

Challenges Faced by Social Entrepreneurs in Malaysia: Navigating Barriers to Growth and Sustainability

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Abstract

Purpose: Social enterprises in Malaysia are increasingly recognized for their potential to address critical social and environmental issues while fostering economic development. Despite addressing the issues, social enterprises encounter numerous challenges that impede their growth and long-term viability. This study investigates the primary obstacles social enterprises face in Malaysia, including regulatory complexities, limited access to funding, market penetration difficulties, and operational inefficiencies.

Design/methodology/approach: This research employs a qualitative approach, through semi-structured interviews with social entrepreneurs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights, while the literature review focused on academic articles, government reports, and policies relevant to the Malaysian context.

Findings: The study identifies several critical challenges faced by social enterprises such as regulatory complexities due to unclear and troublesome procedures, limited access to financial support initiatives to scale up, market penetration difficulties due to limitation of marketing resources and consumer awareness, and operational inefficiencies in related to lack of business management expertise and resources.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by the scope of qualitative interviews, which may not capture all possible perspectives. Future research could expand the sample size and include quantitative methods to validate findings. The implications highlight the need for policy adjustments and the development of targeted support mechanisms to address the identified challenges.

Practical implications: The findings of this study provide actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders to enhance the support ecosystem for social enterprises. Recommendations include simplifying regulatory processes, improving access to funding, increasing market awareness through targeted campaigns, and offering comprehensive training programs to build operational capacity.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on social enterprises in Malaysia by providing a detailed analysis of the challenges they face. It offers valuable recommendations for creating a more conducive environment for these enterprises to thrive, thus fostering their potential to contribute to social and economic development.

Keywords: Social Enterprises, Challenges, Qualitative, Support Mechanisms, Scale Up

Introduction

Since the 1980s, social entrepreneurship has gained the attention of researchers, practitioners, and governments worldwide (Cheah, Yeoh, et al., 2023; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Eng et al., 2020) by addressing social problems and issues. Social enterprises differ from traditional enterprises as they prioritize transformative social change or benefiting the community while attaining financial sustainability. Social enterprises employ market mechanisms to achieve their social mission. Fundamentally, social enterprises are associated with social change that offers advantages and solutions to society, and they can significantly influence the nation in resolving social issues.

Social entrepreneurship in Malaysia is still in its early stages of development (Abdul Kadir & Mhd Sarif, 2016; Cheah, Yeoh, et al., 2023) and still growing. Malaysia started its social enterprises when Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) in September 1987, duplicating the model from Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Since the establishment of Malaysia Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC) in 2014, the national agency under the Ministry of Finance (MOF) has supported the local social enterprises (SE) community through outreach, workshops, an accelerator program and provided RM20 million in funding for social enterprises to create 1,000 social enterprises by 2018 (MaGIC, 2015). However, as of 27 May 2024, Malaysia has a total of 286 social enterprises comprising 41 aspiring social enterprises, 224 social enterprises basic, and 20 social enterprises accredited. The number is still far from the projected number of 1,000 social enterprises by 2018 and 5,000 by 2025 (MEDAC, 2022).

In Malaysia, social enterprises are essential in promoting equitable economic growth by addressing 17 groups of beneficiaries comprised of children, the elderly, victims of natural disasters, persons with disabilities, the homeless, offenders under community service, victims of human trafficking, single mothers or single fathers, poor or hardcore poor individuals, undocumented persons, Indigenous peoples, domestic violence victims, disadvantage youths, vulnerable populations, person with addictions, ex-convicts and animal protection (MEDAC, 2022). Social enterprises provide creative solutions that assist underserved populations and strengthen the nation's socioeconomic.

Social enterprises play an important role in tackling societal issues while developing sustainable business strategies. Social enterprises face distinct problems, which have an impact on their growth and viability. According to a study done by British Council Malaysia (2019), there are several common challenges for social entrepreneurs in Malaysia including lack of cash flow (55 percent), lack of awareness of social enterprises (36 percent), recruiting staff or volunteers (33 percent), obtaining financing (31 percent), grants (27 percent), finding suitable premises or workspace (22 percent), access to business support and advice (21 percent), government regulations and administrative burdens (19 percent), and a lack of business. Despite the high potential, social enterprises in Malaysia face various difficulties that restrict their growth and sustainability.

