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## Measuring the Level of Participation and Its Relationship with Psychological Empowerment through Community Based Organisation (CBO) Activities

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### Abstract

In this study, psychological empowerment is a positive change in the psychological dimensions of PWPK members acquired after joining the Community Based Organisation (CBO) such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and proactive behaviour. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the relationship between the level of participation (decision making, implementation and received benefits) with the psychological empowerment among PWPK members in Johor. A total of 366 members from 60 PWPK groups were selected as respondents via cluster multistage sampling method. Data were collected using a questionnaire and were analysed using the SPSS' Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The findings indicated that all three levels of participation have a moderate relationship with psychological empowerment. Therefore, to ensure that PWPK functions as a medium of empowerment, the level of active participation needs to be expanded.

**Keywords:** Community Based Organisation, Empowerment, Participation, Internal Psychology.

### Introduction

In most developing countries, promotional activities to reduce poverty among rural women are often the focus of the government policies main agenda. In fact, the United Nations (UN) acknowledges empowerment as a strategy that can address the powerlessness of women. In addition to ensure the integrity of a family, women empowerment is also important so that they realise that they have the right in life and able to decide what they want in their lives. Their role is not only limited to their households but also needs to be expanded for community and country development. In Malaysia, the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan makes women's empowerment as one of the strategies to make Malaysia a developed nation.

A research done by Acharya, Yoshino, Jimba and Wakai (2005) found that women in rural areas, especially among the farmers, fail to grab the opportunity and take the initiative in community

development activity. Women are also said to have low self-esteem and are not proactive in taking any actions that bring changes to themselves, family and community (Acharya, Yoshino, Jimba & Wakai, 2005). Therefore, the Community Based Organisation (CBO) is founded as the grassroots medium that can benefit women to improve the standard of living of local community (Bess, Perkins, Cooper & Jones, 2011; Sabhlok, 2011).

CBO is one of the approaches used to increase women status through existing local resources mobilisation to reduce poverty in Malaysia and many other developing countries. CBO is used as a channel for individuals or community development to form an independent attitude and effort. Women's associations such as *Pergerakan Wanita Pekebun Kecil* (PWPK) or Movement for Women Smallholder Farmers, *Perkumpulan Wanita Dinamis* (WADIRA) or Dynamic's Women Association, *Kumpulan Pengembangan Wanita* or Women's Development Group and *Kumpulan Sahabat* or Companion Group are some examples of CBO in Malaysia. CBO was found relevant to the poor in rural areas as they were empowered economically, socially and psychologically. The formation, function and sustainability of CBO also depend on the ability of internal psychology to increase control, whether interpersonal and intrapersonal, within the organisation. Meanwhile, their internal psychological strength largely depends on how they utilise CBO as a medium for empowerment (Israel, Checkoway, Zimmerman & Schulz, 1995).

Through CBO, community members are given opportunities to organise themselves to take action by planning, interpreting needs and problems, and executing plans using existing resources to improve their lives (Datta, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman and Checkoway (1995) argued that CBO members have the ability to apply skills, knowledge and mobilise resources collectively to meet their needs to demonstrate empowerment of a CBO. Moreover, CBO stimulates community members' empowerment through participation. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) and Bess et al. (2011) believed that through participation, community members can acquire the knowledge and skills that enable them to make decisions, mobilises and manages resources, as well as strengthen interaction and coordination. Additionally, Datta (2005) observed that active participation in CBO is expected to develop humanitarianism, acceptance, togetherness, loyalty and commitment among members which eventually leads to socio-economic progress. The achievement of CBO to improve the community living standards depends on the extent to which community members participate in the organised activities and also the extent to which these activities impacted the empowerment towards life.

Therefore, using the CBO approach as inspiration, this study was conducted to identify the significant relationship between participation in CBO and internal psychology to enhance the living standards of women in CBO.

