

Entrepreneurship as an Economic Development Vehicle for Rural Communities

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to identify the role of entrepreneurship and its effectiveness in uplifting the socio-economic status and alleviating poverty in rural areas in the Northern region of Malaysia, specifically in Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak. The study measures the outcomes of entrepreneur development programs, focusing on income increases, job creation, promotion of digitalization, and business expansion beyond local borders. The research examines various factors and interventions made through the entrepreneurship program in relation to socio-economic status, poverty alleviation, income levels, job creation, and business expansion. Data collected from 2019 to 2024, fully verified through both qualitative and quantitative methods, indicate significant positive outcomes from the implemented programs. The study assesses specific strategies such as profiling studies, customized training programs, provision of starter kits, community-based approaches, and the establishment of supply chains tailored to the unique needs of each area. The findings conclude that targeted and context-specific entrepreneurship interventions significantly contribute to sustainable socio-economic development in rural areas. Key success factors include local and federal cooperation, support from financing bodies, and tailored programs, driving long-term economic resilience and reducing socioeconomic disparities, particularly among women, youth, and indigenous communities. This paper contributes to the understanding of the factors that encourage rural entrepreneurship and their broader impacts on socio-economic development, providing valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to enhance the effectiveness of rural entrepreneurship programs in Malaysia and beyond.

Keywords: Sustainability, Rural Community, Socioeconomic disparity, Economic Resilience

1.0 Introduction

Entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a catalyst for economic growth, particularly in regions with limited opportunities like rural areas. In Malaysia's northern region, encompassing Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak, concerted efforts have been undertaken to address socio-economic challenges through entrepreneurship development. The Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) has spearheaded these initiatives, aiming to stimulate economic and social progress within the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER). Among NCIA's programs that bridge the socioeconomic gaps is the empowerNCER Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Development Program. Launched in 2019 and set to conclude in 2024, this program seeks to create high-income communities by equipping individuals with in-demand skills and entrepreneurial knowledge, supporting both individual aspirations and broader economic objectives. Ultimately, the program aligns with Malaysia's national goal of achieving high-income nation status. Central to empowerNCER are its two core components: Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Development. The program's overarching objective is to enhance participants' skill sets and entrepreneurial capabilities, thereby fostering sustainable income generation and contributing to long-term economic resilience.

2.0 Background of the Study

This study delves into the effectiveness of entrepreneurship development programs in transforming rural communities in the Northern region of Malaysia. By examining the impact on income, employment, digital adoption, and market expansion, the research seeks to understand the broader socio-economic outcomes. Data collected between 2019 and 2024, analyzed through qualitative and quantitative methods, reveals significant positive impacts from program implementation. Key strategies, including tailored training, starter kit provision, community engagement, and supply chain development, have contributed to these outcomes. Findings underscore the importance of targeted, context-specific approaches in driving sustainable rural development. Successful program implementation is attributed to collaboration between government levels, financial support, and program adaptability, ultimately benefiting women, youth, and indigenous communities.

2.1 Definition Of Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship encompasses the process of identifying opportunities, creating value, and assuming risks to establish and grow a business. It is a dynamic force that drives innovation, job creation, and economic growth. In the context of rural development, entrepreneurship offers a pathway to overcome economic challenges and build resilient communities.

2.2 Importance Of Entrepreneurship In Rural Development

Entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in fostering economic growth and reducing poverty in rural areas. By creating employment opportunities, generating income, and stimulating innovation, entrepreneurship can help to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas. Additionally, it contributes to social cohesion and community development by empowering individuals and strengthening local economies. This is particularly evident in programs like those introduced following the PGK 2019 (Poverty Line Income 2019) - measure of poverty in Malaysia used by the government and aid agencies. This led to a shift in aid eligibility and distribution, making entrepreneurship programs even more critical in addressing the challenges faced by rural populations.

