

## Youth Environmental Volunteerism in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Currently, youth have a stronger awareness of the issues and a greater stake in long-term sustainability, thus the environment is one area in which they ought to take the lead. Volunteerism as a form of civic participation, can be a powerful mechanism for giving youth a voice in decision making and promoting social inclusion in environmental governance in order to combat “the greying of the greens. Significantly, the participation of youth in environmental protection can be sought at levels and locations ranging from grass-roots activism and participation in conservation projects

to policy-making bodies and NGOs. Thus, this article provides a conceptual overview of the youth volunteerism in environmental issues with analyzing and reviewing journal articles, reports, newspaper publications, and other relevant documents on youth environmental volunteerism. As conclusion, youth environmental volunteerism needs to be recognized, encouraged, supported and promoted at global, national and regional levels.

**Keywords:** Youth Volunteerism, Environmental Sustainability, Encourage, Capacity, Empowerment

### Introduction

In a rapidly changing world, volunteerism stands as a constant of a universal, dynamic and creative resource present in every society to support multidimensional responses to the challenge of ensuring environmental sustainability. Volunteerism has been a key driver of the global environmental movement, mobilizing communities all over the world to help address environmental problems. Everything that is based on the free giving of time, skills and knowledge can be defined under the broad umbrella of volunteerism.

Volunteerism not only supports the achievement of environmentally sustainable outcomes but also promotes long-term processes that help to build the resilience of communities, improve capacity for local self-sufficiency, encourage empowerment at the grassroots level and durably change attitudes and mindsets, which is necessary to sustain environmental gains (United Nations Organisation, 2014). The youth group should also be recognized as a strategic partner of the government in the policy-making and decision-making process, which is not

only able to encourage the government to take more meaningful climate action, but also (to) produce young people who are more aware and concerned about environmental issues and change climate.

Therefore, Malaysian government is very committed to the youth development agenda, pledging to help build sustainable and highly innovative human capital through youth empowerment. Youth are Malaysian's greatest assets because they bring energy, talent and creativity as well create the foundations for future development. In 2005, youth in Malaysia aged 15 to 35 years represents 41.5 % of the total population and then by 2018, the Malaysian youth make up 45.8% of the total population, and they are significant contributors to the country's pressing issues (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The number of youth population have also increased at the rates of more than 2.0 % per annum.

In 1985, The National Youth Policy was accepted by Cabinet and revised in 1997 and became the first milestone for bringing the youth closer to become partners in development. It serves as a framework for the planning and implementation of youth programs in the country. So that they become more informed and able to contribute meaningfully to environmental action at the local or international level more efficiently and comprehensively. Furthermore, in the 9th Malaysia Plan, there is a chapter on youth (chapter 14: Empowering Youths for the Future). According to the plan, the thrust of youth development would include providing youth with necessary skills to increase their participation and contribution to nation building, as well as develop their leadership qualities and inculcate positive values among them. Youth development programs during the 9th Plan, will ensure they will have a better future and would be able to meet the accelerated pace of economic development and the changes in the environment.

Thus, Malaysian youth are emerging agents of change in several spheres of the nation, and their involvement as volunteer in environmental issues is critical for ecological sustainability (Wee et al., 2017). One of the ways is to improve environmental literacy among youth is through the strengthening of knowledge transfer strategies. This can be done by maximising the capacity of educational institutions to play an active role in producing a young generation who are knowledgeable and concerned about the environment, as well as becoming agents of spreading awareness within their own communities.

## **Methods**

This article provides a conceptual overview of the youth volunteerism in environmental issues with refer to Malaysia. This article reviewing journal articles, reports, newspaper publications, and other relevant documents on youth environmental volunteerism.

## **Findings and Argument**

### **i) The Important of Environmental Volunteerism**

The United Nations General Assembly's resolution in 2011, on the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers, recognized volunteerism as an important component of any strategy aimed at, inter alia, such areas as poverty reduction, sustainable development health, youth empowerment, climate change, disaster prevention and management (UNGA, 2011). Volunteerism is an important vehicle for sustainable development because it simply is not possible to attain the SDGs without a wide range of people engaged at all stages, at all levels, at all times. In short, volunteerism is a powerful means for bringing more people into

the fold. Thus, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognizes volunteer groups as stakeholders to achieve the 17 SDGs (UNV, 2020) especially youth because, young people are especially well-placed to promote environmental awareness simply because they often have better access to information about the environment than do their elders.

