forward, the government should place serious attention to developing the potential and skills of local leaders as a reward for their profound commitment to developing their community.

Keywords: Community leadership, challenges, local leader, rural development, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Community is defined through the dimensions of reinforcement, influence, shared emotional connection, and membership (Garrett et al., 2017). A community may not only share a physical connection, but its members also need to have common interests, such as politics or culture (Walker, 2008). The idea of community is also a fundamental concept of community leadership in the way that by the participation of community leaders in rural community development is subjected to the development of various interests to the society itself and involves the community actively (Geoff Wilson, 2012). In other words, the participation of community leaders is a crucial solution to current problems towards a successful community by being the gateway to opportunities (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2012). Rural leaders are the vital force of communities straddling in the outskirts. Consequently, it is these leaders' willingness, commitment, and degree of leadership that determine the success or failure of community development initiatives (Onitsuka & Hoshino, 2018). Previous studies have been highlighting the need to seek, attract, and develop potential, younger or emerging leaders to spearhead community development (e.g., Wituk et al., 2003). Hence, the necessary ingredient for the advancement of community-building is effective leadership.

Rural communities are an essential aspect of society as a whole because they are hubs of authentic ideas, values, cultures, and lifestyles (Tantoh & McKay, 2020). Unfortunately, rural areas today face major, sweeping changes across these regions, thus causing a sense of uncertainty, especially within the last decades. Among the notable changes is an increase in labor specialization occurring within and between communities (Beaulieu, 2019). Other issues range from declining to rapid growth. Thus, effective leadership at the community level is a prerequisite in organizing community action, nurturing social well-being, and improve community viability. In fact, according to Lamm et al. (2017), the mutual dynamics of community leadership and community action must be at the forefront to effectively roll-out initiatives that address issues specific to rural communities and regions. Undoubtedly, local leaders directly impact the life and well-being of their members.

As part of a larger society and population, the economic and social contributions of communities in the outskirts are significant such as natural resources and a unique value system (Flora et al., 2004). Within contemporary communities and challenges, the roles of local leaders and associations must be acknowledged as the impetus for community development (Horlings et al., 2018). Thus, on-the-ground leadership is needed to tackle complex problems, mobilize community action, enhance social well-being, and improve community efficacy. This study aims to describe several and immediate challenges faced by the rural community leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Leadership

Community is not only considered as the dynamics of a shared geographical identity among individuals but a place where the social interaction process among members is at its core (Worthy et al., 2016). Fundamentally, the community is defined by social interaction. It must be noted that leadership across domains display shared similarities; leadership in communities is distinct because the leaders operate under a different structure with a different purpose as compared to those in organizations or specific individuals (Ricketts & Ladewig, 2008). The underpinned distinctive features of community leaders are the non-reliance on sole power and formal authority. Instead, as conveyed by Pigg (1999), they rely on influence, networking, and extensive interactions with members to develop deep relationships within the community.

For communities to thrive, researchers consider leadership, as a critical resource towards developing, healthy communities and as such the quality and quantity of this resource is indispensable (Hazy et al., 2007; Raelin, 2011). It is also known as a key agent in strengthened communities (Davenport & Mattson, 2018). Within the context of community, as is this study, there are several sociological definitions on leadership. Tinker-Walker and Walker (2020) posited that reputation commensurate with leadership and defined leaders in terms of the power and influence they had over their members. One recent definition of community leadership is Goeppinger (2002), who equated it as an interactive process between the members within a shared geographical identity.

