EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTHS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN KUCHING, SARAWAK.

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Abstract

Environmental threats such as climate change, global warming, pollution, and land degradation are constantly increasing, and youths are predicted to be greatly impacted by its repercussions. As a result, more organisations have acknowledged and taken the initiative to empower and elevate skills and capacities of youths as leaders. With many different types of youth-based programs in place, the review explores how these programs have impacted the youths in Kuching, Sarawak. Furthermore, the review extends its investigation into understanding the methodologies of such programs and the placement and roles of youths within its proceedings. Methodology of the review includes qualitative methods such as social surveys and analysing and reviewing of written publications namely journals, articles, and reports. This paper highlights the effectiveness of components in youth-based programs from both government and non-governmental organisations to derive applicable strategies. The findings of this review benefits environment-based organisations, government bodies and institutions of education.

Keywords: youth, leadership, empowerment, values, environmental issues, environmental protection
Introduction

According to United Nations Youth (2013), youths are best described to be the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Based on the United Nations, this group is commonly categorised between ages of 15 and 24 years. In Malaysia, youth are known as people aged 15 to 30 years old and make up about 45.8% of the total population (Haliza, 2020). However, Sarawak still defines its youth as those between the ages of 15 to 40 and they make up approximately 43.5% of the total population in Sarawak (Ministry of Youth and Sports Sarawak, 2019). Youths will be the major group reaping the consequences of current environmental decisions (Youth and Climate Change, 2013). It is necessary that youths learn about current environmental issues, be included in environmental conservation and to develop sustainable solutions.

There are several environmental issues in Malaysia, including natural disasters such as flood, haze and drought which have led to negative impacts. The major environmental issues in Malaysia include climate change, deforestation, pollution and waste management (Haliza, 2020). Climate change has become more apparent with the incursion of major floods throughout eight states in Malaysia in December 2021 (Yusof, 2021). It directly affects the availability of basic necessities and resources such as clean water, nutritious food, secure living environments and other ecosystem services. To tackle these advancing issues, collective governmental action paired with conscious and informed efforts by individuals and corporations are needed to strengthen the adaptive capabilities and resilience of youths especially in developing countries.

The Sarawak state government has promised to always prioritise environmental sustainability and want to have the highest quality of environment for the Sarawakians (Goh, 2021). However, based on the online survey by World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia (WWF-Malaysia) in 2021, most Sarawakians hope to see politicians attribute more attention to environmental conservation (WWF-Malaysia, 2021). They are also interested to learn more about water pollution, waste management, loss of forest, climate change and Covid-19 pandemic and zoonotic diseases. Concurrently, there are also several groups in Sarawak that are currently working to empower youths for environmental conservation. These include Wildlife Conservation Society Malaysia Program (WCS-Malaysia), WWF-Malaysia, Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC), Kuching Beach Cleaners (KBC) and Sarawak Eco-Warriors.
(SEW). These groups actively engage with Sarawakian youths and provide platforms for them to volunteer.

This paper reviews the existing conditions of youth empowerment in Kuching, Sarawak and reviews the effectiveness of youth-based programs and opportunities.

Methodology

This review includes qualitative methods such as social surveys and analysing published reports such as journals, articles, and non-peer reviewed reports. Within the social survey aspect, a virtual survey was designed through google forms (see Appendix) and was distributed to different organisations and groups through email and mobile messaging. The majority of the respondents were provided with the survey link as they were known through previous environmental-based engagement programs and activities. Surveys were conducted pro bono as respondents did not receive any form of reward or benefit upon completion. These respondents were also encouraged to share the survey with their friends, family and acquaintances. As for the review of publications, information was sourced through a variety of mediums from journal articles to official statements from formal institutions such as United Nations and Swinburne University, and news articles from local news organisations such as Borneo Post. The collected information is then analysed to find relationships and points of interest so as to conclude (where possible), their potential application in Kuching, Sarawak.

Results

Approximately 200 people were approached for this project, ‘Survey on youth empowerment in environmental conservation in Kuching, Sarawak’. Of these, 36 responded (18%). 22 (61.1%) respondents indicated that they were currently working, eight (22.2%) were from the business sector and four (11.1%) were from government agencies. The rest of the respondents were students 14 (38.9%) students aged 18 to 24 years.

