Professionals as Stakeholders: Engagement in Malaysian Government Programs

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Keywords: Stakeholders, Engagement, Government Programs.

Abstract: The objective of this study is to investigate the level of engagement towards Malaysian government programs among stakeholders. This study focused on the external stakeholders namely the Malaysian citizens who are professionals. The research questions addressed the following: What are the government programs identified by the stakeholders? What is the perception of the stakeholders towards the programs? How engaged are the stakeholders with the programs? What expectations do the stakeholders have on the future government programs? From the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), it was found that stakeholders identified government programs from five sectors namely transportation, education, housing, employment, healthcare, and economy. The stakeholders were totally engaged in keeping track with government programs and were aware of many of the programs implemented. They had mixed feelings towards the benefits of the programs. The stakeholders admitted that they paid attention and showed concern on the effectiveness of the programs implemented. They were clear about the different channels of communication that they could use to voice out their views and concerns. They were able to exercise their skills and capabilities to utilize multifarious channels in ensuring their voices were heard. They expressed their expectations that the government would keep their promises and continue to improve current programs and create future programs that would form a nation that is progressive and free from ill practices.

1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia as one of the developing countries is dependent on acceptance and support of the people to ensure a successful implementation of government programs. From the past government to the current new government under Pakatan Harapan (PH) much consideration has been given to improve the public's wellbeing. Prior to PH, the past government under Barisan Nasional (BN), had presented 1Malaysia with a tagline "People First, Performance Now" mirroring the promise to make the administration more performance driven and results oriented. Under PH, the emphasis is on reconstructing the nation and meeting expectations. The objective of this study is to discover the engagement level of external stakeholders toward programs implemented by the Malaysian government.

2 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Stakeholder engagement or 'Citizenship Participation' is vital in building a nation and maintaining a balanced power within (Greenwood, 2007)(Ihugba and Osuji, 2011). Stakeholder Engagement Theory is viewed as essential to check the efficacy and the notable aspects of execution of government programs According to Freeman and McVea (Freeman, 2010) stakeholders are "those groups and individuals who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives". The succes of the program implementation by a country or company depends heavily on the extent of acceptance and reception by the people.

The building block of the development programs initiated by the current Malaysian government focusses on enhancing the well-being and quality of life of Malaysian people. When the US President Barack Obama introduced global engagement in his country's foreign policy, the importance of stakeholder engagement in governmental policies and programs gained momentum and became a much debated topic in re-

cent years. Malaysia, as a developing country has begun to show interest on the importance of stakeholder engagement in its development practices. Thus, exploration into the extent of stakeholders engagement would shed light on the successful implementation of government programs. Through a qualitative method via focus group discussion (FGD), this study aims to illuminate the importance of stakeholder engagement in the successful implementation of government programmes. The findings will indicate the responsiveness and support of the people towards government programs.

3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Internal or external stakeholders play instrumental roles in nation building (Hill and Jones, 2001). Examples of internal stakeholders are stockholders, organisational employees including managers and Board members while external stakeholders are customers, suppliers, governments, unions, local communities and the public. It has been well documented that stakeholder engagement can positively benefit both the organisation and society in the long run (Freeman and McVea, 2001)(Greenwood, 2007)(Ihugba and Osuji, 2011).

A nation can be considered as "an organisation" at a bigger scale. The implementation of programs by a nation's government will generate fruitful outcome if the plans and programs are well received by the stakeholders (Ibrahim et al., 2019). The absence of stakeholders engagement would lead to failure to meet the common goals aimed at improving the well-being of the people.

Findings from previous studies showed that engagement is a two way relationship between the employer and the employee, and in this context the relationship between government and the people(Kular et al., 2008)(Saks, 2006)(Crabtree, 2005)(Kahn, 1990). Kahn (1990) argued that employees are willing to exchange their engagement for whatever benefits they can obtain the organisation or government. Saks (2006) agreed that engagement is one of the ways for people to return the favour to the organisation or gavernment.

Global engagement has been coined by US former President, Barack Obama in the nation's foreign policy. This policy has gained momentum and has cecome an examplar for other nations and Malaysia is without exception. Following this example, Malaysia under the previous government has launched the Government Transformation Program (GTP), through GTP 1.0 and 2.0. The programs were

aimed at improving the quality of life of Malaysian citizens through stakeholder engagement. A study by the Performance Management Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) of Malaysia found that more than half of the respondents were aware of GTP's trajectory and goals. However, the study did not dwell into the importance of stakeholder engagement. Under the current government the stress on stakeholder engagement in governmental policies and programs is in full force. Hence, the current study was conducted to explore the people's awareness towards the new government's initiatives to further improve the people's quality of life.