The terms volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities refer to a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor (UNGA, 2001). Within this conceptual framework, at least four different types of volunteer activity can be identified: mutual aid or self-help; service to others; participation or civic engagement; and advocacy or campaigning (UNV, 1999).

Powerful examples exist in different parts of the world of people uniting and mobilizing action through volunteerism to address local environmental challenges, resulting in systemic changes. The Chipko movement that started in India in the 1970s began as a small-scale volunteer action by a group of peasant women in the region of Uttarakhand to fight for the protection of the local forests on which their livelihoods depended. It grew into a national movement that eventually resulted in bans on tree felling in a number of different parts of the country (United Nations Organisation, 2014). In Kenya, the Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO), a volunteer community-based organization that has worked on forest conservation and reforestation in the Kikuyu Escarpment Forests since 1996, is now providing environmental education in schools and has initiated a number of income-generating activities around the forest, including beekeeping and community tree nurseries (KENVO, 2013). In Papua New Guinea, community volunteers support the Department of Environment and Conservation to systematically monitor crocodile population numbers in the Sepik River. They conduct regular night counts of crocodiles, and population monitoring by aerial surveys has revealed that the crocodile population steadily increased between 1998 and 2010 (UNDP, 2012). In context of Malaysia, Malaysians are known for helping each other or known as *Gotongroyong* (cooperation) making environmental volunteerism an important element in the local community (Mangunjaya, 2010).

Environmental volunteering can take many forms: (i) Practical: Perhaps most well-known are practical forms of environmental volunteering. Volunteers may be involved in practical habitat management, vegetation cutting, removal of invasive species etc. (ii) Fundraising: Many environmental organizations are charitable in nature and thus rely on donations for financial support. Volunteers may be involved in the raising of funds on the grounds. (iii) Administrative: volunteers with professional skills, such as legal or public relation (PR) knowledge, may volunteer in a support role using these skills to provide administrative support.

## **ii) Youth Environmental Volunteerism**

The SDG's emphasis on the environment is an urgent call to shift the world onto a more sustainable path and highlights the need for environmental protection and sustainability. United Nation Environmental Programme (UNEP) has long championed the rights of youth to a sustainable environment and has increasingly involved them in the process. As example, before COP26, the Youth4Climate event drew together 400 youth climate leaders from 186

countries to adopt a collective declaration to present to ministers before COP26 (Haliza, 2020).

Young peoples' dedication and commitment to volunteerism is very much needed. In general, young people as the volunteer have to actively play their leadership roles and assume leadership responsibilities as their contributions will have serious implications on the development of society and the nation. However, creating an environment of volunteerism is no simple task because young people need to be encouraged to participate in discussions, and to make decisions and choices within the community.

Volunteerism as a form of civic participation, can be a powerful mechanism for giving youth a voice in decision making and promoting social inclusion in environmental governance within the post-2015 development framework. The participation of young people becomes critical in all of these processes because of several factors, but mainly due to the fact that youth constitute more than half of the current global population of 7 billion people. As a result, youth stand most to gain with the accomplishment of the new development goals UNV, (2016), who are helping to make the world a cleaner, greener place. The engagement of young people also has the benefit of bringing their ideas and views to light and enhances their capacity to keep track of issues and become better communicators as actors on the environment and related social issues in local and national settings. For example, Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate activist, led school strikes calling for climate action and has inspired other young people in other countries to do the same. Other youth activists worldwide are filming and sharing documentaries on the environment, and increasing awareness of plastic pollution, bush burning, and mudslides in their communities (Turns, 2019). These youth-led initiatives show strong potential in the youth to advocate for and protect the environment. Also, by engaging in issues related to environmental sustainability, the child develops pro-environmental behaviors and skills that are important for environmental sustainability in communities (Browne et al., 2011).

