

Analysis of Sustainable Development Progress in the State of Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Development is a process of creating a prosperous society in terms of its economic, social, political and environmental quality. The government plays a crucial role in realising sustainable development by transforming the state and district economies and balancing socioeconomic income. Issues on Sabah's development have long been debated. The extent of the interest among relevant parties regarding Sabah's development and how the government 'tolerates' ensuring that Sabah is developing at the same pace as other states must be examined crucially. This research aims to investigate the condition of Sabah based on three main pillars of sustainable development: economics, social and environment. The studies only adapted descriptive analysis geared by a questionnaire distributed only to the local Sabahan. Overall, we received 30 respondents, and the outcomes are mixed. Overall, the majority of Sabahan is satisfied with the growth achieved by Sabah; however, they feel pressured by the cost of living and agree that there are still huge poverty issues in this state. Meanwhile, in environmental quality, the local Sabahan are satisfied with the government's approach to maintaining the environment despite huge development in major cities such as Kota Kinabalu. These studies could give meaningful insight to the policymakers in ensuring the development of Sabah is according to the United Nation's sustainable development policy.

Keywords: sustainable development, Sabah, economic, social, environmental quality

1. Introduction

Sabah is one of the states of Malaysia, located on the Borneo Island of East Malaysia. It is the second biggest state in Malaysia, seconded only by Sarawak. With a vast land, coasted by the South China Sea and home to the oldest rainforest in the world, Sabah is a trove of abundant resources, majestic geographical landscapes and fascinating cultures (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2019). In addition, Sabah has been an interest to various communities due to its medicinal plants' properties (Shamsudin et al., 2022; Kunjuraman, 2018), scenic diving spots and aquatic ecosystems (Sulehan & Gabir, 2021; Phu & Palaniappan, 2019) and unique cultural heritage and practices (Kindoyop et al., 2018; Kamaruddin & Ab Aziz, 2018). With such wonders, Sabah had a big potential to be a major economic contributor to the Malaysian economy. However, Sabah's GDP is among the lowest and is considered one of the poorest states in Malaysia.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019), during the 11th Malaysian Plan (RM11), the central regions of Malaysia recorded a high GDP of RM62,886 in 2020. However, Sabah recorded a low GDP of RM22,858, equivalent to a 63.7% gap with the central district. Besides the underwhelming GDP performance, Sabah is facing numerous issues, from underdevelopment and poverty (Wahab, Bunyau & Rezaul Islam, 2018; Idrisa et al., 2019) high employment rate (Nga, Ramlan & Naim, 2021; Sang et al., 2022) and undocumented, stateless and illegal communities (Hassan & Peters, 2020; Khan & Fathil, 2020). With such potential and prospects, it is a loss for Sabah and Malaysia if these issues are not studied and resolved. Therefore, there is an imperative need to look into the current state of Sabah and identify the issues that hinder Sabah from becoming a major economic

powerhouse in Malaysia.

Numerous studies have looked into issues in Sabah. Sabah has a large income gap between urban and rural households. The median household income for Sabah in 2019 was RM2500-RM3000 (RM5000 in urban areas while RM2500 in rural areas), far higher than in other states, where the median household income gap is between RM1500-RM2000. Regarding the poverty rate, Sabah recorded the highest Gini coefficient at 0.397, hardcore poverty at 19.5%, and relative poverty at 14.7% in 2019. However, the index for hardcore poverty in Sabah is improving from 23.97 per cent in 2016 to 19.5 per cent in 2019. Nevertheless, poverty and the income gap remain serious issues in Sabah that need proper remedial solutions.

Regarding the unemployment rate, tertiary graduates and underemployment unemployment remains high in Malaysia. Compared to its neighbour, Sarawak, labour entry in Sabah is stagnant and experienced a downward slop from 1982-2020. In 2019, Sabah recorded an unemployment rate of 5.8%, with labour entry of 70.0%. The absence of outside investors is a major source of unemployment in Sabah. The lack of interest outside is due to the lack of facilities and basic infrastructures like water, electricity and good roads in Sabah. Plus, local employees face competition from foreign labour because employees tend to choose foreign labour based on their preference to receive daily wages.

