

YOUTH INCLINATION IN AGROPRENEURSHIP: STRATEGIES OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SMALLHOLDING FARMING ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT: *Despite the aggressive growth of the agricultural sector and rigorous agricultural development program in Sarawak, the number of youths participating in the industry is still fairly low. Most farmers are often said to be left behind in achieving success in the economic development in Sarawak, while most of them are only interested in farming for their livelihood and are less concerned about the economic development. Thus, this research endures promoting vital strategies for the agricultural sector, especially in smallholding plantation development based on farmer's perception. A qualitative data with phenomenological approach was conducted to allow an in-depth understanding and deep involvement of youth farmers as much as possible. A data analysis of 5 semi-structured interviews on youth agropreneurs was conducted at an agreeable place to the participants. A sampling method was done via both purposive and snowball samplings. The emerging themes revealed several strategies towards proactive solutions for more youth engagement in smallholding plantation, which included parental role, government/ private assistance, setting up a role model, and self-directives. The result shown will provide useful information for government authority, yield useful insight for agriculture agencies and help to formulate the action plan for the youth development strategies. Moreover, the result can also provide a clear picture for young individuals and eradicate the 'Cinderella syndromes' amongst the youth toward agricultural industry as a whole.*

Keywords: Agriculture, Sarawak, Agricultural development, Smallholder, Agropreneurship

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has become a significant agenda to a number of Asian countries including Malaysia. As cited in Adekunle et al. [1], for over the years, the agricultural industry has been facing extensive threats due to the ageing of the farming community, reduction in the number of farms for agriculture, and farmland being converted to housing and industrialization. The productivity level of the aged farmers cannot meet the increasing demand for food and fibre of the rapidly growing population [1]. Besides, the nature of agricultural sector as a '3D' job causes youth to be less interested in entering the industry as compared to other industries. In order to cultivate the interest of youth in agricultural entrepreneurship, Malaysian government, through its development programs constantly incorporated the youth into the industry and provide capital facilities. Although many development programs have been made in order to eradicate the norms toward agricultural sectors, however, many, especially youths, tend to migrate to the city leaving behind agricultural land into the hands of aged farmers. Hence, this study is conducted to formulate more intensive strategies as well as to provide an insight for agricultural development from youth farmers' perceptions, perspectives and understandings toward more engagement of youth in smallholding plantation crops.

Issues on Youth Participation in Agriculture

Malaysian is generally driven by a service-oriented industry whereby agriculture was placed as the third ranks of government economic priority [2]. Nonetheless, it is still a net food importer and has never achieved a food trade balance surplus [3]. Thus, there is the need to empower the nation's human resources in order to cope with the never-ending demand for the food production and the increment of the human population in the country. However, the general insight about the agricultural sector as a low class and

degrading job causes many youths to reject agriculture as one of their job prospects. This is supported by Hall [4] who stated that in many developing countries, youth participation in agriculture is fairly low, due to the unattractive environment as a result of risks, inefficiency, costs and its labour-intensive nature. In addition, parents who experience the challenging farming life wanted their children to have non-agricultural occupations. It is fairly obvious that the environment in which you are raised can affect how you think and behave like an adult. Roe's Theory of Occupational Choice [5] predicts that occupational selection is based on individual differences and interaction between children and parents. Statistically, only 15 per cent of youths were involved in the agricultural sector, as compared to the total number of youths which is 12.5 million or 43.8 per cent [6]. Agriculture has been associated with the production of essential food crops as well as entrepreneurship as it can generate income and is also perceived as a dimension which offers agricultural sustainability [7]. However, Hunter [8] stated that farming, forestry, and fishing are menial works that most of the young people are not willing to experience, thus this job is left to foreigners and older people. With the blooming demand for agricultural produce, this sector requires more resources to boost up its production in order to keep pace with the ever-increasing demand for its products. This resource includes human capital, where it is important to have more people to be engaged in this industry especially youths.