Through a qualitative method via focus group discussion (FGD), this study aims to highlight the extent of stakeholder engagement influnce among the external public particularly the professionals. This study hopes to contribute towards the influnce of the stakeholder engagement theory in the the succesful implementation of future government programs.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the government programs identified by the stakeholders?

- What is the stakeholders' perception towards the programs?

- How engaged are the stakeholders with the programs?

- What expectations do the stakeholders have on the future government programs?

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

The stakeholder refers to a person who holds a stake in the activities of the organisation in some ways. Stakeholders may include employees, customers, suppliers the state, the local community, society, bankers, special interest groups, the environment and technological progress (Argenti, 2018). Freeman (Freeman, 1983) defined a stakeholder as any individual or group who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of the organisation's objectives.

The Stakeholder Theory has evolved over the past decades and is applicable in both public and private entities. The Stakeholder Theory posits a strong relationship between the stakeholders and government or organization will help to affect changes that could be geared towards achieving successful organizational goals Freeman (Freeman and McVea, 2001).

Many scholars (Idris, 2018)(Sharif et al., 2014)(Ali and Sonderling, 2017) viewed that communication and information technology have changed the way the government communicate with the public. In the age of globalization, Social media is seen to be an important medium and has been utilized to promote a positive perception of the government through information sharing which strengthen citizen and government relationship. Ali et.al (Sharif et al., 2014) found that social media plays a role and has the advantage in channeling the information compared to the traditional media. However, mainstream media is more popular among professionals and adults. According to Groshek and Han (Groshek and Han, 2011), alternative media and new media are fragmented, non-responsive and even more exclusionary than mainstream, and hence, mainstream media played a role in shaping readers' perception.

This study will shed light on the perception of professionals as stakeholders towards the implementation of Government Programmes. The findings of this study will serve as guidelines for the government in their planning and implementation of future Government programs. Findings from The Guardians in New Zealand (Ibrahim et al., 2019) showed that engagement and communications with stakeholders are important and this provides direction for communication strategy, create awareness into stakeholders' perceptions and knowledge of the organisation. According to May et.al (May et al., 2004), emotional factors are linked closely with an individual's personal satisfaction and the inspiration to engage with their organization. Some key areas in stakeholder engagement were effective leadership, a commitment towards employee wellbeing, two-way communication between stakeholders and government organization's employees (Noe et al., 2017).

According to Kahn (Kahn, 1990), in the context of stakeholder engagement, employees are willing to exchange their engagement as a repayment for the resources they receive from their organisation or government. When the government fails to provide these resources and meet the expectations, individuals are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves from their roles. Hence, the amount of commitment and engagement an individual is prepared to give to fulfil their citizen role may be dependent on the economic and socio-emotional resources received from the government via the government programs.

6 METHODOLOGY

The data was collected using the Focus group discussion (FGD). FGD was conducted among three different groups of stakeholders. The first group comprises of experienced professionals within the age range of 45 to 55. The second group comprises of young professionals within the age range of 30 to 44 years. The third group comprises of young adults within the age range of 20 to 29. All three groups have a combination of male and female participants with a total number of five participants in each group.

This paper focusses on the first group comprises of experienced professionals within the age range of 45 to 55 from different ethnics (Malay, Chinese and Indian). The choice on professionals was made due to the importance of the professionals' perception in supporting government's programs since they are the influencers for young generation and decision makers in the family institutions and society. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview respondents were invited to elaborate on each question. The data analysis technique employed was thematic analysis. It was carried out to identify popular trends in the responses. The data was triangulated with existing various stakeholders theories.

7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- What are the government programs identified by the stakeholders?

- What is the stakeholders' perception towards the programs?

- How engaged are the stakeholders with the programs?

- What expectations do the stakeholders have on the future government programs?

- What are the government programs identified by the stakeholders?

The stakeholders identified the following government programs which were categorized into six sectors namely transportation, education, housing, employment, healthcare, and economy

- Transportation – the stakeholders identified several transportation programs which they knew had been implemented by the current and previous government. The programs were Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), Express Rail Link (ERL), Light Rapid Transit (LRT) and e hailing.

- Education – the stakeholders showed their awareness of government's efforts to improve schools and institutions of higher learning and were aware of the educational support namely PTPTN and MyBrain provided by the government.

- Housing- the stakeholders were very aware of the government's initiatives in improving the housing problem. They mentioned the affordable housing program like Perbadanan PR1MA Malaysia

- Employment – initiatives from the government in creating programs to provide jobs to the young were mentioned by the stakeholders, for example Skim Latihan 1Malaysia's (SL1M) and TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training).

- Healthcare – the stakeholders mentioned the healthcare support provided by the government such as Klinik 1Malaysia or now known as Klinik Komuniti and the public hospitals.