Community leadership can only be effective when both local leaders and followers consider their roles as allies and collaborators with a shared purpose (Aziz, et al., 2020; Mamat, et al., 2019; Rami, et al., 2019; Rami, et al., 2020a; Rami, et al., 2020b). Equally important are the social behaviors that establish credibility and trust in communal relationships (Pigg, 1999). Redmond (2013) used the tricomponent of interaction - actors, associations, and actions – to assess the performance of community leadership roles within a locale and the possible relationships resulting from the actions. Redmond (2013) also found that local leaders tended to focus on the general needs and concerns of the community rather than pursuing self- and individual interests. Therefore, the role assessment of local leadership requires observations on leaders' contribution towards community-building. Redmond (2013) further identified three components of leadership behaviors among community actors. These are the leaders':

1. degree of involvement in various phases of community action,
2. the span of participation in community actions that address distinct areas of interest, and
3. the extent of involvement in actions that include a standard set of actors possessing a broad perspective on community concerns.

Local Leaders and Rural Community Development

Leadership roles are played in almost every social domain and are significantly fundamental in rural communities. As an essential component, community leadership that authentically develops relationships within a community is a given (Rodela & Bertrand, 2018; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015). By ignoring leaders and actors on the ground, we disregard strong decision-makers and social change agents who provide leadership towards community action, thereby discounting the very meaning of community development itself. In contrast, by acknowledging the presence and associations of rural leadership, we underscore their substantial impacts on the planned change towards a community development that serves the greater good of the community (Hou & Wu, 2020). Nonetheless, rural communities face problems and challenges that are particularistic to their size and structure. What is widely accepted is that rural community development must emphasize self-sustenance, thus aligning with national economic and social progress of developing countries, such as Malaysia.

Government-run community development programs will not succeed without the help of rural community leaders. In this light, rural community leaders play an essential role as the supervisors and facilitators of government policies (Rami et al., 2020a). Community development is a social process to empower individuals to have a sense of some control over local conditions and respond to the changing world accordingly (Ajayi & Otuya, 2006). Yet, force and order have no place in sustainable community development; in its place is equal participatory efforts from all actors to share their ideas, visions, and responsibilities and to democratically steer and implement their community or village development projects (Ajayi & Otuya, 2006). According to Nuttavuthisit et al. (2015), one approach in ensuring sustainable rural development is through an equal-opportunity platform to support participatory brainstorming and planning for their shared future. Essentially, this calls for effective leadership (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010) at the local levels to harness the wealth of knowledge, inputs, and efforts of the rural people towards their development.

Among the diversity of community development programs, several awareness programs are considered mainstream: providing information on resources, inputs, and infrastructure; deploying technical assistance; acquiring skills for self-development; increasing literacy proficiency; improving productivity and productive systems; adapting appropriate technology in agriculture; and sensitizing potential volunteers and donors (Madsen et al., 2014). In developing countries, other quintessential development programs focus on peoples' rightful needs and basic amenities for a decent life, such as the provision of and access to road infrastructure, utilities, healthcare, food security, education, and farm settlements among others (Ajala & Rauf, 2019). Achieving these goals is

possible with the combined, collective efforts of all actors with a shared conviction to prioritize rural community development to alleviate poverty there in achieving national self-sufficiency. To help bring about rural community actions, individuals and groups must step up and step into good leadership roles. The success of rural community development rests on the involvement of influential local leaders lest the progress of such programs being undermined (Kumpulainen & Soini, 2019). Therefore, any agency or organization that is given the mandate to design community development programs must seek initial clearance from the said influential local leaders, a legitimation process. Regretfully, successive governments have been neglecting rural community development since the colonial rule in Malaysia.

Rural Community Leadership Challenges

Rural community leadership essentially spearheads and manages rural community development. The role of a significant rural leader determines the success or failure of rural projects. As the key agent of change at the local level, local leaders should possess specific competencies for a meaningful change (Maharjan, 2017). However, a leader's effectiveness is dependent on several factors, such as the organizational structure, leader's competency, and the conduciveness of the working environment.