The regulatory landscape for social enterprises in Malaysia is frequently seen as complex and confusing, posing challenges in registration, compliance, and scaling up (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). Furthermore, notwithstanding initiatives imposed by the government through Social Entrepreneurship Blueprint 2030 and financial incentives through agencies aimed at promoting social enterprises, many still struggle to acquire appropriate finance to sustain and increase their outcome. These constraints underline the importance of a complete support ecosystem capable of meeting the unique needs of social entrepreneurs and enabling them to grow.

The purpose of this study is to look at issues encountered by social entrepreneurs in Malaysia, as well as to provide an assessment of the barriers to their growth. This study aims to uncover underlying challenges and to provide recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders. This study will add to the body of knowledge on social entrepreneurship in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Social Entrepreneur vs Social Enterprise vs Social Entrepreneurship vs Social Business

A social entrepreneur is someone who uses a financially sustainable organization to provide value for the disadvantaged community (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001) through innovative ideas (Haugh & O'carroll, 2019) or better known as the founder.

A social enterprise is an organization or entity that delivers service to achieve social, environmental, and community objectives by its social aims to address a specific social issue while operating in a self-sustaining business, and profit generated from the business will be used for social and environmental mission (Defourny, 2007). Thus, social enterprise is also known for the outcome of the initiative of the process.

According to Mair & Martí (2006), social entrepreneurship is a blend of commercial activities for economic development and social missions to create social value or the process of the whole system. Others define social entrepreneurship as developing creative solutions for social issues and organizing ideas, skills, and resources to pursue opportunities and social preparations necessary for long-term social change to increase social wealth through new ventures. (Austin et al., 2012; Ebrashi, 2013; Zahra et al., 2009). Roy et al (2021) highlight that social enterprises should work together with stakeholders to offer products and services that help marginalized communities and workers.

Social business runs the business the same as another social enterprise with the social objective and all the investments need to be recovered to ensure self-sustainable as the profit or dividend needs to be reinvested back into the business to benefit the beneficiaries (Yunus et al., 2010).

In Malaysia, social entrepreneurship is known as an entity that is recognized under the law of Malaysia, which is driven by social purposes and must have a financially viable business model to address social or environmental concerns to produce a beneficial impact on beneficiaries and the economy (MEDAC, 2022). Thus, social entrepreneurship must have a significant impact on community well-being.

Regulatory Legal Framework

The regulatory legal framework poses one of the most significant obstacles to social enterprise in Malaysia. While there has been an extended acknowledgement of social entrepreneurship in recent years, the regulations remain complex. Despite having its definition in Malaysia, bureaucratic barriers seem to overshadow social enterprises with recognition, registration, and certification (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021; Mohd Hidzir et al., 2021).

Social enterprises worked extra to access government and corporate support which are tailor-made for traditional businesses. Social enterprises through the Chamber of Social Entrepreneur Development (CSED), PurpoSE Malaysia, Sabah Social Entrepreneurs Association (SOSEA) and Sarawak Digital Economic Corporation Berhad (SDEC) had worked together with the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD) for

government programs, grants, financing, government procurements, e-malls, online shopping platform and corporate consciousness through Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) implementation through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) allocation. Currently, tax exemptions for social enterprises only are given to the social enterprises that are accredited (MEDAC, 2022).

Access to Funding and Financial Sustainability

Another major challenge faced by Malaysian social enterprises is to be financially sustainable. Initially, 71 percent of social enterprises started their operation with their savings (Baskaran et al., 2019). In a study by (British Council Malaysia, 2019), many social entrepreneurs faced a shortage of cash flow where only 37 percent of social enterprises made a profit and 32 percent just barely break-even, obtaining financing due to lack of documentation and relying too much on grants. Many social entrepreneurs did not focus on making a profit thus making it less appealing for investors to invest.