- Economy - Majority of the stakeholders interviewed agreed that the shift from GST to SST 2.0 initiated by the new government was helpful in reducing the price of goods. The stakeholder also mentioned Urban Transformation Centre (UTC).

What is the stakeholders' perception towards the programs?

The five stakeholders who were interviewed expressed both positive and negative reactions to the programs. Several positive reactions were on the convenience of means of transportation, satisfaction on the newly introduced changes to the education sector, medical support and employment opportunities.

On the other hand, even when they do appreciate the government's initiatives to increase affordable housing and provide better jobs, they still have their qualms regarding the price of houses and cars, the rate of unemployment, long queue at government hospitals and minimum improvement in living expenses.

The stakeholders mentioned the following regarding the programs:

S3: rapid railway to the east coast, which to me is something I look forward to, because it will be so convenient for us to go back home in the east coast, and then I remember the ECRL to Singapore, but that particular project I wasn't so happy because I thought whatever that we have now is fast enough already...

S2: the MRT project that goes all the way to near my house.. I think that has impacted a lot on the way I travel to work because finally I don't face too much of a traffic jam because the commuters are now using MRT to go to work in KL so they don't clog my highway..

S3: alright I think since the new government has taken over, I have paying a lot of attention to the education sector, . . . I like most is that they are trying to improve access to education because the philosophy behind education is that everyone should have equal access education, so what they have done is that they have given voice to the teachers, to the stakeholders, to the parents and so on, now parents can link directly to the teachers, they can say things openly and so on, and then the latest one in the news they have also given voice to the lecturers... you know especially the lecturers who have got opinions that are different from the ruling party...

S1: I really like the one the present minister Dr Maszlee he talked about the freedom, and especially he talks about the higher education institution, university and college university, and I think the output previously has given a lot of restriction, to the student, of course now they have actually gone through a few round of amendments.

S3: I read about how they are revamping the feeding the children program, because they notice the children who come from poor are so hungry, when they are in school they cannot learn. Even there is food program at school, but it is not nutritious enough to sustain their attention for the 5 hours that they are in school. So now they are concerned... what they trying to do is trying to improve the quality of free food provided to the poor children in school. I felt I was very happy to read that because finally somebody is paying attention to the children

S4: I do appreciate what the government is trying to do... but even now houses are still so expensive, cars are also expensive and living expenses are not improving much... S1: I'm looking at it . . . am more concerned about the job opportunity for our younger generation, we have such economic growth in our country, that's number one, and then we talk about the work force, do we really need to depend so much on foreign workers or can our people took up the job? I am worried... unemployment will lead to all sorts of problems.

S2: I appreciate all the programs that have helped my family and I to live a better life. The education opportunity, medical support, public transportation, better jobs and many more...I am concerned about our economic recovery... without that, we can't have a better life.

S5: I don't really use public transportation as I have my own car...I don't go to public hospitals or clinics coz the queue is long. I went to public schools and university...but after that I don't use anything that the government has given...

How engaged are the stakeholders with the identi-

fied programs?

All the stakeholders expressed how engaged they are in the government programs except one. He mentioned that he preferred to be independent and not hoping for endowment from the government. He cited that the programs had no impact on him. The stakeholders who are professionals were robust in terms expressing their views via various communication channels both new media and face to face. The following verbatim illustrates the stakeholders' levels of engagement.

S2: I paid attention to all government programs. . . I will discuss in my WhatsApp group. . . any grievances. . . anything we like. . .

S1: I believe that there must be a balance between income and cost of living. I get involved to make sure that I have a say in what happens in the future. . . we must pay attention to the government's programs and express our views. . . so the younger generation will have a chance of a stable and prosperous life.

S3: We want active participation, and as the citizens we can't be sitting quietly and complain. . . I think everybody is educated, if we have an issue, we voice it out. . . we go to the problem.. go to the source of the problem, then that will be direct..we can email, meet face to face, tweet, or any other means of communication.

S4: I do get involved. . . can talk to NGOs. . . NGOs have done a good job in letting the government know of people's grievances.

S2: I think letting our wakil rakyat know is a good way to voice our concerns. I take any opportunity to get my views heard. . . hopefully the government can take appropriate action.

S5: I am managing on my own. Don't really rely on anything from the government. . . it's easier to be independent. I don't get involved.. whatever programs the government do. . . don't have impact on me..

What expectations do the stakeholders have on the future government programs?

All of the stakeholders were in total agreement with regards to what they expected from the government. First and foremost, they wanted transparency in all government programs. They also expected the government to be inclusive, fair in their dealings, corruption free and fulfil their promises.

S1: whatever it is that the government wants to implement, I just want them to be fair, not bias towards a certain race. . . or only for their political supporters. . . do it for the rakyat..be transparent.