Today's community leaders are plagued with complex challenges that are unlike those faced by previous generations. The complexities that befall rural communities thus call for the response of community leaders in overcoming these challenges (Rami et al., 2020). The overarching challenge is for the government to align and ensure rural community development grows in parallel to national development. Therefore, credible, effective community leaders are needed to achieve the country's development aspiration. This study focuses on the role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations. It seeks to answer: When community leaders initiate energy projects, what skill set and knowledge practices do they utilize to nurture grassroots innovations? This section describes the kinds of challenges a leader's faces and suggests some ways in which leaders can weather through them and turn it to an advantage. According to Oruonye (2013), some common but major challenges faced by rural leaders are:

1. The lack of the rule of law and non-adherence to constitutionality;

2. The absence of development-oriented leadership;

3. The absence of accountability and transparency;

4. The entrenchment of corruption;

5. Electoral malpractices; and

6. Tendencies for materialistic gain, power, and self-interest.

Study Context

In Malaysia, the government has established the Village Development and Security Committee (MPKK) at the grassroots district and village level to act as an agent for public

administration and development, especially in a rural area (Rami et al., 2020b). As a community leader, the MPKK plays an integral role as the official community leaders in a community. Therefore, the effectiveness of MPKK leadership plays a crucial role in the local communities in terms of socio-economic development (Rami et al., 2016). In line with its objective, MPKK has become the driving force in various activities and programs directly related to the socio-economic development of the villagers, including carrying out the function of an agency mandated in solving developmental problems. In this regard, they hold power to execute the task given by government agencies including planning community development programs, planning local development, supervising government projects, as well as supporting government agencies in aid distribution to needy households. Moreover, many members of rural communities believe that MPKK's local leaders can bring meaningful changes to their communities. Besides, they believe that MPKK can influence the decisions made by the district office and by the government agencies (Rami et al., 2020a). Thus, community leaders who can support the community are facing challenges head-on by providing better socio-economic and education facilities to the rural communities (Kirk & Shutte, 2004). Notably, MPKK members serve as a driving force in accelerating the process of rural development (Rami et al., 2020a). Consequently, the lack of community leaders like those from MPKK

will see government-planned programs as a challenge to implement (Rami et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the appointed local leaders had reported poor performance of duties due to the unavoidable challenges and obstacles that hindered them from carrying out their responsibilities (Crosby & Bryson, 2005). These challenges have led some leaders to run programs without proper or to its full purpose as envisaged by the government.

This study focuses on the challenges faced by Malaysia's local leaders to fulfil the government's aspiration on rural development. To overcome these challenges, there is a need for awareness about the state of the country's community leaders so that the government can align and ensure rural community development grows in parallel to national development. Therefore, the goal is to develop credible and effective community leaders to achieve Malaysia's national development aspiration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Many of the past researches on leadership challenges of rural communities have used quantitative methods (Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Musitha, 2020; Onitsuka & Hoshino, 2018). In response, this study moved away from proving or refuting predetermined hypotheses by attempting to understand leadership challenges through a detailed inquiry into the lived experience of local leaders. Correspondingly, a qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate for this study (Taylor et al., 2015) as it offered raw inputs to reveal the subjective experiences of local leaders. Thus, this study

employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach to discussing the problems raised in this study. As a research method, phenomenology can qualitatively map the different ways that people are immersed in their experiences, conceptualization, perception, and understanding of a phenomenon (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016). The objective of this method is to frame and describe these qualitative differences in conceptual categories. The phenomenological approach has been used in various educational research contexts and with various populations (e.g., Samuelsson & Pramling, 2016). This method can be exploited to provide.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in Terengganu, Malaysia, which has the highest number of rural areas in Peninsular Malaysia. This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection and used an inductive approach to conduct the analysis. Ethical approval was not considered necessary according to Green and Thorogood (2018), as this study is not stressful for participants and no interventions are performed and interviewees voluntarily attended in interview sessions. Purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used for sampling. To establish the study area, four communities in the state were chosen where interviews and observations were conducted for research data. Consequently, the study involved a total of 60 respondents, including community leaders (MPKK), members of local communities, officials in the relevant government agencies, and residents (See in Table 1).