Low wages and opportunities exacerbate the lack of employment for tertiary graduates in Sabah. The lack of employment opportunities for graduates compels them to seek employment in Peninsular Malaysia, the dense industrial areas, to find jobs that suit their credentials and skill sets. Another prominent reason for low labour entry in Sabah is the stateless group, people who do not have proper documentation. These people are not allowed to work, yet they are among the majority of the Sabahan population. It was estimated that 800,000 from 3.9 million people in Sabah are stateless and highly likely to be working in undesigned areas and exposed to dangerous and exploitative working conditions. These people also did not have access to education, health services and banking, burdening their daily lives. Therefore, their contribution to social and economic growth is not counted in assessing Sabah's growth.

Besides the issue of income inequality and poverty issues, the other aspect of development that cannot be missed is ensuring environmental sustainability. Natural disasters such as the rise in temperature, floods and blazes have been occurring more rapidly in recent years due to global warming. A series of floods have occurred in Sabah in the past five years, and the occurrences are becoming more rapid. Thus, there is a need to capture how well the state of Sabah has progressed forward and, simultaneously, can sustain its environmental quality. Environmental quality is achieved if the state able to record lower pollution, lower deforestation, and many more.

Overall, the issues in Sabah are complicated and cannot be resolved in a one-size-fits-all solution. Therefore, it is urgent to penetrate each issue and identify its root cause. Only by understanding these issues meaningfully can progress be made to unearth Sabah's potential and turn it into a state of immense growth and sustainable well-living, inspired by numerous

national plans and policies.

This study aims to access the views of local Sabahan towards economic development for Sabah. As explained before, the theme of this research will be based on the progression of the Sabah economy in the context of three main pillars of sustainable development. The organisation of this paper is as follows. The next section focuses on the literature review, followed by Methodology in Section 3 and results and discussion in section 4. The last section focuses on the conclusion and policy recommendations.

2. Method

This research constructed a questionnaire which consists of 2 sections. The first section is for respondents' profiles, while the second section evaluates Sabah's sustainability based on three pillars of sustainable development: economics, social and environment. The idea of evaluating the state based on three pillars of sustainable development is inspired by the studies done by Wan Athmar et al. (2021), who have run the same evaluation but based on the tourist island of Sabah. The sample size set for this study is 30, and the questionnaire is distributed randomly to people in Sabah. The sample size of 30 is sufficient because our studies aim to have a preliminary survey based on the proposed topics before pursuing more in-depth research that plans for the future. We used an online Google survey, which is the easiest way to collect the information. The detailed outcome can be observed in the following section.

3. Results

In this section, we begin with summarising the profile of respondents. Next, we focused on describing the respondent's responses to each pillar of sustainable development, which begins with economic development, followed by income distribution and environmental quality.

Section A

According to the statistics, most of the respondents are Sabahan males, representing 77.4% (24 respondents). The remaining 22.6% (7 respondents) are Sabahan females. The figure below shows the average age of the respondents. Overall, 45.2% of the respondents are 41 - 50 years old Sabahan, followed by 35.5% of respondents who are 30 - 40 years old. The remaining groups are above 50 years old Sabahan (16.1%) and 3.2% (18 - 29 years old Sabahan). Most respondents are married (24 respondents or 77.4%), followed by 12.9% or four single respondents, and 9.7% or three divorced respondents. The figure below also shows the respondents' education level, which shows that 54.8% or 17 respondents have qualification certificates from the national higher-level education institutes. The remaining 35.5%, or 11 respondents, have secondary school certificates, while the minority of 6.5% or two respondents, have qualifications from overseas higher learning institutions and 3.2% or only one respondent, has qualifications from other higher-level institutions. Lastly, 61.3% or 19 respondents are government workers, 25.8%, or 8%, are statutory-bodied workers and 6.5% or two respondents, are self-employed.

Next, our studies focus on assessing the progression in the Sabah economy based on the three

main pillars of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). This assessment is important to capture the balanced development in the Sabah economy and how it benefits this state.

