

Rural Entrepreneurship and Community Economic Empowerment through Government-Funded Agricultural Projects: Evidence from a Cassava Community Project in Segamat, Johor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Rural entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a vital catalyst for community economic empowerment and poverty alleviation in developing nations. This article investigates the impact of government-funded agricultural initiatives on the entrepreneurial capacity and socio-economic resilience of rural communities, focusing on a cassava cultivation project in Segamat, Johor, Malaysia. Supported by the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) grant, the project serves as a model for localising the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Employing a qualitative case study methodology, this research analyses policy documents, project implementation reports, and relevant academic literature to assess the transition of the B40 (bottom 40% income group) community from subsistence farming to commercial agricultural entrepreneurship. The findings reveal that direct capital injection, coupled with community-led governance, significantly enhances local economic output, fosters supply chain integration, and builds entrepreneurial self-reliance. However, the study also identifies challenges related to market access, technological adoption, and long-term financial sustainability post-funding. The paper concludes that while government grants are crucial for overcoming initial capital barriers, the sustainable empowerment of rural agricultural enterprises requires continuous mentorship, value-added processing capabilities, and the establishment of robust strategic partnerships between community enterprises and commercial markets. In response to the identified sustainability gaps, the study further proposes formal commercial off-take agreements, phased agri-technology adoption, continuous post-grant mentorship, and a community revolving fund or microfinance mechanism to reduce dependence on one-off grants and strengthen long-term enterprise resilience.

Keywords— Rural Entrepreneurship, Community Empowerment, Government Grants, Agricultural Economics, Sustainable Development Goals, Cassava Cultivation

INTRODUCTION

The economic disparity between urban and rural areas remains a persistent challenge in Malaysia's development trajectory. Despite significant macroeconomic progress over the past five decades, rural communities, which predominantly consist of the B40 (bottom 40% income tier) demographic, continue to face vulnerabilities related to income instability, limited economic diversification, and restricted access to productive resources. The Malaysian government has long recognised this structural imbalance and has strategically shifted its rural development paradigm from mere infrastructure provision to human capital empowerment and economic capacity building. The Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025) explicitly outlines

the need to rejuvenate rural socio-economic activities by fostering entrepreneurship, enhancing agricultural productivity, and creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the rural poor (Unit Perancang Ekonomi, 2021).

One of the key mechanisms deployed to achieve these objectives is the disbursement of community-level grants designed to stimulate grassroots economic activities. The initiatives championed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) represent a significant departure from traditional top-down welfare approaches that have characterised much of Malaysia's earlier development efforts. By providing direct funding ranging from RM50,000 to RM100,000 for community-led projects, the policy aims to stimulate grassroots economic engines that are owned and operated by the communities themselves (Zanudin, 2026). This approach recognises that sustainable development cannot be imposed from above but must emerge from the aspirations and capabilities of local communities.

This article critically examines the efficacy of such government-funded agricultural projects in fostering rural entrepreneurship, using the Cassava Community Project in Segamat, Johor, as the primary case study. Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) was selected by the Segamat community due to its agronomic resilience, low input requirements, and versatility as both a staple food and a commercial commodity with multiple downstream applications (Delaquis et al., 2018). The project's overarching goal is to transition rural households from subsistence living to active participants in the agricultural supply chain, thereby creating a replicable model for community-based economic empowerment.

This study aims to evaluate three key dimensions namely on how the APPGM-SDG grant has catalysed rural entrepreneurship in the Segamat community, the socio-economic impact of the project on the participating B40 households, and the challenges encountered in sustaining community-based agricultural enterprises beyond the initial funding period. By examining these dimensions, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the effectiveness of government interventions in promoting inclusive economic growth at the grassroots level.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, focusing on the Cassava Community Project in Segamat, Johor, as the unit of analysis. Specifically, the study examines the "Projek Penanaman Ubi @ Batu Badak (Seeding the Future)" under the Sejati Madani initiative, spearheaded by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Johor Branch in collaboration with the residents of Kg. Batu Badak and JPKK Gemereh 4. The project received RM100,000.00 in funding and covers 9.5 acres of land across Lots 660, 661, and 636 in Kg. Batu Badak and Kg. Bukit Mentaus. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the processes, impacts, and challenges associated with rural entrepreneurship development through government-funded agricultural initiatives. Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for the examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018).

