

Empowering Indigenous Youth: A Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of TVET Capabilities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) serve as a strategic catalyst for Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income nation. Despite aggressive policy interventions, the participation and completion rates among the Orang Asli (indigenous) youth remain disproportionately low, signaling a persistent systemic gap. Current educational models predominantly adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach, often neglecting the complex socio-cultural and environmental dynamics unique to marginalised communities. This paper proposes a robust conceptual framework that synthesises Amartya Sen's Capability Approach with Matachi's Capacity Development Model. By shifting the focus from mere economic output to holistic empowerment, the framework identifies critical conversion factors across three interconnected levels: individual readiness, organisational support, and institutional environment. This multidimensional lens explores how personal agency, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive policy frameworks facilitate the transformation of vocational resources into real opportunities (capabilities) and meaningful socio-economic outcomes (functioning). The proposed framework offers a novel theoretical contribution to indigenous education literature and provides a strategic roadmap for policymakers to design TVET programs that are not only accessible but also culturally resonant with the Orang Asli community.

Keywords: Orang Asli, TVET, Capability Approach, Matachi Model, Indigenous Empowerment, Conceptual Framework.

INTRODUCTION

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has emerged as a critical driver for socio-economic transformation globally and within the Malaysian context. Under the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) and the MADANI Economy framework, TVET is positioned as a strategic catalyst to elevate the nation's human capital toward high-income status. However, for this national aspiration to be truly inclusive, the empowerment of marginalised communities, particularly the indigenous Orang Asli, must be prioritised to ensure that "no one is left behind" in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 8). The Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia continues to face multidimensional challenges in education and employment. Despite various government interventions, their participation in vocational streams remains significantly lower than the national average. Recent reports indicate that high dropout rates at the secondary school level and a lack of psychological readiness often hinder indigenous youth from accessing formal TVET institutions. This disparity suggests that existing models may not be fully responsive to the unique socio-cultural fabric and geographical constraints of the Orang Asli youth.

The core of the problem lies in a systemic mismatch across three critical dimensions: individual, organisational, and institutional levels. As highlighted in the APPGM-SDG (2024) policy report, the current delivery system for vocational information and incentives often fails to reach the grassroots level effectively. Furthermore, most educational frameworks adopt a top-down or one-size-fits-all approach, which neglects the indigenous perspective of capability. There is a critical lack of research that explores how personal agency (individual),

institutional readiness (organisational), and macro-policy integration (institutional) interact to shape the vocational journey of these youths.

This paper argues that the empowerment of Orang Asli youth requires a shift from traditional human capital model which focus solely on economic output to a capability-based approach. By adopting Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, this study views TVET as a means to expand the freedom of youth to achieve the lives they value. To operationalise this, Matachi's Capacity Development Model is integrated to analyse the ecosystem of support required at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels to turn vocational resources into tangible life outcomes. The primary objective of this concept paper is to propose a multidimensional conceptual framework for the TVET capabilities of Orang Asli youth in Malaysia. By synthesizing indigenous perspectives with established capacity-building theories, this paper provides a novel theoretical foundation. The proposed framework aims to assist policymakers, such as JAKOA and the Ministry of Education, in designing more culturally resonant and inclusive TVET strategies that genuinely empower the indigenous community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Individual Capacity: Cultural Identity, Self-Efficacy, and Career Aspirations

At the individual level, the capability of Orang Asli youth to engage in TVET is deeply rooted in their socio-cultural identity and self-perception. Recent studies indicate a positive paradigm shift where indigenous youth increasingly recognise education as a primary factor for career success and quality of life improvement (Zulkefli et al., 2023). However, this aspiration is often hindered by cultural discontinuity, where the formal school environment acts as a pushing factor due to its lack of resonance with indigenous lifestyles (Awang et al., 2022). Furthermore, many indigenous youths exhibit low self-efficacy and separation anxiety when required to leave their vernacular settlements for distant training centre, which significantly dampens their readiness to participate in formal vocational streams (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Therefore, individual empowerment in TVET must address these psychological and cultural barriers to transform their inherent practical interests into professional competencies.

Organizational Capacity: Institutional Readiness and Parental Involvement

The effectiveness of TVET institutions (organisations) depends on their ability to create an inclusive and culturally responsive ecosystem. Research emphasizes that the image of TVET as a last resort or a path for academic underachievers persists, creating a stigma that discourages indigenous enrolment (Mohd Nawawi & Mohd Anuar, 2023). To counter this, institutions must shift from a one-size-fits-all curriculum toward a culturally responsive pedagogy that integrates hands-on, observation-based learning which aligns with indigenous learning aspirations (Awang et al., 2022). Moreover, the role of parents is pivotal; active parental involvement and positive reinforcement act as moderators that enhance the academic readiness and career commitment of indigenous youth (Mohd Nawawi & Mohd Anuar, 2023). Ibrahim et al. (2023) further argue for the relaxation of rigid entry requirements, such as literacy skills, for hands-on vocational courses to accommodate the specific educational backgrounds of indigenous learners.