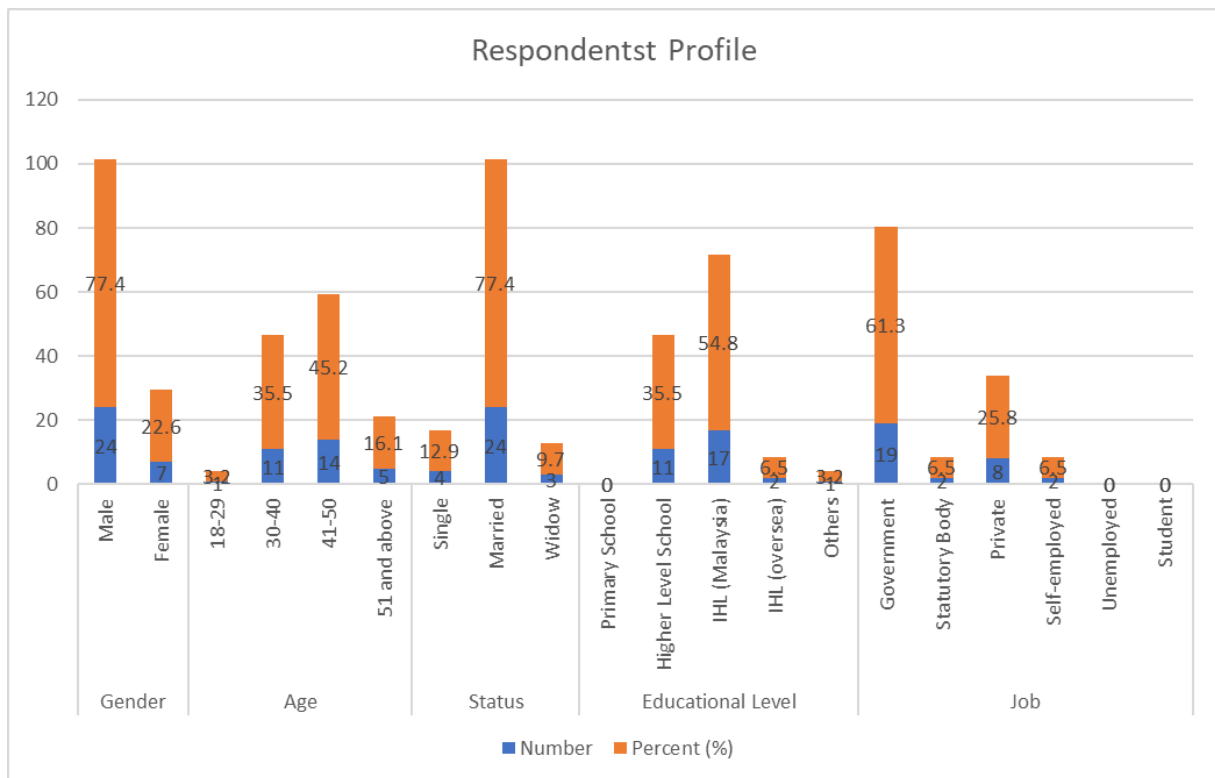


Figure 1. Respondent Profile

Section B

Pillar 1: Improvement in Economic Development (Q1-Q5)

The first evaluation of the sustainable development goal is based on improvement in economic development in Sabah. Five questions have been constructed to capture the development. Based on the first question, most respondents, or 48.4%, said they moderately agree with the overall income. The other 22.6% of respondents said they disagreed with their overall income, and 6.1% agreed with their current income. From the second question, most respondents are unhappy with the employment opportunities offered in Sabah. According to the statistics, ten or 32.3% of respondents disagree with the statement “I am satisfied with the employment opportunities here”. Also, five or 16.1% of respondents strongly disagreed with the above statement, leaving only four or 12.9% of respondents who agreed with the statement. Based on the statements that refer to the development progress in Sabah, as stated in question 3, most respondents agreed that they are evidence of continuous development in Sabah. This study shows that 38.7% or 12 respondents agreed that there is development happening in Sabah, while 6.5% or two respondents extremely agreed. Only 22.6%, or seven respondents, felt neutral about Sabah’s development, while 19.4% or six respondents, disagreed, and 12.9% or four respondents, extremely disagreed. Meanwhile, in question 4,