In terms of age ranges, the biggest sample came from those aged 25 to 40 years (15 individuals, 41.7%), followed by 14 (38.9%) individuals aged 18 to 24 years and 7 (19.4%) people who were 41 to 55 years old. 91.7% (33) of these respondents are either currently living in Kuching or have been to Kuching anytime within the last five years. At the same time, 19 (52.8%) respondents indicated that they were affiliated with groups that are environmentally conscious.
From the 22 working respondents, 9 (40.9%) of them said that their jobs require them to actively engage with youths.

Regarding perceptions of youth empowerment, 28 (77.8%) responded by agreeing that youths are empowered when ‘youths are actively taking leadership roles’ and ‘youths have access for development and capacity building’. In a positive outlook, 14 respondents (63.6%) indicated that within their school, club or association, youths do have opportunities to take part in leadership roles. In the workplace, this is reflected in groups such as the organisation’s Young Professional Club or when they take up positions such as team leaders or project leaders. In order to better prepare youths for these roles, 29 (80.6%) respondents agreed that their school, club or association provides youths with opportunities to develop their skills. These youths are empowered through opportunities in leadership of key roles and positions, as well as funding for youth-led initiatives.

**Figure 1**: Perceptions of youth empowerment in Kuching, 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you think youth empowerment is?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youths actively taking up leadership roles</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths having opportunities for development and capacity building</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths actively contributing to society</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths having access to information</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths having access to professional networks</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths having the right medium, channel to voice their opinions to agencies, regulating bodies and ministries (written response)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths voice out their concerns and aspirations through social media and other means (written response)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide youth with journey to understand the knowledge of environment science (written response)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths initializing grassroot action and movement (written response)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The 36 respondents were provided the option to check the texts that best described their perception on youth empowerment. They were also given the option to write their own perceptions. They were not limited to one response.*
In the question ‘How can youths contribute to conserving the environment’, respondents were asked to provide their own answers. Several responses (33.3%) reflected on the need for individual efforts, particularly in waste management programs, tree planting activities, and lifestyle changes. (27.8%) also mentioned the need for more youth engagement through advocacy efforts, leadership and utilizing youth’s ability for communication.

Based on the Kuching environment, 29 (80.6%) respondents indicated that knowledge sharing and awareness programs are highly available, followed by 27 (75%) responses on volunteering opportunities and 25 responses on (69.4%) school-based programs.

With regards to ability and skills training however, only 13 (36.1%) respondents indicated that such opportunities were available for youths. Thus, there appears to be limited opportunities to understand or develop needed skills for long-term efforts in environmental conservation advocacy.

Apart from skills training only 44.4% said that youths have access to participate in panels and discussions. Several respondents mentioned that youth engagement in environmental conservation is relatively short-term commitments and perhaps even considered non-consequential as it is frequently perceived as a pastime which is also useful for university or position applicants. Concurrently, environmental-based programs are also perceived to be beneficial for youths as it develops critical thinking, networking skills, and other soft skills.

Although the majority of the respondents agree that youth programs are useful for the community, 23 (63.9%) individuals said that there are not enough opportunities in Kuching. The respondents perceive that the majority of these programs come from NGOs (83.3%) and clubs (77.8%). There is a lack of awareness on both local and international initiatives as only 47.2% are aware of such programs. Additionally, there is also a lack of participation in youth coalitions as only 13 individuals (36.1%) were aware of such groups.

**Figure 2**: Survey responses on perceptions of availability of environmental-based programs for youths in Kuching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGO programs (local and international) (eg. WWF, Malaysian Nature Society)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey proceeds to question whether youths have ever been invited for programs only for show and the responses pointed to quite an even split between responses. These average responses indicate the presence of tokenism in some youth programs. Tokenism refers to the practice of including persons or elements into a program only for perfunctory or symbolic needs, this could either be in terms of either lack of representation, information, or participation.

**Figure 3**: Survey results on the representation of youth in youth-based programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you experienced or seen any youth programs where youth were invited only for show?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

Young people even around the ages of seven to 15 have the opportunity to learn about the environment through several avenues ranging from subjects in their education syllabus to participating in environmental clubs such as *Kelab Pencinta Alam* (Love for the Environment Club) in primary and secondary schools. As they move into the youth (above 15 years of age),
they are then exposed to other environmental related programs such as field-based conservation education programs in national parks, to beach cleaning projects and tree planting programs. To amplify the importance of valuing nature amongst youths, local government, NGOs, and groups have taken to training teachers in creating more meaningful experiences.