The interview questions probed on subjects related to their daily activities, a leader's role in managing community affairs, including gatherings and meetings, as well as the relationship between local communities and government and non-government agencies. The focus on the challenges faced by community leaders was the central idea of this research. The principal investigator and a research assistant conducted all the interviews which allowed the respondents to converse and express their opinions with ease.

Table 1

Research participants from 4 selected communities in state of Terengganu

Community	Chairman	Head Task Force	Committee Members
Kampung Kayu Kelat, Besut Terengganu	1	4	10
Kampung Guntung Luar, Setiu Terengganu	1	4	10
Kampung Rawai, Marang, Terengganu	1	4	10
Kampung Banggol Katong, Kuala Terengganu	1	4	10

Data Analysis

The researchers compiled, integrated, and synthesized field notes, debriefing notes, as well as the verbatim transcriptions of the 60 interviews, including those from the focus groups. The method of data collection in this study was through in-depth one-to-one interview and focus group discussion. Indeed, two focus group discussions and twelve in-depth sessions of one-to-one interviews were conducted in four selected communities in Terengganu. Moreover, to verify the challenges of community leadership, respondents from various fields of expertise and backgrounds were interviewed. A total of 60 respondents were selected which comprised community leaders, locals residence and officials in the relevant government agencies. Each interview lasted at least 30 and up to 45 minutes. Using Atlas.ti 8.1's open coding method, the researchers analyzed the qualitative questions first without prior defined categories. Next, they also benefited from the use of this software when compiling, analyzing, and making the connection between the themes.

The combination of interviews increases the trustworthiness of the information, making the findings more robust. The interviews provided a wide variety of views on integrated care, providing a realistic impression of views across the sector (Green & Thorogood, 2018). To develop the coding scheme, two research assistants were sought to extract words and phrases as units of meaning. The scheme developed two types of codes: descriptive codes that described response content observations, and pattern codes that provided meta-level and conceptual understanding of responses. This was followed by the refinement of themes where the representative quotes were chosen. A group of three research assistants, only one of which was part of the initial group independently coded the interview records. In the final step, relevant themes and sub-themes were assigned and representative quotes were selected and repeated during each interview to capture the full experiences of the respondents (Gratton & Jones, 2014). Additionally, the interviews presented a summary of themes to the respondents to document their feedback and reactions.

As mentioned above, Atlas.ti software (version 8.1) was employed in this study to facilitate the process of data analysis. The accuracy of various data sources from within the same method was tested by the triangulation of sources. The data was gathered from rural leaders from four different communities. Besides, the study followed four steps of trustworthiness mentioned by Lincoln and Guba (1985) by checking credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability of Atlas.ti output by three researchers. To locate major and minor themes, Atlas.ti was utilized to obtain reliable sources gathered through interviews and records. As the researcher went through this process and focused on various sources of evidence rather than a single event or data point in the study, the narrative account was considered accurate. Moreover, to verify the challenges of

community leadership, respondents from various fields of expertise and backgrounds were interviewed.