most respondents admitted that their living standards have increased. The finding shows that 35.5% or 11 respondents moderately agreed with the statement “I am satisfied with the increasing living standards”, followed by one respondent who extremely agreed. However, 32.3% of the ten respondents disagreed with the statement. Meanwhile, five respondents (16.1%) strongly disagreed, while four (12.9%) agreed. Only one respondent strongly agrees with the statement. The respondents agreed on the development policies in their area based on question 5. Eleven respondents (35.5%) responded with moderately agreed, while seven respondents (22.6%) disagreed, followed by five respondents (16.1%) who strongly disagreed with the development policies in their area. There are still respondents who agreed with the statement, as four (12.9%) and the other four (12.9%) strongly agreed with the development policies. Overall, the respondents agreed that there is an improvement in the economic development in Sabah. According to Ridzuan et al. (2017); Ridzuan et al. (2018); Abdul Rahman et al. (2021); Halizan et al. (2021), and Norehan et al. (2022), the improvement in economic growth might be due to several factors. These authors highlight that the strengthening of financial institutions, the increase of foreign direct investment inflows into the state, the greater usages of information communication and technologies, and infrastructure improvement are among the drivers driving economic development. As a result, people are experiencing better well-being and improved living standards.

Pillar 2: Improvement in Income Distribution (Q6 - Q10)

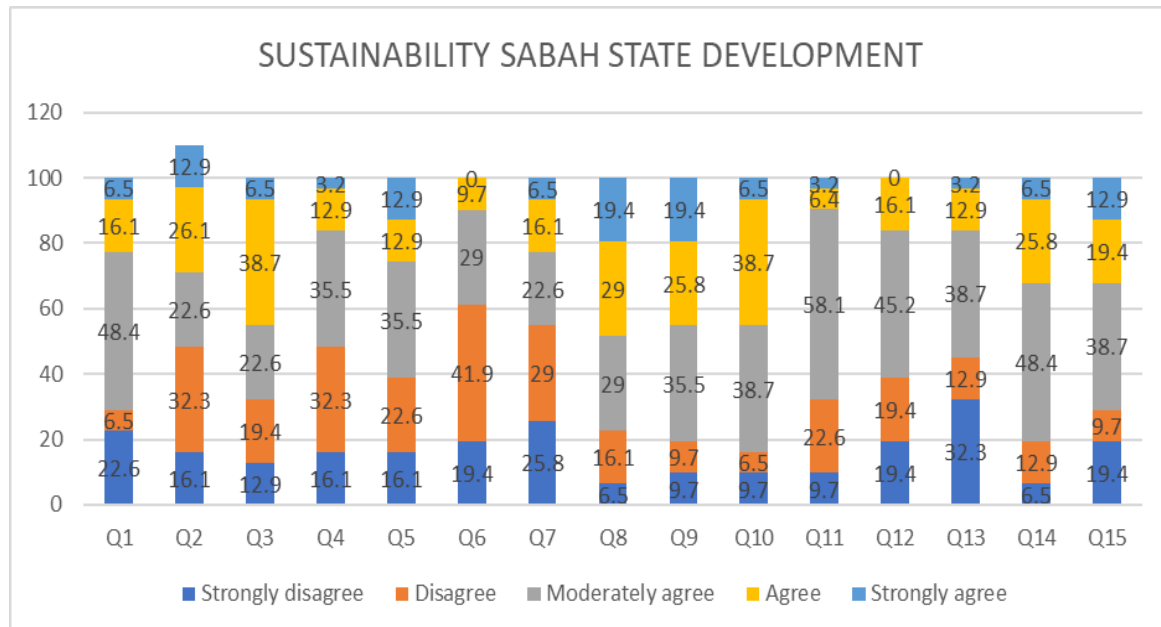
The next pillar focuses on improving income distribution between the people in society. Usually, income distribution is captured using Gini coefficients, and its value is between 0-100. The closer the value to 0, the closer the gap between the rich and the poor. In this part, we intend to ask the respondent about the income disparity scenario in Sabah. Based on the statistics for question 6, most respondents disagreed that the poverty rate in their area is declining. The study found that 13 respondents (41.9%) disagreed, while only three respondents (9.7%) moderately agreed. Only six respondents (19.4%) strongly disagreed with the statement, while three respondents (9.7%) agreed that the poverty rate in their area is declining. The huge percentage of disagreement concerning the declining poverty rate in Sabah indicated alarming conditions in Sabah. Overall, they also disagree that the income gap among Sabahan is narrowing. Based on question 7, nine respondents (29%) disagreed, while eight (25.8%) strongly agreed that the income gap in Sabah is narrowing. Only seven respondents (22.6%) moderately agreed with the statement, while five respondents (16.1%) agreed, and only two respondents (6.5%) strongly agreed. Next, based on question 7, most respondents knew that Sabah offers more educational opportunities. Nine respondents (29%) moderately agreed while the other nine (29%) agreed with the statement. While six respondents (19.4%) strongly agreed with the increasing educational opportunities in Sabah. However, five respondents (16.1%) disagreed, while two (6.5%) strongly disagreed. When we asked about lifestyle changes, as stated in question number 9, most respondents moderately agreed, with eleven or 35.5 per cent of respondents. Also, eight respondents (25.8%) agreed that lifestyle changes are happening in their area, and six (19.4%) strongly agreed. However, some respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed, each represented by six. Lastly, based on the statistics for question number 10, most respondents disagreed that