Among the non-governmental organisations (NGO) and institutions of education, WCS-Malaysia and Swinburne University of Technology developed a teaching manual ‘The Next 100’ (Swinburne University, 2017) for training on conservation education. This manual uses the environment and conservation as a means of teaching and improving English language. The manual was then used by 1000 American Fulbright Teaching Assistants and their Malaysian counterparts (100 American volunteers and 100 Malaysian counterparts each year, for five years, i.e. between 2014-2019). With the dissemination and use of the manual, the group also committed to conducting several specialist, 1-week teaching workshops for the interested Malaysian and Fulbright Teaching Assistants. These workshops incorporated different pedagogies of teaching from classroom activities to outdoor activities which actively encourage creative thinking and problem solving skills regarding the environment.

Upon completion of compulsory education, youths are then exposed to different types of environmental based activities and livelihoods such as skills and knowledge training workshops, fellowships and networking programs, and environmental-based jobs. International government programs such as Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) under the U.S. Mission to ASEAN actively promotes cross-border cooperation to solve regional and global challenges. According to the U.S. Mission to ASEAN (2013), to provide equal opportunity and inclusive development, YSEALI covers the costs for programs such as cultural exchange programs to America, virtual learning courses, Southeast Asia regional workshops, mentorships as well as opportunities for grant funding. Concurrently, the ASEAN Center for Biodiversity (2019) also works to empower youth to conserve biodiversity through similar programs through ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme (AYBP). By working with partners such as the Global Youth Biodiversity Network and European Union, AYBP encourages youth-based leadership through experiential programs such as the Youth Biodiversity Leaders and Youth Internships in Protected Areas in ASEAN.

Although these programs are readily available both from local and international sources, results from the survey have shown a lack of awareness on such programs, especially on those that are
led by government agencies. This lack of awareness may be caused by the lack of representation of concern for environmental issues by political bodies. As said in WWF-Malaysia’s poll on aspirations of political parties in Sarawak ‘88.6 per cent opined that our politicians do not attribute enough attention to the environment.’ (WWF-Malaysia, 2021).

There is also a view that government-led or government-organised programs may be less appealing if it has elements of tokenism. According to Fletcher (2015) and Spajic et al. (2019), to avoid tokenism in youth empowerment, more themes can be introduced in terms of consultations to obtain better representation, facilitation to develop youths, accountability to audit and access meaningful engagement, and evidence that is readily available.

Conclusion

As youths are extremely sensitive to climate change and other environmental issues, their roles have become instrumental in safeguarding the environment. To achieve this, groups need to consider more strategic approaches in engaging and developing youths to take up leading roles. Listed below are several recommendations on how youth empowerment standards in Kuching can be increased.

1. **Collaboration between groups for youth-based engagements**
   Through collaborative efforts, groups can leverage on skills, funding, outreach, and positions of different groups and entities. The distribution of support will allow for the development and implementation of more successful ground-level programs. This representation of groups may also be more appealing especially for youths who are looking to obtain co-curriculum credits for university or work applications.

2. **Streamlining of goals between local government agencies, NGOs and businesses**
   Once groups have effectively developed a mutual understanding on how they can benefit each other, goals can then be streamlined and developed into long term strategies. These goals can also be linked with national and international goals to create greater recognition and support for ongoing efforts.

3. **Multi-level approaches**
   Youths being a highly diverse age group may possess a wide variety of different skills, talents and ambitions. In order to better develop and harness these abilities, engagement efforts should be considered in possible pathways starting from the student phase in secondary school / compulsory education to those furthering their education and those who are entering the workforce. As this holistic approach creates continuous
engagement, youths will be constantly encouraged to value and contribute to environmental conservation efforts.

4. Developing pathways for youth in environmental matters

By providing foundation knowledge and information on the possible career pathways and possibilities, youths will be more willing and able to make informed decisions. Not only does this increase the youths’ knowledge on skills requirement but it also creates a higher supply of future workers and leaders who are passionate about conserving nature.