3.0 Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the entrepreneurship development programs implemented in the Northern region of Malaysia significantly contribute to socio-economic improvements by fostering job creation, income generation, digital integration, and overall socio-economic upliftment. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, it is expected that these programs have a positive impact, mediated by the degree of human capital development, the effectiveness of government facilitation, and the integration of digital tools in entrepreneurial activities. The programs are anticipated to play a crucial role in enhancing economic resilience and reducing poverty in rural communities.

3.1 Dependent Variables

Income: The level of income generated by individuals participating in entrepreneurship development programs. This study seeks to quantify the increase in income as a direct outcome of the interventions provided by the programs.

3.2 Independent Variables

1. **Digitalization:** The extent to which digital tools and technologies are adopted by program participants, facilitating business operations and market expansion.
2. **Facilitation/Government Intervention:** The role of government support, including initiatives such as SSM registration and PBT licensing, in ensuring the success and formalization of entrepreneurship activities.
3. **Job Creation:** The number of new jobs generated as a result of the entrepreneurship development programs, contributing to local employment and economic stability.
4. **Product Placement:** The geographic reach and market penetration of products created by entrepreneurs, measured across international, national, state, and district levels.

4.0 Problem Statement

While the Northern region of Malaysia has implemented various entrepreneurship development programs to uplift local communities, their overall effectiveness in improving socio-economic conditions remains largely unexplored. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by evaluating how these programs, focusing on basic skills and entrepreneurship training, contribute to employment, income generation, and business growth. Particular attention will be given to the role of human capital development in empowering indigenous communities. Additionally, the study will consider the impact of COVID-19 on these programs and their potential to enhance the overall quality of life in the region.

5.0 Research Questions

1. How can entrepreneurship development programs effectively contribute to job creation, socio-economic upliftment, business formalization, and digital integration in rural areas?
2. What are the critical factors and strategies for maximizing the impact of these programs on sustainable rural development?

6.0 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to assess the role and effectiveness of entrepreneurship development programs in uplifting socio-economic status and alleviating poverty in rural areas of Northern Malaysia. The specific objectives are:

1. To measure the impact of these programs on income levels, job creation, digitalization, and business expansion, and evaluate their effectiveness in the local context.
2. To provide guidance and references for similar initiatives locally and internationally.

7.0 Significance of the Study

This research offers valuable insights into the impact of entrepreneurship development programs on the Northern region's economy. By examining the empower NCER program and identifying key success factors such as collaboration between local and federal governments, financial support, and program customization, the study provides actionable recommendations for enhancing entrepreneurial ecosystems. The findings will inform strategies to expand entrepreneurship into sectors like food and beverage, tourism, and technical and vocational education and training. Furthermore, by considering the impact of COVID-19, this research

contributes to building long-term economic resilience and addressing socio-economic disparities within the region.

8.0 Literature Review

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a pivotal catalyst for economic growth and development, particularly in rural regions characterized by limited opportunities. This study investigates the influence of entrepreneurial activities on the socioeconomic conditions of rural communities in Northern Malaysia, with a particular focus on income generation, digital integration, business formalization, and business expansion through product placement.

Entrepreneurial endeavors stimulate job creation, foster innovation, and elevate living standards (Decker et al., 2014; Ács, 2019). Within the Malaysian rural context, entrepreneurship has demonstrated efficacy in mitigating socioeconomic disparities, enhancing economic resilience, and propelling overall community progress (Nyadu-Addo & Mensah, 2018; Zahra & Wright, 2015). The Malaysian government has increasingly recognized entrepreneurship as a strategic imperative for economic transformation and poverty alleviation, especially in rural areas (Kao, 1993; Yusoff et al., 2015).

Entrepreneurship development programs tailored for rural regions have prioritized income enhancement and digital adoption as essential components of business success (Ambad & Damit, 2016; Nasir et al., 2017; Nor et al., 2018). These initiatives typically incorporate skills training, starter kit provision, and mentorship, which have proven instrumental in facilitating business establishment and formalization (Meyer & Meyer, 2017; Othman et al., 2016). The integration of digital tools and platforms within these programs has empowered rural entrepreneurs to expand their market reach beyond local boundaries, accessing both domestic and international markets (Minello et al., 2014; Rahman & Nor, 2016).

