

**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA**

**PARTICIPATION AND  
EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE  
LENS OF THE CAPABILITY  
APPROACH: A CASE FROM  
FELDA'S SETTLER  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME  
(SDP)**

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FELDA'S SETTLER  
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(SDP)**

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
**Master of Administrative Science**

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I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Teknologi MARA. It is original and is the results of my own work, unless otherwise indicated or acknowledged as referenced work. This thesis has not been submitted to any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any degree or qualification.

I, hereby, acknowledge that I have been supplied with the Academic Rules and Regulations for Post Graduate, Universiti Teknologi MARA, regulating the conduct of my study and research.

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## ABSTRACT

Active participation and empowerment are key to the success of development programmes such as FELDA's Settler Development Programme (SDP), which aims to enhance settlers' income and well-being through diversified economic activities. However, despite substantial government investment, participation among FELDA settlers in the SDP has remained limited and inconsistent, raising concerns about the programme's effectiveness, sustainability, and its ability to genuinely empower intended beneficiaries. This study examines participation and empowerment in the SDP among FELDA settlers, focusing on two FELDA settlements in Kedah that recorded some of the lowest participation rates. These settlements were selected as critical cases to provide deeper insight into participation decline and implementation challenges in underperforming schemes. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 44 participants, comprising 35 FELDA settlers and 9 FELDA officers, selected through purposive sampling. The data were analysed thematically using NVivo 12. The study was guided by the Capability Approach, looks at both enabling and constraining factors that influence participation and empowerment. The findings show that settlers largely perceive participation in the SDP as compliance with a government initiative aimed at income generation, rather than as an empowering process involving agency and decision-making. At the local level, the implementation of the SDP is characterised by centralised decision-making, information asymmetry, one-way communication, and instances of favouritism, which restrict settlers' access to information and meaningful engagement. As a result, participation does not automatically translate into empowerment, as settlers experience a lack of capability to act, limited decision-making power, and dominance by public officers. These conditions constrain settlers' ability to exercise choice, influence programme outcomes, and convert participation into improved livelihoods and well-being. The study contributes theoretically by applying the Capability Approach to a Malaysian rural development context, demonstrating how structural and institutional constraints shape the relationship between participation and empowerment. Practically, it recommends enhancing settlers' awareness and understanding of the SDP through practical hands-on training, adopting a bottom-up approach to participatory decision-making, and implementing regular monitoring and evaluation. A structured feedback mechanism is also required to ensure that settler voices are heard in programme development. This study contributes to theoretical discourse by implementing the capability approach in a Malaysian rural development context, and it makes practical recommendations to policymakers and FELDA on how to strengthen participatory development and improve programme outcomes.

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### Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AZAM	<i>Akhiri Zaman Miskin</i>
BKM	<i>Bantuan Keluarga Malaysia</i>
BMTKM	<i>Program Pembasmian Kemiskinan Tegar Keluarga Malaysia</i>
BR1M	Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia
BSH	<i>Bantuan Sara Hidup</i>
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfers
DOSM	Department of Statistic Malaysia
DRP	Defence of Research Proposal
FELCRA	<i>Lembaga Penyatuan dan Pemulihan Tanah Persekutuan</i>
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
GPW	<i>Gerakan Persatuan Wanita FELDA</i>
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
JAKOA	<i>Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli</i>
JKKR	<i>Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Rancangan</i>
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NDP	New Development Policy
NEP	New Economic Policy
NHTS-PR	National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction

PGBF	FELDA New Generation Housing or <i>Perumahan Generasi Baru FELDA</i>
PKH	<i>Program Keluarga Harapan</i>
PPP	<i>Program Peningkatan Pendapatan</i>
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDP	Settler Development Programme
SPKR	<i>Skim Pembangunan Kesejahteraan Rakyat</i>
STR	<i>Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah</i>
UHC	Universal Health Care
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

Poverty continues to be a significant global challenge, with approximately 808 million people worldwide living below the updated international poverty line of \$3.00 per person per day (World Bank, 2025a). While poverty affects all regions, it is most concentrated in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where progress toward eradication remains slow (World Bank, 2023). This enduring struggle is driven by factors such as inequality, conflict, climate change, poor infrastructure, and high unemployment rates (Aguilar et al., 2023; Hoeven et al., 2002). In recognition of these challenges, the United Nations has set a global target to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030 (United Nations, 2022). However, achieving this goal requires more than just economic policies and aid, it fundamentally depends on the active participation and empowerment of target communities. Addressing poverty effectively requires that beneficiaries are not merely passive recipients but active agents in their own development.

Recent data underscores the severity of poverty in specific countries. For instance, Pakistan's poverty rate has surged to 45 percent, reflecting deep-rooted economic and social difficulties. In contrast, India has made notable progress by reducing extreme poverty from 27.1 percent in 2011–2012 to 5.3 percent in 2022–2023. This improvement is largely attributed to economic growth and the expansion of social protection programmes. Despite such successes, about 2 billion people in developing countries still lack adequate social protection, and 60 percent of the global population faces economic insecurity (United Nations, 2025; World Bank, 2022b).

To improve living conditions, especially for vulnerable rural populations, various poverty alleviation programmes have been implemented globally. For example, conditional and unconditional cash transfer schemes are active in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and across Latin America (Andrade-Silva et al., 2024; Jesus et al., 2025; Kugler, 2018; Kyophilavong, 2011; Miguel et al., 2024; Parker, 2023). In the United Kingdom, targeted anti-poverty policies have also been adopted to address growing inequality (Hingley et al., 2014). While these sources provide foundational

understanding, recent evidence highlights evolving approaches. For instance, Shah et al. (2025) revealed that Indonesia's conditional cash transfer programme, the *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH), has varied effects depending on access to healthcare infrastructure, where benefits for maternal care were stronger in areas with better medical access. Similarly, Sari et al. (2023) found that while PKH had lasting effects on healthcare service use, the impact on education spending diminished after support ended, signalling the need for sustained intervention design.

As well as at the international level, Southeast Asia is also attempting to reduce poverty through programmes such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT). Through the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), one of the primary goals of its formation is to eradicate poverty and improve rural areas. This can be seen in the implementation of conditional cash transfer programmes (ASEAN, 2020). For instance, in 2007, Indonesia implemented the Family of Hope Programme (PKH) as a social protection initiative providing financial assistance to underprivileged households (Bangun et al., 2019). Recent studies validate this further. According to Shah et al. (2025), the PKH programme enhances healthcare outcomes in rural areas. However, the impact is contingent on service availability. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the government adopted *Listahanan*, or the National Household Targeting System, to improve targeting for social programmes. David and Maroma (2025) confirmed that the country's flagship CCT programme, the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Programme* (4Ps), significantly reduced poverty and strengthened social inclusion, especially in education and maternal health sectors. Their findings demonstrate that effective implementation and proper targeting can lead to genuine improvements in community well-being. Therefore, most programmes illustrate that successful poverty alleviation depends heavily on the ability of individuals and communities to actively participate in and benefit from these initiatives. Empowerment ensures they are capable of maintaining improvements in health, education, and income long after direct support has ended.

Like other ASEAN countries, Malaysia has developed several poverty programmes that aim to eradicate poverty. Malaysia's poverty eradication programme covered both financial and non-financial assistance, especially for the rural poor, such as land development and human capital development. Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has successfully transitioned from a low-income to a middle-income country. Poverty has dropped dramatically from 49.3% in 1970 to 3.8% in 2010, with hard-core

poverty nearly eliminated in 2009 because of the government's poverty eradication programme (Abidin and Rasiah, 2009; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010, 2011; Hatta and Ali, 2013). Following independence, the government prioritised rural development in response to the 1969 racial riots. This occurred because of the British colonial administration's 'divide and rule' policy, which separated people based on living areas. For example, Chinese and Indians were assigned to mining sites and estates, while Malays were assigned to rural areas. Most Malays became impoverished due to poor job opportunities and financial assistance in rural areas. Given this situation, the government has implemented several programmes aimed at alleviating rural poverty, including new land development schemes, in-situ development programmes, promoting downstream agricultural activities through village industry and rural entrepreneurship programmes, and many others (Economic Planning Unit, 2023; Government of Malaysia, 1984). These programmes were created to help the rural poor improve their well-being and increase their income.

In addition to the poverty alleviation programme by the government, Ngah (2015) in his study revealed that the government tries to assist the rural poor by providing capital-intensive items such as farm machinery, high-yield crop varieties, and other infrastructure and services. The government has implemented many programmes to reduce poverty, with one of the most successful projects being the establishment of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) to eradicate poverty (Sutton, 1989). FELDA is one of the success stories in rural development and poverty reduction mechanisms. FELDA has successfully developed its one-of-a-kind land development and settlement model (Ibrahim, 2018). Its contribution to the national economy is well known for establishing land ownership among the landless poor. The primary activities are developing new agricultural areas and settling the rural and landless poor. This aligns with the global commitment to sustainability, particularly Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 1: 'No Poverty,' which focuses on eradicating poverty through sustainable economic growth, improved livelihoods, and access to resources (SDG Tracker, 2024; UN DESA, 2024). FELDA's initiatives in land development and rural resettlement contributed directly to this goal by providing land ownership and agricultural opportunities to the landless poor.

To further strengthen FELDA's role in developing rural areas and improving livelihoods, the government has revitalised the organisation. One of the key mechanisms introduced is the Settler Development Programme, or *Program*

*Pembangunan Peneroka* (SDP) (SDP will be used onward in this study), aimed at enhancing the income of FELDA settlers through their active participation. The main agenda of SDP is to generate more consistent income and diversify economic resources, aligning with efforts to improve settlers' standards of living (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019). Specifically, SDP seeks to empower settlers and the new generation by increasing income through new revenue streams (FELDA, 2019a). Crucially, the success of SDP relies on the level of settler participation and the degree to which they are empowered to make independent, informed decisions. Without meaningful engagement, the long-term sustainability and impact of such programmes remain limited.

However, after several years of its implementation, participation in the SDP was not encouraging. To date, very scant research has been conducted to understand why participation and empowerment in the SDP are not encouraging. Most of the past research, such as Rashid et al., (2021), focuses only on the implementation of the SDP. To further understand the lack of participation and empowerment among FELDA settlers, this study fills the gaps by examining the enabling and disabling factors behind the involvement and empowerment of FELDA settlers in the SDP. Lack of studies pertaining to participation and empowerment led to this study. The following section describes the problem that justifies the relevance of the research to be undertaken.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

In Malaysia, the government took eradicating poverty seriously. It committed to eradicate poverty on a national scale and prioritised efforts to improve the status and quality of life of the lower-income group (Manaf and Ibrahim, 2017). The government has created numerous poverty-reduction programmes to improve income-earning opportunities and improve the well-being of the poor (Nor and Khelghat, 2019). However, various programmes which were intended to reduce poverty were not successful due to various factors such as lack of participation and consciousness (Hatta and Ali, 2013; National Audit Department, 2015, 2016; Nor and Khelghat, 2019).

For instance, the first poverty programme introduced to help poor people was 1 AZAM, also known as '*Akhiri Zaman Miskin*'. It was introduced in 2010 to assist the poor in increasing their income and breaking out of poverty (Mohd, 2013; Nor and Azhar, 2016; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2010). This programme was designed specifically for the B40 group and poor people, whose participation was

chosen using the *eKasih* Database system (national poverty database) (Nor and Khelghat, 2019). However, after several years of implementation, the programme had numerous issues. According to the Report of the National Audit Department (2015) from their survey, the participation of people in 1AZAM is not among the B40 group but rather among people who are not registered in the *eKasih* Database. Based on the census, there were 58% of participants had unknown status, and officers claimed participation among the M40 or T20 group (Nor and Khelghat, 2019). Furthermore, some participants do not fully utilise the equipment provided, resulting in a waste of government funds (National Audit Department, 2015). As such, it led to the failure of empowerment in the 1AZAM programme.

The second poverty reduction programme, known as *Program Peningkatan Pendapatan* (PPP), also faces similar challenges to other poverty alleviation initiatives. This programme aims to increase the income of poor people in rural areas through participation in economic activities that can enhance their quality of life (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2020; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2017). It targets the hardcore poor and the B40 group, but it also faces issues related to participation and empowerment (Hamid, 2016). Many projects have been abandoned, as most participants are unwilling to continue them, resulting in wasted government funds. Additionally, some participants are not interested in managing the projects, and many still lack the awareness or motivation to escape poverty. Furthermore, some individuals refuse to join the programme, often preferring to wait for financial assistance rather than commit to active participation. Hamid (2016) reported that several participants provided inaccurate information to officers, including false claims of stolen equipment and the concealment of income and asset ownership. This misinformation posed significant challenges for officers in making evidence-based decisions. A more recent study by Ahmad et al. (2025) found that aging, illness, limited decision-making opportunities, and a lack of functional capacity are significant factors contributing to poor well-being. These factors reduce income stability, limit access to training, and hinder efforts to break the cycle of poverty. Consequently, they also contribute to the lack of meaningful participation in the SDP.

As well as 1AZAM and *Program Peningkatan Pendapatan* (PPP), this study also specifically intends to investigate the Settler Development Programme (SDP), whose main aim is to help the FELDA settlers increase their income and empower themselves. After several years of implementation, there were several issues with the

participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP. For instance, out of a total of 112,635 settlers, only 49,631 joined the programme representing just 44% participation. Although the programme involved 7,570 projects across 12 states, and very little research has shown evidence of participation and empowerment in the programme (Salleh, 2022). This was a waste because the government had spent RM1 billion since its implementation, with additional allocations of RM138 million in 2020 and RM100 million in 2022, bringing the total budget to RM1.238 billion (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019, 2020, 2022; Ibrahim, 2019).

Several studies, such as Hassan and Habib (2022) and Marisah (2022), revealed that only a small percentage of settlers participated in the SDP programme. In some cases, even those who did participate were not necessarily empowered. According to Gani (personal communication, November 11, 2022), participation in the SDP does not automatically lead to empowerment. To be empowered, settlers must first participate, but participation alone is not enough. This is supported by evidence showing that high participation in some FELDA settlements did not correspond to higher income from the SDP (Salleh, 2022). In other words, even with active involvement, many settlers did not see improved outcomes, which confirms that participation alone does not guarantee empowerment. This outcome may be due to a lack of technical skills and financial knowledge among settlers, which affected their ability to manage the projects effectively. Rahim (personal communication, March 29, 2023), also noted that while some settlers participated, many were inconsistent in their efforts, which directly impacted their income levels. Furthermore, this concern was reinforced by the Parliament, House of Representatives (2021), which reported that only 20% of settlers benefited from the SDP, despite it being implemented for four years.

In practice, low participation and empowerment among settlers can also be seen from FELDA in the Northern Region (Salleh, 2022). Table 1.1 shows the number of participants in the SDP at FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar, especially in Kedah State.

Table 1.1  
 Number of Participations in the Settler Development Programme (SDP) in FELDA  
 Wilayah Alor Setar, Kedah State

FELDA Settlement in Kedah State	Total Settlers in FELDA	Settler Participate in SDP (2022)	Settler Participate in SDP (2024)
Lubuk Merbau	769	440	384
Teloi Timur	610	173	2
Sungai Tiang	522	109	0
Teloi Kanan	263	100	0
Laka Selatan	85	85	0
Bukit Tembaga	156	63	0
Gunung Bongsu	180	49	3
Bukit Tangga	370	48	0
Total	2,955	1,067	389

Sources: FELDA 2020; Gani 2024; Husni 2024; Jadid 2024; Nordin 2024; Salleh 2022; Wahid 2024

Based on Table 1.1 above, only 1,067 settlers out of 2,955 have participated in the SDP. Following that, Hassan and Habib (2022) stated that limited participation and empowerment have contributed to the problem because not all settlers get information about the SDP. As a result, the settlers did not receive adequate explanations about the SDP because not all FELDA settlements were involved in it. For instance, only five pilot study projects have been implemented (*Jabatan Penggulangan Rang Undang-undang*, 2022; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019). This shows that FELDA only focuses on the pilot project of the SDP and neglects other settlers from different regions. The very selective approach to implementing the SDP led to several problems, such as the disempowerment of the settlers.

In 2024, most FELDA settlements in Kedah have already had zero participation in SDP. The involvement of the settler in 2024 has dropped dramatically from 1,067 to 389. Besides, Wahid (personal communication, January 4, 2024), stated that Kedah has the lowest SDP participation rate compared to other states. This statement was reinforced by Idris (personal communication, January 4, 2024), that the lowest participation occurred due to the project's failure and that some of the settlers involved in the SDP did not earn the target income. Through SDP, FELDA has estimated that each participant in this programme will receive an additional monthly income of RM500.00 to RM1000.00 but some of the settlers did not reach the income of even RM 500.00 (Idris, personal communication, January 4, 2024; Mokhtar et al., 2023; Wahid, personal communication, January 4, 2024).

Furthermore, one of the FELDA settlements in Kedah also has an issue regarding participation and empowerment, which stated that all SDP projects ended and failed (Ibrahim, personal communication, January 2, 2024; Nordin, personal communication, January 4, 2024). Therefore, based on the issues highlighted, the study aims to understand the participation and empowerment of the FELDA settlers in the SDP. The capability approach was employed to understand participation and empowerment in this study. The capability approach was used to examine how and whether the SDP empowers the FELDA settlers. This approach was considered important in this study to examine and investigate factors that enable or disable the participation and empowerment of FELDA settlers in the SDP.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study aimed to examine the participation and empowerment in the Settler Development Programme (SDP). Hence, several questions were developed to have a better understanding of this study:

The first research question was developed to examine how the settlers' understanding of participation in the SDP. It was important to know whether the settlers had their own understanding and knowledge of the SDP.

#### **1.3.1 How did the settlers understand their participation in the SDP?**

The second research question focused on the implementation of the SDP. The main aim of this question was to examine the implementation of the programme by public officers at the federal, state, and local levels. It is important to understand how they implemented and provided information about SDP to the settlers.

#### **1.3.2 How was the SDP implemented at a local level?**

The third research question focused on settlers' empowerment. It was crucial to know whether settlers are empowered with SDP or not.

#### **1.3.3 To what extent did the SDP empower settlers to improve their well-being?**

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The research objectives were:

1.4.1 To examine the settlers' understanding of their participation in the SDP.

1.4.2 To explain the implementation of the SDP at a local level.

1.4.3 To investigate whether the SDP empowers the settlers in improving their well-being.

## **1.5 Research Scopes**

This study's purpose is to understand participation and empowerment in the SDP. Its research scope focuses on the participant, who are FELDA settlers and FELDA officers. The scope of this study was the settlers from FELDA A and FELDA B. The inclusion criteria for FELDA settlers were that all participants came from these two FELDA settlements only. In addition, the selection of settlers was based on the terms and conditions of the SDP project, whereby settlers could only participate once they had reached the age of 18. The participants from FELDA settlers were considered vital as they could provide fresh ideas regarding the participation and empowerment of the SDP and gain greater recognition for the SDP's present situation.

The inclusion criteria for the FELDA officers were that the researcher would only interview FELDA officers who were directly or indirectly involved in the formulation and implementation of the SDP. They were selected because they were expected to provide in-depth information regarding the strategy or implementation of the SDP (details in Chapter 3).

This study was also conducted at the FELDA *Wilayah* Alor Setar, in Kedah state. Kedah has been considered among the poorest states in Peninsular Malaysia, with a poverty rate of 9.0% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). In Kedah, two FELDA were chosen as case studies, which are FELDA A and FELDA B. The selection of FELDA A and FELDA B was analytically driven rather than solely based on poverty indicators. These settlements were identified as critical cases due to their consistently low and declining participation in the SDP, including project discontinuation and near-zero participation in recent years. This focus is further justified as Kedah has recorded one of the lowest SDP participation rates compared to other states, making it an appropriate context for examining participation and empowerment in the programme (Salleh, 2022). Furthermore, the researcher spent approximately four months researching and collecting relevant data for this study, and the data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

## **1.6 Significance of Study**

Based on the findings of this study, the outcome could have a significant impact on the policymaker, the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), and FELDA settlers. The following subsection discusses the contribution in each of these areas.

### **1.6.1 Policymaker**

In terms of policymakers, it can enhance the implementation of SDP by addressing key challenges related to settlers' participation and empowerment. The results indicate that many settlers feel excluded from decision-making due to power dominance by the officer, a lack of clear communication, and engagement opportunities. To improve this, policymakers should establish more transparent and inclusive communication channels, such as regular community meetings, interactive workshops, and digital platforms, to ensure settlers are well-informed and actively involved. Furthermore, feedback since the SDP launch in 2019 suggests that some settlers perceive the programme as lacking responsiveness to their needs. To address this, policymakers should implement a structured feedback mechanism, allowing settlers to voice concerns and provide input on improvements. By making these adjustments, policymakers can ensure the SDP is more effective, participatory, and aligned with settlers' expectations.

### **1.6.2 Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA)**

This study is important to FELDA in improving the implementation of SDP at FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar. The findings highlight several barriers, including a lack of settlers' awareness, ineffective communication, and limited participation opportunities, which hinder the effectiveness of SDP. To enhance the programme, FELDA needs to address these challenges by implementing clearer communication strategies, increasing settlers' involvement in decision-making, and streamlining administrative processes. Additionally, FELDA can improve its performance in managing SDP by actively soliciting feedback from settlers to ensure that the programme aligns with their needs and expectations.

### **1.6.3 FELDA Settler**

This study is important in providing settlers with a better understanding of participation and empowerment within the SDP, particularly for those who may be unfamiliar with the programme. The findings indicate that a limited understanding of SDP can hinder settlers' participation and engagement. By increasing awareness, settlers can better recognize the benefits of SDP and actively take part in its implementation. Moreover, this study highlights how SDP can empower settlers by

giving them a voice in decision-making, increasing their role in community development, and enhancing their skills through capacity-building initiatives. Greater participation and empowerment will ultimately lead to a more effective and sustainable implementation of SDP.

## **1.7 Body of Knowledge**

### **1.7.1 Theoretical Contribution**

The capability approach was used in this study to understand the participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP, which is a rural development programme. Before this, most researchers exploring participation in rural development programmes focused on the theory of participation. However, in understanding participation and empowerment in Malaysia's context, this theory proved insufficient to explain Malaysia's complex and dynamic political and economic aspects.

Arnstein's Ladder is a theory of public participation developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969 that is always used to explore participation in rural development programmes (Ahmad and Abu, 2011; Varwell, 2022). It focuses more on the outcomes of participation than the processes of involvement, and it also does not explain why people fail (Tritter and McCallum, 2006). Due to the limitations of this theory, the capability approach is more adaptable in the Malaysian context and can explain the social structural factors that may enable or disable the participation and empowerment of settlers in the SDP, which failed to be explained by Arnstein's ladder. Therefore, this research on participation and empowerment contributes to the capability approach and fills the limitations of participation theory.