## Literature Review

### Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment is conceptualised based on Human Ecology Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1917 (Christens, 2012). This theory put human development to three level of analysis namely individual (psychology), organisation and community which are related to one another. It shows how individual development processes, embedded in an environmental system that emphasises interaction with one another.

Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) defined psychological empowerment as a process whereby individuals can gain control over their lives, participation in the community, and a critical understanding of their environment. Scholars such as Zimmerman (1995), Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz and Checkoway (1992), and Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) considered this level as psychological empowerment.

Empowered individuals can be recognised by three important elements namely self-confidence and self-competence, control over life situations, as well as participation to influence institutions and decision making. Self-confidence and self-efficacy develop when an individual has a positive mind. They believe in their ability which is evaluated based on their competency or potential. Meanwhile, control over life refers to one's influence on life situations, taking proactive steps in their community and build critical understanding towards socio-political environment (Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman & Checkoway, 1995; Christens, 2012). Lack of control is the result of individual inabilities or the social structure which disallow them to act. According to Christens (2012), a person's change happens if they have interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships acquired through the community.

Individual participation in community development is the basis for empowerment. Through community development initiatives, the individual potential who participate actively in activities or development programmes can be discovered, developed and manipulated so that they can plan, execute and make decisions. Individuals need to have a critical and analytical understanding of the political, economic and social situation as well as having resources such as skills, knowledge, property, position and so on to enable them to take action and make decisions. The ability to make decisions also depends on how far they are able to translate individual, organisations and community goals, and make choices to determine the direction for a better life.

According to Israel et al. (1994), at the individual level, psychological empowerment is linked to organisation and community through individual potentials such as life-long control, competitiveness, social support, interpersonal development, and skills in political, economic and social aspects. Since psychological support is theoretically related to organisation and community, it is viewed differently across both levels (Christens, 2012).

Emphasising collective action is an essential feature in CBO. Therefore, psychological empowerment can be promoted through collective efforts to encourage local changes, challenge the status quo and reject unnecessary changes. In addition, community members can go through a learning process that benefits them through collective action. They can gain knowledge, experience and skills, develop critical thinking, gain a deep understanding of the local system, and increase confidence and self-esteem. In fact, this vast interpersonal relationship forms a social network within a community that brings a good impact on an individual.

The effects of internal psychological improvements lead to community members into joining CBO to gain more benefits than those who move individually. As a result of participation in CBO, they gain information and resources, coping strategies, social support, positive attitudes, and enhanced self-image. The more active they are involved in CBO activities, the more internal psychological empowerment and benefits can they earn from the group. In this case, active interaction between

group members accelerated the change. Psychologically empowered members can gain more benefits through group activities. Meanwhile, Moyle et al. (2006) argued that an individual is considered psychologically empowered when there is a change in individual psychology constructs namely self-efficacy, self-esteem and a proactive attitude.

Self-efficacy (competence) is a belief that a person can manage and take action to complete a task regardless of any obstacles and challenges (Bandura, 1986). Individuals with high self-efficacy can change obstacles to opportunities that benefit them. An action can be taken with the right knowledge, skills, endurance and self-efficacy to change one's life. In the context of CBO, rural women are encouraged to develop self-efficacy by learning new skills through the activities organised. Their participation in CBO shows their confidence in their ability to succeed in the group.

Similar to self-efficacy, proactive attitude, according to Schwarzer (1999), is a personality trait that gives implication on motivation and action. It believes that an individual can change through the use of resources, responsibilities and values. When it is associated with rural women, proactive individuals are usually aware of valuable internal and external resources. For example, one realises that there are services that can help them to accomplish the goals and internal qualities required to achieve the goals. For rural women, they need to believe in themselves to find solutions rather than being victims of problems. Proactive individuals focus on problem-solving even for problems caused by the environment. Previous studies have found that proactive attitudes have strong relationships with self-efficacy (Schmitz & Schwarzer, 1999). For rural women, quality combinations allow individuals to believe in themselves to take action and build resources to improve their family environment.