Business formalization constitutes another critical outcome of entrepreneurship programs, providing enterprises with the legal and structural foundations necessary for sustained growth and market penetration. This formalization process not only legitimizes businesses but also facilitates access to financial resources and broader market opportunities (Arrighetti et al., 2016; Ács, 2019). Notably, digitalization has emerged as a potent catalyst for business expansion, enabling rural entrepreneurs to tap into new markets and optimize operational efficiency (Minello et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs in rural settings is contingent upon several key factors, including collaborative efforts between federal and local governments, financial support, and customized interventions that address the specific needs of diverse demographic groups (Arrighetti et al., 2016). Community-based approaches that leverage local knowledge and networks have also proven effective in fostering entrepreneurship, particularly when complemented by digital strategies and tools (Meyer & Meyer, 2017; Zulkifli, 2015).

Despite notable achievements, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to entrepreneurial opportunities, especially for marginalized groups. Continuous support, mentorship, and digital literacy training are indispensable for the long-term success of rural entrepreneurs (Salleh & Fauzi, 2019). By implementing comprehensive and contextually relevant entrepreneurship programs, policymakers and practitioners can harness the potential of entrepreneurship to augment income, facilitate digital integration, formalize businesses, and expand market reach, ultimately contributing to the socioeconomic development of rural

communities in Northern Malaysia. Future research should concentrate on identifying specific barriers encountered by rural entrepreneurs and exploring innovative strategies to surmount these challenges.

9.0 Research Methodology

9.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to thoroughly examine the role and impact of entrepreneurship development programs on the socio-economic advancement of rural communities in Northern Malaysia. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, the study aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

9.2 Target Population

The research focused on entrepreneurs who had participated in entrepreneurship development programs across the Northern region of Malaysia, specifically within the states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak. Additionally, key informants such as government officials, program managers, and community leaders involved in these initiatives were included for the qualitative phase of the study.

9.3 Data Collection Methods

9.3.1 Quantitative Data:

Secondary Data: Data was gathered from government sources, including the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA), and other relevant ministries. These secondary data sources provided insights into socio-economic indicators, poverty levels, employment figures, and business registration statistics.

Primary Data: A structured questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of entrepreneurs who had participated in these programs. The questionnaire collected information on demographic details, business characteristics, income levels, employment generation, digital technology adoption, and perceptions of the effectiveness of the programs.

9.3.2 Qualitative Data:

Focus Group Discussions: Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of entrepreneurs to delve into their experiences, perceptions, and aspirations concerning the entrepreneurship development programs.

9.3.3. Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to identify the entrepreneurs for the quantitative study. The process began by selecting the four Northern states (Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak). Within these states, districts with a high incidence of poverty were identified. From these districts, all entrepreneurs who had participated in entrepreneurship development programs were included in the survey.

To ensure the highest level of data accuracy and reliability, 100% verification was conducted on the entire population. This involved thoroughly cross-checking all responses and data collected from the entrepreneurs against other available records and information sources. Additionally, the data underwent the NCIA's internal audit check, ensuring that all processes adhered to rigorous standards of data quality and integrity. This comprehensive verification and audit process guaranteed the validity of the findings, ensuring that every data point was accurately represented.

9.3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative Data:

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and key variables. Inferential statistical analyses, such as correlation and regression analysis, were conducted to explore the relationships between entrepreneurship development programs and socio-economic outcomes.

Qualitative Data:

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes from the focus group discussions and interviews. The qualitative findings were triangulated with the quantitative data to provide a well-rounded understanding of the research question.