### **1.7.2 Methodological Contribution**

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP. This method is beneficial as it allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions based on the interviewee's responses, leading to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Unlike previous studies on participation in rural development, which primarily used quantitative methods such as questionnaires (Hoe et al., 2018; Yew et al., 2019), a qualitative approach provides an in-depth exploration of settlers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. This

approach is more suitable for capturing nuanced insights that may not be easily quantified, ensuring a richer understanding of participation dynamics in the SDP.

To achieve this, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used. This method enables the researcher to adapt questions based on participants' answers, allowing for a more flexible and interactive discussion. As a result, the researcher can gather diverse perspectives from settlers, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of their participation and empowerment within the SDP.

### **1.7.3 Empirical Contribution**

This study examines participation and empowerment within the SDP, focusing on two FELDA settlements, FELDA A and FELDA B, which are located in the FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar. While much of the existing literature on FELDA emphasizes organizational strategies, economic development, and technological implementation, relatively little attention has been paid to the perspectives, voices, and lived experiences of the settlers themselves. FELDA A and B were selected because prior research has often concentrated on successful or high-performing schemes, often overlooking less prominent or less active settlements.

Furthermore, limited research has genuinely engaged with the voices and viewpoints of settlers. Existing studies tend to focus narrowly on women's participation in downstream economic activities, highlight socio-economic challenges without addressing marginalized schemes or communities, and emphasize income generation through technological adaptation, particularly within the context of Industry 4.0. Some also concentrate on demographic changes and generational transitions, capturing lifestyle evolution without examining how settlers themselves participate in or feel empowered by development programmes. As a result, the literature often prioritizes economic and technological outcomes while side lining issues of agency, lived realities, and the power dynamics that influence settler experiences.

Previous research, such as Idris et al. (2014), explored settler participation, particularly women's involvement in downstream economic activities. However, these studies often adopted a narrow economic lens and rarely addressed broader dimensions of empowerment from the settlers' perspectives. Similarly, Hashim et al. (2009) highlighted socio-economic challenges faced by settlers but offered limited engagement with underrepresented schemes or communities. More recent works, including Zakaria and Rizal (2024), focused on technological adaptation and income generation in

FELDA Bukit Tajau within the context of Industry 4.0. Zainal et al. (2023) examined demographic shifts and generational transitions in FELDA Bukit Goh and Tenggaraoh, revealing the evolving nature of rural life within FELDA schemes.

This study builds upon and extends these contributions by exploring how both actively and less actively engaged settlements experience participation and empowerment differently. It seeks to bridge the empirical gap between the policy rhetoric of participatory development and the everyday realities of settlers. Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, this research provides a grounded and inclusive account of how power, trust, and voice shape participation outcomes in FELDA programmes, dimensions often overlooked in dominant technocratic and commercially driven narratives.

## **1.8 Definition of Term**

### **1.8.1 Settler Development Programme (SDP)**

Settler Development Programme, also known as *Program Pembangunan Peneroka* (SDP) is a programme that empowers the settlers and the new generation to increase income through new revenue. Besides, the main objective of SDP is to increase settlers' income and reduce settlers' reliance on commodity products (palm oil and rubber). Not only did the settlers benefit, but it also ensured national food security (Parliament, House of Representative, 2019).

### **1.8.2 Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA)**

Federal Land Development Authority is referring to FELDA. The function of FELDA is to carry out land development and agricultural projects, as well as industrial and commercial social economy projects. Besides, the role of FELDA is to develop new land for use as productive agricultural fields through effective agricultural management among settlers, as well as to promote the development of a developed and disciplined society (FELDA, 2019a).

### **1.8.3 Participation**

According to the World Bank (1994), participation is defined as a process in which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions, and resources. Similarly, Rowe and Frewer (2005) define participation as the practice

of involving the public in policy development and decision-making processes. Likewise, a study by Sutiyo and Maharjan (2017) defines participation as the involvement of people in every stage of a programme, from planning to evaluation. In this study, participation is defined as the voluntary involvement of settlers in the Settler Development Programme (SDP).

#### **1.8.4 Empowerment**

Empowerment can be defined as the ability of an individual or a group of people to make a choice, transform that choice into a desired action, and achieve the desired result (World Bank, 2006). Meanwhile, in a study done by Gutierrez and Ortega (1991), empowerment is a process that occurs in communities or organisations that involves active participation and access to control over crucial choices and resources. In this study, empowerment refers to the ability of settlers to participate and be empowered in the programme and transform their choices into defined actions and outcomes.

#### **1.8.5 Capability Approach**

The capability approach is an evaluative framework that assesses well-being, social arrangements, and development by focusing on individuals' real freedoms and opportunities rather than resources or economic wealth. It distinguishes between functioning, which refers to actual achievements or states of being such as being healthy or educated, and capabilities, which represent the actual opportunities or freedoms to perform those functions (Sen, 1985). Sen emphasises that development should be measured by the degree to which people have the freedom to live lives they value rather than solely by income or utility (Sen, 1999). Similarly, Stiglitz et al. (2009) define the capability approach as one that focuses on human ends while respecting people's ability to pursue and realize their goals. Furthermore, the capability approach views human progress as the advancement of freedom and the capability to lead lives that people have reason to value (Dreze and Sen, 2002). As such, in this study, the capability approach is used as a guideline to understand the concept of participation and empowerment in SDP.

### **1.9 Summary of Chapter**

This study was divided into six chapters. Each chapter contained explanations and data about the study. The first chapter introduced the topic of the rural development

programme to eradicate poverty. SDP was one of the rural development programmes available to FELDA settlers. This section described the problem statement, research question, research objective, research scope, significance of the study, body of knowledge, and definition of terms. This chapter also explained the summary section at the end. Chapter two provided an overview of poverty and poor people and discussed the programme and strategies for eradicating global poverty, including international, Southeast Asian nations, and Malaysia.

This chapter also discussed participation as an approach to empowerment, and it discussed participation and empowerment through the lens of the capability approach. This chapter concluded by discussing the framework, proposition, and conclusion. The third chapter discussed the research methodology. The research design, case study, sample size, sampling technique, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and ethics were all covered in this chapter. This study was conducted through interview sessions for better understanding, and it used the qualitative method, which allowed participants to express their own opinions.

Aside from that, this study employed purposive sampling. In qualitative research, interview questions were developed from the research questions. The data were analysed using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12), which involved converting raw data into information. The fourth chapter contained the findings and results of the study. This section included all the data collection results. Lastly, chapter five provided a summary and discussion of the research findings, including limitations, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion of this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter 2 discussed the literature review on several concepts of poverty, rural areas, participation, and empowerment, as well as the origin of the capability approach theory. The first section discussed an overview of poverty and poor people. It also explained the programme and strategies for eradicating global poverty, including international and Malaysian programmes, followed by a discussion on the implementation of the poverty eradication programme and participation as an approach for empowerment. The next section discusses the capability approach, which is being used to comprehend the limitations of participation theory by examining the empowerment of local people through the lens of Sen's capability approach. Following that, the next section discusses the rural development programme in Malaysia, specifically the Settler Development Programme, or *Program Pembangunan Perneroka* (SDP) (SDP will be used onward in this study). This section provides an overview of the nature and processes of participation and empowerment in the SDP. In addition, this chapter also explained the conceptual framework developed based on the literature reviews and the capability approach, followed by the propositions. The final section concludes the chapter.

#### **2.2 An Overview of Poverty and Poor People**

Poverty remains one of the most pressing global challenges, affecting millions of individuals and limiting human development (Hasell et al., 2023). While poverty is commonly defined as a deprivation of basic needs, it is also a multidimensional issue that extends beyond material scarcity. Sen (1985) argues that poverty should be understood as a lack of capability to function in society, rather than merely an economic shortfall. This perspective broadens the discourse, urging scholars and policymakers to consider structural inequalities and systemic barriers rather than solely focusing on income levels. A significant proportion of the global poor reside in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where 81% of the global poor are concentrated, and 60% of the extreme poor are in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aguilar et al., 2023). However, while the discourse on poverty often focuses on these regions, Southeast Asia also faces significant challenges.

The Asian Development Bank (2022) reported that in 2021, 4.7 million people in Southeast Asia were living in extreme poverty. In Myanmar, approximately 40% of the population lived below the national poverty line due to weak economic activities (World Bank, 2022b). These statistics highlight the complex interplay between economic instability, political governance, and structural inequalities in perpetuating poverty.

Scholars have offered varying definitions of poverty. For example, Crossman (2018) suggests that poverty occurs when individuals lack access to essential needs such as food, water, clothing, and shelter. While this view captures material deprivation, it does not fully address the systemic factors that sustain poverty cycles, such as limited access to education and healthcare. Furthermore, defining poverty solely by income thresholds can be problematic, as it ignores aspects of social exclusion and lack of agency in decision-making processes. Another critical aspect of poverty is the rural-urban divide. Empirical evidence suggests that poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon, with over 70% of the poor living in rural areas. Specifically, in countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, nearly 90% of the poor reside in rural areas (Asian Development Bank, 2004; Balisacan et al., 2005). The effectiveness of urban-focused development policies in addressing poverty remains questionable, as rural communities often lack access to essential services and infrastructure.

One of the primary reasons for rural poverty is dependence on agriculture. Dethier and Effenberger (2012), Lusa (2008), Okidegbe (2001), and Uphaus (2008) emphasize that 75% of people in rural areas rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. This heavy reliance, while providing subsistence, often traps individuals in cycles of poverty due to low productivity, market instability, and climate vulnerability. Ahmad (2021) highlights that for many rural communities in Southeast Asia, agriculture remains the primary, if not sole, source of income. However, Khan (2000) argues that this overreliance on agriculture can be a significant driver of poverty, especially when coupled with underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of technology adoption, and poor market access. Rather than solely improving agricultural productivity, policymakers should focus on diversifying rural economies to create alternative sources of income and resilience against economic shocks. Rural poverty is also characterized by multiple interlinked factors, including low income, large family sizes, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, low education levels, and lack of empowerment (Dixon, 1990; Okidegbe, 2001; Pakpahan et al., 1995; Simatupang et al., 2004; Sudaryanto and Rusastra, 2006; Swastika and Supriyatna, 2008; Taryoto, 1995). Among these, landlessness is

particularly critical, as Khan (2000) highlights that land ownership significantly influences rural poverty levels. While land distribution reforms are often proposed as a solution, their effectiveness remains debated. Land reforms alone do not guarantee poverty reduction and must be accompanied by broader socioeconomic changes, such as access to education and financial services.

Since most of the global poor reside in rural areas, governments and international organizations must prioritize rural development in their poverty alleviation strategies. However, traditional top-down approaches may not be sufficient. The effectiveness of poverty reduction programmes depends on local contexts, governance structures, and community engagement. The next section will delve into specific programmes and strategies designed to tackle poverty and evaluate their effectiveness in different regions.

### **2.3 Programme and Strategies for Eradication Poverty**

Poverty remains a significant global challenge, with various nations employing different strategies to combat it. As discussed by Ahluwalia (1990) and in line with the perspectives of Khan (2010), several Asian countries such as the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia have successfully reduced poverty through diverse development strategies, including targeted poverty eradication programmes, often supported by institutions like the Asian Development Bank. These programmes, designed to provide financial or non-financial assistance to the poor, play a crucial role in addressing poverty in its many forms (Sneyd, 2015; World Bank, 1990, 2001). Recognizing its severity, the global community emphasized poverty eradication as a priority within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. However, despite concerted efforts, poverty persisted beyond the MDG era and remained a central component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs aim to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030 and reduce at least half of the global population living in poverty (United Nations, 2022).

However, progress toward these goals was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected the world's poorest populations (Paramo et al., 2021). According to the United Nations (2024) and the World Bank (2024), over 800 million people live on less than \$1.25 per day, while 692 million endure extreme poverty. A recurring pattern in global poverty is its concentration in rural areas. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021)

reported that 80% of the poor lived in rural regions post-pandemic. This observation aligns with Khan's (2000) earlier argument that poverty is more prevalent in rural than urban areas. Consequently, many governments have emphasized rural development as a strategy for poverty reduction. While this approach is logical given the demographics of poverty, it is important to critically assess its effectiveness. Rural development initiatives often focus on infrastructure, agricultural productivity, and access to basic services, but these strategies may not always address the root causes of poverty, such as systemic inequality, land ownership issues, or lack of economic diversification.

Additionally, while poverty eradication programmes provide immediate relief, their long-term impact remains debatable. Some critics, including Moyo (2009) and Easterly (2007), contend that prolonged aid and poorly designed poverty alleviation programmes risk creating dependency, highlighting the need for sustainable economic initiatives that empower communities. More recent studies, such as Dupont and Roy (2024), Juarez (2009), and Nikolov and Bonci (2020) reinforce this concern by showing how social protection programmes can displace local support systems or foster reliance on short-term assistance, unless paired with long-term strategies like financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and capacity-building.

Moreover, the focus on rural development raises questions about urban poverty, which is also a growing concern. Rapid urbanization has led to the rise of slums, precarious employment, and inadequate social services (Satterthwaite et al., 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022), suggesting that urban poverty should not be overlooked in anti-poverty strategies. Given these considerations, while rural development is a key component of poverty eradication efforts, it should not be the sole focus (World Bank, 2021). A more holistic approach, incorporating both rural and urban poverty strategies, as well as policies that address structural inequalities, may be necessary to achieve meaningful and lasting poverty reduction (Beegle et al., 2021; ILO, 2022).

Rural development has been widely implemented to address the need for progress in rural areas. It is a crucial process aimed at improving the well-being and self-sufficiency of those living outside urban centres (Atkinson, 2017). The World Bank (1975) defines rural development as a strategy to enhance the economic and social conditions of the rural poor by ensuring they benefit from broader development efforts. Additionally, it is often considered a tool for poverty reduction, economic growth, and agricultural productivity (Anriquez and Stamoulis, 2007). However, while rural development is often presented as a comprehensive solution to poverty, its effectiveness

remains debatable. Many programmes focus on agricultural development, assuming that rural livelihoods are primarily dependent on farming. Yet, this overlooks the fact that rural economies are diversifying, with increasing engagement in non-agricultural sectors such as small businesses and services. Over-reliance on agricultural policies may limit opportunities for sustainable income growth and economic resilience. Moreover, while the rural development programme aims to reduce poverty, some critics argue that these initiatives may inadvertently reinforce dependency on government aid rather than fostering long-term economic independence.

To strengthen rural development efforts, various programmes and policies have been introduced at international, regional (Southeast Asian), and national (Malaysia) levels. While these initiatives have contributed to poverty alleviation, their success often depends on factors such as effective governance, infrastructure development, and access to education (Cuong et al., 2021; Khan, 2021). Without addressing these structural challenges, rural development alone may not be sufficient to achieve lasting poverty reduction.

Internationally, various strategies have been implemented to reduce poverty, including cash transfer programmes, rural development initiatives, and other poverty alleviation measures. Among these, cash transfer programmes are widely used by many countries and have demonstrated success in specific contexts. These programmes offer multiple benefits, such as reducing poverty, increasing school enrolment, and improving nutrition (Kandpal, 2019). According to Bastagli et al. (2016), over 63 countries, including the United States, Brazil, Mexico, and others, have adopted a cash transfer programme as part of their poverty reduction strategies.

In the 1990s, Latin America introduced the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme as a mechanism to combat poverty and promote economic stability (Das and Nanda, 2016). The CCT programme aims to provide immediate poverty relief by redistributing wealth through cash transfers while fostering long-term socioeconomic improvements through better education, healthcare, and nutrition for the poor (Kugler, 2018). For instance, Brazil's CCT programme led to a significant reduction in extreme poverty, with the poverty rate dropping from 9.7% to 4.3% within a decade, alongside a 15% decrease in income inequality (Erdoğan and Akar, 2018). Similarly, New York City, USA introduced a CCT initiative known as Opportunity NYC-Family Rewards between 2007 and 2010 to break the cycle of poverty. The programme yielded positive

results, increasing family monthly income by approximately 22%, 18%, and 41%, leading to a reduction in both poverty and extreme poverty (Fergin, 2014).

However, despite their successes, CCT programmes are not without challenges. Their implementation is often complex and expensive, requiring strong institutions, efficient administration, and substantial financial resources (Kyophilavong, 2011). Furthermore, while cash transfers provide immediate economic relief, they may not always lead to long-term poverty eradication if structural issues such as job availability, economic diversification, and corruption are not addressed (Bastagli et al., 2016; Fiszbein and Schady, 2009). Additionally, Kidd and Athias (2019) argued that these programmes, while effective in Latin America and some developed nations, may not be universally applicable, as their success often depends on local socioeconomic conditions and institutional capacity. Socioeconomic conditions, governance structures, and cultural factors influence their success, and what works in Brazil or the United States may not necessarily work in lower-income countries with weaker institutional frameworks (Honorati et al., 2015)

Not all poverty eradication programmes have been successful, as seen in cases like the United Kingdom and Nigeria. The United Kingdom implemented anti-poverty policies from 1997 to 2010 to reduce child and pensioner poverty (Collin, 2007). However, these efforts fell short, largely because poverty remained persistent despite government interventions (Hingley and Birdsall, 2014). Similarly, Nigeria has introduced multiple poverty reduction strategies, including the National Poverty Eradication Programme, Integrated Rural Development, Better Life for Rural Women, New Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, and the Green Revolution (Felix and Osu, 2014). Despite these initiatives, poverty remains a critical issue due to poor programme design, corruption, and a lack of local participation. Warwick (2013) argued that many of Nigeria's poverty eradication programmes have failed because they are top-down in nature, uncoordinated, and poorly executed. This highlights a crucial lesson for poverty reduction programmes to be effective: they must be inclusive, transparent, and tailored to the specific needs of the target communities.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia has made significant efforts to combat poverty through various targeted programmes. While these initiatives have contributed to poverty reduction, questions remain regarding their sustainability and overall impact. Some countries in the region have made substantial progress, but others continue to struggle due to governance challenges, economic disparities, and limited infrastructure.

Thus, while poverty eradication programmes are essential, their long-term success depends on strong institutions, community engagement, and the ability to address underlying systemic issues rather than merely providing short-term financial relief. Recognizing these challenges, regional cooperation has played a crucial role in sustaining long-term progress. A key driver of these efforts is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded in 1967 by Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia (Fucharoen and Winichagoon, 1987). ASEAN's primary goal is to accelerate regional economic growth, social progress, and cultural development while promoting regional peace and stability. To achieve this, ASEAN upholds justice, adherence to the rule of law in regional relations, and commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter (Hafez, 2004; Mangku, 2017). Recognizing the challenges of poverty, ASEAN has implemented various strategies, such as empowering the poor, increasing targeted expenditure, fostering sustainable economic growth, and enhancing education and healthcare systems (Sumarto and Moselle, 2015). However, despite these efforts, the effectiveness of ASEAN's poverty alleviation programmes varies across member states due to differing economic conditions, governance structures, and implementation challenges.

One widely implemented poverty reduction strategy in ASEAN countries is Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT). While CCT programmes have been successful in many nations, Indonesia presents a more complex case. The country introduced its CCT programme, the 'Family of Hope Programme', in 2007 (Bangun et al., 2019). This initiative provides cash assistance to members of *Keluarga Penerima Manfaat* (KPM) and underprivileged households (Chotim and Tedja, 2022; Lestari, 2019). Its primary goal is to improve the quality of life by alleviating financial burdens. However, despite its intentions, the programme has faced major challenges, particularly related to inaccurate targeting. Reports indicate that ineligible families have received assistance, while deserving households have been overlooked (Bangun et al., 2019). This misallocation of resources not only undermines the programme's effectiveness but also raises concerns about the broader issue of governance and transparency in poverty alleviation efforts. Moreover, the lack of empowerment initiatives within the programme means that many poor households remain dependent on cash transfers rather than developing long-term economic resilience.

Similarly, Cambodia implemented its cash transfer programmes, including the Poor Households Programme or '*IDPoor*' (Karamba et al., 2021). This programme was

introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as an emergency response to the worsening economic conditions. Eligible households received government cash assistance for an expected seven-month period, while conditional cash transfers were provided to pregnant women and children under two years old. Unlike Indonesia's experience, Cambodia's cash transfer initiative appears to have been more successful, with 90% of targeted beneficiaries receiving assistance (Associated Press, 2020). However, the long-term sustainability of such programmes remains a key concern. While cash transfers provide immediate relief, they do not necessarily address structural poverty or create sustainable pathways out of economic hardship.

Beyond cash transfers, several Southeast Asian countries have implemented targeted poverty reduction policies. In the Philippines, for example, the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR) was introduced as a tool to identify poor households and ensure appropriate programme delivery (Fernandez, 2012; Velarde, 2018). The success of similar programmes in Latin America influenced the adoption of NHTS-PR in the Philippines (Castañeda et al., 2005). This initiative helps determine which households are eligible for poverty alleviation programmes such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT), the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino* Programme, and PhilHealth's universal health care (UHC). Over time, NHTS-PR has demonstrated effectiveness in improving data accuracy and ensuring benefits reach the intended recipients (Velarde, 2018). This suggests that well-structured poverty policies, supported by strong data management, can significantly improve the efficiency of aid distribution. However, the situation in Thailand presents a stark contrast. Unlike its regional counterparts, Thailand has not implemented new anti-poverty policies since 2008 due to the impact of the global financial crisis on economic activities (Kamnuansilpa, 2021). This raises questions about the country's long-term poverty reduction strategy. While Thailand has made significant economic progress in previous decades, the absence of updated policies could lead to stagnation or even a reversal of poverty reduction gains.

In contrast, Malaysia has continued to implement various poverty eradication programmes aimed at improving economic conditions and reducing inequality. These initiatives reflect the country's ongoing commitment to addressing poverty, with a focus on both financial assistance and long-term economic empowerment. The next subtopic discusses further on the poverty reduction and eradication Programme: Malaysia perspective.

### 2.3.1 Poverty Reduction and Eradication Programme: Malaysia Perspective

During Malaysia's first decade of independence, poverty was widely perceived. To combat poverty, several policy programmes were developed, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), the National Development Policy (NDP), and the National Vision Policy (NVP) (Khalid and Abidin, 2014). According to Nor and Khelghat (2019), many poverty-eradication programmes have been implemented by the government that aim to improve the poor's earning potential and living conditions. There are many poverties eradication programmes that have been implemented in Malaysia for poor people, covering both financial and non-financial aspects. Nonetheless, not all the poverty-eradication programmes planned for the country have been successful, and some have failed due to unforeseen circumstances.