Market Access and Competition

Market access presents a substantial challenge for social enterprises in Malaysia when competing with established companies. With limited visibility, marketing, brand awareness, and high pricing with the assumption to inculcate together the social impact, many social enterprises focus on business-to-business compared to business-to-customer as bulk purchases make better sales and thus turn to profit. But, recently, due to social entrepreneurship being taught in universities, and student-related projects on social enterprise, they support products from social enterprises (Abdullah et al., 2022).

What is Human Capital and Talent Management

Malaysian social enterprises face recurring issues in recruiting and retaining talented workers. In a study done by (Park & Kim, 2020), financially stable social enterprises will generate decent jobs thus better performance and higher salaries.

In Malaysia, many social enterprise founders created their social enterprise after they left their corporate job at the age of 31 to 40 with 36 percent (British Council Malaysia, 2019). Thus, social enterprises need to find people with the necessary skills and motivation for the social cause (Che Nawi et al., 2022; Cheah, Loh, et al., 2023). The search can be difficult unless they have the talent, passion, and knowledge and have been exposed to social enterprise since university.

Social Impact Measurement and Reporting

For a social enterprise, measuring social impact is important to sustain growth and reflect its social mission (Siqueira et al., 2021). Measuring social impact is important for a social enterprise to understand the demand, monitor performance, resource acquisition, and stakeholder responsibility to ensure the legitimacy of its operation. Through social impact measurement and reporting, this will increase the visibility of the organization to future investors and partners (Usman et al., 2022).

Social enterprises in Malaysia encounter numerous difficulties that will restrict their growth and sustainability. To ensure the problems can be rectified, the social enterprise community must work together with the whole ecosystem to ensure continuous improvement, innovation, resistance, and sustainability.

Method

This study employed a basic qualitative approach to gather and analyze data (Merriam, 2009). An interview guide was developed to conduct in-depth interviews, which provided an opportunity to investigate the problems confronting challenges faced by Malaysian social entrepreneurs in navigating barriers to grow and sustain. Informants were chosen from the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD) portal which is available to the public. The social enterprises selected in this study run social enterprises with products or service offerings to support their social mission.

The method employed was purposeful sampling, in which informants were chosen based on predetermined standards. The requirements for participation were as follows: (1) be willing to participate in the study; (2) be easily contactable; and (3) have operated a social enterprise for at least two years as a social entrepreneur.

Informants were contacted via phone, WhatsApp, and approach during the social enterprise event. Following confirmation of a participant's consent, the time, date, and location of the data collection were determined. The goal of the study, the method of gathering data, and the requirement that informants need to sign a consent form before taking part in the study were all briefly described before the interview started.

Data saturation was reached following the interviews with five informants; that is, no new information was discovered, and the same data was repeated (Merriam Sharan, 2016). Detailed information related is described in Table 1.

Findings

Table 1: Comparison of Social Enterprise

Informant	Age	Year as SE	Beneficiaries	Social Impact Factor
Lisa	31	2	People with disabilities (PWD)	Job creation, training
Hajar	47	12	Community of B40s	Poverty eradication
Ali	40	8	Community of B40s	Youth development
Azwar	36	10	Problem Youth	Youth development
Alvin	34	7	Community Centre	Food waste

Following the selection and contact of participants, the researcher had a pre-interview with the informants to establish a rapport and learn more about their social enterprise (Merriam Sharan, 2016). For the informants to feel more comfortable providing information during the actual interview sessions, it was necessary to build a rapport or familiarity with them beforehand.

All five of the study's informants were actively engaged in social enterprises. Their ages ranged from 31 to 47. Out of the informants, two had worked with a social business focusing on youth empowerment before operating their social enterprise.