Furthermore, self-esteem shows the level in which an individual feels confident, powerful, valuable, productive and priceless. Rosenberg (1965) found that self-esteem can influence behaviour as well as the level of acceptance and rejection of oneself. Individuals with high self-esteem will usually believe, appreciate and confident of themselves and consider that their presence as indispensable to others. Meanwhile, those with low self-esteem tend to feel that they are unable to do anything and dare not risk everything. They are more comfortable with familiar situations, not confident, worry about criticisms, incapable of developing good communication and feel that their life is miserable.

### **Participation**

Another theory that supports this study is the participation theory. The participatory term appeared for the first time in the 1950s in development terms and became popular in the 1970s when the UN identified participation as an essential approach to raise economic and social standards especially in rural areas (Cummings, 1997). The failure of the conventional economic model to improve a majority of poor people in the Third World countries was identified by Lowe, Ray, Ward, Wood and Woodward (1998) as a factor that initiates the introduction of the concept of participation.

The conventional economic model uses a top-down approach to address poverty-related problems by emphasising on the exogenous development such as physical infrastructure and material resources, investments, finances and others to boost the productivity of key sectors. The



assumption is that community members do not have the expertise and knowledge to solve technical and production problems (Cummings, 1997).

However, Abbott (1995) and Lowe et al. (1998) argued that exogenous economic strategy has led to a more efficient form of new development to help increase the community living standard. The government realises that human, environmental and cultural factors are neglected resources which lead to failure of exogenous development in rural community development. In the 1980s, changes were made with an emphasis on endogenous development by optimising the use of community-based human resources, environment, culture and assets for rural community development.

The economic development paradigm forms an environment that requires an efficient approach to address poverty among community members (Lowe et al., 1998; Marsden & Oakley, 1991). Participation became increasingly influential in rural development planning due to the failure of the top-down approach in development and eradication of poverty in rural areas (Cummings, 1997; Kelly & Vlaenderen, 1996). Cummings (1997) viewed participation as an effort to overcome the weaknesses of the top-down approach. It emphasises on the ability of community members to mobilise their potential to improve themselves, family and community for a better standard of living.

In general, community participation is defined by Abbott (1995), Asnarulkhadi (2006), Asnarulkhadi and Aref (2011), Hung, Sirakaya-Turk and Ingaram (2010) from two perspectives namely participation as a means and participation as an end.

As a means, the community members are not directly involved in the decision-making process but are determined by the government to achieve the set objectives which may not be in line with their wants (Asnarulkhadi & Aref, 2011). This participation is also regarded as static and passive since they are asked and encouraged to participate in the programme by the authorities such as government agencies or other bodies. The efficiency and effectiveness of participation as a means was identified by Burkey (1993), and Marsden and Oakley (1991) by looking at the outcome of an activity or community development programme. For this particular reason, Koneya (1978) believed that since the government is planning and executing development activities, the participation of community members from this perspective is not an effective strategy.

As for an end, participation refers to the direct involvement of community members in the decision-making process, planning and implementing development activities according to their needs and wants. It is also regarded as a process that helps to develop the capacity or abilities of the community members, identify and increase their potential. This participation also provides opportunities to influence and to share power collectively, namely the power to determine and gain control over their lives (Asnarulkhadi & Aref, 2011; Nikkhah, 2010). It is a dynamic, active and responsive form of participation for local and environmental needs. The importance of achieving development goals is the second thing, but active participation in the development process is given priority. This participation is viewed by Moser (1989) as using a bottom-up approach.