RESULTS

The data analysis led to the development of seven major themes. This study found that most leaders were willing to contribute to the government and the local community actively. However, they faced challenges in carrying out their duties effectively (see Figure 1). The eight (8) themes included "*difficulty in decision-making*", "*strengthening external network*", "*disseminating the precise information*", "*comprehensive participation of the community members*", "*preparing an efficient work plan*", "*overlapping functions of government agencies*", *"political control"*, and *"the lack of facilities and infrastructure".*
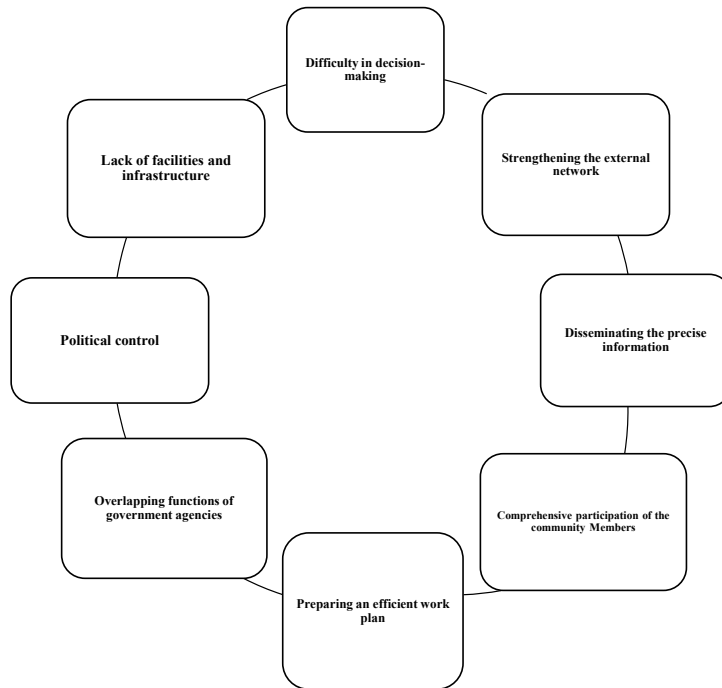

Figure 1. Emerged themes of the present study

Difficulty in Decision-making

As many rural communities consist of people from diverse backgrounds, different community leaders have given a variety of responses. Each community has different aspirations; at times, it is difficult to execute programs with a common goal as a different result might be obtained from different communities. Furthermore, various parties, whether from within or outside the

community, may intervene in the execution of these programs as they have different interests. This leads to the inability of MPKK leaders to make decisions, as they act based on the best interest of all parties. According to MPKK leaders interviewed, some projects have received intervention from various parties such as government agencies, and their involvement influences the decisions made at the grassroots level. This could harm the area as the decision was not based on the real, local needs.

> "… *Yes … we admit, we are having difficulty in making decisions, especially involving development projects in the villages.*"(R1A)

The local community members interviewed also questioned the decisions made by their leader's views and claimed that the decisions did not reflect the needs of the local population. A local youth leader interviewed explained;

> "*MPKK (community leader) rarely involve the youth in any project or plan village, a part of this is because we do not want to participate in programs organized by them*" (R2A)

Strengthening the External Network

The community leaders are aware that strengthening the link with external parties is one of the biggest challenges they face. In this light, they are aware that networking with external parties, such as government agencies, local political parties, the private sector, and the industry can help improve the socio-economic well-being of the

local community. However, they found it difficult to establish a positive connection with outsiders, especially with the industry. According to interviewees, they have no idea how to start communicating with outsiders. They also admitted that as most of the community leaders were farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs, they had limited educational background and professional experience in managing a community. Moreover, even though some of these leaders do have an excellent educational background and professional experiences, they still have little networking experience with external parties. Consequently, they face challenges in getting help and to cooperate with external parties in executing development programs. Some of the leaders interviewed claimed that they received assistance only from government agencies and political parties, and there was a limited collaboration with the private sectors.

Disseminating the Precise Information

Information is key to making the right decisions, and to resolve any problems. It is also crucial to ensure more active involvement from the local community. When members of the community receive adequate information, they will be able to contribute to the decision-making process. Moreover, they will be more motivated and eager to contribute to the betterment of their community. One of the interviewees responded;

> "*Yes, we understand that effective communication is essential, but at times, uncertainty is caused by several*

factors such as public acceptance, understanding and limited time to convey information quickly" (R3A)

However, the advent of the latest communication technologies has made information travel faster, and the community members are more likely to get information from the Internet. The spread of unverified news has increased the communication gap between community leaders and community members. There is also an apparent generation gap, as many community leaders are from the older generation who are reluctant to embrace ICT as a medium for communication, such as the use of instant messaging to deliver information faster. One of the MPKK chairmen interviewed admitted that he faced difficulties in delivering timely and accurate information because they did not have access to the right information from the government.