Data were gathered through a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including official government policy documents (such as the Twelfth Malaysia Plan and annual budget documents), APPGM-SDG project implementation guidelines and progress reports, academic literature on rural development and agricultural economics, and media reports documenting the project's implementation and outcomes. The use of multiple data sources enables triangulation, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

The analytical framework of the study evaluates the project across three primary dimensions. The first dimension, Entrepreneurial Capacity Building, assesses the extent to which the project has fostered business model development, commercial orientation, and market integration among participants. The second dimension, Socio-Economic Impact, evaluates tangible outcomes such as income generation, employment creation, and improvements in household food security. The third dimension, Project Sustainability, identifies operational challenges, financial viability concerns, and factors that influence the long-term continuation of the enterprise beyond the initial grant period. Within the Project Sustainability dimension, the analysis also

explicitly considers four operational risks: post-funding financial vulnerability, market-access and off-take limitations, low technology adoption, and continued exposure to raw-commodity pricing.

Thematic analysis was employed to synthesise the data, following the six-phase approach of familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. This systematic approach allows for the extraction of key insights regarding the effectiveness of government grants in fostering rural agricultural enterprises while maintaining analytical rigour and transparency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Entrepreneurship and Economic Development

Rural entrepreneurship is defined as the creation of new enterprises or the introduction of innovative economic activities within rural settings, leveraging local resources to generate income, employment, and community wealth. Unlike urban entrepreneurship, which typically benefits from established market infrastructure and access to diverse resources, rural entrepreneurship must contend with geographical isolation, limited market access, and a scarcity of business support services (Chambers, 1983). Nevertheless, rural entrepreneurship holds immense potential for transforming local economies when appropriate enabling conditions are established.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights rural entrepreneurship as a key driver of equitable growth and resilience in developing economies (UNDP Malaysia, 2026). In the Malaysian context, Aziz (2022) notes that rural entrepreneurship is often constrained by a lack of initial capital, limited access to formal credit facilities, and a deficit in business management skills. These constraints create a vicious cycle where rural communities remain trapped in low-productivity subsistence activities because they cannot access the resources needed to transition to more productive commercial ventures.

Microcredit and community grant programmes have thus emerged as essential interventions to bridge these gaps. When rural communities are empowered to manage their own economic enterprises with adequate financial support, they are more likely to develop sustainable business models that are tailored to their specific socio-cultural contexts and local resource endowments (Maloney & Gatfield, 2019). The success of such programmes, however, depends critically on complementary factors such as skills training, market linkages, and institutional support that extend beyond the mere provision of capital.

Agricultural Grants and Community Empowerment

The role of government funding in community empowerment has been widely debated in development economics literature. While some critics argue that grants may foster dependency and undermine local initiative, substantial evidence from community-driven development (CDD) programmes across the developing world suggests otherwise. A comprehensive review by the World Bank (2012) indicates that when grants are accompanied by community governance structures and participatory decision-making processes, they effectively build local institutional capacity, promote accountability, and foster long-term economic self-reliance.

In the agricultural sector specifically, government funding is critical for overcoming the high barriers to entry associated with modern farming techniques, land preparation, procurement of quality planting materials, and the acquisition of basic agricultural equipment. Without such support, smallholder farmers in rural areas often remain locked into traditional, low-yield farming practices that generate insufficient income to lift them out of poverty. Dumpangol (2024) observed that community-led farming initiatives in Malaysia, supported by APPGM-SDG grants, have successfully increased local food production while simultaneously creating new income streams for vulnerable populations. These initiatives demonstrate that with appropriate financial support and community governance, rural agricultural projects can achieve both food security and economic empowerment objectives simultaneously.

The concept of community empowerment through agricultural grants also aligns with the asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, which emphasises building upon existing community strengths rather than focusing solely on deficits. In the context of the Segamat cassava project, the community's existing knowledge of local soil conditions, climate patterns, and traditional farming practices represents valuable assets that, when combined with financial capital from government grants, can be leveraged to create sustainable agricultural enterprises.