One of the poverty eradication programmes is cash financial assistance. Cash financial assistance has undergone many name changes since its reformation by the government. For instance, from *Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia* (BR1M) in 2012 to *Bantuan Sara Hidup* (BSH) in 2018, it changed again to *Bantuan Keluarga Malaysia* (BKM) in 2022, and it was renamed *Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah* (STR) as of today (Nooh et al., 2021; Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia [IRBM], 2022; Ministry of Finance, 2023). This programme provided cash financial assistance for the poor and hard-core households. Generally, households with an income below RM4,000 per month are eligible to receive. This programme has been implemented since the government saw Brazil as successful in implementing cash transfer, where the poverty rate fell from 9.7% to 4.3% (Erdogdu and Akar, 2018).

However, this programme has a significant impact on the well-being of people, but this programme might not be good for other countries (Cooper, 2020). In Malaysia, this programme does not show a positive impact since there is still poverty in the country. According to Shin (2013), the amount given is not sufficient to help the poor in their daily living, and it has a low impact on poverty and inequality. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) (2021), absolute poverty increased from 5.6% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020 after COVID-19. Besides, this programme's rate remains low and has not had a significant impact on reducing poverty and inequality (New Straits Times, 2019). On the other hand, many argue that the amount spent by the Malaysian government on this programme each year is large and that it may not be sustainable in the long run as it is decreasing year after year (New Straits Times, 2018).

In addition to the cash financial assistance, another poverty eradication programme is *Program Pembasmian Kemiskinan Tegar Keluarga Malaysia* (BMTKM), which was introduced in 2022. The BMTKM programmes are being implemented to eradicate hard-core poverty in the countries covered by the 12th Malaysia Plan and provide several projects, including agriculture, livestock, entrepreneurs, and many more (Ministry of Economic, 2021). Besides, this programme has been designed especially for hardcore poor, who are registered in the *eKasih* system. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) (2019), a household is considered hardcore poor if its monthly income is less than RM1,169. The aim of BMTKM is to achieve zero extreme poverty by the end of 2025, and it is trying to eradicate poverty among the 144,932 hardcore poor recorded throughout the country (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2022a). However, problems at the central and state government levels are among the difficulties encountered during the first phase of the BMTKM pilot project (Rahim, 2022). Furthermore, the problem of the status of households eligible for this programme, the selection of unsuitable economic activities, the project implementation model that is not sustainable, and the participation of strategic partners are still low (Rahim, 2022). Due to that, the government has attempted to improve BMTKM implementation for the second and third phases to eradicate poverty among the hardcore poor.

The next poverty eradication programme is cash-in-kind assistance in the form of training and development, as well as equipment provision, namely 1AZAM, also known as '*Akhiri Zaman Miskin*'. It was introduced to help the poor and B40 group increase their income (Mohd, 2013; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2010). There are five components in 1 AZAM: AZAM *Tani* (Aim Agricultural), AZAM *Niaga* (Aim Business), AZAM *Khidmat* (Aims Services), AZAM *Bandar* (Aim City), and AZAM *Kerja* (Aim Works) (Nor and Azhar, 2016). Moreover, the respective state governments in Sabah and Sarawak are also implementing 1AZAM. This programme also seeks to create economic opportunities to boost productivity in low-income households. For example, a person participating in AZAM *Tani* will get all agricultural equipment, livestock, and training, and the government will also provide all equipment related to the programme in which people participate (Nor and Khelghat 2019). Furthermore, this programme is not intended to make them wealthy. Rather, the government wishes to assist the poor in increasing their monthly income by at least RM300 from their current

income. However, since its inception in 2010, there have been numerous issues with this programme (Nor and Azhar, 2016).

According to the Public Accounts Committee of the Thirteenth Parliament, National Audit Department (2015), participation was not chosen using the *eKasih* database, which has 58% of participants with unknown status. Next, some of the participants did not use all the equipment that was provided, and some of the projects have yet to generate revenue. Furthermore, there is no standard operating procedure (SOP) for suppliers for 1AZAM, which does not provide a detailed price list of goods received by participants (National Audit Department, 2015). As a result, SDP also failed due to a lack of empowerment for the poor.

Income increment programme or *Program Peningkatan Pendapatan* (PPP) is another poverty eradication programme developed by the government which focuses on increasing the income of the poor, which includes the B40 group and the hardcore poor in rural areas (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2020; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2017). In SDP, there are four main scopes: SME projects, livestock activities, service activities, and agriculture and fisheries activities. Furthermore, through SDP, participants will receive equipment assistance with a maximum cost of up to RM10,000 per person, with a total of 564 people benefiting from the programme in 2021 (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2022b). SDP also focuses on the orang Asli community, with which the ministry collaborates with the *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* (JAKOA) and has identified the need for assistance based on the appropriate scope, such as the supply of Boats, Boat Engines, and others.

Apart from SDP programmes, there is one successful project under SDP, namely *Skim Pembangunan Kesejahteraan Rakyat* (SPKR), which is a livestock project that has been implemented by FELCRA. This project is quite successful when it provides additional income to the poor or extremely poor in rural areas through an annual dividend amounting to RM600 (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2016). However, this programme also has an issue regarding participation and empowerment in SDP. Some participants are not interested in managing and continuing the project. They also refuse to join the project and are more likely to seek financial aid than to commit to it (Hamid, 2016). As a result, SDP also failed due to a lack of empowerment for the poor.

While various initiatives such as BTR, BMTKM, 1AZAM, and SDP have been introduced to combat poverty, their scope primarily targets financial assistance and economic empowerment for general low-income groups. However, rural poverty,

particularly among settlers, requires a different approach due to its unique challenges, such as land dependency, agricultural productivity, and generational economic sustainability. Recognizing these challenges, the government introduced the Settler Development Programme, or *Program Pembangunan Pengeroka* (SDP), which specifically focuses on FELDA settlers. This programme differs from the broader poverty eradication initiatives as it is designed to improve the socio-economic conditions of settlers who are part of Malaysia's land development schemes.

Before discussing the details of SDP, it is worth explaining the origin of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA). FELDA was established after Malaysia gained independence with the primary goal of eradicating rural poverty through structured land development and agricultural projects. Over 63 years of its implementation, the programme has undergone several reforms, including the transition from FELDA to FELDA 2.0 in 2018 (FELDA, 2018). In response to these reforms, SDP was introduced in 2019 as part of the government's broader effort to improve the economic standing of settlers. According to the FELDA chairman, Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad, the reformation of FELDA 2.0 adopts a bottom-up approach to rural development (Malek, 2018). The government believes that by employing such an approach, it can empower settlers to take an active role in enhancing their living conditions. However, the success of SDP is highly dependent on settler participation. If settlers do not engage with the programme, its intended goals cannot be achieved. Salleh (2022) reported that only 49,631 settlers participated in SDP out of a total of 112,635 settlers, with 7,570 projects approved by FELDA. Despite years of implementation, SDP continues to face participation and empowerment challenges among settlers (while this section provides background context, the specific details of the SDP will be examined in the later part of this chapter). Given these issues, the next section will further explore the implementation of poverty eradication programmes and their effectiveness in addressing such challenges. The next section will discuss the implementation of poverty eradication programmes using a top-down and bottom-up approach, analyse the challenges faced in executing these initiatives, and explore potential strategies for improving their effectiveness.

## **2.4 The Implementation of Poverty Eradication Programmes: A Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approach**

There are numerous poverty-reduction programmes in the country, and it is important to understand how they will be implemented. According to Durlak (2008), implementation refers to what and how a programme consists of when it is delivered in a specific setting. Besides, there are several aspects of implementation, including monitoring, the rate of involvement of representatives in programmes, and many more (Evans et al., 2022; Durlak, 1985). The policymaker is typically the actor involved in the implementation process. The success or failure of the programmes depends on their implementation. Furthermore, high-quality implementation is important for the outcomes of the programmes. Gao (2016) claims that ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ can be used as approaches for poverty eradication programmes. The successful implementation of poverty eradication programmes depends on the effectiveness of these approaches. However, the extent to which each approach contributes to long-term poverty reduction remains debatable, as different contexts require different strategies.

A top-down approach is a commonly used strategy in poverty eradication, where government-led programmes are designed and implemented with limited input from beneficiaries. This approach assumes that centralised planning and decision-making can efficiently address poverty when backed by strong institutions (Kaiser, 2020). If the top-down approach leads to poverty reduction for the poor, the government should prioritise it. Policy actors are typically the key actors involved in programme implementation, and all the programmes require intervention from the government and policymakers. All decision-making regarding the programmes is made by the government, and people who participate in the programmes do not have the power to influence these decisions. Undoubtedly, the top-down approach has been quite successful in South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan in achieving economic development by following formulas from the Bretton Woods institutions, where there is government and market intervention (Brett, 2003). While the top-down approach has proven effective in East Asian contexts like South Korea and Taiwan, it has been largely unsuccessful in many African countries, where differing economic structures, governance systems, and institutional capacities hinder its impact (Easterly, 2007; Mkandawire, 2011; Pieterse, 2010). The effectiveness of the top-down approach is largely dependent on strong governance and efficient institutional frameworks. In cases

where government intervention lacks transparency and accountability, such as in many rural development programmes, the top-down approach has failed (Kaiser, 2020).

Most failures in rural development programmes stem from top-down models that rely heavily on government intervention and policymaker-driven decisions (Akyeampong et al., 2024). In such cases, people become passive recipients rather than active participants in shaping their own development. While some scholars attribute these failures to weak governance and institutional shortcomings, others argue that the model itself is fundamentally flawed, as it systematically disregards local needs and perspectives (Schneider et al., 2024).

Moreover, the top-down approach is often linked to a capitalist system, such as the market-led approach. A market-led approach exacerbates poverty and harms human well-being, especially among the rural poor (Subramaniam and Kasipillai, 2007). It benefits the wealthy while further marginalising the poor, creating economic disparities rather than bridging them. This approach prioritises economic growth and market efficiency over social welfare. For instance, in the United States, the government has spent more than \$2 trillion in financial aid that has been transferred to the poor in the Global South (Rist, 2009). These development programmes have been planned to eradicate poverty and improve economic growth (Moyo, 2010). However, this programme was unsuccessful because it lacked capital resources and technical skills for combating poverty. This raises concerns about whether financial aid alone is an effective poverty reduction strategy or whether a more community-driven, participatory approach is necessary. Given these challenges, the effectiveness of top-down approaches remains questionable, particularly in addressing the structural causes of poverty. As Chambers (1983) argued, in rural development, people should be placed first rather than last.

The failure of many top-down initiatives has led to the adoption of bottom-up approaches (Kaiser, 2020). Several scholars argue that bottom-up strategies are more effective than top-down ones (Easterly, 2007; Mayo, 2010). In a bottom-up approach, people are empowered to make decisions without direct intervention from policymakers or government authorities. According to Kothari (2001), public participation is a critical element in such approaches, as it enables individuals to take ownership of the development process, thereby increasing the likelihood of programme success. This model fosters community engagement and ensures that development efforts are aligned with local needs. As a result, it positively impacts the poor by enabling them to improve

their standard of living through self-determined strategies (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003; World Bank, 2013). However, while participation is a core strength of the bottom-up approach, it also presents challenges. Without adequate institutional support and resources, communities may struggle to implement sustainable poverty eradication initiatives.

Additionally, this approach requires the ‘developer’ to support the people and respect their ideas, fostering an environment where local knowledge and expertise are valued. Lewies (1988) state that a bottom-up approach makes development programmes more sustainable, replicable, and cost-effective. Recent studies indicate that bottom-up, community-driven initiatives enhance sustainability, deepen local ownership, and deliver public services in a cost-effective and replicable manner (Orgill et al., 2021). In practice, the bottom-up approach has been applied in microfinance programmes in Bangladesh to eradicate poverty, and these programmes have been successful (Nawaz, 2010). Microfinance, which involves providing small loans to the rural poor, has enabled individuals to establish businesses, generate income, and improve their quality of life. However, all successful programmes, particularly those based on a bottom-up approach, need the willingness of people to participate in the programme's process (Macdonald, 1995). A recent study in 2024 reported strong support for participatory development, especially when the processes are inclusive and interactive, even when participation involves personal costs (Hofer et al., 2024). While this approach allows for greater community involvement, it also requires long-term commitment, training, and financial literacy among participants. Furthermore, reliance on bottom-up approaches alone may not be sufficient in cases where structural inequalities, such as lack of infrastructure and economic opportunities, remain unaddressed.

Given the strengths and limitations of both approaches, it is evident that neither the top-down nor the bottom-up model alone is a comprehensive solution to poverty eradication. While government intervention is necessary for large-scale economic planning and resource distribution, community participation ensures that development efforts are relevant and sustainable. Accordingly, participation is widely recognised as a key mechanism for enhancing the bottom-up approach. The next section will discuss participation as an approach for bottom-up and as a means for empowerment, highlighting its role in enhancing the effectiveness of poverty eradication programmes.

## **2.5 Participation as an Approach for Empowerment**

According to the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (1994), participation is about empowering people to mobilize their own capacities, take control of resources, and make decisions that affect their lives. Similarly, Rowe and Frewer (2005) define participation as the practice of involving the public in policy development and decision-making processes. In line with these perspectives, the World Bank (1994) defines participation as a process where stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions, and resources. This definition aligns with rural development, where participation enables farmers, individuals, and communities to take an active role in shaping initiatives that meet their local needs. However, participation alone does not guarantee success. Without adequate support and resources, local actors may still struggle to influence meaningful change. By fostering shared decision-making, ownership, and resource management, participation enhances sustainability in rural areas, as seen in community-led irrigation projects or microfinance programmes. Engaging rural populations in these processes not only empowers them but also promotes self-reliance and long-term economic and social well-being.

Furthermore, participation has been widely used in various programmes, but it may be ineffective without empowerment. There are several methods to enhance participation, particularly in rural areas (Ahmad and Abu, 2011). To address this, a participatory approach in decision-making and planning has been adopted, ensuring that all actors are involved and can protect their rights. Consequently, participation is essential for amplifying the voices and choices of marginalized groups (Cornwall, 2006). This approach positions local individuals and communities as agents of change, strengthening their capacity to influence decisions that directly impact their lives (Bradley and Schneider, 2004). However, participation without empowerment risks being superficial. Some programmes may involve people only at a minimal level, limiting their ability to influence outcomes. People might participate, but not all people are empowered by the programmes. The previous section has mentioned the top-down approach, which most countries use for development programmes, but most of them fail because this approach is more focused on government intervention without considering people's conditions (Breet, 2003; Easterly, 2007). People may participate in the programmes, but how they participate and whether they are truly empowered remains

questionable because all the decision-making is made by the government. Due to that, the people-centred approach is suitable for development because it relies on a bottom-up method, which allows people to participate while also ensuring they are empowered. It is worth noting here that most scholars use the bottom-up approach interchangeably with public participation (Arnstein, 1969), participatory (Ahmad and Abu 2011; Bradley and Schneider, 2004; Glenn, 2003), and people-centred approach (Thompson, 2015; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2011).

A people-centred approach is an approach to sustainable development at the community level (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2011). It also promotes ‘ground-up development,’ which empowers local communities by incorporating the social and cultural aspects of individuals (Thompson, 2015). In this approach, the government no longer makes decisions on behalf of the people. Instead, people are encouraged to make their own decisions about what they want to do. This shift from a government-controlled model to a community-driven model ensures that local perspectives and knowledge are valued. A people-centred approach encourages the local community to take control of their own future, views, expectations, and plans. Participation in rural development programmes can occur when an individual responds to the programmes, accepts the idea, extends moral support, and is empowered by the programme (Setty, 1985).

In addition, Sen (2008) also argues that development needs to be about giving people independence so they have real power to choose and decide on their own, and it should not be a top-down approach where decisions flow from the government to the people (Thompson, 2015). Instead, people need to take control of their own well-being initiatives. However, while bottom-up approaches empower people, they also come with challenges. They require strong leadership, community organization, and external support to ensure effectiveness. Many of the participants must adhere to the rules established by the government. Using a bottom-up approach, governments can gain a clearer understanding of local problems and needs, as such participatory processes better reflect community realities and allow for more informed, locally relevant policy responses (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). This ensures that policies are more responsive to actual conditions on the ground rather than being dictated solely by centralized authorities. Since the 1950s and continuing into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many developing countries have increasingly emphasized community participation and empowerment in their own economic and development processes through rural

development programmes (Adelman et al., 1984). Thus, to have a successful development programme, people's participation and empowerment are important.

Participation and empowerment provide people with the opportunity to make informed decisions. This is because they allow individuals to choose their own methods rather than being directed by others. As stated by Abbott (1996), Friedman (1996), and Rakodi (1991), empowerment can be achieved through participation, both as a process and as an outcome. This is further supported by Syafaruddin (2025), who found that strong community involvement in planning and fair access to resources significantly enhance empowerment in rural development initiatives. Participation as an outcome refers to people gaining lasting influence over decisions that affect their lives, while participation as a process involves continuous engagement in decision-making across various stages of development initiatives. A bottom-up approach facilitates participation by allowing communities to lead decision-making without intervention from governments or policymakers. Several scholars argue that participation and empowerment are most effectively achieved through a bottom-up approach (Abbott, 1996; Friedman, 1996; Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2009; Rakodi, 1991). Empowerment becomes evident when people are actively involved throughout the entire participatory process from decision-making to evaluation.

Participation and empowerment are important because they provide more information and knowledge that strengthens the decision-making process. This process also enhances transparency and accountability, as local actors become directly involved in shaping policies that affect them. Participation serves as a method that leads to empowerment. The involvement of people in participation is a transformative tool for social change (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004), but sometimes participation varies in intensity, as it depends on how people engage and whether they are empowered through the programmes (Rifkin and Kangere, 2002). According to the World Bank (1991), participation and empowerment are closely linked, as participation is ultimately about giving people greater control over their lives. Thus, empowerment is also an important element of participation in decision-making. However, empowerment is not automatic. Without institutional support and resources, participation alone may not be enough to bring meaningful change. Empowerment refers to the capacity of an individual or group to make a decision, transform that decision into a desired action, and obtain a result (World Bank, 2006). True empowerment can be measured by the extent to which individuals gain control over economic, social, and political resources.

Empowerment within participation becomes evident when people exercise power and the ability to decide on their own. For instance, several agencies promote participation and empowerment, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. International governmental organisations, such as the World Bank, often use methods and tools based on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation to measure public participation. However, some scholars argue that Arnstein's model oversimplifies participation, as real-world decision-making often involves complex power dynamics and structural inequalities. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine and discuss the relevance of Arnstein's Ladder in this context of public participation theory.

### **2.5.1 Arnstein's Ladder of Public Participation Theory**

The public participation theory of Arnstein's Ladder has been used to explore participation in many rural development programmes. It is also a way to show how different levels of participation affect levels of power or access to power. This public participation may refer to the idea that "people are a categorical term for power" (Arnstein, 1969). However, while Arnstein's model provides a useful framework, it may oversimplify the complexities of power dynamics in different political and cultural contexts. Participation in rural development is not always a straightforward movement up the ladder. Power is often negotiated and influenced by external factors such as government structures, social norms, and economic conditions (Collins and Ison, 2006). For instance, Kalenga et al. (2024) found that community engagement in Malawi's co-management of natural resources often remains at the level of tokenism, with real decision-making power retained by authorities, highlighting the negotiated and constrained nature of power in rural settings. Similarly, Yusof et al. (2022) demonstrated that even where partnership is achieved in localising the Sustainable Development Goals in Malaysia, meaningful participation depends on ongoing engagement shaped by institutional and cultural factors. These examples suggest that Arnstein's model does not fully reflect the complexities of participation in non-Western or rural settings, where decision-making continues to be influenced by local traditions and informal power structures.

The theory assumes that participation is a power struggle between citizens who want to move up the ladder and control the organisations and institutions that (intentionally or unintentionally) block their way to the 'top,' making it hard for citizens to take control or power for themselves (Collins and Ison, 2006). This perspective

assumes that power is always withheld by authorities, but in reality, participation can also be limited by social factors such as lack of education, economic disparities, or cultural resistance to change. Simply moving up the ladder does not always guarantee meaningful empowerment, particularly if structural barriers remain unaddressed. Without addressing these underlying inequalities, participation may remain symbolic rather than transformative. Moreover, this ladder also seeks to understand how public participation in government affects public perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and good governance. In addition, this ladder is based on the idea that participation is classified by power (Arnstein, 1969). However, the model does not fully account for different forms of participation beyond formal governance structures. Grassroots movements and informal networks often play a crucial role in decision-making, even if they are not officially recognized. These alternative forms of participation may be more effective in achieving meaningful engagement compared to institutionalized mechanisms. For instance, Ndlovu et al. (2021), applying Arnstein's Ladder to communal cattle farmers in rural Zimbabwe, found that while formal structures for participation were present, most engagement remained at tokenistic levels. Genuine citizen power was rare, and participation was often undermined by informal power dynamics and socio-economic constraints, highlighting the limitations of the model in rural and non-Western contexts.

To better understand these limitations, it is important to examine the internal structure of Arnstein's Ladder itself. This model consists of eight rungs representing different levels of public participation: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). While this classification helps distinguish degrees of participation, it does not necessarily capture the dynamic and evolving nature of participation in real-world contexts. A community may simultaneously experience different levels of participation depending on the issue at hand (Kiss et al., 2022; Mellink, 2025). Participation is not always a linear process. People may shift between levels based on external circumstances, political will, or resource availability (Sharma, 2025).

The ladder is also important for its categorization into three broader levels: non-participation, tokenism, and degrees of citizen power. The lower rungs, categorized as non-participation, represent forms of involvement where citizen influence is replaced by superficial engagement without decision-making power. The middle rungs are considered tokenistic. Informing and consultation allow the public to be heard, but do

not guarantee that their input will influence policymaking. These stages often represent one-way communication flows from authorities to the public, without opportunities for feedback or negotiation, rendering the process unfair and ineffective (Sharma, 2025; RSIS International, 2024). Criticism of tokenism remains highly relevant today, particularly when governments or international bodies use “participation” as a symbolic gesture of legitimacy while withholding real decision-making authority (Cornwall, 2006; Mellink, 2025).

Recent studies on participatory governance emphasize that without legal and institutional frameworks, public participation tends to remain superficial (RSIS International, 2024; Janaagraha, 2024). Tokenism creates an illusion of inclusion while reinforcing existing power structures. Furthermore, the top rungs of the ladder represent degrees of citizen power, including delegated power and full citizen control. These levels highlight the potential for increased autonomy and democratic decision-making. However, achieving true citizen control remains rare in practice. Even when participation reaches its highest levels, external influences such as political agendas, financial constraints, and bureaucratic resistance often limit the impact of citizen-led decisions (Sharma, 2025; Janaagraha, 2024; Kiss et al., 2022). Structural and institutional barriers commonly hinder full autonomy, making it difficult for citizens to exercise complete control over public decision-making processes.