9.3.5 Ethical Considerations

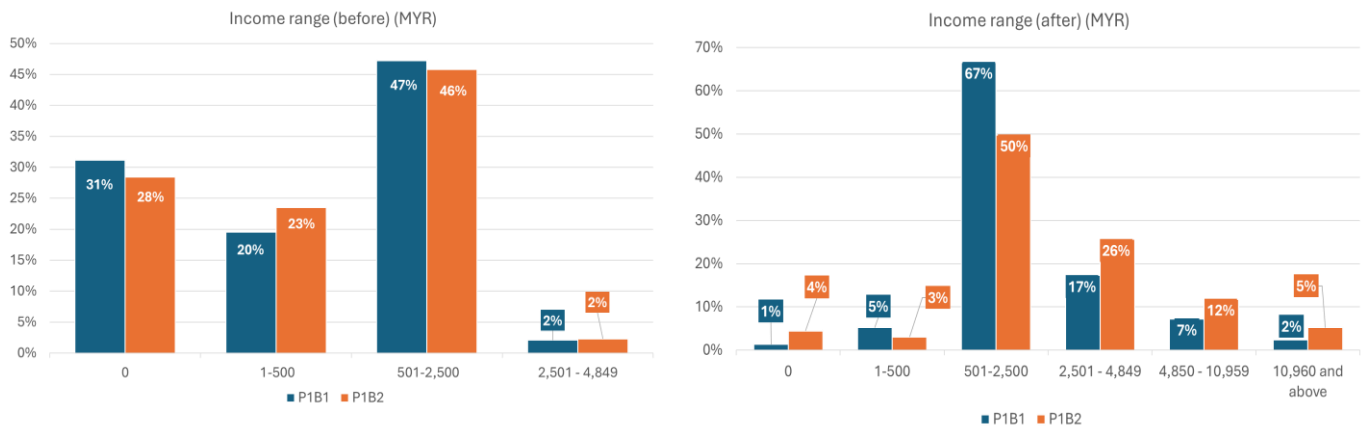
The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the confidentiality of their data was strictly maintained. The research was conducted in alignment with ethical standards set by the NCIA.

By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and focusing on a specific population, this study sought to provide a thorough understanding of how entrepreneurship contributed to the socio-economic development of rural communities in Northern Malaysia. The findings informed the development of effective policies and programs to support entrepreneurship and rural development.

10.0 Findings and Result

This report analyzes data from the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) on the effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs in uplifting the socio-economic status of rural communities in Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak. The analysis focuses on two batches of data, Phase 1 Batch 1 (2019-2021) involving 2,199 participants and Phase 1 Batch 2 (2021-2023) involving 2082 participants from 11 districts, examining key metrics such as digitalization, business formalization, licensing, job creation, and market expansion. The findings provide insights into the successes and challenges of these programs, particularly in addressing income disparities and promoting economic resilience.

10.1 Program impact towards income generation



The analysis of the income data before and after participation in entrepreneurship programs in the rural areas of Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak reveals significant improvements in the socio-economic status of the participants. The data indicates that before the programs, a substantial portion of participants were in lower income brackets, with 31% of P1B1 and 28% of P1B2 participants having no income at all, and around 46-47% earning between MYR 501-2,500.

However, after completing the programs, most participants experienced notable income growth. For example, in P1B1, 67% of participants moved into the MYR 501-2,500 income range, with an additional 17% advancing to the MYR 2,501-4,849 range. Similar progress was observed in P1B2, where 50% of participants now earn between MYR 501-2,500, and 26% have reached the MYR 2,501-4,849 bracket.

One of the most significant outcomes of the programs was the sharp reduction in participants with no income. In P1B1, the percentage of participants with zero income dropped from 31% to just 1%, and in P1B2, it decreased from 28% to 4%. This substantial decline highlights the effectiveness of the programs in alleviating poverty among rural participants.