**Table 1: Comparison of Participation as a Process and Goal**

<b>Participation as a Means</b>	<b>Participation as an End</b>
The goals and objectives set at the beginning	Empowering community members to participate actively
Mobilising resources to achieve the objectives of the programme or project	Ensuring the role of the community increases in development efforts
Emphasises the achievement of the objectives, not much on the action itself	Enhancing the ability of the population to participate rather than just achieving project objectives
More to the government programmes of which the main purpose is to mobilise the community to improve achievement	More to the programmes or activities that the community organised themselves
Participation as a short-term process	Participation as a long-term process
Passive participation	Relatively more active in the long run

In line with that view, Nelson and Wright (1995) believed that the community empowerment and achievement are limited to participation as a means rather than participation as an end. Meanwhile, Burke (1968) believed that people's participation is not an end but a strategy used to achieve a predetermined goal. In this study, the participation as an end was studied and expected to influence internal psychological empowerment.

At the individual level, many past studies were focusing on the direct relationship between community participation and psychological empowerment. Scholars such as Mok and Cheung (2006), Christens et al. (2012), Zimmerman et al. (1992), Rappaport (1987), Florin and Wandersman (1990), as well as Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) agreed that through participation, community members gain good control over their lives, and develop critical understanding of the political and social environment.

Moyle, Dollard and Biswas (2006) believed that participation in a group produces positive attitudes such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and proactive manner that enable them to make a decision, plan and execute the activities that can give positive impact to their lives. Speer et al. (2012), Itzhaky and York (2000), and Zimmerman et al. (1992) had proven that the interpersonal component of the psychological empowerment has a positive relationship with participation. Itzhaky and York (2000) argued that the timeframe should be taken into consideration when measuring the level of psychological empowerment to support that view. The longer a person involves in the activities, the higher their psychological empowerment will become.

The direct relationship between participation levels and empowerment can happen at the organisation and group level (Schulz et al., 1995; Tremblay & Gutberlet, 2010; Hardina, 2003; Moyle, Dollard & Biswas, 2006), as well as at the community level (Perkins, Florin, Rich & Chavis, 1990; Peterson, Andrew & Speer, 2000).

Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988), and Mok and Cheung (2006) argued that the participation in an organisation is an important mechanism to build psychological empowerment since the participants can gain experience in managing people, identifying resources and developing strategies to achieve goals. In addition, participation in groups not only helps to achieve maximum benefits but also develop personal and economic empowerment. Nevertheless, individual empowerment will not be effective without empowering the organisations and communities. Adams (2003) believed that the groups, organisations or community are capable of providing community members with positive experiences, skills and self-esteem to improve quality of life.

## Methodology

This study utilised a quantitative inferential approach and analysed via SPSS version 21. This method was able to discuss and give a clear view of participation and empowerment among members while conducting PWPK activities in Johor. SPSS was used to examine the correlation between variables.

For the purpose of this study, a total of 366 members were selected via cluster multistage sampling. According to Fowler (2002) and Floyd J. Fowler (2009), this sampling method is suitable for surveys with large population size even without a complete list of names. There are several stages of sample selection to represent the population. **First stage:** The researcher randomly selected 12 out of 23 PWPK stations representing the districts namely Kota Tinggi (2), Muar (3), Pontian (2), Segamat (2), Mersing (1) and Kluang (2). **Second stage:** A total of 60 out of 119 PWPKs were randomly selected representing the selected stations as in the first stage namely Kota Tinggi (8), Muar (13), Pontian (10), Segamat (10), Mersing (9) and Kluang (10). **Third stage:** Six (6) members were randomly selected from each PWPK, leading to a total of 366 members involved as respondents.

The data were collected via face-to-face interview questionnaire consisting of three parts. Part A collected data on the demographic background such as districts, age, membership duration, primary occupation, marital status, level of education and income. Part B contained questions on the level of participation among PWPK members in development activities. Participation items were designed by adopting the participation typology by Cohen and Uphoff (1981) which included three levels namely decision making, implementation and received benefits. The total number of participation level items was 32 questions and measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

In Part C, the questionnaire for the psychological dimension was designed with a combination of three sub-dimensions namely self-efficacy, proactive and self-esteem. To measure self-efficacy, the researchers adopted General Efficacy Scale questionnaire by Ralf Schwarzer (1995). The proactive attitude was measured via the Proactive Attitude Scale by Schwarzer (1999), while the Self-Esteem Scale questionnaire by Rosenberg (1965) was adopted to measure self-esteem. The total number for internal psychology was 14 items and measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (lowest level) to Strongly Agree (highest level). The instrument reliability index for the questionnaire was 0.79 for the proactive dimension, 0.76 – 0.90 for self-efficacy and 0.77 – 0.88 for self-esteem.