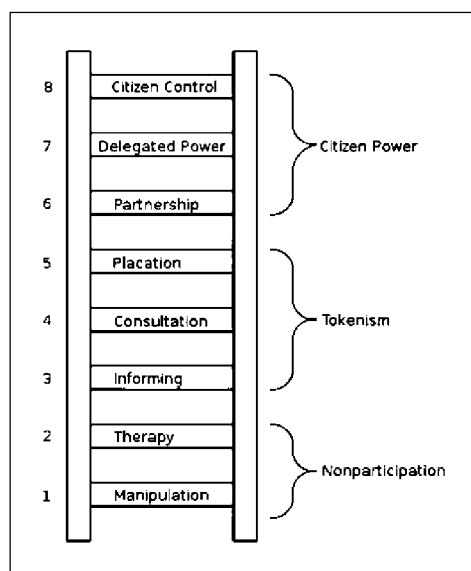


Figure 2.1 Arnstain Ladder of Participation  
Source: Arnstein, 1969

However, Tritter and McCallum (2006) stated that there are several limitations to this theory. First, Arnstein's ladder does not allow for more than one type of participation approach to happen simultaneously. Participation is not always a linear process, and different levels of engagement can coexist within a single programme or policy initiative. For instance, a community may experience both consultation and partnership at different stages of a development project. This rigid structure of the ladder oversimplifies how participation unfolds in diverse socio-political contexts. It states that, to be empowered, people need to follow all the steps of the ladder, but it fails to explain the factors behind the rungs and why people struggle to climb the ladder. Factors such as political will, economic disparities, and institutional barriers can hinder participation, yet the model does not account for these contextual influences. It assumes that the lack of participation is solely due to citizens' inability to move up the ladder rather than external constraints that may suppress their involvement. As Ganguly (2023) argues, true empowerment requires more than participation. It demands enabling institutional contexts that enhance individuals' capabilities to act and influence governance.

Second, the ladder does not explain how it enables or disables people to participate. Without considering structural and systemic obstacles, the model risks placing responsibility for empowerment solely on individuals, ignoring the role of governments, institutions, and policies in either facilitating or obstructing participation. This omission leads to the disempowerment of people in the decision-making process because it focuses more on the outcomes of participation than the processes of involvement. This emphasis on outcomes overlooks the importance of capacity-building and long-term engagement, which are essential for genuine empowerment. As Talbot (2024) explains, empowerment must be rooted in access to "powerful knowledge," a key component of the Capability Approach, which transforms participation into meaningful agency. This highlights how capability development must accompany participatory mechanisms to produce equitable outcomes.

In addition, Sieber (2006) claims that achieving the higher rungs of the ladder may not be feasible in certain countries due to a lack of empowerment. This is particularly relevant in authoritarian regimes or highly centralized governance structures where citizen participation is restricted or manipulated. Even in democratic contexts, structural inequalities such as poverty, illiteracy, or political marginalization can prevent communities from reaching the top levels of participation. Thus, the ladder

does not fully capture the complexity of real-world power dynamics. This criticism is further supported by recent work in sustainable development, where researchers argue that the Capability Approach can better assess how structural factors such as corporate behaviour, state accountability, and human rights obligations either enable or constrain empowerment (Moses and Gebremedhin, 2024).

On the other hand, while Arnstein's Ladder has been successfully implemented by organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, it does not necessarily demonstrate that public participation leads to empowerment. Participation alone does not guarantee empowerment if it is not accompanied by meaningful decision-making power and institutional accountability. Many international development initiatives claim to promote participation, yet they often fail to transfer real authority to local communities, leading to tokenistic involvement rather than substantive change.

Due to the limitations of Arnstein's ladder, the researcher believes that the Capability Approach is more suitable because it discusses participation and empowerment. The Capability Approach, developed by Sen (1999), shifts the focus from mere participation to an individual's actual ability to make choices and influence their environment. Unlike Arnstein's Ladder, which measures participation through hierarchical steps, the Capability Approach emphasizes real freedoms and opportunities, making it a more inclusive and adaptable framework for understanding empowerment.

To understand participation, whether it is empowering or not, it is worth adding a discussion on empowerment to this study. This discussion is crucial because participation without empowerment can be superficial, leading to frustration rather than actual change. Understanding empowerment through the Capability Approach allows for a broader and more context-sensitive analysis of how individuals and communities gain control over their lives. In understanding the concept of empowerment, the next section discusses in detail empowerment from Sen's Capability Approach.

## **2.6 Capability Approach: Freedom and Empowerment**

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Sen (1999) saw development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy and focuses on human ends. This perspective highlights that development is not merely about economic growth but about enabling individuals to pursue lives they value. It is a positive option, where

people can decide what they want to be and do. The capability approach can be defined as the possibility for individuals to choose and achieve something that helps them reach well-being (Alkire, 2005). This approach emphasizes that well-being is not only about possessing resources but also about having the ability to convert them into meaningful achievements. It states that a person's capabilities are determined by the resources at their disposal as well as personal and environmental characteristics that influence how effectively they can use those resources. In addition, the capability approach promotes empowerment by focusing on both agency and well-being (Keleher, 2014). For instance, an individual's participation in programmes can improve their standard of living, yet not everyone who participates becomes empowered. In some cases, participation may lead to disempowerment if individuals lack the means to utilize the opportunities provided.

The capability approach also emphasises the distinction between the means and ends of well-being and development (Alkire, 2002). According to Robeyns (2005), only the ends are intrinsically important, whereas the means are used to achieve the goals of increased well-being, justice, and development. This suggests that policies should not only focus on providing resources but also on ensuring that individuals can effectively use them. The ends of well-being, justice, and development should be conceptualised in terms of people's capabilities to function in being and doing (Daojiu, 2014). For instance, the capability to be excellent in education is an end in itself, but it is also a means to the capability to study. According to Sen (1999, 2005), the capability approach focuses on two important elements, which are functioning and capabilities. Functioning refers to the choices individuals make based on what they value and consider meaningful in their lives. It represents the actual achievements of an individual, such as participating in programmes, maintaining good health, being literate, or gaining respect within the community.

Besides, Sen (1999) argued that functioning encompasses the various things a person may value doing and being. To develop, people need to be capable of being and doing. This means that development should empower individuals to transform their aspirations into tangible realities. In addition, functioning refers to a set of states and activities that constitute a person's being in ways that are either positive or negative and are influenced by their environment and opportunities (Alkire, 2002). A person will be considered empowered if they are able to utilise available resources. To be capable, a person needs to have four essential elements: resources, capability, functioning, and

utility (Stiglitz et al., 2009). For example, if a person has access to a car and the ability to drive, they are considered empowered in that aspect. However, if a person has a car but lacks the skills to drive, they do not possess the capability to use it effectively.

The relationship between resources and functioning in achieving certain states of being and doing is shaped by conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005). A conversion factor affects how well something works to accomplish an intended goal. According to Robeyns (2005), there are three types of conversion factors: personal, social, and environmental, all of which influence a person's ability to participate and become empowered. Firstly, personal conversion factors are internal to the individual and include aspects such as age, gender, physical condition, and skills. Secondly, social conversion factors encompass social norms, cultural expectations, power relations, and gender roles, which shape how society structures opportunities and imposes limitations. Lastly, environmental conversion factors relate to the physical and infrastructural conditions surrounding an individual, including geographical location, public services, and access to resources.

These three conversion factors interact and significantly impact an individual's level of participation and empowerment. For example, an individual's ability to engage in decision-making processes may depend on their personal skills and on cultural expectations and the physical environment they live in. This aligns with Sen (1999) argument that real freedom requires more than just access to resources, and it depends on the individual's actual capability to convert those resources into meaningful outcomes. Additionally, Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes how gendered power dynamics and cultural barriers can limit one's agency, particularly among women, highlighting the importance of addressing social and institutional obstacles. While personal motivation is crucial, it alone may not be sufficient if societal and environmental factors act as barriers. The above section has discussed the theoretical foundation and significance of the capability approach. To strengthen this discussion, it is important to explore its practical applications and real-world experiences.

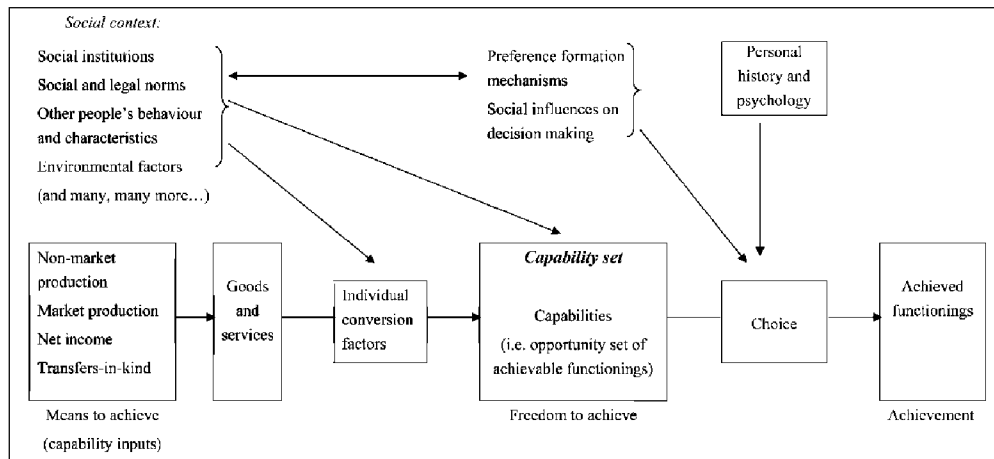


Figure 2.2 A Stylised Non-Dynamic Representation of A Person's Capability Set and Her Social and Personal Context  
Source: Robeyn, 2005

Figure 2.2 presents the capability approach framework, illustrating how various elements interact to shape individual well-being. The process begins with resources, such as goods and services, which may come from market and non-market production, income, or in-kind transfers. These resources are influenced by personal, social, and environmental conversion factors, which determine how effectively they can be transformed into real opportunities, known as the capability set. Social context, including institutions, norms, and other people's behaviour, together with personal history and psychology, also shapes preferences and decision-making. From the capability set, individuals make choices that lead to achieved functioning, which are the actual states of being and doing that people value. This framework demonstrates that access to resources alone is insufficient because true empowerment depends on the ability to convert those resources into meaningful achievements.

The capability approach is a framework within the fields of economics and development theory that prioritises the assessment of individuals' capabilities as a measure of welfare, rather than relying solely on income or utility. In practice, numerous scholars have applied the capability approach in diverse fields, including education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. Thus, this study focuses on economic development, specifically poverty eradication programmes, aiming to understand people's participation and empowerment in relation to their well-being. Several studies, including those by Banerjee (2005), Hoque (2020), Tjelta (2005), Trani et al. (2009), and Fauzan et al. (2021), have explored the capability approach within poverty-related contexts. These studies highlight how this framework provides valuable insights into poverty eradication strategies worldwide.

In practice, the capability approach has been applied in Mexico, which is the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme, ‘*Oportunidades*’ or ‘Programmes for the Development of Human Opportunities’ (Tjelta, 2005). This programme aims to empower individuals living in poverty by providing them with the necessary resources and opportunities to improve their well-being. The goal of these programmes is to enhance the basic capabilities of marginalized communities through development initiatives focused on social security, self-sufficiency, and economic stability (Sedesol, 2003). The capability approach is well-suited for this programme because it evaluates poverty beyond financial measures, focusing instead on individuals' abilities to convert resources into meaningful outcomes. According to Tjelta (2005), exploring poverty through the capability approach yielded significant results, showing that shifting from an income-based perspective to a focus on human capabilities enhances policy effectiveness. This shift reorients poverty alleviation efforts towards enhancing people's ability to make choices and lead fulfilling lives (Sen, 1999).

The capability approach, as in Mexico, has also been widely applied to guide and evaluate various poverty alleviation programmes in Southeast Asia. For instance, Indonesia introduced the *Minapolitan* programme, a rural development initiative designed to improve fishing production systems and promote sustainable resource management (Fauzan et al., 2021). To assess its impact, researchers have used the capability approach to measure the programme's effectiveness in enhancing the well-being of fishing communities (Pramono, 2016). Findings indicate that the programme has contributed positively to fish farmers' livelihoods, reinforcing the importance of capability-driven development policies. As a result, scholars have advocated for the expansion of such initiatives, recognizing their potential to drive sustainable rural development (Fauzan et al., 2021). Similar to Indonesia and other case studies, this research employs the capability approach to examine participation and empowerment within the SDP framework. By doing so, this study aims to provide a structured understanding of how participation and empowerment contribute to the success of SDP programmes. The capability approach serves as a guiding principle, offering a comprehensive framework to analyse the dynamics of participation and empowerment in development programmes.

## **2.7 The Settler Development Programme or *Program Pembangunan Peneroka* (SDP)**

Rural development has been a core focus of Malaysian economic policies since the country gained independence in 1957. From the beginning, rural areas were identified as regions struggling with poverty, low living standards, high illiteracy rates, high unemployment, and a lack of basic facilities, services, and healthcare (Jomo, 2004). During the colonial era, the British implemented a ‘divide and rule’ policy, which segregated people based on ethnic identification (Andaya, 2001; Stockwell, 1982). This policy shaped the socioeconomic landscape of Malaysia, reinforcing disparities among ethnic groups. Consequently, Malays predominantly resided in rural areas and engaged in low-income agricultural activities. In contrast, the Chinese were concentrated in urban and mining areas, often involved in trade and commerce, while Indians worked primarily as labourers on rubber estates (Hirschman, 1986). This ethnic-based occupational division entrenched structural inequality, with the rural Malay population being disproportionately affected by poverty. Recognizing the severity of rural poverty, the Malaysian government implemented targeted rural development programmes. These included the First and Second Malaysia Plans (1966–1975), which aimed to uplift rural communities, improve income levels, and address inter-ethnic socioeconomic disparities (Economic Planning Unit, 1971).

After independence, eradicating poverty and restructuring society became the primary goals of rural development (Economic Planning Unit, 1971; Jomo, 2004). To turn these objectives into reality, the government introduced several programmes focusing on key areas such as basic infrastructure, social facilities, crop modernization and diversification, new land schemes, and community development initiatives (Ngah et al., 2010). The Rural Economic Development Book, also known as the Red Book, was the first monitoring system introduced during the First Malaya Plan (1956–1961) (Ngah, 2010; Parliament, House of Representatives, 1961). This initiative emphasized that government committees should actively listen to and act upon the needs of the people. It also served as a guideline for government officers in assisting rural communities by improving road construction, schools, clinics, and telephone services. The success of these development plans heavily relied on strong cooperation between the state and federal governments. More importantly, the introduction of the Red Book contributed to the establishment of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), a significant milestone in Malaysia’s rural development efforts (FELDA, 2019a).

The Red Book was implemented in the first FELDA land settlement in Lurah Bilut, Pahang, in 1958, with the goal of developing new land, increasing agricultural productivity, and strengthening the agricultural sector as a key income generator for rural communities (Hussin and Abdullah, 2012). This initiative marked the beginning of structured rural development efforts in Malaysia. In addition to the Red Book, the government introduced the First Malaysia Plan in 1966 to further combat poverty, particularly in rural areas. During this period, the global price of rubber declined, causing significant income losses among rubber plantation labourers and worsening unemployment, income inequality, and the overall development of human resources. In response, the First Malaysia Plan was designed to enhance social welfare, improve the well-being of the rural poor, and increase income levels through targeted policies (Parliament, House of Representatives, 1965). FELDA played a crucial role in these efforts by opening more land for settlements, with its plantation schemes expected to benefit 60,000 previously landless families. The role of FELDA expanded further with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to eradicate poverty and restructure society, regardless of ethnicity, while also addressing economic imbalances (Jomo, 2004). This policy represented a major shift in Malaysia's economic approach, focusing on inclusivity and equitable growth. Poverty eradication efforts under the NEP focused on mobilizing rural resources through land development programmes and reorganizing institutions to modernize and develop the agricultural and rural sectors (Idris, 2017). To reduce poverty, new land development schemes and in-situ development programmes were introduced. Both initiatives sought to improve the quality of life in rural areas by providing land, housing, and essential facilities such as water supply and electricity to poor and landless families. During this period, FELDA emerged as one of the most impactful programmes, significantly reducing poverty rates across rural communities (Sutton, 1989). The implementation of FELDA aligns with SDG 1 (No Poverty), as it was designed to uplift rural communities by providing land ownership, housing, and financial assistance to landless families. Through structured agricultural programmes and settlement schemes, FELDA has significantly contributed to reducing poverty and improving the socioeconomic conditions of settlers. By 1995, FELDA had successfully transformed many rural areas, creating sustainable livelihoods and economic opportunities.

After 32 years of establishment, approximately 112,635 settlers had been placed across 317 FELDA regions since 1958, covering a total of 450,652.12 hectares (Ismail, 2009). However, in 1990, FELDA stopped recruiting new settlers, marking a shift in its development strategy. By 1995, FELDA had achieved significant success, implementing various strategies such as the formation of FELDA Holding and FELDA Plantation Sdn. Bhd. to generate independent income. This transition enabled FELDA to emerge as a market leader in large-scale food industries, catering to both export and domestic consumption (FELDA, 2019b). In 1988, FELDA introduced a minimum income policy for settlers to assess their financial stability. If settlers failed to meet the required income level, FELDA provided financial and technical assistance to support them, ensuring their continued economic participation. Additionally, FELDA was initially part of the Prime Minister's Department before being transferred to the Ministry of Cooperatives and Entrepreneurship. Over the years, its administrative oversight shifted multiple times, reflecting its growing importance in Malaysia's development agenda. In 2018, FELDA became an agency under the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, FELDA successfully established its own name and brand. Despite its accomplishments, FELDA underwent management reforms to enhance efficiency and ensure sustainable rural development. These reforms were introduced to transform the landscape of rural development and spearhead the growth of 317 FELDA settlements nationwide (Malek, 2018). As part of the FELDA 2.0 reformation, a bottom-up approach was adopted to develop rural areas (FELDA, 2018). FELDA 2.0 aimed to enhance technology, the economy, the environment, education, and the overall well-being of settlers. A key priority of this initiative was to empower the younger generation, particularly the second and third generations of settlers, by equipping them with better opportunities for economic sustainability. The reformation was expected to create a more resilient and forward-thinking community, ensuring that rural development remained relevant in a rapidly changing world.

The government allocated approximately RM50 million for the FELDA 2.0 project. The first major initiative launched under this programme was the Bilut Digital Valley, which aimed to integrate digital advancements into rural economic activities. However, the project was discontinued due to budget constraints. During the same period, Malaysia faced an economic crisis that further impacted the FELDA Group, raising concerns about its financial sustainability. The volatility of palm oil prices

significantly affected settlers' incomes. The average crude palm oil (CPO) prices in Malaysia showed fluctuations between 2015 and 2018. In 2015, the average CPO price was RM2,172 per tonne (Malaysian Palm Oil Council, Jan–Dec) (MPOC, 2015). This increased to RM2,653 per tonne in 2016, according to the Economic Development Division (MPOC, 2016). The upward trend continued in 2017, with the average price reaching RM2,783 per tonne (Malaysian Palm Oil Council, Jan–Dec). However, in 2018, the price of crude palm oil in 2018 averaged around RM2,235 per tonne, starting the year at over RM2,400 per tonne and declining to RM1,795 per tonne by December. To reduce overreliance on palm oil and strengthen settlers' economic resilience, the government introduced the Settler Development Programme or *Program Pembangunan Perneroka* (SDP) initiative in 2019.

The Settler Development Programme (SDP) was designed to create new income-generating opportunities for settlers through diversified agricultural activities. The programme forms a key component of FELDA's new development model, Towards FELDA Sustainability, which reflects a broader shift in rural development policy towards livelihood diversification and long-term resilience. This development model aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: No Poverty (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019), as well as the objectives of the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 and KEGA 13: Smart and High-Value Agriculture (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019). Despite these policy commitments, participation in SDP remains relatively low, and its impact on settlers' empowerment has been uneven. This situation necessitates a closer examination of the structural factors that enable or constrain settlers' participation and empowerment within the programme. Using the capability approach as an analytical lens, this study examines how SDP contributes to settlers' well-being and economic independence.

Within FELDA's institutional framework, SDP represents a departure from the agency's traditional plantation-based development model, which has historically relied heavily on palm oil as the primary source of settler income. Instead, SDP is designed as a mechanism to operationalise income diversification by encouraging settlers to engage in alternative high-value agricultural activities. The programme targets small-scale entrepreneurial initiatives that are intended to reduce vulnerability to commodity price fluctuations and enhance settlers' capacity to sustain their livelihoods independently. As such, SDP constitutes an important policy instrument through which FELDA seeks to foster a more adaptable and economically autonomous settler population.

From a capability perspective, SDP aims to expand settlers' substantive freedoms by increasing their ability to make informed economic choices and pursue livelihood strategies beyond monocrop dependence. The programme promotes income diversification and seeks to reduce overreliance on palm oil by encouraging activities such as high-value crop cultivation, livestock farming, and aquaculture (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019). To support these initiatives, SDP provides technical assistance, training, and access to financing (FELDA, 2019c; Idris, 2017). Infrastructure support, including modern irrigation systems, storage facilities, and improved access to markets, is also offered to enhance the commercial viability of small-scale agricultural enterprises (FELDA, 2019c). These forms of support are intended not only to raise income levels, but also to strengthen settlers' productive skills, decision-making capacity, and engagement with market systems, which are central elements of capability expansion.

SDP also aligns closely with national and international development objectives, including the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, KEGA 13: Smart and High-Value Agriculture (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019), and Sustainable Development Goal 1 (United Nations, 2015). By promoting diversified income sources and more sustainable livelihood strategies, SDP reflects an effort to transform FELDA settlements into more resilient rural communities (Sutton, 1989; Malek, 2018). In addition, the programme seeks to enhance settlers' entrepreneurial capabilities by strengthening their participation in local and regional markets and improving their capacity for economic decision-making (Ngah et al., 2010).

Despite these objectives, participation in SDP remains limited. Several factors contribute to this outcome, including limited awareness among settlers, risk aversion associated with reliance on familiar crops, restricted access to capital, and uncertainties surrounding the marketing of new agricultural products (MPOC, 2018; FELDA, 2018). Institutional and administrative constraints, such as land availability and coordination challenges between FELDA headquarters and local settlement offices, further affect programme implementation and settler engagement (Hussin & Abdullah, 2012). While targeted interventions such as training workshops, extension services, and simplified administrative procedures have been introduced to address these issues (Idris, 2017; FELDA, 2019c), persistent low participation suggests that structural constraints continue to limit settlers' ability to convert available resources into meaningful livelihood choices.