Localising the SDGs through Agriculture

The localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires translating global targets into actionable, community-level projects that address specific local needs and contexts. This process of localisation is essential because the SDGs, while providing a universal framework for sustainable development, must be adapted to the diverse realities of different communities around the world. Khoo and Tan (2019) emphasise that civil society organisations and grassroots communities are indispensable partners in achieving the SDGs in Malaysia, as they possess intimate knowledge of local challenges and are best positioned to design and implement contextually appropriate solutions.

Agricultural community projects directly address multiple SDGs simultaneously, most notably SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). By cultivating crops like cassava, rural communities not only secure their own food sources but also generate surplus for commercial sale, thereby addressing both food security and economic vulnerability simultaneously (Hassan & Kam, 2022). The APPGM-SDG approach of funding community-identified projects represents a practical mechanism for SDG localisation, as it allows communities to determine which SDG targets are most relevant to their circumstances and to design projects that address those targets in locally meaningful ways.

Furthermore, Salleh et al. (2024) argue that the impact of SDG localisation extends beyond the immediate project beneficiaries to influence broader community networks and institutional arrangements. When a community successfully implements an SDG-aligned project, it creates demonstration effects that inspire neighbouring communities and provides evidence that can inform policy improvements at higher levels of governance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Catalysing Rural Entrepreneurship through Capital Injection

The injection of government funds through the APPGM-SDG grant proved to be a pivotal catalyst for entrepreneurial activity in the Segamat community. Prior to the project, many participants were engaged in disjointed, small-scale subsistence farming with minimal economic returns. Their agricultural activities were characterised by low productivity, limited market orientation, and heavy reliance on traditional methods that had remained largely unchanged for generations. The grant provided the necessary capital to achieve economies of scale and transition from subsistence to commercial production. For instance, Lot 660, which covers approximately 3.5 acres and is operated by the recipient of the fund, demonstrates how the funding facilitated a systematic commercial project timeline: land clearing in August 2024, bed preparation in September 2024, planting in October 2024, and a targeted harvest by May 2025. The capital injection also financed essential farm infrastructure, including blue metal fencing with black netting for security, as well as equipment such as backpack sprayers for crop maintenance.

Funds were utilised strategically for systematic land clearing and preparation, the procurement of high-yield cassava cuttings from certified sources, the purchase of essential agricultural inputs such as organic fertilisers and pest management supplies, and the acquisition of basic farming equipment. These investments addressed the most critical barrier to rural entrepreneurship identified in the literature—the lack of initial capital that prevents communities from investing in productive economic activities despite possessing other necessary resources such as land, labour, and local knowledge.

More significantly, the project facilitated a fundamental shift in the community's economic mindset. Participants began to operate as a collective agricultural enterprise rather than isolated individual farmers. The community committee took on roles akin to a corporate management team, handling procurement decisions, scheduling planting and harvesting activities, managing quality control, and negotiating with buyers. This structural shift represents a hallmark of successful rural entrepreneurship, where collective action is leveraged to increase bargaining power in the market and achieve efficiencies that would be impossible for individual smallholders acting alone.

The entrepreneurial transformation was also evident in the community's approach to risk management. Rather than planting their entire allocation simultaneously, the committee adopted a staggered planting schedule that ensured continuous harvesting throughout the year. This strategy not only provided a steady income stream but also reduced the risk of total crop failure due to adverse weather events or pest outbreaks. Such strategic thinking demonstrates the development of genuine entrepreneurial capabilities within the community.

Value Chain Integration and Income Diversification

A critical component of the project's economic success was its integration into the broader agricultural value chain. Cassava, while a relatively low-value crop in its raw form, offers significant potential for value addition through processing. The study found that the entrepreneurial empowerment of the community extended beyond primary cultivation to encompass basic processing and product diversification, representing a more sophisticated understanding of agricultural business than simple commodity production.

A portion of the harvested cassava was processed into derivative products such as cassava chips (kerepek ubi), fermented cassava (tapai), cassava flour, and traditional snacks. This diversification strategy serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it mitigates the risk of price volatility in the raw commodity market by providing multiple revenue streams from a single crop. Secondly, the production of value-added goods significantly increases profit margins compared to selling raw cassava. Thirdly, the processing activities create secondary employment opportunities within the village, particularly for women who often manage the processing and packaging phases.