However, in order to create environmental volunteering as norms, youth need to have good environmental values and develop a positive set of beliefs about environmental activities as theory of value-belief norms (Stern et al., 2000). Next, role modelling through parenting is the strongest predictor for adolescent volunteerism that can continue throughout their life, it is because, encouragement from parents can motivate adolescents to participate in the activities like volunteering (Law et al., 2013). Government also plays a role in supporting the youth environmental volunteering through campaign, financial support and introduced environmental education in schools (Binder & Blankenberg, 2016). In addition, social media helps to spread the information about environmental issues (Arbatani et al., 2016) and affects youth environmental knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behavior (Carpenter et al., 2016).

Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States shown positive sign for educational institutions and governments that seek to promote volunteerism among students and youth. The universities involved in this study also have volunteer programs that also influence student involvement in volunteer activities by clubs, university clubs and sports and cultural organizations. Most of these organizations are based on campus activities, so they are easily accessible to students thus helped in fostering pro environmental activities such as volunteering. Therefore, social support and role models can serve to reinforce social

norms in supporting pro-environmental activities such as volunteering among youth (Smith et al., 2010).

### **iii) Youth Environmental Volunteerism in Malaysia**

Young people are the most vulnerable group when it comes to environmental issues such as climate change, but their voices have been ignored for far too long. The Change for Climate report released in 2020 found that Malaysian youth are eager to act on climate and environmental issues. However, some gaps remain, such as the lack of local narratives and local entry points that can help young people take their first steps in environmental action. Educating young people is really important because it creates lasting impact, not just to the individual but to the community as well.

In Malaysia, according to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNICEF (2020), youth are a critical stakeholder to engage in environmental matters, where they account for 43% of the country's population. Despite the many ways environmental impacts young people, they continue to be excluded from the forefront of related policy and conversations about solutions. Climate change as example is a youth issue; however, little is known about what Malaysian youth think about climate change, and how climate change impacts them.

The UNDP together with the UNICEF, supported by a youth environmental organization EcoKnights conducted the National Youth Climate Change Survey from 28 July to 18 August 2020 through an interactive chatbot platform which involved a total of 1,393 respondents, found that (UNDP & UNICEF, 2020)

1. Survey respondents self-reported a fairly good to very good level of understanding of climate change. However, there still remains some confusion on basic scientific climate concepts.
2. Overall, young people are worried about climate change which 92% of young people think that climate change is a crisis.
3. Youth are not isolated from environmental factors because 9 in 10 youth have personally experienced environment and climate-related effects.
4. Nine in 10 youth are already taking individual actions to address climate change. Although youth are among the most vulnerable to climate change, they are potentially also the best placed to generate an ambitious societal response to combat climate change, through lifestyle changes and involvement in environmental activities.
5. Youth are heavily reliant on social media for information on climate change, which reflects the high digital connectivity and social media savviness of Malaysian youth. Eight out of 10 young people (83.6%) mentioned social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as their main source of information, whereas one out of two young people (52.7%) refer to websites. Only 38.8% of youth are obtaining their information on climate change through formal education channels such as their schools and universities. Hence, social media and digital connectivity also represent powerful tools to mobilize social movements around climate action. Instead, social media messages can be more compelling in affecting environmental knowledge, attitude and behaviors among youth because they have grown up with the internet and access through their device and more likely to find information on their social media (Carpenter et.al, 2016). This simple, yet effective action can result in prompt awareness of an environmental incident and timely response from various individuals,

agencies, organizations and also government thus in a way can influencing new individual to become new volunteers (Arbatani, Labafi & Robati, 2016).

6. Young people are overwhelmingly confident (90.5%) that they can make a difference with regards to climate change. Youth with better self-reported knowledge of climate change are more confident about the impact of youth in addressing climate change.

Malaysia struggles with environmental exploitation, underprivileged communities, unsustainable tourism, and many more issues. Hence, it is important that youth as key stakeholder take note of the role of volunteerism in environmental sustainability. Therefore, youth needs given focus because they will play a role in governing the country in the future and youth is the most productive stage to contribute energy, time and money to engage in environmental volunteer activities. Environmental volunteering is a rapidly growing that has proven to be a valuable tool for environmental conservation. Collaborative environmental volunteering has a greater impact towards environmental conservation (Woosnam et al., 2019).