Early pilot projects implemented in selected FELDA settlements indicate gradual improvements in income diversification and productivity (FELDA, 2019c). Settlers involved in activities such as vegetable farming, poultry rearing, and aquaculture have demonstrated alternative pathways for income generation beyond palm oil, while also contributing to community development through knowledge sharing and cooperative management (Sutton, 1989). These initial outcomes highlight the potential of SDP, while also underscoring the uneven nature of its implementation across settlements.

Overall, SDP constitutes a central element of FELDA's strategy to modernise rural development and enhance settlers' economic empowerment (Malek, 2018; FELDA, 2019c). Its implementation reflects the evolving direction of rural development policy in Malaysia, moving away from traditional land settlement schemes towards approaches that emphasise income diversification, capability expansion, and the long-term resilience of rural communities (Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019). This study builds on this context by examining the extent to which SDP succeeds in expanding settlers' capabilities and identifying the structural factors that shape its outcomes.

## **2.8 Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an essential component of research. This conceptual framework will serve as a guideline for this research only and will not be tested in fieldwork. By employing qualitative research, this conceptual framework may be changed according to the data collected during the fieldwork. To explain participation and empowerment in SDP, it is worth discussing poverty in rural areas. According to Zailani (2024), 12% of people in rural areas and 3% of people in urban areas, respectively, live below the poverty line. These figures demonstrate that rural poverty rates are still more significant than those in urban areas in Malaysia. However, while these statistics highlight the disparity, they do not provide insight into the structural causes of rural poverty or whether government interventions have significantly addressed the root issues. There is a need to critically examine whether rural development programmes effectively target poverty alleviation or if they merely provide temporary relief. In Malaysia, the government has tried to eradicate poverty by implementing rural development programmes to help the poor.

In addition, the success of the programmes also depends on the implementation, which is employed top down or bottom up. According to Kothari (2001), the bottom-up approach led to the success of programmes because people can decide for themselves without government intervention. While the bottom-up approach is widely advocated for its participatory benefits, it is also necessary to question whether complete autonomy always leads to successful implementation. In certain cases, a hybrid approach, balancing government support with community decision-making, might be more effective. This is especially relevant in structured programmes like SDP, where settlers may require guidance in navigating economic and administrative complexities. However, the success of this programme is determined by the participation and empowerment of settlers. It could be considered a success if the settlers participate and are empowered. As such, the capability approach will be used as a guideline in this study. The researcher believes the capability approach is sufficient to explain participation and empowerment in SDP.

The capability approach goes beyond simply identifying whether settlers participate or feel empowered; it focuses on what settlers are actually able to do and to be as a result of the programme. Capability, therefore, refers to the real opportunities and freedoms settlers have to make meaningful choices over their lives. In this context, true empowerment is only achieved when participation leads to tangible improvements in settlers' capabilities, such as the ability to manage their livelihood independently, make informed decisions, and access resources equally. This is where the integration of conversion factors becomes essential: personal, social, and environmental conversion factors help explain how settlers transform available resources into real opportunities, which is central to the capability approach. This study will consider how conversion factors shape not only participation and empowerment, but ultimately the settlers' capabilities to live the kind of life they have reason to value.

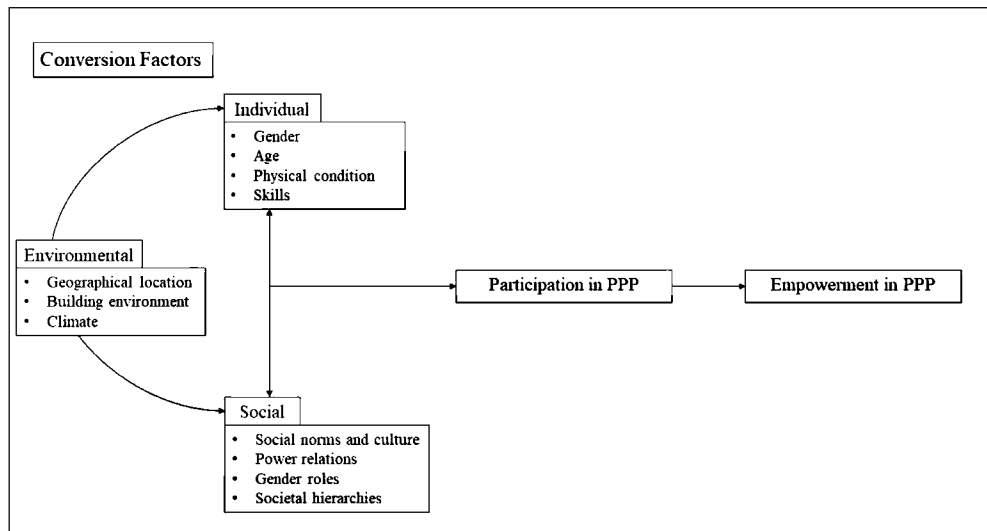


Figure 2.3 Framework of Participation and Empowerment in the Settler Development Programme (SDP)

Source: Adapted from Sen in the Capability Approach, 1999 and Robeyns (2005)

Figure 2.3 shows the important elements that may enable or disable participation and empowerment based on the capability approach. The capability approach gives people freedom to decide for themselves (Sen, 1999). Robeyns (2005) and Sen (2005) stated that the capability of an individual to participate and empower might be shaped by several conversion factors. There are three conversion factors in the capability approach: personal, social, and environmental conversion factors.

Firstly, participation and empowerment of settlers in the SDP may be enabled or disabled because of the personal factor. For instance, not all settlers are proficient with technology, which makes the settlers disable to participate. Settlers may participate in the SDP by agreeing to be involved in the programme, but they may not be empowered if they cannot decide on their own because of a lack of technological knowledge. Furthermore, several settlers might not have a high education, which makes them unable to participate and be empowered if they do not understand how to manage the project. While SDP aims to empower settlers, certain personal limitations may inadvertently create a dependency on external assistance, which could challenge the empowerment goal. Therefore, additional support mechanisms, such as training programmes, may be necessary to ensure that all settlers can fully participate.

Furthermore, the participation and empowerment of settlers may also be influenced or hindered by social structural factors, including culture, religion, and language. Social factors can influence an individual's willingness to participate and be empowered in SDP. According to Robeyns (2005), social conversion factors include

public policies, power dynamics, and many others. That means the involvement of FELDA officers in this study may also influence settlers to participate in or empower themselves in the SDP. Intervention from FELDA officers can also shape the participation and empowerment of the settlers. However, excessive government or institutional intervention may limit settlers' ability to make autonomous decisions, contradicting the very essence of empowerment. It is crucial to find a balance between providing necessary support and allowing settlers the autonomy to develop their economic activities. In addition, the selective approach taken by FELDA in implementing five pilot projects meant that not all the FELDA settlements were involved in the projects (*Jabatan Pengguluangan Rang Undang-undang, 2022; Parliament, House of Representatives, 2019*). This pilot study also shapes the participation and empowerment of settlers. The exclusion of certain settlements from the pilot projects raises concerns about equitable access. If only a few selected groups benefit from the programme, the broader impact of SDP may be limited, creating disparities among FELDA settlers. This warrants further investigation into the selection criteria and their implications on overall rural development.

Third, the environmental factor might shape both the individual and social factors of the settlers' participation and empowerment in the SDP. Environmental factors include the geographical location, the stability of a building, and a person's mobility (Robeyn, 2005). In this study, the settlers' participation and empowerment might be enabled or disabled because of the environmental factor. For instance, the geographical location of the settlers' land may not be suitable or too far from their settlements, making it more difficult for them to join the SDP. In addition, settlers must have their own land to carry out the project because FELDA did not provide it, which discouraged settlers from taking part. As such, the participation and empowerment of settlers in SDP can be influenced by the conversion factor. As well as these conversion factors, during the data collection, there might be other factors that enable or disable the participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP. Hence, it is worth noting here that this conceptual framework will be used as a guideline only and not be tested.

It is also important to emphasise that the core of the capability approach lies not merely in participation or empowerment as isolated outcomes, but in whether settlers are genuinely able to achieve valuable functioning such as the ability to make decisions, sustain livelihoods, or access opportunities that improve their well-being. In this context, capability represents the real freedom settlers have to convert resources and

opportunities into meaningful achievements. This study will therefore reflect on whether participation and empowerment in SDP truly expand the settlers' capabilities, or if structural barriers continue to restrict their agency.

## **2.9 Proposition**

This proposition is a loose statement and is not meant to be as precise as a hypothesis. In this study, the proposition has been developed based on research questions and literature reviews. The main aim of this research is to understand and examine the participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP. Thus, several propositions have been developed as follows:

2.9.1 Settlers are less inclined to participate in the SDP.

2.9.2 The FELDA officers are more likely to employ a top-down approach in the implementation of the SDP.

2.9.3 The SDP is not likely to empower settlers in improving their well-being.

## **2.10 Conclusion**

To summarise, this chapter has provided an overview of poverty, rural areas and poverty eradication programmes. Following that, it explained the implementation of the poverty eradication programme and participation as an approach to empowerment through an explanation of the public participation theory and capability approach for a better understanding. Following that, it discussed the rural development programme, particularly the FELDA programme, which is a SDP. This chapter also explained the conceptual framework, propositions, and conclusion. The next chapter will cover research methodology.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The overall research process discussed in this chapter includes the research design, sample size, data collection, sampling technique, data analysis, validity and reliability, and ethics. The first section discusses research design. To fully comprehend this study, qualitative research has been proposed, with two FELDA settlements chosen as case studies. Purposive sampling has been used to conduct interviews with FELDA settlers and the FELDA officers. In addition, NVivo and thematic analysis have been used as data analysis tools. Following that, validity, reliability, and ethics are critical components of a high-quality study. Finally, the conclusion will be presented in this chapter.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine participation and empowerment in the Settler Development Programme (SDP) (hereafter referred to as SDP). To address the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1, this study employed a qualitative approach, which involved conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method allowed interviewees to express their opinions freely and provided the researcher with deeper insights into the participation and empowerment of settlers in the SDP.

Participation and empowerment within the SDP were closely tied to social structure, as individuals' involvement in the programme was shaped by their surrounding social environment. Social structures, such as community interactions and institutional frameworks, played a crucial role in determining the extent to which settlers felt empowered through their participation. In the context of SDP, these structural elements could either enable or hinder settlers' empowerment, depending on how they shaped participation within the programme.

In addition, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the experiences, perceptions, and views of settlers and FELDA officers involved in the SDP. The unit of analysis in this study is the individual settler, as the focus is on their personal experiences, perceptions, and sense of empowerment within the SDP. In addition, perspectives from FELDA officers were included to provide complementary

insights at the programme implementation level. Although all interviewees participated in the SDP, their involvement varied in form and intensity. Recognising this variation allows the study to capture a range of experiences related to participation and empowerment, in line with the research objectives. Furthermore, as suggested by Adams (2015) and Warren (2002), a semi-structured, in-depth interview was considered the best option for this study because it could reveal settlers' experiences and ideas about participation and empowerment in the SDP, as well as the implementation of the programme at the local level.

### **3.2.1 Case Study**

According to Crowe et al. (2011), a case study is an in-depth and extended example used to illustrate a specific argument. Meanwhile, Wholey et al. (2010) stated that a case study is a method for understanding the process of a programme or specific activity. A case study also assisted researchers in understanding a case within a specific context by collecting data from various sources (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, case studies provided a clear picture of programme implementation and led to a more in-depth understanding of how and why the programme was linked to the outcomes.

This study adopts an instrumental case study design. According to Stake (1995), an instrumental case study is used when a case is examined to provide insight into a broader issue rather than because the case itself is of intrinsic interest. In this study, the selected FELDA settlements are used as instruments to understand participation and empowerment in the SDP. In line with Yin (2018), this research employs a qualitative multiple-case study approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The cases were not selected for comparative purposes but to allow analytical insight into programme implementation and participation dynamics in underperforming SDP contexts.

For this study, two case studies of FELDA settlements were chosen: FELDA A and FELDA B. These two case studies were sufficient to develop an understanding of the participation and empowerment of FELDA settlers in the SDP. The selected FELDA settlements employed different approaches in implementing the SDP. Prior to exploring the case studies in further detail, it is essential to present an outline of FELDA's background.

In Malaysia, there are approximately 317 FELDA settlements spread across 11 states. This study focused on two FELDA settlements in Kedah due to the state's

economic challenges. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2022, Kedah is among the states with the highest poverty rates in Peninsular Malaysia. The Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2022 by DOSM highlights that Kedah has a high absolute poverty rate, lower than average household income, and a high unemployment rate. Specifically, the absolute poverty rate in Kedah stood at 9.0%, while its mean household income stood at RM 5,550 (DOSM, 2022; The Edge Malaysia, 2023). Additionally, the Malaysia Economic Monitor: Catching Up – Inclusive Recovery and Growth for Lagging States (World Bank, 2022a) further reinforces that Kedah, along with Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak, experiences some of the lowest average incomes and the highest poverty rates in the country.

In the state of Kedah, FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar was responsible for managing 17 FELDA settlements covering two northern states, Kedah and Perlis. The population of settlers in FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar was approximately 4,042, including those in Kedah and Perlis (FELDA, 2019b). Due to the large number of FELDA settlements, this study only selected two FELDA settlements in Kedah, namely FELDA A and FELDA B. FELDA A was chosen because it had more experience and was considered one of the most active settlements in the SDP, with 440 settlers participating in the programme (Gani, personal communication, November 11, 2022; Salleh, 2022; Zulkifli, personal communication, July 10, 2023).

The second case study was FELDA B, which was considered less active in the SDP, as reflected in the low income received since its implementation (Wahid, personal communication, January 4, 2024). FELDA B struggled to improve participation from the first year of the SDP's implementation, even though all previous participation in chilli projects had ended in failure (Idris, personal communication, January 4, 2024)

Therefore, considering the different levels of participation in the SDP, the settlers in these two FELDA settlements provided valuable insights into the programme based on their experiences and perspectives. Given the uniqueness of both case studies, this study focused on exploring the ideas, experiences, participation, and empowerment of FELDA settlers in the SDP.

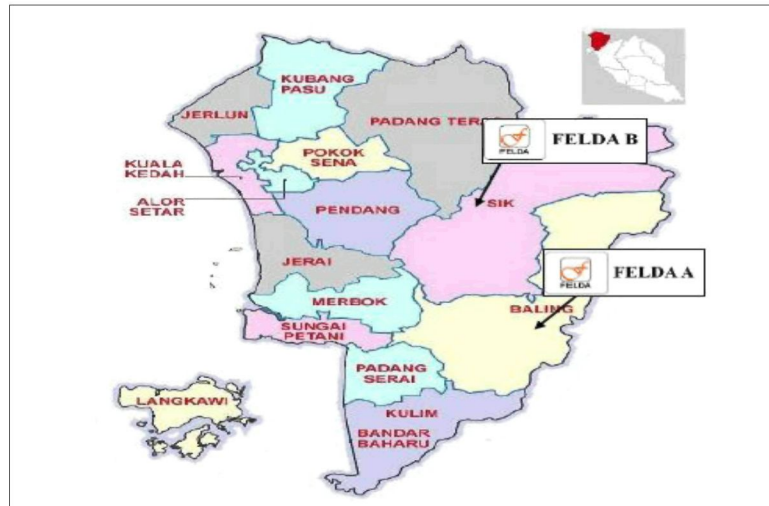


Figure 3.1 Map of Kedah State  
 Source: *Bahagian Teknologi Maklumat PTG Kedah, 2023*



Figure 3.2 Location on the Maps of Two FELDA settlement  
 Source: FELDA, 2019b

The two FELDA settlements have been selected based on a variety of factors, including the participants' experience in the SDP, the economic conditions of the settlers, the level of education, the population, the facilities of the FELDA settlement, and the implementation of SDP in the FELDA settlement. These factors are important in determining the circumstances surrounding the settlers' participation in the SDP.

FELDA A was established in 1968, earlier than FELDA B, and the land area of the FELDA settlement is around 4104.72 hectares. This FELDA is located in Padang Terap district, and the nearest town is Pendang (40 km) (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). This settlement has 769 houses, and all the settlers in FELDA A are Malays. Besides,

Bahagian Maklumat Am FELDA (2022) stated that, until the year 2022, there were around 7230 people who were staying in FELDA A because of the second and third generations who were staying with their parents and grandparents. It also stated that the number of family households is around seven people per house (*Bahagian Maklumat Am FELDA*, 2022). In this FELDA, there are two main industries: rubber cultivation and oil palm cultivation. Not only that, settlers in FELDA A are also involved in the entrepreneurship sector, the fishery sector, farming, and many more (FELDA, 2019b).

Besides, FELDA A is equipped with the facilities of a clinic, police station, petrol station, futsal hall, badminton hall, post office, internet centre, mosque, public hall, primary school, and secondary school. FELDA gave enough facilities to FELDA A because FELDA is far from town, and it needed to give the best facilities to the people. Next, FELDA New Generation Housing or known as *Perumahan Generasi Baru* FELDA (PGBF) in FELDA A was also established in 2018 with 130 houses for the second and third generations (Halid, 2018). Besides, for SDP, Gani (personal communication, November 11, 2022), has stated that FELDA A has high participation in SDP but low income from SDP projects. In this FELDA, there are focuses on two projects in SDP, which are rose apple or known as '*Jambu Loceng Merah*' and chilli fertigation but for the chili fertigation project, all the project has been ended (Jadid, personal communication, January 4 2024; Zulkifli, personal communication, January 4, 2024). As such, FELDA A is an interesting case study to be explored.

The second FELDA settlement is FELDA B. This FELDA settlement was established in 1977 with 610 houses, and all the settlers started occupying it in 1978 (FELDA, 2019b). Next, the land area of this FELDA settlement is 126.74 hectares and 2512.87 hectares for the rubber plantations. According to Husni (personal communication, January 16, 2024), there are more than 1120 people who are staying at this FELDA, including the second and third generations, and all the settlers are Malay. Most of the settlers in FELDA B work as rubber tappers because the main industry in this FELDA is the cultivation of rubber. Besides, FELDA B is also equipped with facilities such as a primary school, a police station, a pre-school, a public hall, a mosque, a futsal court, and many more. Not only that, but the settlers were also involved in a variety of economic fields, including entrepreneurship, farming, and handicrafts (Husni, personal communication, January 16, 2024). In addition, this FELDA is located in the Sik district, close to Kuala Ketil town (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2), and it is approximately 26 kilometres from Kuala Ketil town (FELDA, 2019b). For SDP, FELDA B has 173

participants out of 610 settlers, with approximately 437 having no intention of joining (Salleh, 2022). In this FELDA, two main projects were implemented under SDP: rabbit farming and chilli fertigation. However, the chilli project has since ended. Additionally, some participants have sold all their rabbits, as they no longer wished to continue with the SDP project (Wahid, personal communication, January 4, 2024). This decline in participation highlights the challenges faced by settlers in sustaining their involvement in SDP initiatives. Therefore, FELDA B is also a case study that is interesting to study.

FELDA A and FELDA B differ in terms of population, income, and facilities. FELDA A has a larger population than FELDA B, and their income levels differ due to their respective cultivations (FELDA, 2019b). FELDA A has two main industries compared to FELDA B, which depends on rubber cultivation. Besides, the facilities of FELDA B are too minimal compared to FELDA A because FELDA A is far from town and it is the largest FELDA in Kedah (Bahagian Maklumat Am FELDA, 2022). Besides, for participation in the SDP, FELDA A had high participation, but did not correspond to the high income in the SDP (Zulkifli, personal communication, July 10, 2023). Meanwhile, the participation rate for FELDA B has been decreasing since 2023 due to the low income of the project (Idris, personal communication, January 4, 2024; Wahid, personal communication, January 4, 2024). It is worth noting that the similarities and differences in both case study FELDA settlements are not for the comparison study, but instead, it is useful to gain more information from both case studies. Therefore, based on the above justification, employing these two FELDA in this study provides a better understanding of the participation and empowerment of the SDP.

### **3.3 Sample Size**

According to qualitative research experts, there is no simple answer to the question of how many sample sizes are appropriate to use in the process of gathering case study information because it relies on information that has a range of conceptual relevance for the categories, saturating the areas where the information is supporting and answering the questions as well as the repetitive answers or information for the categories (Charmaz, 1990). As such, the sample size for this study is determined by a rule of thumb developed by Warren (2002) and Neuman (2014), which is deemed adequate in this study.

In this study, the researcher interviewed FELDA settlers and FELDA officers. For FELDA settlers, the study initially proposed interviewing approximately 20–30 participants. According to Warren (2002), qualitative research typically requires a minimum of 20 to 30 interviews to achieve data saturation, with the final sample size determined based on the consistency of responses. The researcher concluded the interviews once saturation was reached, meaning no new information emerged from the responses. While 20–30 participants served as a guideline, the final number depended on the consistency of the data obtained. The interviews were terminated when responses became repetitive and consistent, indicating that sufficient data had been collected to address the research questions.

This approach aligns with contemporary qualitative research practices. Lowe et al. (2018) introduced quantitative measures to assess thematic saturation, concluding that 24–30 interviews are typically adequate, depending on the study's complexity. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that 20 to 30 interviews are generally sufficient for phenomenological research, while Guest et al. (2006) found that data saturation often occurs within the first 12 interviews, with 20 providing a strong basis for analysis. Additionally, studies such as those by Vasileiou et al. (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasize that smaller qualitative samples can still yield meaningful insights, provided thematic saturation is achieved.

Given these insights, the inclusion of 35 FELDA settlers and nine FELDA officers in this study exceeds commonly recommended thresholds, ensuring a robust and comprehensive dataset. The researcher concluded the interviews once saturation was reached, confirming that 35 participants were sufficient to capture the necessary insights. This enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed for a deeper exploration of perspectives from both FELDA settlers and FELDA officers, which contributed to the total of 44 participants of the study.

Regarding FELDA officers, interviewees were selected based on their position, expertise, and experience in policy coordination and execution (Neuman, 2014). In total, nine officers were interviewed for this study. These included two secretaries from the Department of Agricultural and Livestock Development at FELDA Headquarters, one deputy director from FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar, one manager from FELDA A, one community development assistant (SDA) from FELDA A, one supervisor from FELDA B, one field supervisor from FELDA A, and two administrative assistants (one from FELDA A and one from FELDA B). This number was deemed sufficient, as the

responses provided comprehensive insights into policy implementation and coordination within FELDA, contributing to the overall robustness of the study. Their expertise and roles ensured that diverse perspectives on public policy and programme execution were captured, strengthening the validity of the findings.

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the actual number of participants, including both FELDA settlers and FELDA officers involved in SDP implementation.