Comprehensive Participation of the Community Members

Andrew (2014) stated that community participation was essential to ensure that rural development can be implemented quickly and thoroughly. The support of each member of the community in any organized program or activity could make an impact on each individual. However, most rural communities comprise members with diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Some of the community members come from the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder, and they need to work most of the time to make ends meet. This makes it difficult for them to be engaged in communities' activities and connect with the leader and other community members. A local community member explained;

"*We do not have much time to participate in our community activity and also help our leaders and their members. We are busy looking for extra income . . . until the night we work*" (R3C)

In this light, the chairman and committee members of MPKK sometimes had to sacrifice their free time to organize programs on the weekend or in the evening to ensure full participation from the community members.

Preparing an Efficient Work Plan

The community leaders had expressed the need to provide a more effective work plan to overcome the challenges in developing rural areas. The respondents also admitted such a work plan provided practical help in running programs or community development activities. They also expressed their concerns about their lack of experience and knowledge in providing an effective work plan and claimed that these shortcomings might fail specific programs. In this regard, the lack of adequate planning has caused some poverty eradication programs to have little or no impact on the community. This is also evident with youth development programs that showed lackluster success due to budget constraints and lack of external funding.

"*… we realize that we lack experience in managing programs, particularly large-scaled programs.*"(R4C)

"… *there are some programs that have been successful. However, there are still few weaknesses that we need to overcome.*" (R4D)

To overcome this problem, MPKK leadership should hold a forum where community members meet and discuss available opportunities and efforts that can be done to achieve them. This indirectly helps to build understanding with the help community members to cope with issues plaguing the area, build understanding, as well as help community members and officers to connect with the relevant organizations and agencies appointed to manage the community.

Overlapping Functions of Government Agencies

The overlapping functions of different government agencies were also listed as one of the challenges in the development of rural areas. The overlapping roles and the lack of coordination among government ministries and agencies involved in rural development have led to redundant programs and projects and the lack of focus on their real-life implementation. This issue creates a challenge for MPKK to cooperate with these agencies to ensure optimal use of resources and effective project implementation. Coordination between government agencies with MPKK leaders is essential, particularly in assisting the community as MPKK has a clearer outlook on specific assistance needed by their communities.

One of the MPKK chairmen posited that if there are government agencies that want to implement any programs or projects in the rural areas, the agency should consult and discuss with the MPKK committee of the village in advance to avoid redundancies, for example, in the distribution of flood aids. These aides will come from various sources, including the Regional Office, the Social Welfare Department, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These parties should go through MPKK so that the assistance can be distributed optimally. However, some officials of government agencies, in particular, the managers do not understand the situation and take an easy way out in implementing such programs. As a result, the programs have little benefit to the community and do not fulfill the government's aspiration.

Political Control

According to an MPKK chairman interviewed, one of the major problems faced by local leaders is the influence of politicians. Although the respondents believe that political involvement in rural development is essential, from their perspective, such involvement must be confined to policy matters and should not be an imposition on the implementation process on the ground. Subsequently, they see the selection of MPKK leaders and committee being gradually based on political preferences, there in transforming the committee into a political entity how it is used as a political tool. William Wilson's (2012) study supported this evidence-based experience that is typical in developing countries. He described how governments

had notoriously used NGOs as convenient vehicles to establish political footing with rural grassroots. As a result, the committees have slowly become intermediaries for a top-down consolidated political control, rather than being earnest programs implemented programs aimed at poverty eradication.

Correspondingly, it was observed that community leaders (MPKK) who were selected based on their political alignment were said to perform with less accountability towards their community members. Instead, they feel more obligated to the politicians who secured positions for them and who are seemingly immune from criticisms by the committee members. Therefore, it is suggested that the state authorities should ensure that there is no political intervention in appointing village leaders for this committee.