The names of the informants were hidden by using aliases. The informants were from a range of various social impact fields, such as job creation – training, waste management, youth development, and poverty eradication. The investigation's five informants' profiles are summed

up in the table above. The interview revealed two main themes: challenges faced by social entrepreneurs and social enterprise growth and sustainability, the theme and category are further explained through the classification in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Social Enterprise

Theme	Category	Sub-Category
Challenges	Capital	Grants, Crowdfunding
	Awareness	Program, collaboration
	Changing Mindset	People can change (problem youth, nearly expired food)
Growth and Sustainability	Economy	Profit, capital, new services and products, new outlet, social procurement
	Social	Eradicate poverty – job creation, upgrade skills, income generation Provide better placement for problem youth through education, sports, health and spiritual
	Environment	Food waste management – nearly expired food for a community centre.

Discussion and Conclusion

Challenges to Overcome

There are many challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in doing business. Liza and Azwar previously worked in a social business in Malaysia. After several years working in the social business scene, Azwar operates a social enterprise focusing on modern combat sports with his two partners. *“Our challenges when we decide to operate in an alley that is known for its dark side. Years passed by and the place became a tourist spot for the night market. For us to focus only on training the kids will not make us break even, therefore we have opened the centre for others to join and currently, we also engage with corporate companies to train their staff. This is how we generate more sustainable income and not depend on grants”*. Azwar’s social enterprise is one of the accredited social enterprises in Malaysia.

Alvin, who runs his social enterprise in Penang faced challenges getting edible food and cutting down the wastage of food by selling it at a discount price to people. On top of that, Alvin also did charity by providing food collected from café and bakeries to selected shelter homes and homeless people. *“Our business model is to work with an outlet and save as much food and*

pastries by selling them at a lower price or sending them to the community centre and the B40 community". When we first started this idea, people thought that we were crazy. Saving food can make us sick. But no. The expiry date usually has a buffer of another day which still can be eaten by many others. We saw a lot of food waste in the bin which can cater to many other people who need food. We rescue it for others to eat. Right now, we are expanding our business model outside of Penang where this cause can spill over to more people. We worked with more than 30 outlets at one time and still, there are shortages of food as many are in need. We create a roster to distribute food so everyone can have a taste of it". Alvin's social enterprise is one of the social enterprises endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Hajar worked with communities in Kelantan from B40s families to the cottage industries owner. She faced difficulties as many of her beneficiaries could not understand and speak English. There is a big gap for her to fill by ensuring the people in Kelantan stay in Kelantan and develop the economy there. *"Many trainings and programs handled by collaborators were conducted in English which is difficult for the beneficiaries to understand". I was trained in the United States for social enterprise and assisting people of my state is hard. Thus, I partner up with universities in Kelantan to assist me as the intermediary for the community to teach them basic skills like English, financial literacy, and basic business operations. This is for their survival, especially in places like Gua Musang where there are not many occupations for the people".* Hajar's social enterprise is one of the social enterprises endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

For a social entrepreneur to stay relevant, they need to think and pivot their business whenever it is needed (Pybus Julie, 2020; Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Ratten, 2021) as it will affect the whole supply chain if one part turns sour.

Growth and Sustainability

As a result of the interview conducted, the researcher identified the communities assisted by the social enterprises. The informant mentioned six target groups for aid in the interpretation: owners of shelter homes, community centres, people with disabilities (PWD), the community of B40s, and problem youth.

Lisa created a social enterprise focusing on a learning centre for People with disabilities (PWD). The team trained them in preparation for work. They managed to secure jobs for People with disabilities (PWD) working for multinational companies in Malaysia which broke down the barriers and promoted equal opportunities for them to work. They aim to provide 150 PWD individuals with jobs by 2026. Currently, they have supplied PWD for work and secured 60 new placements for upskilling and ready to work for data mining and programming. Lisa's social enterprise was born from an incubation program run by a multinational company and won USD 20,000 for being the top 5 winners. Lisa's social enterprise is one of the social enterprises basic endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Alvin created the social enterprise when he saw food waste in Penang. He attended a short course in Cyberjaya on social enterprise before operating. As of June 2024, the social enterprise had rescued 600kg of food and collected RM2,031 sponsorship. The food was distributed to 9 shelter homes and the community of B40s. Out of 600kg of food waste, 178kg comes from unsold bread and pastries of many artisan and bakery shops in Penang. Others were packed