the government protects their basic rights. Twelve respondents (38.7%) agreed, and twelve (38.7%) moderately agreed. Only two respondents (6.5%) strongly agreed that the government agreed with the government protected their basic rights. The remaining three respondents (9.7%) disagreed, and two respondents (6.5%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Overall, most respondents in this section felt there was an improvement in income distribution. However, this condition still needs to be observed clearly by the state government from time to time. According to Sani and Ridzuan (2020), income distribution improvement helps people cope with the current cost of living and ease their burden. Besides, Ridzuan et al. (2021) added that income distribution could also be increased from the improvement in the financial institution and the government action on attracting higher foreign direct investment into the state. When there is more investment, there will be more job creation, especially for skilled workers. This will reduce the unemployment problem, as addressed by Abdul Rahman et al. (2020). Foreign companies can usually pay their workers higher, thus improving local people's income. Che Sulaiman et al. (2021) proposed that the government should emphasise inclusive growth with a fairer income distribution to maintain harmony, especially for a multi races country.

Pillar 3: Sustainability in Environmental Quality (Q11 - Q15)

The third assessment for SDG is environmental quality. Another 5 questions are developed to explore this pillar based on the Sabah economy. Based on question 11, most respondents moderately agreed that “I felt that the development in my area did not pollute the environment”, with eighteen respondents (58.1%). Also, seven respondents (22.6%) disagreed with the statement, followed by three respondents (9.7%) who strongly disagreed. However, two respondents (6.5%) agreed, while one agreed (3.2%). Meanwhile, for question 12, fourteen respondents (45.2%) moderately agreed on this matter. Also, six respondents (19.4%) disagreed, and six respondents (19.4%) strongly disagreed on that matter. The remaining five respondents (16.1%) felt that their area's development aligns with environmental care. Next, question 13 highlights the advancement of green technology like solar, hydroponics, and vertical are moderately agreed, represented by twelve respondents (38.7%). However, ten respondents or 32.3%, strongly disagreed with green technologies in their area. Other four respondents (12.9%) disagreed with the statement, four (12.9%) agreed, and one strongly agreed. Next, based on the statistics for question 14, most respondents moderately agreed that they felt the environmental changes in their area, with fifteen respondents (48.4%). The other eight respondents (25.8%) agreed, while two (6.5%) strongly agreed. However, two respondents (6.5%) strongly agreed, while four (12.9%) disagreed with any environmental changes in their area. The final question asked to provide their view on the government's responsibilities in caring for the environment in their area. Most respondents moderately agreed, with twelve respondents (38.7%) who felt that the government cares for the environment in their area. Six respondents (19.4%) agreed with the statement, followed by four (12.9%) who strongly disagreed. Six respondents strongly disagreed that the government cared for the environment, while three (9.7%) disagreed. Overall, the respondents' assessment based on sustainability in environmental quality is good. Most respondents agreed that the government had made many efforts to protect the environment.

The importance of achieving sustainable environmental quality has been addressed a lot by previous researchers such as Zainal et al. (2020); Md Razak et al. (2017); Shaari et al. (2021), and Ridzuan et al. (2019). These authors believed that by pursuing balance development, the country would minimise environmental disasters such as floods caused by irresponsible developers who do not follow the law when pursuing construction activities.