In 2017, the price of commodities such as pepper, oil palm and rubber surged, giving most of the smallholding farmers a high raise of income. For example, currently, the price of SMR CV is at 910.21 cent/kg compared to 714.69 cents/kg in June 2016 [9]. This allows the smallholding farmers to benefit from the price increment. Moreover, in 2010, Malaysia was renowned as the fifth largest pepper producer

with the total exports of 14,040 tonnes (RM190 million) where it had been cultivated extensively in Sarawak, Johor, and Sabah [10]. For instance, oil palm and timber or even rubber, being the main sources of raw materials will lead to more manufacturing industries, creating more job opportunities. As a result, the national income level, as well as the people's standard of living, is improved. The fast rate of development in agriculture sector offers a progressive outlook, as well as increased motivation, for development. Hence, it helps to create a good atmosphere for overall economic development. Therefore, economic development relies on the agriculture growth rate as a whole.

2. METHOD

This study involved eight in-depth interviews with youth farmers in Sarawak. The samplings were made using both purposive and snowball samplings. Each interview was qualitatively and manually analysed which involved searching for recurring themes across a data set. For the purpose of this study, the thematic analysis was driven by a few particular analytic questions. In this case, questions were emphasized on the strategies towards more youth participation in agriculture. The data were transcribed and translated into layman's terms. The themes, when identified, coded, and analysed were an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set in the interviews.

Themes or patterns within data will be identified as a theoretical or deductive or 'top-down' way [11]. The analysis is driven by the researchers' theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus, more explicitly analyst driven. For the purpose of this study, themes were identified as a latent or interpretative level, an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications, often in relation to previous literature. The researchers will identify and examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organises and describes dataset in detail. In conclusion, the thematic analysis will be utilised because the area of investigation is new and the focus of the study is the strategies of youth engagement in smallholding plantation crops.

Strategies for Engaging Youth

Clearly, for the participants, engaging youths to enter the agricultural industry is indeed a very challenging thing especially when they were not raised in an agricultural environment. However, after interviewing all of the eight participants, all of them have consensus opinions regarding attracting more participation amongst youths in the industry. The strategies can be further themed into (1) Parental role (2) Government initiatives (3) Being a role-model (4) Self-directive.

Theme 1: Parental Role

The majority of the participants highlighted that the parents can play their role in exposing and influencing more participation of youths in agricultural activity. One participant responded when she was asked about her opinion on how to attract more youths in agriculture:

"...they should learn from their parents about agriculture, and parents should give support, for example, allowing them to join workshops, etc. Then maybe, young people will be interested"-(Mawen)

Another two participants also acknowledged that parents or family plays an important role when being asked the same question:

"Like the saying goes, "kalau dari kecil masih jadi bukit, tapi kalau dah besar akan jadi gunung", this indicated that, it is much easier to educate them when they are still children and more difficult when they have already grown up."-Bonny

Theme 2: Government Initiative

Some of the participants agreed that the government or authorized bodies should provide assistance in terms of marketing channel or grants to spur the effectiveness and efficiency of their activities in agriculture:

"Yes, if there is an authorized body helping to promote our products."-Mawen

One participant also suggested that the government bodies promote the agriculture sector:

"If they want to organize the expo, all agriculture agencies should be gathered at one place to have a showcase like MAHA. Therefore, we can expose the young people to agriculture."- Bonny

This is supported by one participant:

"Another way is, the government agencies should go to schools, giving exposure to students, especially to those in form 5, about the agricultural industry, so that they will get interested. So maybe, after having their SPM, they will further their studies in agriculture or participate in agricultural courses with agricultural agencies. This should be nurtured since they are young."- Douglas

Theme 3: Being a Role Model

Most people are receptive to the notion that they can be anything they want, but in terms of real influence on the choice of careers, visual examples speak louder than words. As one participant suggested, he had to become proof as a successful young farmer to promote more participation in agriculture among youths:

"We have to show to others, that with the government assistance, such as incentives and subsidies, we will be more motivated and carry out all the work in our farm. From this, young people will become interested and will approach us for advice."- Sarkawi

This is supported by another participant:

"... I was also inspired by successful farmers. Today, I consider myself as a successful agropreneur. I can help to motivate the young people and nurture their interest, especially those who "tinggal di bawah tempurung". They will come to us when they know we are already successful and we will share with them our experience."- Bonny

Interestingly, Addy stated that shared experiences can be a way to arouse interest in young people, which is by setting himself up as an example:

"I might not be able to conduct a training program for them, but I can personally share my experiences on anything they want for me to share."