S4: there must a platform for the rakyat to meet and voice their concerns to government officials. Don't think that the poor and people from rural areas don't matter. . . they do matter. . . the facilities must be provided and available to all.

S5: to me, very simple. Keep your promises. Implement programs that could help the rakyat. Be transparent.

S3: My hopes for the future. . . 4 things... more transparency, no more corruption, lower cost of living and better living conditions like Norway and Sweden. Improve government programs so everyone can progress and prosper. . . .so the children will have a better life.

S2: You walk the talk..we want the government to be like NIKE, ok, just do it. You promised, now action. We are here. Our support as rakyat is unwavering..make life better, safer and richer for all of us..my only hope. . . is for the government to be honest, fair, and make all the good things happen!

The findings of the study revealed that the professionals were totally engaged in keeping track with government programs and were aware of many of the programs that benefitted them. They were very realistic in the ways they perceived the government programs. They could see the positive sides of the programs as well as those that need to be further improved. They were practical in their outlook and this standpoint led them to be more engaged.

They expressed support for the programs and recognized the limitations. This is in line with Faridah et.al (Ibrahim et al., 2019) and Nalick et al. (Nalick et al., 2016). Faridah et.al (Ibrahim et al., 2019) found that youth in Malaysia expressed support but identified weaknesses of the government's programs. Nalick et al. (2016) suggested that there is a point of intersection between the government and the stakeholders on certain programs and activities. This will encourage acceptability among the stakeholders which in turn will sustain collaborative relationships.

The findings from this study are consistent with earlier studies in this area (Freeman and McVea, 2001)(Greenwood, 2007)(Ihugba and Osuji, 2011)(Ibrahim et al., 2019) which proved that with strong stakeholder engagement, both government and society will benefit. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the possibility of stakeholders being disengaged. This could happen should the programs initiated by the government did not meet their expectation and be of benefit to them.

The stakeholders have expressed that they can freely voice out their views and concerns. They were confident in being actively participating and using different channels of communication be it social media or face to face interaction. This study has added a new insight where professionals as stakeholders were assertive in their expression of views compared to the youth as stakeholders. The youth, in an earlier study

by Faridah et.al.,(Ibrahim et al., 2019), dominantly utilized only social media as medium of expression.

It was also found that the stakeholders were involved in government's programs because they wanted their voices to be heard so that the government can take appropriate action. This finding is line with a study by Faridah et.al (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Lawler and Worley (Lawler and Worley, 2006) argued that in order for organisations to have positive impact on stakeholder engagement, people need to be empowered. They highlighted that the level of involvement can be increased when the highest possible level of power is given to the people. This then will lead to a maximum level of engagement by the stakeholders.

The stakeholders were willing to contribute because the ultimate goal is to realize their dreams and benefit them. This supports Saks (Saks, 2006) and the earlier work of Kahn (Kahn, 1990) who suggested that people are more likely to exchange their engagement for resources and benefits provided by their government. This is also in line with the suggestion from Faridah et al. (Ibrahim et al., 2019) who mentioned the reciprocal obligation between people and government.

In this study, one of the dominant findings is the expectations of the stakeholder towards the government. The findings illustrated that people expected the government's initiatives to match their values, demands and aspirations for a better future especially for the younger generation.

Understanding stakeholder's perception towards the government programs is absolutely significant as the government-people collaboration will result in a win-win outcome. Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that the government consistently find alternative ways to actively engage with the stakeholders where inclusivity is not side lined. Upon receiving the feedback from stakeholders, it is hoped that the government will be proactive in addressing the problems and making strategic moves to ensure continuous, sustainable improvements for the future of the nation.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The study dwells on the perception of professionals as stakeholders and their engagement towards government programs. The study found that stakeholder engagement is critical for successful implementation of programs by a country, government or company. Engagement will empower people to contribute and put forth necessary suggestion for the betterment of the implemented government programs and future initia-

tives by the government.

The stakeholders identified government programs from six sectors six sectors namely transportation, education, housing, employment, healthcare, and economy.

Several stakeholders reacted positively towards the programs. They felt that the programs have benefitted them in many ways. Nevertheless, there was also a negative reaction regarding the minimal impact of the programs on the stakeholders. Despite the negative reaction, the stakeholders were very attentive and concerned towards the government's initiatives.

The results of this study clearly indicated the resourcefulness of the professionals in information seeking as well actively giving feedback regarding the government programs through multifarious channels. They believed their active engagement would prompt the government to take immediate action. Being passive was not an option.

Several profound findings in the forms of stakeholders' expectations and aspirations were identified. Close to the hearts of the stakeholders were transparency, inclusiveness, fairness, corruption free practices, lower cost of living, better living conditions, safe and a prosperous nation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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