

Poverty Alleviation Without Participation? Examining Beneficiary Engagement in a Poverty Alleviation Program in Kedah, Malaysia through the Lens of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

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Abstract

Participation in poverty alleviation programs is often regarded as a key factor in ensuring their success and sustainability. However, in reality, many programs exhibit low levels of participation, where beneficiaries remain passive recipients rather than active decision-makers. This qualitative study explores the nature of participation in poverty alleviation initiatives in Kedah, one of the poorest states in Malaysia, through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight program recipients. Using thematic analysis, the study identifies key patterns in participants' experiences, revealing that their involvement is largely limited to receiving aid and attending training sessions provided by public officers, with minimal engagement in decision-making processes. Applying Arnstein's Ladder of Participation as a theoretical lens, the findings categorize participation at the lower rungs of "non-participation", where individuals are merely informed and consulted but lack real influence over program design or implementation. The absence of collective decision-making and meaningful interaction with policymakers hinders empowerment, reinforcing dependency rather than fostering long-term self-reliance. The study highlights the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach in poverty alleviation efforts, ensuring that recipients in Kedah are not just passive beneficiaries but active contributors to program development and decision-making.