He also added that with all of the sharing process, young people might get a clear picture of the real situation and get interested in the field.

Theme 4: Self -directive

Some participants suggested that youth themselves should find their way to understand the importance of the agricultural sector, while not solely depending on incentives or other people to keep on spoon-feeding them. This is supported by Bonny who said, "*Nowadays, everything is within our fingertips, one can search and look for information everywhere in order to equip and stimulate their interest toward one particular thing. They should equip themselves with appropriate knowledge so they can do a lot of things.*"

Another participant also suggested self-participatory amongst youths:

"In my opinion, the best way is to try first to enter the industry and from there, they can gain the experiences."-Addy

3. DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the interviews, it can be asserted that parents play pivotal roles in building up an agropreneurship values in youths. This is because; children always reflect what their parents have shown them. This finding is consistent with what Roe [5] emphasized in her theory that parenting styles and a child's psychological needs can influence the careers among which a person chooses as an adult. As such, it is more apparent that youths who came from the farming family tend to be involved in agriculture, although it is just in a very small-scale nature. Whether or not the parents were from the farming family, as parents, they should encourage their children to succeed in whatever field they are in. Sadly, in some cases, parents themselves embedded the negative perception toward the agricultural sector, which became the reason why many youths nowadays have that stigma to perceive agricultural as a non-profitable activity. One participant stated that parents should nurture the new generation to get involved in farming activities or else, there will be no development for the industry. This indicates that there is a need for the younger generation to drive the agricultural sector while parents simultaneously stimulate and nurture their children toward the industry. However, parents alone would not be enough to stimulate the interest of youths to participate in the industry when there is the need of assistance from both of the government and private bodies to help these young farmers on the operation, as well as giving them an in-depth understanding of the importance of the agricultural sector. As such, educational programs or expos should be established in more innovative and creative ways to promote more interesting activities for the youths to participate. Some of the participants stated that setting up role models could be a good example to gain confidence from the youth since action always speaks louder than words! This can be a good indication that involvement in agricultural sector does not necessarily label one in the third class people, however, one can actually become a noble by doing the farming activity. This is supported by Saad, Selvadurai, Isnin, Basaruddin, & Mansur [12] for a country to achieve economic stability, the agricultural sector must be vibrant and

the youths encouraged, imbibing farming as a noble profession. Lastly, the youth themselves should actively look for information and seek knowledge regarding the industry, instead of sticking to or upholding the negative stigmatization made by other people who are not even in the industry. The community and older people who are already in the industry should recognize the potentials of these youngsters while the youths themselves should not solely depend on external assistance or stimulants (parent, government/private or even mentor). In other words, the youth should try to enter the industry to get the taste of agricultural environment before making mere judgements over what it actually feels like to be in the agricultural industry. Only then, can they conclude whether they still have that negative perception, or they already can get rid of the 'Cinderella syndromes' amongst themselves?

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is found that several conclusions can be made; the several strategies suggested by young farmers upon realizing the agricultural importance, which is, firstly, a parental role especially in building up the interest of youths toward entering the industry. Secondly, government and private bodies should also take part in promoting the agricultural sector to the younger generation. Setting up role models as an example to secure the confidence of youngsters is also at the top of the list. Finally, yet most importantly, the youth themselves should be more self-directive toward removing the general stigma by seeking knowledge and self-participating in the industry to understand more about agricultural sector.

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