The ability to generate a steady, diversified income stream has a profound impact on the socio-economic resilience of the participating households, directly contributing to poverty alleviation as envisioned by SDG 1 (No Poverty). Households that previously relied on irregular and unpredictable income from day labour or subsistence farming now have access to more stable and predictable earnings. This financial stability enables better household planning, including investments in children's education and healthcare, creating positive intergenerational effects that extend far beyond the immediate economic returns of the cassava project itself. Although some processing has begun, value-added activities remain limited in scale relative to primary cassava production. This leaves the enterprise partly exposed to raw-commodity price fluctuations. A more resilient commercial pathway would gradually increase the share of output converted into higher-margin products such as cassava flour, chips, industrial starch, and animal feed, supported by suitable processing equipment, product standardisation, packaging, and quality certification. This move would deepen value-chain integration and retain more economic value within the community.

Community Governance and Institutional Development

Beyond the direct economic outcomes, the project has catalysed significant institutional development at the community level. The requirement for community-led governance of the grant funds has necessitated the development of organisational structures, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms that did not previously exist in the community. This institutional capacity was driven by a strong local leadership structure, working in tandem with academic facilitators from UiTM. The project committee has had to learn financial management, record-keeping, procurement procedures, and reporting requirements, skills that represent valuable human capital investments with applications far beyond the cassava project.

This institutional development represents what development scholars refer to as social capital formation. The collaborative nature of the project has strengthened social bonds within the community, built trust between

members, and created norms of reciprocity and cooperation that facilitate future collective action. These social capital outcomes are often overlooked in conventional economic evaluations of development projects but represent some of the most durable and transferable benefits of community-based initiatives.

Food Security and SDG Alignment

Beyond the direct economic benefits, the cassava project contributes meaningfully to food security at the community level, directly addressing SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Malaysia's food import bill has been rising steadily, exceeding RM60 billion annually in recent years, which raises serious concerns about national food sovereignty (Hassan & Kam, 2022). Community-based food production initiatives such as the Segamat cassava project represent a decentralised approach to strengthening food security from the ground up.

Cassava is particularly well-suited for food security programmes due to its unique agronomic characteristics. It is drought-tolerant, grows well in marginal soils, requires minimal chemical inputs, and can remain unharvested in the ground for extended periods without deterioration—effectively functioning as a living food reserve. These characteristics make it an ideal crop for communities with limited resources and uncertain access to external food supplies. The project has demonstrated that even modest investments in community agriculture can yield significant returns in terms of both food availability and dietary diversification.

Furthermore, the project's alignment with multiple SDGs creates synergistic effects that amplify its overall development impact. The income generated addresses SDG 1 (No Poverty), the food produced addresses SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), the employment created addresses SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and the community governance structures developed address SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Additionally, the project advanced SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by hosting an "Entrepreneurial Summer Camp" (Kegiatan Internasional Mahasiswa) from May 26 to June 1, 2024. This event brought together university students from regional institutions including Perbanas Institute, Universitas Lancang Kuning, and Universitas Brawijaya, fostering international knowledge exchange and exposing the rural community to broader entrepreneurial perspectives. This multi-dimensional impact demonstrates the efficiency of well-designed community projects in advancing several development objectives simultaneously with a single intervention.

Challenges in Sustaining Agricultural Enterprises

Despite the positive outcomes documented above, the evaluation also identified several structural challenges that threaten the long-term sustainability of such community projects. The primary concern is market access. While the community successfully produced both raw and processed cassava products, their market reach was largely confined to local networks, nearby towns, and periodic farmers' markets. Scaling up the enterprise requires access to broader regional or national markets, which demands a level of marketing expertise, logistical capability, and quality certification that the community currently lacks. To address this bottleneck, the enterprise should move from ad hoc local selling toward formal off-take arrangements with food manufacturers, institutional buyers, wholesalers, or industrial processors. Multi-cycle or longer-term purchase agreements can improve demand certainty, production planning, and price stability, provided that quality, volume, and delivery requirements are clearly specified.