Becoming an environmental volunteer in Malaysia, youth can be get involved in various conservation projects such as wildlife protection. However, to create environmental volunteering as norms, youth need to have good environmental values and develop a positive set of beliefs about environmental activities as theory of value-belief norms. (Stern et al. 2000). Skill acquisition, networking, and career development might be key motivators for younger volunteers, whereas older volunteers may be more interested in altruistic acts such as sharing information and teaching others (Asah et al. 2014). To take part in youth volunteerism, youth need to be supported by parents, family, peers, teachers and community influence (Van Goethem et al., 2014). Government also play a role in supporting the environmental volunteering through campaign, financial support and introduced environmental education in schools (Binder & Blankenberg, 2016). Thus, the federal government needs to start consultations for a comprehensive policy that focuses on civic engagement and enable volunteerism to become a key element to produce engaged, informed and committed citizens.

Volunteerism it is a tool that can include advocacy and spreading awareness based on the free giving of time, skills and knowledge to the society. For that reason, the country should embrace volunteerism as one of the best forms of nation building and as an enabler of national reconciliation, a pillar that can bring diverse communities together. Besides that, environmental volunteering activity has great impact on individual wellbeing as it involved engagement with other people and significantly improved positive elements and significantly decreased negative elements of participants' immediate well-being (Kragh et al., 2016). Moreover, according to Martin (2007): (i) public participation is viewed as an important aspect by a democratic government, (ii) public participation is a way of making decisions to improve the environment, and (iii) public participation can foster social legitimacy by building trust or "sense of ownership" in the decision-making process and reduce conflict.

Malaysia experiencing several extreme weather events such as floods, frequent air and water pollution, extreme temperature increases and increasingly erratic weather in recent times. It does not only degrade the quality of the environment, but also causes a decline in the quality of life of the people mainly due to the increase in socioeconomic disparity and the decline in the health of the Malaysian community. One of the ways to address this is to support

capacities and enabling environments for Malaysian youth participation in environmental issues such as climate action. Therefore, it's very significant to provide platforms, support, and recognition to indigenous youth, community groups, and civil society organizations who are leading to environmental matters action initiatives. Moreover, government needs to facilitate youth with policies through systemic consultations and meaningful participation in environmental policy-making processes because the role of youth is very significant and encouraging. It is also essential for federal and state governments to come up with a comprehensive plan to harness the power of youth environmental volunteerism. The Malaysian government should look seriously at efforts to increase youth involvement by increasing the capacity of young people, especially in public policy advocacy focused on environmental issues.

It was also utmost importance to invest in the younger generation. Therefore, Malaysia started a school programme called 'Sekolah SDG', in cooperation with the Education Ministry, to teach school students about SDG. This is one of the ways for our young to start doing more for their environment in the early stages and continue when they pursue their studies at the tertiary level. This action could empower more youth to gain a deeper understanding of SDG and take steps into making the world a better place. Moreover, the relevant stakeholder need to strengthen the ecosystem of youth environmental leaders through capacity building for evidence-based advocacy, work exposure and skill-building opportunities to nurture them to become a volunteerism in protecting the environment because young people would face the brunt of the impacts of climate change. Youth in Malaysia must actively taking climate action to protect their surroundings and home from climate change. This is the main reason that youth need to join hands as volunteerism to call on policymakers and governments to lead the change towards a safer, cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable environment and future. These aims can be achieved by increasing awareness, education and positive behavior youth on climate adaptation and mitigation.

### **Conclusions**

Youth represent at least 40 per cent of the Malaysia's population. Thus, youth are central in achieving a more sustainable and healthier planet in this country. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda recognizes that young people have a strong ability to drive change, and more than one-third of the SDG's targets involve youth explicitly or implicitly. The reason is, young people have a special role in instigating change and action on the pressing global challenges because they are pivotal to finding innovative solutions that speak to local and global realities. In addition, they are key actors and agents of change, mobilizing on environmental action, thus, their voices can greatly inform the policy formulation process. It is vital that their voices are heard and transformed into decision-making and that more opportunities that support environmental advocacy become accessible, inclusive and representative of the unique extra vulnerabilities faced by youth. Therefore, youth environmental volunteerism in Malaysia needs to be recognized, encouraged, supported and promoted in pristine of the environment in local and national levels. It is our responsibility as Malaysians to nurture youth seriously to be committed not only to issues such as economic growth and the welfare of the people, but also to ensure that environmental sustainability is also preserved.

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