Institutional Capacity: Social Trust and Policy Integration

At the macro-institutional level, the success of TVET policies relies on the establishment of "Social Trust" between the government and the indigenous community. Azizan et al. (2024) assert that social trust is the nucleus of empowerment; without it, indigenous communities remain sceptical of formal interventions, leading to a breakdown in the policy delivery system. This aligns with findings from the APPGM-SDG (2024) report, which identifies a systemic gap in how vocational information and resources are disseminated to rural grassroots. The lack of a robust follow-up mechanism post-training such as job placement or entrepreneurial capital remains a significant barrier to long-term economic sustainability (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Consequently, building institutional capacity requires a holistic synchronization of inter-agency efforts and the integration of the community into the decision-making process to ensure that TVET initiatives are truly transformative and inclusive.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative conceptual analysis approach, specifically utilizing an integrative literature review design. Unlike empirical studies that rely on field data, this conceptual paper focuses on synthesizing existing theories and diverse research findings to generate a new perspective on indigenous TVET capabilities. The methodology involved three systematic stages. **Data Sourcing and Selection:** A comprehensive search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on literature published between 2015 and 2024. Key search terms included "Orang Asli," "TVET," "Capability Approach," and "Capacity Development." Additionally, critical government policy documents, such as the APPGM-SDG (2024) report, were analysed to provide a contemporary national context.

Thematic Synthesis: The selected literature was analysed using a thematic approach, categorized into the three levels of Matachi's Capacity Development Model: individual, organisational, and institutional. This allowed for the identification of systemic gaps and conversion factors unique to the Orang Asli community. **Framework Development:** The final stage involved the theoretical integration of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach with the synthesized themes. This process resulted in the formulation of the multidimensional conceptual framework presented in this paper, which aims to provide a strategic roadmap for indigenous empowerment in the vocational sector.

The Proposed Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper is built upon a synthesis of two prominent frameworks: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Kazuo Matachi's Capacity Development Model. This integration provides a holistic lens to examine the vocational empowerment of Orang Asli youth.

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

At its core, the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) shifts the focus of development from economic productivity (Human Capital) to human well-being and freedom. In the context of TVET, this theory argues that education should not merely produce "workers," but should expand the "capabilities" of indigenous youth their substantive freedom to choose and achieve the lives they value. Central to this approach are "Conversion Factors," which are the conditions that determine how an individual can transform resources (e.g., a TVET certificate) into real-life outcomes (e.g., a sustainable career). These factors include personal attributes, social norms, and environmental conditions. For Orang Asli youth, these conversion factors often involve the reconciliation of their indigenous identity with the requirements of a modern vocational system (Zulkefli et al., 2023; Azizan et al., 2024).

Matachi's Capacity Development Model

To operationalize the broad goals of the Capability Approach, this paper adopts Matachi's Capacity Development Model (2002). Matachi posits that true capacity building is not a one-dimensional training process but a multidimensional systemic change that occurs at three levels:

1. **Individual Level:** Focuses on the development of skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy. This is the foundation where youth gain technical competencies.
2. **Organizational Level:** Focuses on the readiness and quality of institutions (e.g., GiatMara, ILP) to support learners. It involves culturally responsive pedagogy and adequate infrastructure (Awang et al., 2022).
3. **Institutional/Societal Level:** Focuses on the broader enabling environment, including national policies (JAKOA/KPM), legal frameworks, and social trust within the community (Azizan et al., 2024; APPGM-SDG, 2024).

Theoretical Synthesis

The synthesis of Sen and Matachi creates a robust framework for this study. While Sen provides the philosophical goal (expanding capabilities and freedom), Matachi provides the structural roadmap (the three levels of intervention). This integration allows for an analysis that goes beyond the deficits of the indigenous youth and instead critiques the entire ecosystem. It suggests that for Orang Asli youth to achieve "Sustainable Outcomes," there must be a simultaneous strengthening of individual readiness, organizational responsiveness, and institutional support.