foods, buffets from hotels and sushi. Currently, they approach food vendors, and bakery artisans to educate and spread awareness of food waste. The social enterprise also has a touch-and-go link to sponsor food for others who are in need. By doing this, the social enterprise assists the municipal in clearing up food waste in Penang. Alvins's social enterprise is one of the social enterprises basic endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Hajar was previously known for her charity work with several non-profit organizations (NGOs) in Kelantan. During the massive flood back in 2014, she lost everything and restarted her life by commuting from Kelantan to Kuala Lumpur for her job with the NGO. Due to her dedication, she was nominated by the US Embassy to study social enterprise in the United States for 3 weeks. When she came back to Kelantan, she saw the opportunity and worked to develop her idea. With her background in accounting and hospitality, she engaged with women of the B40s to work and develop their skills. With her social enterprise, she partners with several other social enterprises and social businesses to assist the women of the B40s in eradicating poverty, especially in Gua Musang. Hajar later collaborated with universities around Kelantan and government link companies from Kuala Lumpur for programs empowering women and small businesses related to English speaking, financial literacy and business operation. Hajar is also a trainer for Institut Keusahawanan Negara (INSKEN) for the social enterprise course. To ensure growth and sustainability, Hajar engaged with many companies in Kuala Lumpur to assist new crafts in Kelantan with a twist. Hajar's social enterprise is one of the social enterprises basic endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Ali is an eye Dr. He created the social enterprise because he wanted to help many Kelantanese who were required to go as far as Kuala Lumpur for eye check-ups. A multinational company first recognized his service when they came to do CSR in Kelantan. He then taught Dr Ali how to create a social enterprise with his expertise in assisting others. After several years of operating the clinic, he saw the opportunity to assist many other youths in Kelantan. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he saw the need for other services related to food and he created a food chain from planting to harvesting, distribution, wholesale centre, and lastly a restaurant for the youths to be involved in the business. Ali currently works together with the youths to breed fish as another source of income for them. Ali is still a doctor and occasionally, he will assist his team to do eye check-ups and other related services. While on the other hand, he runs a food source chain for the people of Kelantan. Dr Ali's social enterprise is one of the aspiring social enterprises endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Azwar was a TESL graduate from UiTM and his passion was helping youth through youth development. He first started working in another social enterprise for several years before operating his social enterprise with his two other friends also from the same social enterprise. Hafiz the co-founder has a passion for combat sports and brought the ideation to Malaysia. They have recruited 12 batches of students, most of them came from problematic family backgrounds. They were exposed to different activities and programs during the training. From the 12 batches, some of their recruits had represented Malaysia in the SEA Games and became trainers in other gymnasiums. Social enterprise is one of the social enterprises accredited and endorsed by the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development (MECD).

Starting the journey of social entrepreneurship in Malaysia exposes a terrain loaded with challenges that endanger both growth and sustainability. These problems are more than just bureaucratic or financial; they are deeply ingrained in the sociocultural structure and operational reality facing dedicated individuals working to make a difference. The informants in this study shared the experiences they encountered when developing their social enterprises. They choose to become social entrepreneurs in giving back to others. The transition led them to face challenges by exploring the interlink between the social mission and the beneficiaries' wants (Johari et al., 2020; Munoz et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2024). This is to ensure growth that links towards sustainability.

To make it a reality, awareness of social entrepreneurship must be raised and promoted. Government assistance and policy support for social enterprise and its social mission to assist 17 different types of beneficiaries must be coordinated (MaGIC, 2020; MEDAC, 2022; Mohd Adnan et al., 2021; Mohd Hidzir et al., 2021). Challenges come in any way, thus social entrepreneurs should be prepared to predict what's good and best for them for their growth and to sustain in the industry. To assist, the government and private sectors play critical roles in developing targeted marketing efforts and educational programs to create awareness of social entrepreneurship thus embracing more of the social procurement aimed to assist more of the social enterprises' social mission towards sustainability (Barraket, 2020; M. J. Roy et al., 2024).

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