Q1	I am satisfied with the amount of income I earn every month
Q2	I am satisfied with the job opportunities offered here
Q3	I am satisfied with the development progress in my area compared to before
Q4	I am satisfied with the improvement in living standards
Q5	I am satisfied with the government's development policy in my area
Q6	I realised the poverty rate is decreasing in my area
Q7	I realised that the income gap is decreasing in society
Q8	I realised that more and more educational opportunities are offered in my place
Q9	I am aware of the change in lifestyle
Q10	I realise the government protects my basic rights
Q11	I feel the development in my area does not pollute the environment
Q12	I feel that development goes hand in hand with environmental protection
Q13	I feel progress in the advancement of green technology (use of solar, hydroponics, vertical farming) in my area
Q14	I feel the change in environmental conditions in my area
Q15	I feel the government cares about environmental issues in my area

Figure 2. Sustainability of Sabah State Development

4. Conclusion

This research aims to oversee the progress of the economic development of Sabah based on the main pillar of SDG, which are economic growth, income distribution and environmental quality. Thirty responded that Sabahan people had answered the questions distributed online. Overall, the respondent is satisfied with the current economic progress that took place in the state. Besides, the respondents also felt the consequences of development based on the environmental quality aspects and acknowledged that the state government had played a crucial role in taking care of the environmental issues. The most lack and dissatisfying part of this survey is the assessment of income distribution. Many Sabahan feels that the poverty issues are still huge, and part of Sabahan feel that the income disparity between the rich and the poor is still huge. Despite this research focus on descriptive analysis, it still provided an overview of Sabah's current state towards pursuing the SDG goal. The role of state government is crucial to ensure the policy they have made can direct to sustainability which is important for future generations. Among the policies suggested to improve the Sabah economy as a whole are as follows:

1. Sabah Maju Jaya plan is a development plan for 2021-2025 that fully encompasses the development aspect of Sabah, like agriculture, industry, and tourism. In addition, the plan emphasises the Human modal, people's welfare, infrastructure network and green sustainability. Therefore, it is a long-term plan to help boost Sabah's development. However, efforts to inform and promote awareness among the people are still low, as seen in weak dissemination and enforcement. Therefore, the government must carry out other short-term plans to achieve the long-term plan.
2. Shifting the economy to knowledge and high-skill-based must be considered for a more efficient human model in Sabah. Universities and the state government should form a strong partnership to ensure their local graduates can fulfil the local market demand, increasing labour entry and reducing the dependency on commodities income. Eventually, Sabah should shift to a high-value-added economic sector, based on high technology, in line with Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (WKB2030). These moves can help close the development, and economic gaps between Sabah (and Sarawak) with Peninsular Malaysia states, reducing labour transfer to the peninsular and foreign workers' entry.
3. Sabah's development plan must be more 'human-centric' to create a people-friendly economic environment. The development model must be adapted using the 'bottom-up' approach to create equal economic ownership. Equal economic ownership is vital to create awareness and make people understand their role in developing the state economy. The state government must be more reliable and aware of the people's needs and demands as they directly receive the effects of economic slums (for example, inflation). The concept of social enterprise, a joint effort between the local communities and the non-government organisations (NGOs), should be developed as both parties can work together successfully. It is better than just employing the locals.
4. Agriculture is the third highest economic source (RM13.7 billion or 16%) of Sabah's GDP in 2019. This report shows that agriculture has a huge potential to boost economic growth. Therefore, the state and federal governments play a critical role in

commercialising Sabah's crops and ensuring optimum land use according to sustainable development. It can be achieved using 'smart agriculture' or climate-friendly agriculture rather than taking their lands away. This effort can help Sabah to achieve SDG goals 8,10, and 13 to maintain environment and economic sustainability growth.

5. Geographically, Sabah is the closest state to its neighbours, especially Indonesia. However, at the same time, Indonesia plans to move the capital city from Jakarta to Kalimantan due to uncontrollable urbanisation. This move can directly affect Sabah's social and development state. Therefore, the state government must prepare comprehensively to face any impact that comes from this move, whether economically or socially.

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