Table 3.1  
Numbers of the Participants

No	Categories of Participants	The number of the participants	Gender of the participant	
1	First Stage			
	Committee:			
	<i>Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Rancangan (JKKR)</i>			
	Chairman (FELDA settlers chief)	2	2 Male	
	Chairwoman of <i>Gerakan Persatuan Wanita (GPW)</i>	2	2 Female	
	FELDA settlers:			
	FELDA A, Kedah	20	6 Male 16 Female	
	FELDA B, Kedah	11	11 Male 2 Female	
	2	Second Stage		
		FELDA officers:		
Secretaries from Department of Agriculture and Livestock Development FELDA		2	2 Female	
Deputy Director FELDA <i>Wilayah</i> Alor Setar		1	1 Male	
Manager FELDA A		1	1 Male	
Community Development Assistant (SDA) FELDA A		1	1 Female	
Supervisor FELDA B		1	1 Male	
Field supervisor FELDA A		1	1 Male	
Administrative assistant FELDA A		1	1 Male	
Administrative assistant FELDA B		1	1 Male	
	Total Participant	44		

Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Table 3.2  
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Participant

Inclusion Criteria
<p>FELDA Settlers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants must be 18-year-old and above.</li> <li>• Participants must participate in the SDP programme.</li> <li>• Participants must be settlers from FELDA A and FELDA B only.</li> </ul> <p>FELDA Officers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants must be selected based on their experience, expertise and experience in SDP implementation.</li> </ul>
Exclusion Criteria
<p>FELDA Settlers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants under the age of 18 is legally considered a child and consider as student, the researcher acknowledges under the age of 18 may unable to answer the research question.</li> <li>• Participants who are not involved in the SDP programme will be excluded from the study.</li> <li>• Only FELDA settlers in the settlements A and B are included, excluding all other FELDA settlements in Kedah and other states.</li> </ul> <p>FELDA Officers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants who do not meet the requirements which is experience or expertise in SDP implementation will not be selected.</li> </ul>

Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

This study also included inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 3.2). Inclusion was defined as a characteristic of the target population that was used to answer the research question (Browner et al., 2022; Patino and Ferreira, 2018). Meanwhile, exclusion was defined as a characteristic of participants who met the inclusion criteria but had another characteristic that could lead to failure in this study (Browner et al., 2022). The inclusion criteria for FELDA settlers were that the participants had to be 18 years old and above, and the study only focused on settlers from FELDA A and FELDA B. An exclusion criterion for this study was individuals under the age of 18, as they were considered children and students, making them ineligible for the scope of the study.

Furthermore, although many FELDA settlements implemented SDP, this study only covered FELDA A and FELDA B. The inclusion criteria for FELDA officers required that participants be selected based on their experience and expertise in SDP implementation. The total number of participants was 44, consisting of 35 FELDA settlers and nine FELDA officers. The researcher determined that this sample size was sufficient to answer the research questions, as data saturation was achieved among the FELDA settlers. Additionally, all participants had relevant experience with SDP, ensuring they could provide informed responses. Researchers also believed that all

participants had their own experience with SDP. As a result, the researchers felt that participants could adequately answer the questions.

### **3.4 Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling has been chosen as the sampling frame for this study. According to Patton (2002), this sampling technique is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases that provide in-depth insights into a particular phenomenon. Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, enables researchers to select participants who are most relevant to the research objectives, ensuring that detailed and meaningful data are collected (Etikan et al., 2016).

Several studies have employed purposive sampling in research related to rural development and community-based programmes. For instance, Samah and Aref (2011) used purposive sampling to examine the effectiveness of community participation in rural development projects in Malaysia, selecting participants who had direct involvement in such programmes. Similarly, Mansourian et al. (2020) applied purposive sampling in their study on sustainable rural development initiatives, ensuring that only key stakeholders with practical experience and knowledge were included.

By employing purposive sampling, this study ensures that participants are chosen based on their direct involvement in SDP, allowing for a richer understanding of its implementation, challenges, and impacts.

This approach aligns with previous research that has successfully used purposive sampling to gather in-depth qualitative insights into rural development programmes.

In addition, the researcher conducted interviews with FELDA settlers and FELDA officers to obtain detailed insights into the SDP. The selection criteria for participants were based on their relevance to the study objectives. FELDA officers were chosen based on their position, direct involvement in SDP implementation, and knowledge of the programme's policies and outcomes. Their expertise was crucial in explaining how the SDP is implemented at the local level and assessing its effectiveness in empowering settlers.

For FELDA settlers, the researcher selected participants from FELDA A and FELDA B who met specific criteria: they must reside in the settlement and be 18 years and above. These criteria ensured that participants had direct experience with the SDP and could provide meaningful insights into their participation and the programme's

impact on their well-being. By specifically selecting these groups, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to target individuals with first-hand knowledge and experience, ensuring the collection of rich, relevant, and context-specific data.

### **3.5 Data Collection**

According to Kabir (2016), data collection is the process of gathering data from various sources, such as document analysis, observation, interviews, and many more. The primary data for this study were collected through interviews. Interviews provided an opportunity for deeper engagement with participants, allowing them to express their thoughts freely rather than being constrained by rigid response formats (Sutton and Austin, 2015). This study employed a semi-structured in-depth interview approach, which was widely used by researchers because the questions were prepared in advance, serving as an 'interview guide' to ensure the discussion remained focused and relevant (Bernard, 1988; Kabir, 2016). By having a structured yet flexible framework, this study was able to explore unexpected but important insights while still maintaining alignment with its objectives. As such, interviewing was the best option for this study because it enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Through interviews, this study was able to engage directly with participants, clarify responses, and uncover deeper meanings behind their experiences.

#### **3.5.1 Primary Data**

Primary data involved a Primary data involved a semi-structured in-depth interview. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), semi-structured in-depth interviews are commonly used in qualitative research. This method is a loosely structured interview that allows participants to express their own perspectives on the topic while also giving the researcher guidelines to avoid discussing topics unrelated to the study.

Besides, this study also employed an interview protocol. It is a guide for the interview that provides direction from the beginning to the end (Hunter, 2012). As a result, during the interviews, specific topics related to the research question will be discussed. According to Jacob and Furgerson (2012), an interview protocol is more than just a list of interview questions. It also includes information about interview procedures. Furthermore, there are four phases to interview protocol refinement (IRP) (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The first phase focuses on ensuring that the research questions align with the interview questions. In this study, the questions were carefully designed to delve into how FELDA settlers and FELDA officers perceive both participation and empowerment within the SDP. This phase establishes a clear link between the research objectives and the interview inquiries, enabling a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the study.

The second phase focuses on the topic to be discussed during the interview. According to Patton (2015), researchers need to ask questions that relate to the aim of the study. During the interviews, topics such as SDP implementation efficiency, settlers' participation, policy effectiveness, empowerment, and settler well-being emerged as key discussion points. This alignment ensured that the data collected directly addressed the research objectives.

By structuring the interviews around these core areas, this study ensured that the data collected was relevant and provided a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research objectives. The discussions allowed for a deeper exploration of how SDP policies and initiatives translated into real outcomes for settlers, capturing their perspectives on opportunities, challenges, and the extent to which the programme contributed to their socio-economic development and empowerment. This alignment between discussion topics and research objectives reinforced the study's validity, ensuring that the findings were deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the participants.

The third stage involves gathering feedback on the interview protocol. Feedback from participants provides the researcher with insights into how well the questions are understood (Patton, 2015). This input was essential in refining the interview process, ensuring that both settlers and FELDA officers could fully comprehend and accurately respond to the questions. By integrating this feedback, the researcher enhanced the reliability and trustworthiness of the data collected (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), ultimately ensuring that the responses reflected the participants' true experiences and insights into SDP implementation in FELDA settlements.

In this study, participants' feedback played a crucial role in improving the clarity and effectiveness of the interview protocol. By analysing participants responses and identifying areas of confusion or misinterpretation, necessary adjustments were made to enhance question clarity and relevance. This iterative refinement process ensured that the data collected was both accurate and meaningful, allowing for a deeper

understanding of settlers' and FELDA officers' perspectives on SDP implementation in FELDA settlements.

Phase four discusses piloting the interview protocol. During the interviews, which lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, it became evident that settlers required more time to express their experiences, while FELDA officers preferred a more structured format. As a result, the researcher adjusted the interview duration and structure accordingly. In this study, piloting was essential in refining the interview protocol to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collected (Maxwell, 2012). The pilot phase also confirmed that the questions successfully elicited detailed responses about the realities of SDP implementation in FELDA settlements, ensuring that the final interviews would capture rich and meaningful data (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Patton, 2015).

In this study, both the researcher and the participants followed a set of procedures before, during, and after the interviews to ensure a smooth and effective data collection process. The decision to conduct face-to-face interviews was intentional, as it allowed for deeper engagement, better understanding, and the opportunity to capture additional, often unspoken, information through body language and tone (Opdenakker, 2006).

There was something about face-to-face interactions that made the conversations feel more natural and more spontaneous. Instead of rigid, scripted responses, the settlers and FELDA officers had the space to express their thoughts freely, sometimes revealing insights that might not have surfaced in a more structured setting. As Wengraf (2001) suggested, the interviewer needed to craft questions that felt less like a formal interrogation and more like a meaningful exchange, creating an environment where participants felt comfortable enough to share their true perspectives.

The first step for the interviewer was to inform the participants about the recording process and obtain their permission to use a digital recorder. It was important to be transparent by letting them know that the recordings were solely for reporting purposes and would help maintain the accuracy of their responses. After all, relying only on written notes risked missing key details, subtle expressions, or the exact way something was said.

Opdenakker (2006) emphasizes that recorded audio provides a far more precise account than note-taking alone. That made perfect sense. In this study, using a digital recorder was not just about convenience but about ensuring that every word, pause, and

nance was preserved. This way, no critical insights were lost in translation, and the participants' voices were captured in their most authentic form.

During the interviews, some participants were initially hesitant about being recorded, voicing concerns about confidentiality. It was understandable, as having their words captured might have felt intimidating at first. However, after being reassured that the recordings were strictly for research purposes and would remain confidential, they gradually became more at ease. The shift was noticeable as once that initial worry faded, the conversation felt more natural and they opened up more freely.

Using the recorder also made a difference on the researcher's end. Without having to write everything down all the time, there was space to truly listen and to be present in the conversation rather than just documenting it. This improved the flow of the discussion and allowed for capturing spontaneous and unfiltered responses. Thoughts and emotions that might have been lost if the focus had been split between listening and taking notes were now preserved.

Throughout the interview, the interviewer could ask several different questions depending on how the participants answered until a relevant response was obtained from their perspective. This flexibility was crucial as it allowed the conversation to flow naturally rather than feeling like a rigid questionnaire. According to Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush (2006), it was the interviewer's responsibility to ensure that the discussion remained focused on the intended topic and to control the tone of voice to maintain a comfortable atmosphere. It was not just about asking questions but also about creating a space where participants felt at ease to share their thoughts.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) stated that interviews should be conducted in everyday language. This made perfect sense because language plays a huge role in how people express themselves. Therefore, in this study, the interviews were conducted in Malay, as some participants might have struggled to answer in English due to language barriers and other factors. It was clear that language choice mattered. During the interviews, most participants appeared more comfortable and were able to share their experiences in greater detail when speaking in Malay. They spoke more freely, sometimes even adding personal anecdotes that provided deeper insights into their experiences.

However, there were some challenges, such as participants taking time to understand certain questions or providing vague answers. It was a tricky situation because pushing too hard might make them uncomfortable, but leaving vague responses

unclarified could affect the accuracy of the data. In such cases, the interviewer quietly rephrased and simplified the questions to ensure the responses were accurate and meaningful. This small adjustment often made a big difference, as participants would then respond with greater clarity.

Additionally, in a few instances, some participants showed signs of discomfort or wished to end the interview early. It was important to respect their boundaries. In such cases, the interviewer immediately stopped the interview and discarded any responses provided by that participant. There was no point in forcing an interview if the participant was unwilling or uneasy, as ethical considerations always came first.

After completing the interview, the interviewer needed to ensure that the session was properly recorded and saved to prevent any data loss (Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush, 2006). In this study, since the interviews were conducted in Malay, all responses were later translated into English to facilitate analysis. During the translation process, careful attention was given to maintaining the accuracy and context of participants' statements to ensure that their original meaning was preserved.

At the end of the interview, the researcher expressed gratitude to the participants for their willingness to participate. Some participants appeared curious about how their responses would be used, so the researcher reassured them that their answers would serve as a primary reference in understanding settlers' participation and empowerment in the SDP. Additionally, they were reminded that their responses would be included only in the researcher's report and treated with confidentiality. This final step helped build trust and reinforced the ethical considerations of the study.

Following that, gatekeepers have been used in this study. A gatekeeper is someone who has the authority to grant or deny access to people needed for research purposes (Berg, 2004; De, 2000; McFadyen and Rankin, 2016). Furthermore, it is important in the research process because it provides more efficient and expedient routes to participants who would otherwise be difficult to reach (Clark, 2010). In this study, gatekeepers were identified through the FELDA headquarters (HQ) rather than selected independently at the local level. The involvement of HQ in appointing gatekeepers helped to reduce the potential for selection bias, as the process was not influenced by personal relationships or local interests within the settlements. Nevertheless, to ensure transparency and methodological rigour, additional measures were taken to minimise any remaining risk of gatekeeper bias. These measures included

clearly communicating the participant inclusion criteria to the gatekeepers, emphasising the involvement of settlers with diverse levels of participation in the SDP.

This study begins with FELDA settlers in the first stage of interviewing, followed by FELDA officers. Choosing FELDA settlers at the first stage of interviewing because the researcher believes that settlers can give a fresh idea about SDP and be able to give in-depth information regarding the present situation of SDP. At this stage, the researcher begins the semi-structured in-depth interview by identifying the gatekeepers of the FELDA settlements. The common gatekeepers in the settlements are the Chairman of the FELDA settlement and the chairwoman of GPW. They are appointed by the government. After identifying the gatekeeper, the researcher will contact them and make an appointment to get permission from them before the interview can be conducted. The researcher believes that by interviewing the JKKR committee, they can gain more information regarding the settlers at the FELDA settlement. After interviewing the JKKR committee, researchers begin interviewing the settlers using the information gleaned from the JKKR committee. The interview was conducted based on the participants' availability, as each participant has their own free time, which may differ from one another.

The willingness of participants was essential, as the interview sessions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and some participants were reluctant to participate in lengthy discussions. In this study, the researcher conducted interviews in two sessions: morning and evening. In the morning, only a few settlers were available, and interviews typically began around 10:00 a.m. This timing was chosen because most settlers worked as rubber tappers and usually finished their work before 10 a.m. However, some settlers still needed extra time to rest before agreeing to participate in the interview.

For the evening session, interviews were conducted between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. The researcher found that more settlers were available in the evening, making it a more suitable time to conduct longer and more detailed discussions. Additionally, participants were given the freedom to choose the interview location based on their convenience, with the option of either their homes or the FELDA offices. However, all participants preferred to be interviewed at home, as they felt more comfortable in a familiar environment. Conducting the interviews at their homes also allowed participants to speak more openly about their experiences without distractions, creating a more relaxed and natural conversation flow. Therefore, this flexible approach to interview timing and

location aimed to ensure participants' comfort, encouraging openness and richer responses, which produced data that was more detailed, in-depth, and of higher quality.

After completing the interview sessions with the settlers, the researcher conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview with FELDA officers. In addition to identifying the gatekeeper at FELDA settlements, the researcher also identified the gatekeeper within the FELDA department to facilitate access to the relevant officer. The data collected from the settlers' interviews served as a crucial reference for formulating questions and guiding discussions with the FELDA officers.

In the FELDA department, nine officers were contacted and selected as participants. All of them were well-versed in SDP implementation, possessing extensive knowledge and experience in managing related programmes. During the interviews, some officers provided detailed insights into the challenges and successes of SDP implementation, while others emphasized the importance of collaboration between settlers and government agencies. The information gathered from these sessions significantly enhanced the researcher's understanding of SDP implementation, offering a more comprehensive perspective from both the settlers and FELDA officers involved.

Table 3.3 summarises the data collection for this study. The strategy for answering the research question has been summarised by the researcher. For instance, research question one focuses on the settlers to know whether they actively participate or inactively participate in SDP. The second research question is for FELDA officers since the question is on the implementation of SDP. The third research question is designed for both the settlers and the FELDA officers. It is critical to understand whether SDP empowers settlers or not. Therefore, researchers believe having a strategy for answering the research question will avoid mistakes during the interview session.

Table 3.3  
Summary of Data Collection

Research Question	Sources of data	Methodology
RQ 1: How did the settlers understand their participation in the SDP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data from FELDA officers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth interview with FELDA settlers</li> </ul>
RQ 2: How was the SDP implemented at a local level?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White paper policy</li> <li>• Data from house of representative</li> <li>• Newspaper cutting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth interview with FELDA officers</li> </ul>
RQ 3: To what extent did the SDP empower settlers in improving their well-being?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data from RQ1 and RQ 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collected from both in-depth interviews with FELDA settlers and responsible FELDA officers</li> </ul>

Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

### 3.6 Data Analysis

According to Bhatia (2017), data analysis is the process of scrutinising raw data with the goal of converting the data into something that is easy to understand, conclusive, and supports the decision-making mechanism. Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the data in this study. It is a process that involves delving through a data set, which includes identifying patterns, systematically coding, deriving themes, and creating a narrative (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Besides, Braun and Clarke (2006) also stated that thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting on themes discovered in a data set. Thematic analysis involves six phases: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Thematic analysis has been used in this study to analyse the data gathered from the participants who were interviewed. For the first phase, the researcher focuses on rereading the data that they get from the participants. In this phase, researchers need to carefully read all the data. After reading all the data, researchers need to jot down initial ideas that are relevant to the study. The second phase involved coding key terms and phrases from the data collected from all participants. The researcher carefully identified and selected codes that were relevant to this study, ensuring that they accurately captured important themes and patterns. In this study, several codes were identified, such as SDP project, income, passion, position, and many more.

Following that, the researcher reviewed and refined the identified themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. This process involved grouping similar

themes together and eliminating any redundant or irrelevant codes. Once the themes were finalized, they were systematically analysed to uncover relationships, trends, and significant insights related to SDP implementation in FELDA settlements. The researcher then interpreted these findings in relation to the study's objectives, providing a deeper understanding of the settlers' and FELDA officers' perspectives.

In the fourth phase, the researcher reviewed the data related to each code by carefully examining interview transcripts and audio recordings. During this process, it was observed that while some settlers provided detailed responses, others gave brief or vague answers that required follow-up questions for clarification. For instance, when discussing their participation in SDP, some settlers initially responded with short statements such as 'not really involved' or 'just follow friends'. To gain deeper insights, the researcher asked follow-up questions like 'Can you explain why you are not involved?' or 'What specific challenges have you faced?'. This approach helped uncover underlying issues such as health concerns, hierarchical power structures, centralized decision-making, and insufficient information.

Additionally, some participants struggled to recall specific details during the interviews, leading to hesitation or uncertainty in their answers. In these cases, the researcher used prompts and contextual cues to help participants retrieve relevant information. Some settlers also expressed their thoughts in generalized terms, such as 'it has always been like this' or 'we just follow what they decide', without further elaboration. To ensure clarity and accuracy, the researcher encouraged them to provide concrete examples or personal experiences. This method not only helped gather richer data but also ensured that the findings accurately reflected the settlers' actual involvement in SDP.

The fifth phase involved refining the data and identifying key themes. At this stage, the researcher analysed recurring statements from participants to determine significant patterns. One major finding was that many settlers perceived their limited role in decision-making as a significant barrier to meaningful participation in SDP. Although the findings indicated that settlers were involved in the programme, they expressed frustration over their lack of authority in influencing key decisions. Several participants shared that most decisions were made by higher authorities, restricting their role to mere implementation rather than active policymaking.

Moreover, many settlers preferred speaking in informal Malay, incorporating local dialects and colloquial expressions. This required careful interpretation during

transcription to ensure that the intended meaning was accurately conveyed in the final analysis. In certain instances, direct translations did not fully capture the depth of their experiences, prompting the researcher to consider contextual meanings rather than relying solely on literal translations.

To maintain accuracy and reliability, the researcher ensured that all data was clear and free of ambiguity. In the final phase, the research findings were compiled, and the report was finalized. At this stage, it was crucial to verify that all selected data aligned with the study's objective of understanding participation and empowerment in SDP.

The researcher also analysed data in this study using qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo 12, to transform raw data into meaningful information. The unstructured text and audio from the interviews were processed through NVivo 12, allowing the researcher to identify and categorize key themes related to the study. Through NVivo 12, several categories emerged, including SDP project, power dominance, income, hobbies, passion, and others. The software helped in organizing large amounts of qualitative data by coding interview responses into these categories, making it easier to identify patterns and recurring themes.

To integrate NVivo 12 with thematic analysis, the researcher first conducted thematic analysis by manually identifying recurring patterns and developing initial codes based on settlers' responses. This step allowed for a deeper understanding of the context and meaning behind the data. Consequently, NVivo 12 was used to systematically organise, refine, and validate these codes by categorising recurring words and phrases. This combination of methods ensured a structured yet flexible approach to data analysis, enhancing both the depth of interpretation and the reliability of the findings.

### **3.7 Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability are important elements in ensuring the quality of qualitative research. Neuman et al. (2014) define validity as 'truthfulness'. However, in qualitative research, the focus is less on discovering a single version of 'truth' and more on achieving authenticity. Although some scholars argue that traditional concepts of validity may not fully apply to qualitative approaches, many still acknowledge the importance of ensuring research trustworthiness. As a result, various interpretations and frameworks of validity have been developed within the field. In contrast, Neuman et al.

(2014) define reliability as the dependability or consistency of the research. In qualitative studies, this is often addressed through strategies such as document analysis, the use of photographs, and participant observation to ensure consistency in data collection and interpretation.

To strengthen both validity and reliability, triangulation is commonly employed. Mathison (1988) identifies triangulation as a key method for enhancing credibility, while Creswell and Miller (2000) describe it as a process where researchers use multiple and diverse data sources to identify recurring themes or categories, allowing for convergence and confirmation of findings. In this study, methodological triangulation involved combining interview data with other sources. When information from different sources produced similar results, it confirmed the reliability of the researcher's interpretations. Besides, trustworthiness was ensured by applying the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are considered the qualitative equivalents of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, and served as guiding principles throughout the research process.

To ensure credibility, several strategies were employed. First, expert validation of the research instrument was conducted prior to data collection. The semi-structured interview guide was reviewed by academic experts to confirm its clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. The interview protocol was also reviewed and validated by FELDA officers to ensure its contextual appropriateness. Additionally, the protocol was submitted to the institutional ethics committee for review and approval prior to data collection. Feedback from both expert groups was gathered before and after the interviews, and refinements were made accordingly.

To further enhance the validity and reliability of this study, multiple methods were employed during data collection and analysis. Interviews were conducted in a consistent manner across all participants until data saturation was achieved. In this study, saturation occurred after interviews with 35 settlers and nine FELDA officers, at which point no new themes, perspectives, or insights emerged, and responses became repetitive. This indicated that sufficient data had been collected to fully understand settlers' participation and empowerment in the SDP.