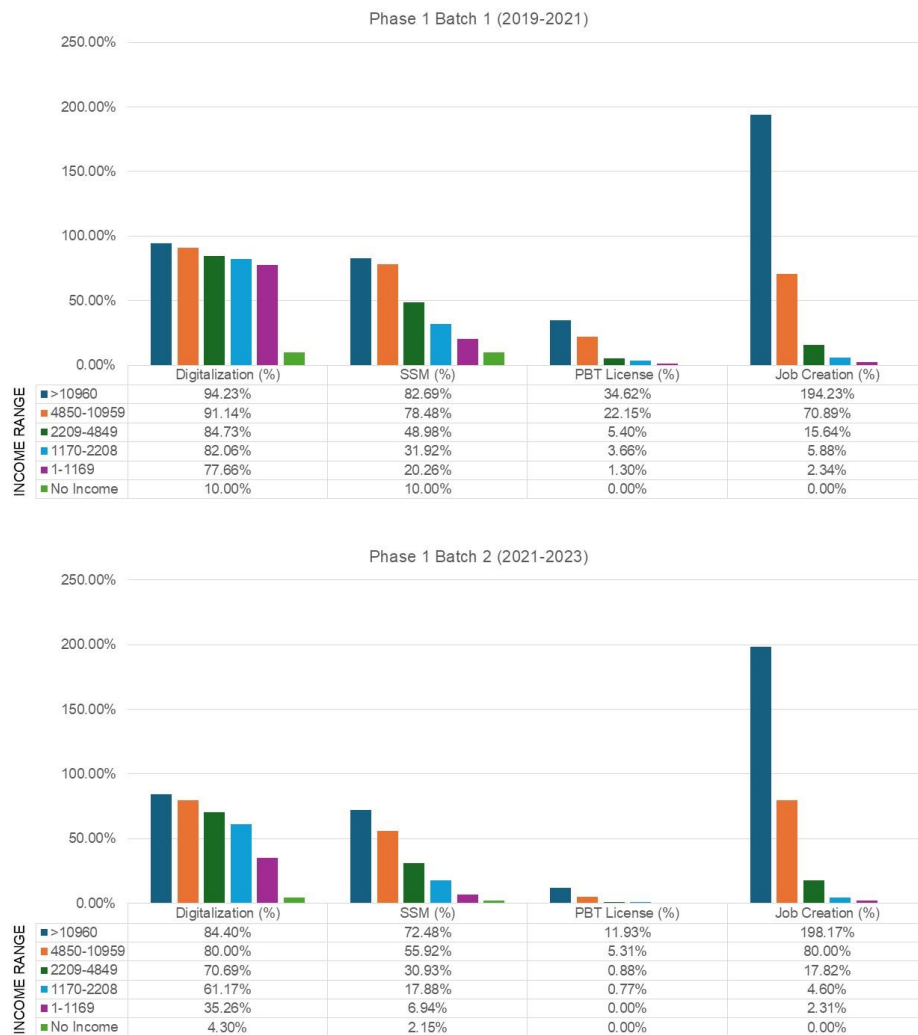
Moreover, the programs also enabled some participants to become high earners, with a small but meaningful increase in those earning above MYR 10,960. Specifically, P1B1 saw an increase from 0% to 2%, and P1B2 from 0% to 5%, indicating that the programs not only helped participants escape poverty but also empowered them to achieve significant income growth.

Overall, the entrepreneurship programs demonstrated considerable success in improving the socio-economic status of rural participants. The data suggests that the programs effectively moved participants out of lower income brackets and provided them with the tools and opportunities to achieve higher earnings. This success is particularly notable given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscores the resilience and effectiveness of the programs. The positive outcomes can be attributed to targeted interventions, such as customized training and the provision of starter kits, which played a crucial role in helping participants achieve sustainable economic growth.

10.2 1 Batch 1 and Batch 2 Analysis: Identifying Consistent Trends

10.2.1 Sustainability and Rural Development: Key Insights from Phase 1 Batches

Sustainability is crucial for business growth, especially in rural areas where challenges are often more severe. The analysis of Phase 1 Batch 1 (2019-2021) and Phase 1 Batch 2 (2021-2023) provides valuable insights into how digitalization, formal business registration, licensing, job creation, and market expansion contribute to long-term sustainability, all while highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on these factors.