5. Increased opportunities for youth representation

If the previous recommendations are successful, youths will have better skills and awareness to better represent their aspirations in discussions and proceedings. Groups can support youths by providing opportunities and positions for youth to actively represent in delegations and planning. Through incorporation of youth leadership in the development of youth-targeted programs, youth-centered tokenism is expected to decrease.

Through these recommendations, youths are expected to be able to think critically, develop solutions, and apply their knowledge into their daily decision making process. The overall objective is not only to develop youths to champion environmental conservation but to create a working ecosystem to effectively integrate youths into local ongoing environmental conservation efforts.

Acknowledgements

Following the completion of this review, KBC would like to acknowledge support from the Global Environment Facility and United Nations Development Programme. In 2021, these two organisations provided KBC and SEW with financial assistance and skills training needed to empower youths to champion environmental conservation in Sarawak. The support comes under a grant titled ‘Youth & Climate Innovation Programme’. Through this grant, youths are engaged in a series of development programs from 1. Awareness and initiation, 2. Mentorship and knowledge sharing, and 3. Documentation and archival of youth values.
References

ASEAN Center for Biodiversity. 2019. ASEAN youth diversity programme. ASEAN Center for Biodiversity at https://aybp.aseanbiodiversity.org/, accessed on 28 December 2021.


Appendix
Survey on youth empowerment in environmental conservation in Kuching, Sarawak.
To participate in this survey, respondents were required to click on a google forms link and login through an existing Gmail account. Once they successfully navigate to the google form, they would need to read and agree to a disclaimer, then provide their phone numbers and emails. Below are questions asked during the survey, respondents were asked to only answer the survey once.
Note: This survey consists of several multiple choice [MC], checkbox [CB], and subjective [SJ] questions. The questions may either be specific to one type of question or be a combination of two types. Descriptions of these questions are listed as:

| MC - Respondents may only select one answer. |
| CB - Respondents may select more than one answer. |
| SJ - Respondents may submit their own answer. |

1. What sector do you work in? [MC,SJ]
   a. I am a student
   b. NGO
   c. Government
   d. Business
   e. Other

2. What do you think youth empowerment is? (Tick all that apply) [CB,SJ]
   a. Youths actively taking up leadership roles
   b. Youths having access to information
   c. Youths having opportunities for development and capacity building
   d. Youths having access to professional networks
   e. Youths actively contributing to society
   f. Other
3. Are you currently living in Kuching or have been in Kuching anytime over the last 5 years? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. What is your age? [MC]
   a. 18 - 24 years old
   b. 25 - 40 years old
   c. 41 - 55 years old
   d. 56 years old and above

**Professional perspective**
This section on 'professional perspective' focuses on your professional experience in a workplace or position. This includes any jobs or profession regardless of type of employment may it be freelance, contract, or full-time.

1. Does your workplace actively participate in or organises environmental-related activities? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not relevant (students)

2. Does your job require you to actively engage with youths? (Anyone from age 15-25 years old) [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not relevant (students)

3. If your workplace actively engages youths, do these youths actively take up leadership roles? Please describe their leadership roles. [SJ, Optional]

**Personal perspective**
This section on 'personal perspective' focuses on your life experiences outside your workplace. Among other experiences, this includes volunteering, interactions with social
groups/clubs, and communal gatherings. Additionally, all questions should be answered based on your perceptions and experiences as an individual.

1. Does your school / club / association regularly provide opportunities for youths to learn or develop their abilities and skills in general? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. Are you affiliated with any group that are environmentally conscious? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. If you answered 'Yes' to be above question, do youths play any leadership roles within the group? [MC, Optional]
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. How does this group actively support the growth and development of youths? [SJ, Optional]

6. In your opinion, how can youths (anyone from age 15-25 years old) contribute to conserving the environment? [SJ]

**Programs for youths**
This section on 'programs for youths' focuses on your experiences, insights and observations on youth-based programs and activities. These youth based programs include programs that are either developed for youth participation or have elements that are fully or partially developed by youths.