Purposive sampling was adopted to specifically target FELDA settlers and FELDA officers involved in the SDP programme. This sampling approach allowed the study to focus exclusively on the participation and empowerment of settlers. To

strengthen the validity of the findings, both primary and secondary data sources were utilised. Semi-structured in-depth interviews served as the main data collection method, and all interview sessions were recorded to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation.

The data were analysed thematically using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, which helped systematically categorise the emerging concepts and reduce researcher bias. According to Yin (2014), the use of a structured analytical process, including protocols and coding frameworks, enhances the trustworthiness and validity of qualitative research. In this study, the thematic analysis followed a defined protocol that guided the processes of coding, categorisation, and interpretation. This consistent analytical approach supported data saturation and minimised the risk of selective interpretation, thereby contributing to the overall credibility and transparency of the study's findings.

### **3.8 Ethics**

Ethics refers to what is or is not legitimate to do or what moral research procedures involve (Neuman, 2014). According to Bryman (2016) and Diener and Grandall (1978), four ethical principles must be considered, which are whether participants are harmed, whether informed consent is lacking, whether there is an invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved. In this study, the ethical aspects that the researcher will discuss are research ethical approval, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

The research commenced only after obtaining approval from the faculty committee to proceed with the Defence of Research Proposal (DRP) session. After successfully passing the DRP, the researcher applied for and received ethical approval from Universiti Teknologi MARA's Research Ethics Committee. The interview protocol and all necessary instruments were reviewed and approved as part of the ethical clearance process (Ethical Approval Reference No: [REC/01/2024 (PG/MR/27)]). This ensured that the study adhered to ethical guidelines, protecting the rights and confidentiality of all participants.

Before conducting the interview, the researcher prepared an informed consent form for the participants. The informed consent included details such as the participant's personal information, name, and signature. The researcher asked the participants whether they were willing to participate in the interview and reassured them that all participants would remain anonymous. Additionally, the researcher inquired whether

the participants had any health issues that might prevent them from participating. However, in this study, none of the participants reported having any health issues that would hinder their participation as participants. Once the participants agreed, they were asked to sign the informed consent form. During the interview, the researcher ensured that the questions were appropriate for the participants and assured them that all data gathered from the interview session would remain confidential.

In this study, there were two groups of participants from two case study FELDA settlements, namely FELDA A and FELDA B. For the FELDA settlers, the identity of each participant was kept confidential. Similarly, the names of FELDA officers were not disclosed. Only the names of the ministry and government agency were retained. After completing the interviews, the researcher ensured that all data collected was securely stored. To maintain confidentiality and security, the researcher protected the computer with a password. Upon the completion of the research, all participant data was destroyed.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter has discussed the procedures of research methodology that are important to this study. Qualitative research has been used for a better understanding of participation and empowerment in SDP. Social structure might influence the settlers' decision to join the SDP. In this study, there are two phases of data collection: primary data and secondary data. Following that, this study has selected two FELDA settlements as a case study, and the proposed number is 48 participants, which include settlers and FELDA officers. For analysing the data from participants, NVivo 12 and thematic analysis have been used. At the end of this study, it discusses validity, reliability, and ethics. All the procedures in the research methodology are for a better understanding of participation and empowerment in SDP.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings from the data collection during the interview session, which took place from February to May 2024. This study seeks a better understanding of the participation and empowerment of the Settler Development Programme (SDP) (SDP will be used onward in this study). The first section explains the findings that aim to understand how the settlers understand the concept of SDP. It is followed by the explanation of the participation of FELDA settlers in the SDP programme, specifically focusing on the implementation of the SDP and the empowerment of the settlers in improving their well-being while participating in the SDP. This chapter begins with a discussion of the demographic profile of the participants. Then, the findings of the study are presented and discussed according to the research objectives, as follows:

- a) To examine the settlers' understanding of their participation in the Settler Development Programme (SDP).
- b) To explain the implementation of the Settler Development Programme (SDP) at a local level.
- c) To investigate whether the Settler Development Programme (SDP) empowers the settlers in improving their well-being.

#### **4.2 Demographic Profile of the Participant**

In this study, there were two settlements chosen, FELDA A and FELDA B. The study aimed to comprehend FELDA settlers' participation and empowerment in the SDP. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show the demographic profile of the participant. The total number of interviewees was 44, with 35 participants from FELDA settlers and nine from FELDA officers. In both FELDA settlements, the youngest participant was 33, and the oldest was 75, but most of the participants were between 40 and 69 years old. This indicates that most settlements are inhabited by individuals in the middle-aged to older adult age group. Therefore, the participants in this study are predominantly within this age group.

The main SDP projects for both settlements were chilli *centil* fertigation (chilli *centil* is primarily found in Indonesia, and the term “*centil*” came from an Indonesian word that might describe the chilli as being small but attention-grabbing due to its spiciness, and it is quite similar to *cili padi kampung*), *Jambu loceng merah* project (the guava variety previously known as *jambu madu* has been rebranded as *jambu loceng merah* by FELDA), and rabbit farming (Salleh, 2022). These three SDP projects are the most familiar projects among the FELDA in the Northern Region. Different settlements received different SDP projects based on decisions made by their respective management teams. The selection of a SDP project is determined by an officer at FELDA headquarters, considering the suitability of each settlement. Additionally, FELDA has set strategic goals and priorities based on its vision for the development of each settlement. This SDP involves more than just FELDA officers. It also includes a contractor responsible for managing the project from beginning to end.

The contractor's involvement in the SDP project has several key roles, including procurement and supply, design and planning, site preparation and installation, and many more. The contractor is specifically involved in managing the seminar for the participants and installing the plant rack until harvest. The FELDA officers are primarily responsible for monitoring, supporting, and guiding the settler who participates.

In this study, the participants demonstrated a slight predominance of females, with 18 female settlers compared to 17 male settlers. In FELDA A, the number of female participants was much higher, with 16 women and only 6 men. In contrast, in FELDA B, the majority of participants were men, with 11 men and only 2 women. This difference can be explained by the one-participant-per-house, where only one individual is allowed to officially represent the family. However, the SDP projects are usually managed collectively by family members, not solely by the registered participant. Although the overall number of female participants slightly exceeded that of males by just one, this did not result in any significant differences or contradictory responses based on gender. Furthermore, the study employed purposive sampling, in which participants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Therefore, the slight gender imbalance did not affect the quality or focus of the study's findings. Table 4.1 below presents the demographic profile of the participant.

Table 4.1  
Demographic Profile of the Participant (Settlers)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Name of FELDA Settlement	Income (RM/USD)	SDP Project
Participant 1	Female	56	FELDA A	RM 1,500 (USD 319)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 2	Male	54	FELDA A	RM 1,500 (USD 319)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project <i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 3	Female	35	FELDA A	RM 1,500 (USD 319)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 4	Male	51	FELDA A	RM 2,500 (USD 531)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 5	Male	45	FELDA A	RM 1,500 (USD 319)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 6	Male	33	FELDA A	RM 2,500 (USD 531)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 7	Male	48	FELDA A	RM 15,000 (USD 3,186)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project <i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 8	Female	55	FELDA A	RM 300 (USD 64)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 9	Female	50	FELDA A	RM 300 (USD 64)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 10	Female	56	FELDA A	RM 200 (USD 42)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 11	Female	60	FELDA A	RM 400 (USD 85)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 12	Female	40	FELDA A	RM 0 (USD 0)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project <i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 13	Female	56	FELDA A	RM 250 (USD 53)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 14	Female	42	FELDA A	RM 300 (USD 64)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project <i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 15	Female	48	FELDA A	RM 350 (USD 74)	<i>Chilli centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i>

Participant 16	Female	54	FELDA A	RM 400 (USD 85)	<i>merah</i> project Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 17	Female	49	FELDA A	RM 200 (USD 42)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 18	Female	64	FELDA A	RM 0 (USD 0)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 19	Female	54	FELDA A	RM 0 (USD 0)	<i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 20	Female	62	FELDA A	RM 200 (USD 42)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project/ <i>Jambu loceng</i> <i>merah</i> project
Participant 21	Female	66	FELDA A	RM 0 (USD 0)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 22	Male	50	FELDA A	RM 0 (USD 0)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 23	Male	31	FELDA B	RM 2,500 (USD 531)	Rabbit Farming
Participant 24	Male	49	FELDA B	RM 3,000 (USD 637)	Rabbit Farming
Participant 25	Male	69	FELDA B	RM 400 (USD 85)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 26	Female	68	FELDA B	RM 200 (USD 42)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 27	Male	71	FELDA B	RM 300 (USD 64)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 28	Male	71	FELDA B	RM 400 (USD 85)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 29	Female	64	FELDA B	RM 250 (USD 53)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 30	Male	69	FELDA B	RM 200 (USD 42)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 31	Male	75	FELDA B	RM 350 (USD 74)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 32	Male	69	FELDA B	RM 400 (USD 85)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 33	Male	56	FELDA B	RM 200 (USD 42)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 34	Male	73	FELDA B	RM 250 (USD 53)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project
Participant 35	Male	73	FELDA B	RM 300 (USD 64)	Chilli <i>centil</i> fertigation project

Note: RM1 MYR = USD 0.2124 (average rate for May 2024)

Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Besides, several FELDA officers were interviewed in this study. The primary purpose of interviewing them was to elicit ideas and knowledge about implementing the SDP at a local level. Table 4.2 shows the information on nine FELDA officers with pseudonyms to conceal their identities. All the officers were directly involved in implementing the SDP, including six male and three female officers. Their main tasks are monitoring, supporting, and guiding all the settlers participating in the SDP. The officers are responsible for ensuring that all participants are actively involved and making significant progress in the SDP. The officers must also provide support and guidance to ensure that the settler contributes effectively to the SDP.

Table 4.2  
Demographic Profile of the Participant (Settlers)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation
Officer 1	Female	41	Community Development Assistant (SDA)
Officer 2	Male	36	Supervisor (Plantation management)
Officer 3	Male	31	Supervisor (Plantation management)
Officer 4	Male	32	Deputy Director FELDA Wilayah Alor Setar
Officer 5	Male	35	Administrative assistant (administration and finance)
Officer 6	Male	37	Administrative assistant (administration and finance)
Officer 7	Male	34	Settlement manager
Officer 8	Female	43	Data project manager, Department of Agriculture and Livestock Development (JPPT)
Officer 9	Female	44	Deputy Director of Strategic Division, Department of Agriculture and Livestock Development (JPPT)

Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

#### **4.3 Settler' Understanding of Their Participation in the Settler Development Programme (SDP)**

This section describes the themes based on the first objective of this study, which is to examine the settlers' understanding their participation in the SDP. The main aim of this objective was to understand whether the settlers had their own understanding and knowledge of the SDP. From the findings, three themes emerged in describing the participation of the settlers in the SDP. For instance, government initiatives, income generation, and personal interest. Despite various settlers' involvement, it was discovered that they did not participate well. A detailed explanation is given in the next section.

### 4.3.1 Government Initiative

Four main sub-themes emerged in describing how settlers understand their participation in the SDP, as illustrated in Figure 4.1 below. These sub-themes, drawn from the findings, relate to various government initiatives, including the SDP project, the chilli *centil* fertigation project, the *jambu loceng merah* project, and rabbit farming.

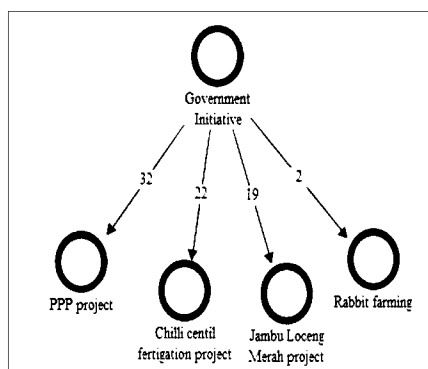


Figure 4.1 The sub-themes of the Government Initiative  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

This sub-theme explores how settlers understand their participation in the SDP in relation to government initiatives, particularly those introduced through FELDA. In the context of government, an initiative is a specific action or proposal taken by government officers or agencies to address a specific problem, achieve a specific goal, or implement a new policy or programme (Jain, 2024). The findings indicate that many settlers viewed their participation as a response to government direction, rather than an initiative that originated from their own planning or collective action. This understanding reveals the role of institutional influence in shaping their perception of participation.

The SDP, introduced in 2019, was designed to support settlers in generating additional income and strengthening national food security. However, participation in the programme did not begin simultaneously across all settlements. FELDA first conducted pilot projects to assess feasibility before expanding to other areas in phases. As a result, settlers from different locations joined the SDP in different years based on when the programme was approved for their settlement.

All settlers interviewed reported that they learned about the SDP directly from FELDA officers (22 out of 22 interviews in FELDA A and 13 out of 13 interviews in FELDA B). Their understanding of the programme was largely shaped by the information and guidance received during briefings or meetings. They did not describe the SDP as something they pursued independently or in collaboration with others, but

rather as a government-led initiative to which they responded. Several participants stated:

*I've been participating in the SDP since 2020 with jambu loceng merah project after the officer spread the information.*

*(Participant 7)*

*I've been involved in the chilli centil fertigation project since 2022 after meeting about SDP with the officer.*

*(Participant 20)*

*I have been involved in SDP since 2022 with the rabbit farming project after heard about SDP from the officer.*

*(Participant 24)*

These responses indicate that settlers' participation was closely linked to the presence and influence of FELDA officers. They perceived the officers as the main source of information and authority in relation to the SDP. The decision to participate appeared to be motivated less by a personal or community-driven interest, and more by a sense of obligation or trust in government planning.

This pattern suggests a top-down approach to participation. Settlers were not involved in the design or selection of the SDP projects but were instead informed of available opportunities and encouraged to take part. In both case study settlements, the projects implemented were determined by FELDA based on criteria such as land suitability, potential market value, and logistical feasibility.

For instance, FELDA A implemented two projects: the chilli *centil* fertigation and *jambu loceng merah* projects. Meanwhile, FELDA B introduced chilli *centil* fertigation and rabbit farming. These projects were planned at the institutional level, and settlers joined them after being briefed. The understanding among settlers was that participation was expected once a project was introduced and approved. One participant explained:

*After we were informed about the SDP during the officer's visit, we were told the chilli project was suitable for this area. So, we just joined.*

*(Participant 15)*

However, not all projects continued successfully. The chilli *centil* fertigation project, implemented in both settlements, was later terminated. According to FELDA Officer 3, this led to a decrease in the number of participants. FELDA Officer 5 added that the termination was due to issues such as contractors not collecting the produce and participants failing to meet income targets in which they are not earn even RM 500 for

this chilli *centil* fertigation project. While these operational details lie outside the main scope of this chapter, they are important in understanding how settlers perceived their role. The fact that settlers had no control over the start or end of projects reinforces the idea that participation was largely reactive, not proactive.

From these findings, it can be concluded that settlers understood their participation in the SDP primarily as a response to government-led initiatives. The direction and planning came from FELDA, while settlers responded by joining once a project was introduced in their area. Their role was more of a recipient than a co-creator, and participation was interpreted as cooperation with a government programme, rather than a form of empowerment or initiative.

### 4.3.2 Income Generation

The second theme that can be used to describe how settlers understand their participation in the SDP was income generation. Figure 4.2 shows that four sub-themes, such as increased income, non-monetary support, enhanced income, and training and technical support, have been found in the findings.

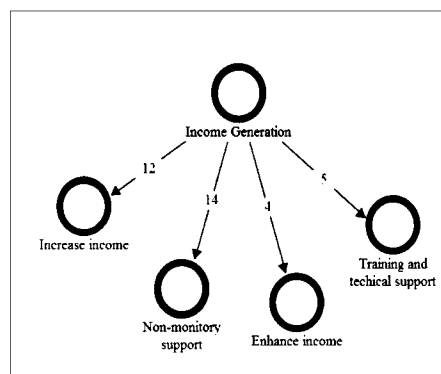


Figure 4.2 The sub-themes of the Income Generation  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Income generation refers to the process of generating income or revenue through various means, such as income from agricultural products, commercial trading of goods and services, and voluntary fundraising, including grants (Holden et al., 2019). Another perspective on income generation focuses on development and poverty alleviation, empowering individuals and communities through programmes that enhance their economic status and quality of life.

From the findings, the primary motivation for participants in the SDP was to increase their income. Most participants stated that they joined the programme to earn

additional revenue and improve their existing earnings. The responses from participants support this focus by the following remarks:

*I understood that SDP can increase additional income for my family.*

*(Participant 3)*

*This project can help me increase my side income.*

*(Participant 5)*

*I've been selling this jambu loceng merah for about two years, and it helps me to increase my side income.*

*(Participant 6)*

*With this project, I can generate more income.*

*(Participant 7)*

*My rabbit farming project's progress enables me to earn money without relying on rubber products. This project has the potential to generate additional income for me.*

*(Participant 23)*

*I believe that SDP can enhance income.*

*(Participant 28)*

While income generation was the main goal, it is important to consider the broader implications. A singular focus on financial outcomes may limit opportunities for settlers, preventing them from pursuing passions, hobbies, or interests that do not directly contribute to financial gain. Additionally, excessive pressure to achieve income targets could lead to burnout or frustration if financial expectations are not met. Balancing income generation with other aspects of personal satisfaction is crucial for long-term well-being.

Beyond direct income, 25 out of the 35 respondents reported benefiting in other ways, including cost savings, access to essential resources, and improved financial stability. FELDA played a significant role in supporting participants by providing resources, equipment, and technical knowledge, although the level of assistance varied by project. For example, in the rabbit farming project, FELDA fully supported participants by providing rabbits and cages, ensuring that they could start their businesses with minimal investment. This assistance significantly reduced financial strain and enabled them to focus on farm expansion, as the following highlights:

*FELDA provided the rabbits and cages, so I didn't have to spend a lot to start my farm.*

*(Participant 23)*

*With FELDA's support, I could focus on breeding and selling the rabbits instead of worrying about the setup costs.*

*(Participant 24)*

Similarly, in the chilli *centil* farming project, FELDA provided each participant with 240 chilli *centil* plants, along with essential farming equipment. This minimized financial risks and helped participants generate additional income while reducing operational expenses:

*FELDA provided 240 chilli centil plants, so I didn't have to buy seedlings myself.*

*(Participant 9)*

*I can sell chilli centil at the market every few days, which gives me a steady income.*

*(Participant 14)*

*Chilli farming is a good opportunity because it grows quickly, and with FELDA's support, I don't have to worry about initial costs.*

*(Participant 18)*

However, in the *jambu loceng merah* project, FELDA provided only three trees per participant, requiring them to invest more in expanding their cultivation. Despite this limitation, some participants successfully leveraged the opportunity to increase their income:

*I've been selling this jambu loceng merah for about two years, and it helps me to increase my side income.*

*(Participant 6)*

In addition to direct financial benefits, some participants indicated that SDP improved their financial stability by reducing dependency on a single income source. For example, a farmer who previously relied solely on rubber tapping mentioned that the programme allowed him to venture into rabbit farming, providing an alternative revenue stream that made his household income more secure, as the following participant states:

*Before this, I only depended on rubber, but now I have another way to earn money, which makes my financial situation more stable.*

(Participant 23)

Beyond non-monetary support, the programme also provided access to essential resources such as training, technical knowledge, and infrastructure support. The participants gained valuable skills that helped them manage their finances, reduce costs, and improve productivity. Below are the remarks:

*With the training provided, I learned how to manage my farming costs better and reduce waste.*

(Participant 12)

*The programme provided seedlings and fertilizers, which helped me save money on buying them myself.*

(Participant 17)

While all 35 participants prioritized financial benefits, the SDP also contributed to broader economic resilience by reducing financial burdens, providing resources, and ensuring long-term financial stability. FELDA's provision of farming materials such as rabbits, cages, chilli *centil* plants, and equipment significantly lowered start-up costs, making it easier for participants to establish their businesses. Beyond direct income generation, the programme played a crucial role in fostering long-term financial security and business sustainability, demonstrating its impact on economic empowerment.

While many participants found the programme useful, not all experiences were positive. Some expressed frustration when their expectations were unmet often due to external factors such as crop failure, inconsistent market access, or limited support. In these cases, the perceived opportunity came with uncertainty.

*I planted the chilli, but not all of them survived. I was a bit disappointed because I hoped for better results.*

(Participant 15)

*Sometimes, even with support, it's still hard. I expected more income, but it's not always what we imagine.*

(Participant 21)

These remarks reveal that income generation, while promising in theory, also involved significant emotional and practical challenges. 29 out of 35 participants (about 83%) explained that “*I joined thinking it would help a lot financially, but after all the hard work, the profit is not that much*”.

For these individuals, the pressure to succeed economically created stress and dissatisfaction, especially when outcomes were beyond their control. These experiences

highlight that while the programme focused heavily on financial improvement, its structure did not always account for the uncertainties participants faced.

In summary, the settlers tended to interpret their participation in the SDP primarily through a financial lens. Although they appreciated support such as reduced costs, technical input, and training, they understood these benefits mainly in terms of income potential. However, the presence of frustration among some participants shows that expectations were not always met. This suggests that while the SDP encouraged income generation, it also needed to better accommodate participants' varying capacities and the external constraints they encountered. Their interpretation of the programme remained relatively narrow, focusing more on short-term economic gains than on the broader aims of long-term sustainability and community development.

### 4.3.3 Personal Interest

The personal interest reveals four sub-themes. From the findings, Figure 4.3 illustrates the emergence of four sub-themes, including passion, hobbies, position, and peer influence, which could potentially shape the settler's personal interest in participating.

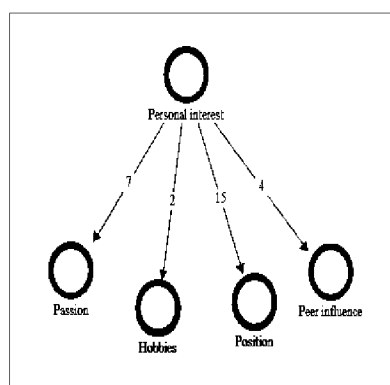


Figure 4.3 The sub-themes of the Personal Interest  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Personal interest refers to the specific things or activities an individual pays attention to and focuses on (Zhao et al., 2019). Besides, demographic characteristics and personality traits could influence a person's interest. A person may have different interests that cover a wide range of activities and passions. These include hobbies, learning new things, goals, and personal growth. In addition, individuals are motivated by what they find enjoyable and fascinating, among other things. Personal interests significantly influence participant behaviour and decisions. Below are the remarks made by the participant:

*I was the second generation of FELDA and work as a farmer. I believe that farming is my passion and I voluntarily participate in the SDP. Before joining SDP, I had previously planted cash crops such as vegetables and fruit.*

*(Participant 4)*

*Planting has been my hobby since I was a housewife, I took part in the 2022 chilli centil fertigation project.*

*(Participant 3)*

The preceding statement exemplifies how personal interests, particularly passion and hobbies, influenced their participation in the SDP. Individuals are more likely to participate actively and meaningfully when their interests and hobbies coincide with their goals. When settlers pursued their passions and hobbies, they positively contributed to SDP.