10.2.2 Digitalization and Sustainability

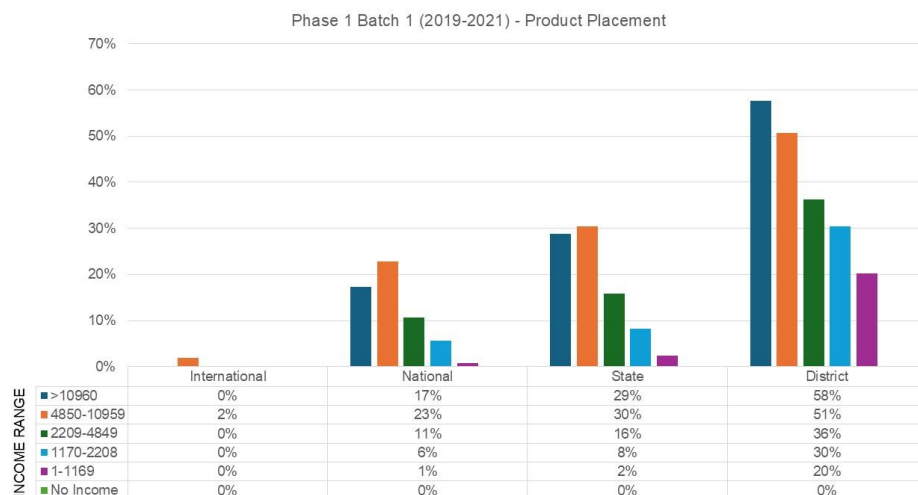
Digitalization plays a vital role in enhancing business sustainability by improving efficiency, market reach, and adaptability. In Phase 1 Batch 1, higher-income groups demonstrated higher digitalization rates, with the >MYR 10,960 income group at 94.23%, compared to just 10% in the no-income group. By Phase 1 Batch 2, digitalization rates had generally declined across all groups due to the pandemic's disruptions, with the >MYR 10,960 group at 84.40% and the no income group at only 4.30%. The pandemic accelerated the need for digital tools, but also highlighted the disparities in digital adoption, underscoring the importance of increasing digital access for lower-income and rural participants to support long-term business viability.

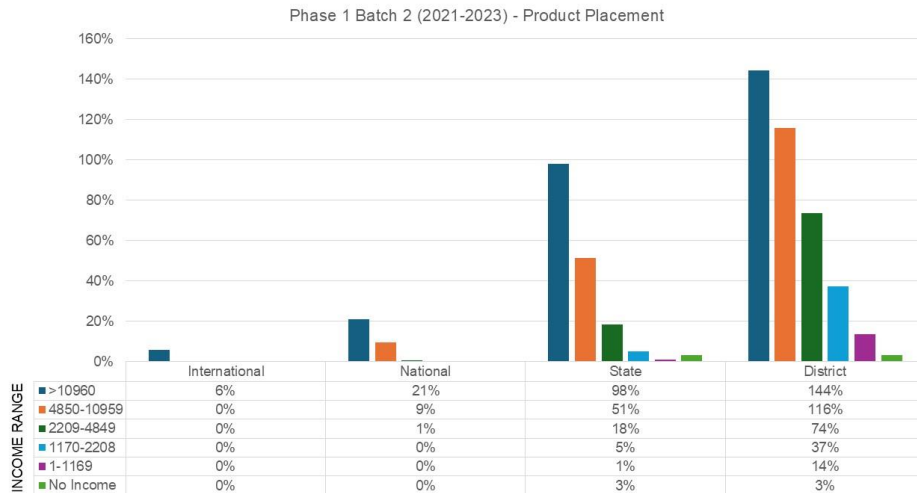
10.2.3 SSM Registration and Licensing

Formal business registration and licensing are essential for establishing legitimacy and operational stability. In Phase 1 Batch 1, higher-income groups showed higher rates of SSM registration (82.69%) and PBT licensing (34.62%) compared to lower-income groups. However, by Phase 1 Batch 2, there was a noticeable decrease in these rates, with SSM registration at 72.48% and PBT licensing at 11.93%. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to these declines by complicating business operations and formalization processes. To support sustainability, it is crucial to streamline registration and licensing procedures and offer targeted assistance to help rural and lower-income entrepreneurs navigate these challenges.