The Proposed Conceptual Framework

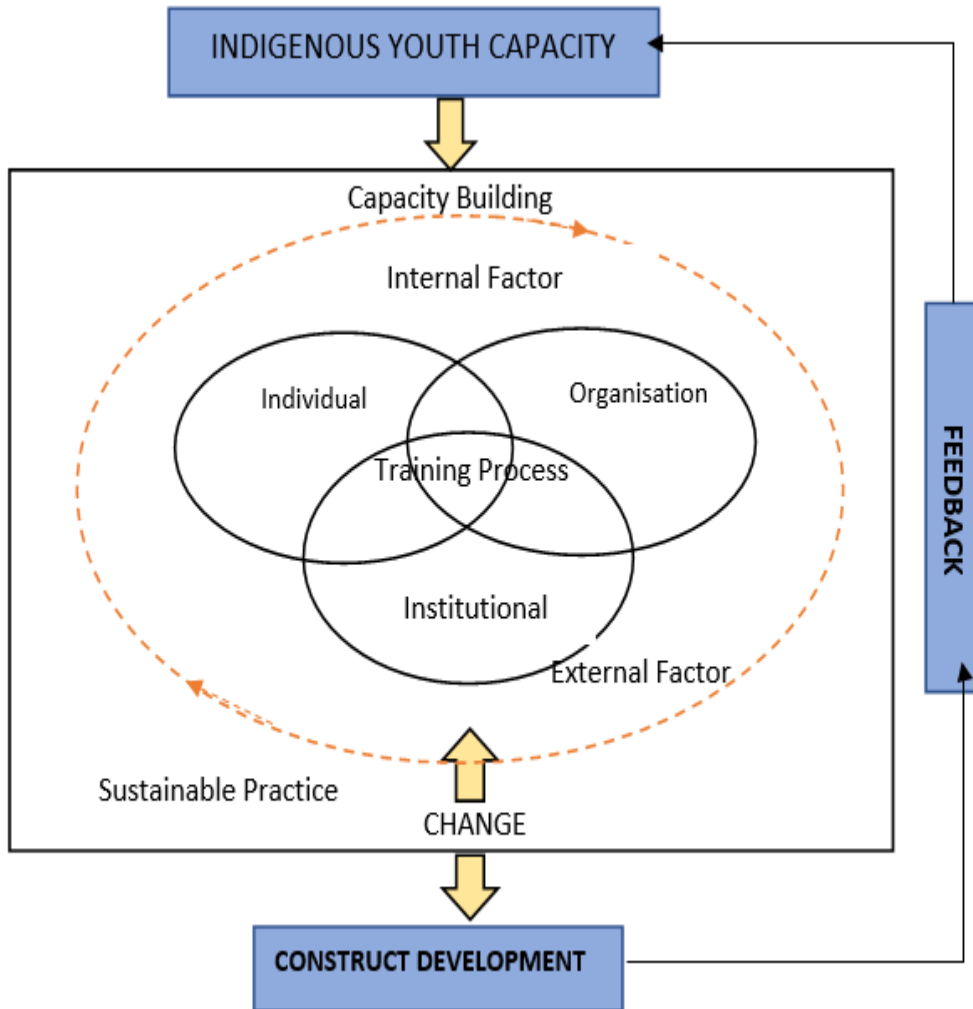


Figure 1:

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) integrates Matachi's Capacity Development Model within the overarching goal of enhancing the Capabilities of Orang Asli Youth. At the core of the framework is a Venn diagram representing the interconnectedness of Individual, Organizational, and Institutional dimensions. The overlap of these three spheres signifies where meaningful vocational training occurs. This internal process is fueled by 'Conversion Factors' both internal and external which facilitate the Change from resources into real opportunities. The cyclical arrows (Capacity Building & Sustainable Practice) emphasize that empowerment is a continuous, sustainable process, supported by a robust Feedback mechanism to ensure long-term socio-economic impact. The final output of this framework, as shown in the bottom box, is the Construct Development. This represents the culmination of the training process and systemic changes, which eventually serves as a benchmark for future indigenous TVET policies. The Feedback loop ensures that the developed construct remains relevant by continuously informing the initial Indigenous Youth Capacity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a multidimensional conceptual framework for empowering Orang Asli youth through TVET, integrating Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Matachi's Capacity Development Model. The synthesis of literature and contemporary reports, including the APPGM-SDG (2024), underscores that the vocational empowerment of indigenous youth is not merely a matter of technical training. Instead, it is a systemic process that requires a harmonious intersection between individual readiness, organizational responsiveness, and institutional support.

By shifting the focus from traditional human capital metrics to holistic capabilities, this framework highlights that socio-cultural identity and social trust are the true engines of sustainable development for the Orang Asli community. Without addressing the systemic barriers at all three levels individual, organizational, and institutional TVET interventions will continue to remain one-size-fits-all and fail to achieve long-term socio-economic transformation.

Recommendations

Based on the proposed framework, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Policy Decentralization: Government agencies (JAKOA, KPM, and KSM) should move toward decentralized TVET delivery systems that are locally managed and culturally responsive, reducing the separation anxiety and logistical barriers faced by rural youth.
2. Flexible Entry Requirements: Institutional frameworks should relax rigid academic prerequisites for hands-on vocational courses, allowing indigenous youth with high psychomotor skills but low formal literacy to access certification and employment.
3. Strengthening Social Trust: Policymakers must actively involve indigenous leaders (Tok Batin) and parents in the curriculum design and decision-making process to build the necessary interpersonal and institutional trust required for student retention.
4. Integrated Follow-up Systems: Post-training support, including micro-credit facilities and strategic job placements within the forestry or eco-tourism sectors, must be established to ensure that "capabilities" are successfully transformed into achieved functioning.

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