Furthermore, the transition from grant-dependency to financial self-sufficiency remains a critical hurdle. The APPGM-SDG grant provided the initial capital expenditure (CAPEX) necessary to establish the enterprise, but the community must generate sufficient revenue to cover ongoing operational expenditures (OPEX), maintenance costs, and future replanting cycles without continued external funding. Financial literacy and rigorous reinvestment strategies are required to ensure that the enterprise does not collapse once the grant funds are fully utilised. There is a real risk that without careful financial planning, the community may consume all revenues without setting aside adequate reserves for future production cycles. A practical post-grant mechanism would be to ring-fence a fixed proportion of sales revenue as a reinvestment reserve and gradually develop a community revolving fund or cooperative microfinance facility. Such a mechanism would finance replanting, maintenance, and working capital between harvest cycles and reduce repeated dependence

on government grants; this complements the wider role of microcredit in addressing financing constraints among rural B40 groups (Aziz et al., 2022)

There is also a noted deficit in the adoption of modern agricultural technologies that could further optimise yields and reduce labour intensity. While the project has introduced some improvements over traditional methods, there remains significant scope for technological upgrading in areas such as soil testing, precision irrigation, integrated pest management, and post-harvest handling. Access to agricultural extension services from government agencies needs to be more consistent and sustained rather than limited to the initial project setup phase. Technology adoption should therefore be phased and affordability-based rather than equipment-intensive. Priority interventions include routine soil testing, simple moisture or irrigation monitoring, improved planting records, mechanised or semi-mechanised processing, and better post-harvest storage and handling. Technical support should continue through extension officers and university-industry partnerships after the initial implementation phase.

Strategic Recommendations for Sustainable Rural Entrepreneurship

To ensure the long-term viability and scalability of such rural enterprises, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, government agencies must facilitate stronger market linkages by connecting community enterprises with commercial off-takers, food processing companies, or institutional buyers such as school feeding programmes. Establishing formal supply agreements would provide the income predictability that community enterprises need to plan and invest with confidence. Where feasible, these arrangements should be formalised as multi-cycle or longer-term off-take contracts that specify expected volumes, quality standards, delivery schedules, and pricing mechanisms.

Second, funding programmes should be coupled with sustained capacity-building initiatives that extend well beyond the initial grant period. These should focus on financial literacy and business planning, digital marketing and e-commerce capabilities, advanced agro-technology adoption, and quality management systems that enable access to premium markets.

Third, encouraging the formalisation of these community groups into registered agricultural cooperatives could provide them with greater legal standing, easier access to commercial credit facilities, and enhanced economies of scale through collective purchasing and marketing. Agri-technology support should prioritise accessible, scalable tools, such as soil testing, basic irrigation monitoring, digital farm records, and appropriately sized processing machinery, rather than high-cost technologies that the community cannot maintain independently. Mentorship should continue after the grant period through scheduled business coaching on costing, cash-flow management, branding, marketing, and enterprise governance. The cooperative structure could also manage a ring-fenced revolving fund financed partly from retained earnings, providing members with working capital for replanting and small-scale upgrading without returning immediately to grant dependency.

Fourth, a phased funding model should be considered, where initial grants are followed by smaller supplementary allocations tied to the achievement of specific performance milestones. This approach would provide a bridge between full grant dependency and complete financial independence, reducing the risk of project collapse during the critical transition period. Finally, establishing peer-learning networks between different community projects would facilitate knowledge exchange, inspire innovation, and create a support ecosystem that enhances the resilience of individual projects. Supplementary grants should decline over time while retained earnings and revolving finance assume a larger share of working capital, creating a planned exit from grant dependency rather than an abrupt funding cliff.

Taken together, these recommendations indicate that fostering robust rural entrepreneurship requires a holistic ecosystem approach that extends beyond the initial provision of grant funding. It requires diversified financing, active community participation, strategic partnerships with private-sector actors that can provide market access and technical expertise, and stronger institutional support. When these elements are aligned, government-funded agricultural projects can serve as powerful engines of inclusive economic growth that transform the lives of rural communities.

CONCLUSION

The Cassava Community Project in Segamat provides compelling evidence that government-funded agricultural grants are highly effective instruments for catalysing rural entrepreneurship and empowering B40 communities. By providing the necessary capital to overcome initial barriers to entry, the APPGM-SDG initiative has successfully transformed subsistence farmers into active participants in the commercial agricultural supply chain. The project not only generates tangible economic returns through income diversification and value chain integration but also builds local institutional capacity, strengthens social capital, and demonstrates a successful model for localising the Sustainable Development Goals at the community level.

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