There were two validity tests conducted which were the content and construct validity. The content validity was evaluated by an acknowledged specialist and tested via a pilot study, while the reliability of the construct was tested through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). According to the



test, only 13 out of 32 items were measuring the construct (decision-making – 4 items, implementation – 5 items and received benefits– 4 items), and used in this study. The final result of CFA for psychological empowerment showed that 11 out of 14 items exceeded a set of criteria with all the corresponding indexes.

### Findings and Discussion

The objective of this study is to identify the relationship between the level of participation in decision-making, implementation and received benefits with internal psychological empowerment. SPSS' Pearson Correlation Product Moment was used to analyse the relationship. The researcher applied Cohen's Rules of Thumb (1988) to measure the level of relationship by looking at the strength of the relationship between independent and dependent variables with correlation represented by  $r$ .

The results indicated moderate and significant relationship between participation in decision-making ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < 0.5$ ), implementation ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < 0.5$ ), and received benefits ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < 0.5$ ) with internal psychology. This study has proven that all three participation in decision-making, implementation and received benefits have positive relationship with internal psychology in which members gain good control over life, as well as develop critical understanding of political and social environment through active participation, and subsequently support past research (Mok & Cheung, 2006; Christens, Peterson & Speer, 2011; Speer et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 1992; Moyle, Dollard & Biswas, 2006). In the context of PWPK, participation in groups initiates positive attitudes such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and proactive manner that empower them to make decisions, plan and carry out activities which improve their lives for the better.

**Table 2: Relationship between Participation Level and Internal Psychological Empowerment**

Variable	X1	X2	X3	Y3
<b>X1</b> (Decision-making)	1			
<b>X2</b> (Implementation)	0.430	1		
<b>X3</b> (Benefits Received)	0.441	0.597*	1	
<b>Y3</b> (Psychological Empowerment)	0.399	0.435	0.452	1

\* The correlation was significant at 0.05 (2-tailed)

\*\* The correlation was significant at 0.01 (1-tailed)

Overall, despite having different relationship strengths, the results of this study have proven that there is a significant and positive relationship between the three levels of participation with internal psychological empowerment among PWPK members. Consistent with the results of other studies such as Saidu (2014), Li (2006), Ohmer (2007), Mohammad (2010) and Muhammad (2009), it can be concluded that active participation in group activities is closely related to the level of internal psychological empowerment. It means that members' internal psychological empowerment can be achieved significantly through participation in PWPK. According to Cohen and Uphoff (1971), community members should be fully involved in several stages of decision-making, implementation, benefits received and evaluation to ensure that such activities have a positive impact on their lives.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, PWPK functions as a CBO which plays a significant role in the development of rural communities. The establishment of PWPK will not only have a positive impact on the empowerment of its members to improve their quality of life, but also contribute to the country's development.

However, the level of internal psychological empowerment depends on how well the members make this organisation a medium which enables them to control and overcome the problems that impacted their lives. The findings show that participation (decision-making, implementation and benefits received) in PWPK activities has a positive relationship with PWPK members' internal psychology. Their participation in the groups gives them the opportunity to develop social skills that encourage them to believe in their abilities. From there, they learn about themselves and the environment, solve problems, decide, manage and carry out community work, as well as take action to improve lives. Through the groups, they also gain new experience, knowledge and skills to be able to manage and carry out CBO activities efficiently.

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