1. In your opinion, what types of environmental-based programs are available for youths in Kuching? [CB, SJ]
   a. Abilities and skills training
   b. Knowledge sharing and awareness talks
c. Youth panels and discussions
d. School-based workshops
e. Volunteering opportunities
f. Other

2. In your opinion, what are available sources for the programs as mentioned above? [CB, SJ]
   a. NGO programs (local and international) (eg. WWF, Malaysian Nature Society)
b. Government initiatives (local) (eg. Sarawak Forestry Corporation)
c. Government initiatives (international) (eg. ASEAN Center For Biodiversity, YSEALI)
d. Youth coalitions (eg. Global Youth Biodiversity Network)
e. Clubs (eg. Swinburne Green Club, Pencinta Alam Sekitar)
f. Other

3. Please share how you think these opportunities benefit our youths? [SJ]

4. In your opinion, do we have sufficient opportunities for youth development in Kuching? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No

5. Have you experienced or seen any youth programs where youth were invited only for show? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Maybe

6. Are programs for youths beneficial for the community? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Maybe
7. In Kuching, are environmental youth programs in line with local or international environmental targets/goals? [MC]
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Maybe

Below are several quotes which were extracted directly from the survey. Names of the respondents were not collected to maintain anonymity. No changes were made to correct their English grammar. The quotes were thus verbatim,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Quotes / Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If your workplace actively engages youths, do these youths actively take up leadership roles?</td>
<td>we have YPC - Young Professional Committee where young staffs take leadership role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>become a leader of some activities that had been conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, as team leads, project leads etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depends on many factors eg. activity type, location, timespan of engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For example, they are a part of school environment club for school recycling programmes i.e. PALS CLUB. Aside from that, the youths are participating actively in a solid waste segregation programme actively held by their respective schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, how can youths (anyone from age 15-25 years old) contribute to conserving the environment?</td>
<td>Use the product that can be recycled. Don’t throw rubbish anywhere, if there are no rubbish bin besides, just put it in the pocket and the it when we saw the rubbish bin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More relatable exposure/education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aside from spreading awareness, the youths can participate actively in events such as cleaning the forest etc. Aside from that, these youths should practice recycling habits and proper littering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>habits, using Japan as an example for cleanliness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First of all giving chances for youths to participate in organising environment conservation activities will give them a lot of motivation.</strong> This not only raise their awareness on environment related issues, but also give them opportunities to use their knowledge and creativity to create fresh ideas about different ways to promote environment conservation. Organise campaigns maybe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offering/promoting volunteer and internship roles to the youth can receive a good response as there aren't many environment-related roles in Sarawak/Malaysia where you don't have to pay to volunteer</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hmm I guess participate in more activities in recycling, programs for beach cleanings, replanting of tress and plants etc. But just simple everyday things such as not asking for plastic cutlery when taking away food, or reducing the use of plastic bags by using resuable ones. It's good to start somewhere.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actively participating in local/regional groups dedicated to conservation, as well as small-scale individual efforts such as reducing family consumption of single-use plastics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Through more environmentally responsible lifestyle, volunteering, seeking online and offline opportunities to learn about conservation and to share with others about conservation, participating in and/or organising activities and programmes related to environmental education/conservation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepping up to take leadership roles, creating more activities and initiatives for the involvement.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By encouraging people using social media as nowadays people</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. By leading in activities. 2. Actively participating in activities that support conservation of the environment. 3. Educating themselves on the importance of the subject matter and 4. Getting more information on the subject matter (information is power). 5. Continue to create awareness within the community.

Voting for the right political parties (even if it seems environmental issues aren't often openly discussed in the parties programmes.) trying to put pressure on politicians to force on some crucial green initiatives. Protest/demonstrate in front of business with poor environmental practices (stand in front of shop with signs that say "no to plastic", no to straws...)

They first have to be aware of why they must be conserving the environment and be motivated to do it. Then they can start by spreading awareness on social media and contributing manpower to environmental programs etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do environmental based opportunities benefit youth?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing a chance to learn new skills and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide hands on experiences, connect youth with professionals and like minded people and build their capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths are the leaders of the future, providing these opportunities will empower them with experiences, network and knowledge to lead Sarawak towards a sustainable future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help us to engage critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They give the youths more exposure to what is really happening with the environment, and what truly is causing the damage. This is because there are a lot of misconceptions out there. It also allows youths to be hands-on and practical about contributing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their efforts -- learning through the experience.

This will increase their knowledge thus leading toward greater awareness and action plan.

Well, in one way it will make our lives more colourful. The other way is of course let us know and act on environment issues, knowing that the world that we will be living in the future is getting worst and we have to do something about it.