The Lack of Facilities and Infrastructure

Several rural areas are still lacking in comprehensive coverage and connectivity, as well as clean water supply and electricity. This situation has affected the development process and hindered the expansion of economic activities in rural areas. Public facilities, such as community halls, futsal court, and children's playground have been provided as a place for the community members to interact. However, this objective is yet to be fully achieved due to the wrong location and low maintenance of the facility. These drawbacks have restricted the community's ability to generate rental income to cover the cost of maintenance.

In this regard, the community leaders have tried to seek assistance from both government and non-governmental agencies in an attempt to upgrade the existing facilities. However, often, their call for assistance was not being answered due to financial constraints plaguing both the government and non-governmental agencies. Even when some of the funding requests were granted, the budget given was insufficient, and this had caused many projects to be abandoned before completion. As a result, the community leaders were forced to generate their funding to ensure that their locality was equipped with necessary facilities for better livelihood.

Finally, out of 60 respondents who were interviewed, many had explained that one of the biggest challenges they faced was developing an efficient framework to strengthen their network connectivity with external parties. Based on the matrix analysis given to the respondents, 76% believed that both challenges were hard to overcome. They also agreed that the involvement of external parties could help empower the aspects above.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this study have revealed that rural community leaders face various and specific obstacles and challenges for community development of their hometown. This study found that these challenges were caused by the lack of experience in organizational management, lack of higher education, and lack of

professional working experience. This study suggests that the government should focus on rural community leaders as social capitals, and provide assistance in terms of networking, communication, value creation, and leadership norms. In this regard, the government should place serious attention to developing the potential and skills of local leaders as a reward for their profound commitment to developing their community.

While the rural communities in the state of Terengganu have undergone numerous changes, the success of these rural development projects and programs have benefitted from the local leaders, which comprise MPKK leaders. So far, they have been exemplary in their leadership role in realizing the government's development endeavor while aligning with the national agenda. It can be concluded that the local leaders' response towards challenges and the issues that follow have shown positive outcomes due to their planned developmental efforts. This ripple effect is seen as successful in closing the socio-economic gap between the rural and the urban areas.

Overall, the MPKK leaders have been responding well to every issue, and they have become an excellent communications intermediary to channel the government's message to the rural grassroots. Undeniably, their role in spearheading the waves of development is impactful and meaningful. Unsurprisingly, this study found that the MPKK leaders in Terengganu have excellently and effectively helped eradicate poverty in their communities. In this light,

these leaders are deemed as useful due to their ability to lead their community in different development programs. These leaders can successfully influence the local community to have a positive involvement in the programs held for them.

Furthermore, they have successfully executed their role as the agent for rural transformation and development. The development programs are successful due to the unity and tolerance demonstrated by the community members, community leaders, and government agencies. This is not an easy feat, and this further illustrates that the influence of the community leader is integral in ensuring the success of the execution of the government's development agenda.

IMPLICATIONS

The efficacy of rural development programs is dependent on the tripartite cooperation of the rural leaders, government agencies, and organizations, where all are considered as key stakeholders in the policy-making process. The insights of the interdependent relationships among rural community, leadership, and community action can help researchers link theory to policy, thus grounding the fundamentals of rural development policy. It must be noted that the findings of the present study showed that these complex issues cannot be addressed with past strategies. Instead, they require leaders to relook and rethink fresh perspectives and aspects of their community. Therefore, it is commendable for community leaders to be willing to take action and create

broad social networks to successfully tackle the complex, contemporary issues. Besides, local leaders need to raise their game by recognizing the unique needs particularistic to rural growth when developing well-adapted local public policy.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The limitations of this study should also be noted. The present study is qualitative research in nature, and the findings cannot be generalized for a more significant population. Besides, the challenges found by this study are related to rural Malaysia with specific cultural and social characteristics. Thus, the findings only can be used as a basis for future empirical studies in developing countries to unearth rural leadership challenges. Furthermore, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, rural leaders are now faced with new challenges that hinder community development. Future researches need to study how local leaders are responding, managing, and coping with the current situation in rural areas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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