10.2.4 Job Creation and Economic Impact

Job creation is a key indicator of economic impact and sustainability. In Phase 1 Batch 1, job creation was strongest in the > MYR10,960 group (194.23%), with little to no job creation in the no-income group. Phase 1 Batch 2 showed a slight increase in job creation within the >MYR 10,960 group (198.17%), but minimal activity in lower-income groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated job losses and created further barriers to employment, especially in rural areas. Supporting job creation through targeted resources and recovery programs is vital for promoting economic stability and inclusive growth in these regions.





10.2.5 Product Placement and Market Expansion

Effective product placement and market expansion are critical for business sustainability. In Phase 1 Batch 1, product placement was mainly national and state-level, with limited international reach. By Phase 1 Batch 2, there was an increase in state and district placements, especially among the >MYR 10,960 group, with state placement at 98% and district placement at 144%. Despite these improvements, international market penetration remained limited, partly due to the pandemic’s disruption of global supply chains and market access. To enhance sustainability, it is important to support rural businesses in overcoming barriers to international expansion and adapting to the post-pandemic economic landscape.

11.0 Discussions

Both Phase 1 Batch 1 and Batch 2 reveal that higher-income groups benefit from better digital tools, formal recognition, and market reach, contributing to their success. The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted and often widened existing disparities, making it essential to address these challenges through targeted interventions. Improving digital infrastructure, streamlining formalization processes, supporting job creation, and facilitating market expansion are crucial for fostering sustainability and promoting inclusive economic growth, particularly in rural areas.

11.1 Recommendations for Enhancing Sustainability:

1. **Enhance Digital Adoption:** Implement targeted digital literacy programs and infrastructure improvements to help lower-income participants achieve greater technological integration, leading to increased sustainability.
2. **Support Formalization:** Provide resources and incentives to encourage SSM registration and PBT licensing for all participants, ensuring their businesses can operate legally and sustainably.
3. **Promote Inclusive Job Creation:** Develop initiatives to support lower-income entrepreneurs in scaling their businesses and creating jobs, thereby contributing to broader economic stability and sustainability.

4. **Expand Market Reach:** Facilitate access to international markets and help all entrepreneurs overcome barriers to global expansion, promoting long-term business growth and sustainability.
5. **Ensure Ongoing Support:** Offer continuous support to maintain progress in digitalization, formalization, job creation, and market expansion, ensuring that all participants can achieve and sustain long-term success.

12.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of entrepreneurship as an economic development tool in Malaysia's Northern region reveals its significant impact on socio-economic upliftment and poverty alleviation. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, participants in the empower NCER Skills Training and Entrepreneurship Development Program benefited significantly from the program. The initiative, running from 2019 to 2024, has been instrumental in transforming rural communities in Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak. The program's focus on skills training and entrepreneurship development has successfully enhanced income levels, created job opportunities, and fostered digital adoption and business expansion beyond local markets.

The research highlights that targeted and context-specific entrepreneurship interventions are crucial for sustainable rural development. The rate of success achieved through these programs is notably attributed to customized training and the provision of starter kits, which have significantly contributed to this success. These strategies address local needs and support entrepreneurs in overcoming barriers, thus facilitating business growth and sustainability.

The study confirms the hypothesis that entrepreneurship development programs significantly contribute to socio-economic improvements by fostering job creation, income generation, and digital integration. The positive impact of these programs underscores the importance of continued support and investment in entrepreneurship as a means to drive long-term economic resilience and enhance the well-being of rural populations.

To further enhance the effectiveness of rural entrepreneurship programs, policymakers and practitioners should consider the following recommendations: enhancing digital adoption, supporting formalization efforts, promoting inclusive job creation, expanding market reach, and ensuring ongoing support for program participants. By implementing these strategies, rural entrepreneurship programs can continue to play a pivotal role in bridging socio-economic gaps, driving sustainability, and fostering development in rural areas.

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