However, some of the participants disclosed that their participation was due to another reason, such as the position they held. 15 participants (43%) reported that their involvement was motivated by the positions they held within the settlement rather than by personal interest. Many felt obligated to participate to inspire or influence others, even when they had limited time or personal motivation. The participants responded as follows:

*I also one of the members of Gerakan Persatuan Wanita (GPW) who receive two jambu loceng merah tree and I need to participate because I was the block chief. Every block chief needs to participate in the SDP to influence other even though the individual did not have interest to participate on it.*

*(Participant 9)*

*As a chairwoman in GPW, I need to participate in SDP to inspire other settlers, but I don't have free time to manage this project.*

*(Participant 12)*

*I was the members of GPW group, and I got two jambu loceng merah tree from FELDA to inspire other settlers to participate in SDP. The only person who having a position will receive this tree.*

*(Participant 14)*

*I need to participate because I was the Chairman of this settlement.*

*(Participant 25)*

The above statements demonstrate that the leaders' personal interests and position do not constitute real participation, referring to situations in which individuals hold

influential positions but are not actively involved in or contributing to the programme. Besides, nominal participation occurs when someone in a programme or organisation holds a position of leadership or authority but does not actively participate or significantly contribute to the programme. In this study, their position or title may imply that they are involved. However, they are not actively participating in or advancing the programme's objectives. Therefore, encouraging real participation entails more than just holding a position or title. It also entails actively participating in the organization's goals and seeing them through to completion through serious involvement and meaningful contributions. Real participation occurs when a person participates in a programme voluntarily and without being forced to do so.

In addition to personal interest and position, peer influence also plays a role in motivating participation. Peer influences can be described when someone does something because they feel accepted by others. The findings revealed that they merely participated to follow others and derive pleasure from doing so, not because they were interested in expressing their ideas or making decisions. Some participants participated in the SDP not out of personal interest but to follow friends or fulfil a desire for socialization. This "follower" dynamic reflects a form of passive participation, where involvement is shaped by social connections rather than individual motivation. For example, several participants admitted that their participation was driven by a desire to socialize or make friends, leading to limited independent contributions to the programme. The following statement reinforced this:

*My friends ask me to participate in SDP. I just agreed with her decision.*

*(Participant 11)*

*I participate in SDP because I want to make friends with other people.*

*(Participant 13)*

*I just follow others who are involved in the SDP.*

*(Participant 31)*

These statements illustrate how peer influence can sometimes lead individuals to participate superficially, with the primary motivation being social acceptance or friendship rather than personal interest in the activity itself. This reliance on peer guidance or social motivation often limits the individual's willingness to engage deeply or make independent contributions. Consequently, social pressure may lead to nominal or passive involvement without meaningful input, as participants feel content following the direction set by others rather than actively contributing.

#### 4.4 The Implementation of the Settler Development Programme (SDP) at a Local Level

This section explains the implementation of the SDP at the local level to answer the second research objective, which is to explain the implementation of the SDP at the local level. It is crucial to understand how the federal, state, and local officers implement and manage the implementation of the SDP at a local level. From the findings, four themes emerged, such as centralised decision-making, asymmetric information, one-way communication, and favouritism, which portray the implementation of the SDP at a local level.

##### 4.4.1 Centralized Decision-Making

Figure 4.4 presents the three sub-themes that emerged from the centralised decision-making. This sub-theme has been found, such as the SDP programme, stopped projects, and decisions made by officers.

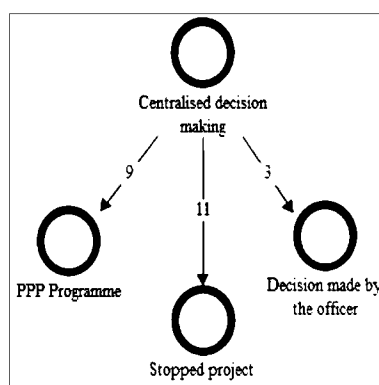


Figure 4.4 The sub-themes of the Centralised Decision-Making  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Centralised decision-making was the first theme found from this study. Numerous studies have investigated centralised decision-making, a popular concept, and policymakers have used it to promote development. According to Khalilov (2023), centralised decision-making involves a top-down process where power is delegated to the management and follows a chain of command. The top-down approach involves a hierarchical approach, and cascaded top-down management makes all the decisions and directives and cascades them down to lower levels (Li, 2023). Governmental institutions have used the commendable approach of centralised decision-making. Centralised decision-making is a commendable approach that has been used in governmental institutions, and in this case, is FELDA.

From the findings, FELDA has decided on the procedures and developed the strategies of the SDP project and implemented them downwards. The participants provided the following responses:

*SDP is a best programme that was launched to help settler to enhance their income in which the settler can manage the project by own.*

*(Officer 7, FELDA officer)*

*SDP want to help the first and second generation of FELDA to improve their well-being.*

*(Officer 8, FELDA Officer)*

*SDP is an initiative from government to help settler.*

*(Officer 9, FELDA Officer)*

The interview with all 9 officers revealed that the SDP had been designed to help settlers improve their income. As part of this initiative, FELDA adopted a centralised decision-making approach, where all procedures and implementation strategies were determined by top management, ensuring a structured but rigid framework for settler participation. This approach was created to be straightforward and effective because it does not involve many people to decide. To achieve a high level of control and efficiency, centralisation aims to concentrate authority and power in a single node or entity (Khalilov, 2023). However, this approach was not considered the best approach when all decisions were bound to be biased because power lay with the implementer rather than the people, and gave the settler limited autonomy. Below is the insight offered by the participant:

*Setter who participates need to follow the decision that has been made by the management in which they cannot choose other SDP project that not be introduced in their settlement.*

*(Participant 2)*

This statement revealed that centralised decision-making deprives the settler of the ability to choose what they want to do and be. It gives the settlers limited autonomy because it restricts their choices. The settler needs to agree with the decision that has been made by the FELDA if they want to participate in the SDP project. The lack of decision-making authority of settlers has resulted in their discouragement, while FELDA, instead of taking responsibility, solely blames the settlers for any failures in participation. Moreover, the settlers did not have the power to deny all the decisions that had been made by them. This statement was supported:

*All the agricultural produce, like chilli, needs to be collected by the contractor. The settler does not have authority to sell it on his own.*

*(Officer 6, FELDA officer)*

The management has set all the chilli prices, even though they are incredibly cheap. In addition, the settlers did not have the power to sell on their own due to centralized decision-making that had been made by the FELDA officers. On the other hand, the termination of the chilli *centil* fertigation project due to the failure of the settler to achieve the target of the SDP. FELDA claims that many participants failed to achieve the FELDA target or goal. This statement was supported by:

*FELDA A and FELDA B did not exceed RM 500 for the chilli centil fertigation projects.*

*(Officer 3, FELDA officer)*

*FELDA terminated all chilli centil fertigation projects across all settlements in 2022. Since then, there have been no further initiatives to continue the chilli centil fertigation project.*

*(Officer 8, FELDA officer)*

As a result, both the top management and the contractor decided to terminate the chilli *centil* fertigation project without consulting the settlers. Consequently, the settlers were compelled to comply with the decision made by the top management. Indeed, the FELDA headquarters decided to centralize the termination of the chilli *centil* fertigation project across all settlements. Overall, the results demonstrate that centralising decision-making in FELDA affects the SDP project. By imposing strict procedures and restricting settlers' autonomy, this top-down approach ignored local needs and their input. Settlers became frustrated with having to follow management's instructions. In the end, the rigid centralisation inhibited flexibility, leading to the project's failure and the settlers' dissatisfaction.

#### **4.4.2 Information Asymmetry**

The second identified theme is information asymmetry. Information asymmetry occurs when one party has more or better information than the other (Akerlof, 1970). The concept of information asymmetry is frequently used in policy research (Anderson, 2015). This imbalance has the potential to have a significant impact on development programmes, including implementation, monitoring, and empowerment processes.

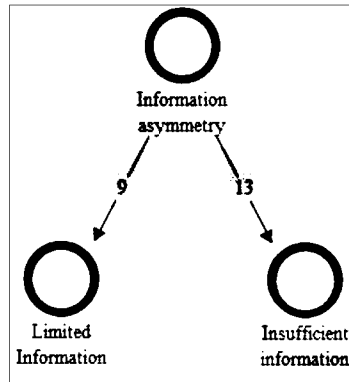


Figure 5 The sub-themes of the Information Asymmetry  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Figure 4.5 depicts the sub-themes of information asymmetry, such as limited information and insufficient information. The findings show that in this study, FELDA officers knew more about the SDP programme than the settlers. Despite this, the officers claimed to have provided adequate information to the settlers. This claim is reflected in the responses of the participants, who stated:

*The officer has shared all the information about implementing SDP in the WhatsApp group.*

*(Officer 1, FELDA officer)*

*The officer has set a meeting with all the settler to share the information about the SDP.*

*(Officer 2, FELDA officer)*

*The officer has shared the information about the SDP with all the settlers, and those who are interested in joining the SDP can fill-out the form.*

*(Officer 4, FELDA officer)*

Based on the above statements, the FELDA officer stated that they supplied the necessary information to all settlers who wanted to engage in SDP. They also stressed the need for programme directors to be particular about the information that they give out regarding the programme in question. Moreover, they argued that they kept updating and sharing information through the WhatsApp group of the settler who participate in the SDP. It is an open, ongoing communication channel that provides the ability to provide settlers with regular updates, important clarifications, or questions being asked to ensure that the settlers stay active and updated during the entire course of the programme.

However, there was a contrasting perspective from the FELDA settlers, who stated that the FELDA officers did not provide detailed information about the SDP. The

settler claimed that the officer did not have transparency in information sharing. For instance,

*FELDA provided limited information about the SDP which only explain and focus on its potential to increase our income rather than providing specific guidance on how to manage the project successfully.*

*(Participant 6)*

*FELDA did not properly discuss the SDP with us during the meeting.*

*(Participant 1)*

Based on the responses above, the FELDA officer's information is insufficient for the participant. The primary goal appears to be generating revenue rather than providing guidance and support for the SDP project. 83% of the participants have expressed confusion about the SDP, viewing their participation as a lack of real empowerment. Due to a lack of comprehensive information, the participants is unsure about the programme's specific details, such as the proper methods for project management, overcoming obstacles, and ensuring long-term viability. Additionally, there appears to be a disconnect between the settlers' expectations and FELDA's focus, which prioritises generating income over promoting comprehensive empowerment. As such, information asymmetry may limit the settler's ability to maximise the benefits of the SDP, potentially resulting in missed opportunities for sustainable development and community empowerment.

#### 4.4.3 One- Way Communication

The next theme is one-way communication. Figure 4.6 illustrates six sub-themes, such as hierarchical communication, ineffective communication, lack of engagement, poor communication, over-reliance on contractors, and ineffective digital platforms.

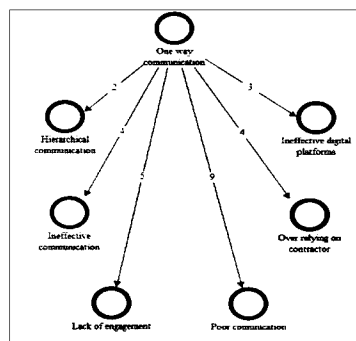


Figure 6 The sub-themes of the One-Way Communication  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

One-way communication occurs when information flows in a single direction, from sender to receiver, without opportunities for feedback, discussion, or interaction. This study found that such communication patterns were prevalent in the SDP, where FELDA officers, contractors, and settlers engaged within a rigid, hierarchical system that limited settlers' participation and access to necessary support. The findings highlighted several key aspects of this one-way communication, particularly its impact on decision-making, transparency, and settler engagement.

A defining characteristic of one-way communication in the SDP was its hierarchical structure, where information flowed strictly from FELDA officers and contractors to settlers, without opportunities for feedback. The officers provided instructions but did not engage in discussions, creating a power imbalance that left settlers feeling excluded. Instead of actively overseeing the project, FELDA officers relied entirely on the contractor, further distancing themselves from settlers. Below is the FELDA officer's response:

*The contractor has complete control over the project and makes all the decisions without consulting us. They handle everything. I just observers.*

*(Officer 1, FELDA officer)*

*The contractor handles everything, from rack installation to seminars and product collection. We, as officers, are merely observers.*

*(Officer 7, FELDA officer)*

This situation highlights a significant flaw in the communication and management structure of the project. The statements from the FELDA officers indicate that they had no real authority or involvement in the project's execution. Instead of acting as facilitators who bridge the gap between settlers and project implementers, the officers were relegated to a passive role, merely watching the contractor take full control. By allowing the contractor to manage everything without oversight, the officers unintentionally distanced themselves from the settlers, further weakening the settlers' ability to engage with the project. The hierarchical structure meant that information flowed in only one direction from the contractor to the settlers without opportunities for feedback or dialogue. This limited transparency and stripped settlers of the chance to voice their concerns, suggest improvements, or gain a clear understanding of the project's progress.

The FELDA officers' lack of decision-making power also meant that when settlers faced challenges, they had nowhere to turn for assistance. The officers were

unable to intervene effectively, leaving settlers feeling abandoned and powerless. This reinforced the perception that the project was imposed on them rather than being a collaborative effort aimed at improving their livelihoods. Ultimately, this rigid and ineffective communication structure hindered the success of the project. Without active engagement from officers and open channels of communication, settlers were left as mere recipients of decisions made by an external party, reducing their ability to contribute to or benefit from the initiative.

Another major issue was the absence of engagement and feedback mechanisms. Settlers were not given opportunities to provide input or ask questions, leaving them feeling powerless and unheard. Many participants expressed frustration at their exclusion from decision-making, stating that they were only informed about project decisions after they had already been made, as seen in the following feedback:

*We were never consulted about the project's progress. Everything was decided for us. If we had been informed earlier, maybe we could have done something.*

*(Participant 15)*

*Whenever we asked questions, they just told us to follow the contractor's instructions. It felt like we had no voice in our own project.*

*(Participant 35)*

These responses highlight how settlers were denied agency in a programme that directly affected their livelihoods. Without engagement, they could not raise concerns, propose solutions, or participate in decision-making, leading to frustration and disengagement.

One of the most significant flaws in communication was the complete delegation of responsibility to the contractor. Instead of actively monitoring and guiding the project, FELDA officers relied entirely on the contractor, limiting their ability to support settlers effectively. This excessive reliance created a communication bottleneck, where the officers had no real authority, and settlers were left without a voice in decisions that directly impacted them.

The chilli *centil* fertigation project was entirely managed by the contractor, including the organization of all related seminars. As FELDA officer (Officer 1) noted, *The chilli centil fertigation project has been managed entirely by the contractor. All seminars related to it are also organized by them.*

*(Officer 1, FELDA officer)*

Rather than taking responsibility for oversight, the officers allowed the contractor to dictate the project's direction, reducing their ability to address settlers' challenges or ensure its success. Instead of supervising or engaging in problem-solving, they remained passive, making them ineffective in assisting settlers when issues arose. The issue became even more apparent when the contractor suddenly stopped the project without providing a clear reason. According to another FELDA officer (Officer 5), "*The contractor just said that all decisions were made by top management*". This statement underscores the power imbalance, where the officers willingly distanced themselves from any authority to intervene or offer settlers clarity. By choosing not to take an oversight role, they further weakened their position, leaving settlers with no clear support system.

As a result, more than half of the settlers (29 out of 35 participants) were left in confusion and frustration. Without direct communication or timely updates, they had no way to seek accountability or receive guidance. Participant 8 expressed their uncertainty: "*The project was suddenly stopped, and we were not informed why. The officer just told us to wait, but no follow-up was given*". Similarly, Participant 18 voiced their frustration: "*I kept asking about the future of the project, but nobody gave a clear answer. We were just told to wait*". These responses highlight the settlers' sense of powerlessness due to the lack of transparency.

The lack of coordination became particularly problematic when the project was abruptly terminated. The FELDA Officers, having chosen not to be actively involved in decision-making, had no answers when settlers sought clarification. This absence of transparency led to uncertainty and distrust, preventing settlers from making informed decisions about their livelihoods.

This breakdown in accountability was further compounded by ineffective communication methods. Not only were FELDA officers disengaged from project oversight, but their approach to communicating with settlers also reinforced one-way interactions. Rather than fostering meaningful dialogue, the officers relied on digital platforms like WhatsApp to provide updates, an approach that lacked interactivity and further isolated settlers from decision-making.

Although digital communication can be effective, in this case, it functioned merely as a broadcasting tool rather than an interactive platform. FELDA Officer 1 explained, "*I'm keeping track of all the participants using mobile applications like WhatsApp*". This statement indicates that the primary use of digital platforms was to

send updates rather than facilitate discussions, limiting settlers' ability to engage meaningfully.

In these cases, settlers needed more than just one-way messages. They required a space to ask questions and receive timely feedback. 75% of participants highlighted this issue, stating, “*We got messages about the project, but when we had questions, we didn’t always get answer*”. This response underscores the lack of interaction, where messages were delivered without an open channel for settlers to seek clarification. Consequently, many settlers felt unheard and uninformed, reinforcing the communication barriers that already existed within the project.

The study highlights that one-way communication in the SDP significantly hindered its success. Overall, hierarchical communication, ineffective communication, lack of engagement, poor communication, over-reliance on the contractor, and ineffective digital platforms severely impacted the project's effectiveness. These limitations led to frustration, confusion, and disengagement among settlers, ultimately reducing their ability to benefit from the programme.

#### 4.4.4 Favouritism

The last theme is favouritism. Favouritism is the act of showing unfair and biased treatment towards someone (Tytko et al., 2020). Besides, the benefits and privileges are granted to the relatives or friends without looking at their professional value. Figure 4.7 shows three sub-themes related to favouritism, such as *Gerakan Persatuan Wanita* (GPW) members, older participants, and young participants.

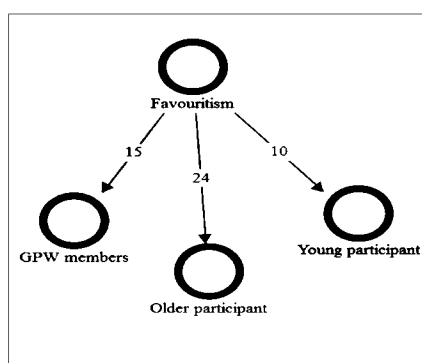


Figure 7 The sub-themes of the Favouritism  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

From the findings, this study revealed that many of the settlers participated in the SDP due to favouritism. Various forms of favouritism were identified, including cronyism, patronage, and age bias. The interview findings indicated that FELDA

officers favoured certain individuals when distributing resources. For instance, the officers selectively provided the *jambu loceng merah* tree to the chief block leaders, expecting them to influence others to participate. This selective approach was seen as unfair to other settlers. The participants disclosed as follows:

*Every chief block received one jambu loceng merah tree from the politician, and it is not fair to me, as I do not hold any position. As a participant without a position, I had to buy my own tree if I wanted to plant more.*

*(Participant 11)*

*I didn't get one because I don't hold any position. FELDA only chose settlers with positions to receive the jambu loceng merah tree from the politician, while the rest of us had to buy our own if we wanted to plant more trees. It's not fair because everyone should have the same opportunity, even if it's just one.*

*(Participant 16)*

This statement highlights that the FELDA officer displayed favouritism by prioritizing settlers with leadership positions over others. 15 out of 35 participants held a position in the settlement. This situation aligns with cronyism, where benefits are granted based on personal connections rather than merit. Such favouritism created an unfair environment, leading to negative perceptions of the officers among settlers.

Beyond cronyism, the study also found evidence of patronage, where the FELDA officers favoured individuals who had already achieved success rather than supporting those who were still struggling. This unequal treatment created a situation where only a select group of settlers continued to receive benefits, while others who needed support the most were left behind. Instead of assisting new or struggling participants in building their capacity, the officers prioritized settlers with proven track records, reinforcing an unfair cycle where established individuals kept receiving additional opportunities and resources. The participants illustrated this issue:

*I have over 300 jambu loceng merah trees and was the first settler to plant them in 2007. In 2020, FELDA acknowledged the tree's potential for SDP projects. Besides, FELDA offered me reserved land to plant more trees and asked me to care for their trees. The officers always accompany me, and they even appointed me as a 'sifu.*

*(Participant 7)*

This statement highlighted how the FELDA officers selectively provided opportunities to those who had already succeeded in their agricultural ventures. Rather than ensuring an equitable distribution of support, they granted additional privileges to settlers who had already gained a strong foothold in the programme. The participant not only received extra land and resources but was also recognized as a mentor, further reinforcing their privileged status within the SDP initiative. While it was reasonable to acknowledge and utilize experienced settlers as mentors, the issue arose when such preferential treatment came at the expense of newer or less fortunate participants.

Instead of using the SDP initiative to uplift struggling settlers, the FELDA officers continued to focus on those who were already well-established, making it even harder for newcomers to catch up. Another participant voiced frustration over this selective approach to guidance and monitoring:

*The officers are biased, they only guide participants who have already succeeded in the project. Those of us who do not have many trees are neither observed nor monitored by them.*

*(Participant 1)*

This response reflected the deep-seated dissatisfaction among settlers who felt excluded from the programme's benefits. It suggested that the FELDA officers were more interested in supporting those who had already demonstrated success rather than nurturing those who were still trying to establish themselves. Such favouritism resulted in limited access to resources, mentorship, and technical support for the less experienced settlers, ultimately discouraging them from actively participating in the programme.

By choosing to prioritize a select group of successful settlers, the FELDA officers inadvertently created barriers for others to thrive within the SDP programme. This favouritism widened the gap between successful and struggling participants and fostered a sense of frustration and resentment among those who were left out. The lack of equal access to resources and mentorship weakened the overall effectiveness of the programme, as it failed to empower all settlers equally. Instead of being an inclusive initiative that encouraged broad participation, the SDP programme became an exclusive opportunity that primarily benefited those who were already in advantageous positions.

Thus, the FELDA officers' approach to patronage significantly undermined the goal of the SDP initiative, as it did not create a level playing field for all settlers. To maximize the impact of the programme, FELDA needed to ensure that resources,

training, and guidance were distributed fairly, rather than reinforcing existing disparities. Only through equitable access and inclusive participation could the SDP initiative truly succeed in improving the livelihoods of all settlers.

Beyond favouritism, this study also found evidence of prejudice and discrimination, particularly ageism, where the FELDA officers favoured younger participants over older settlers when providing guidance and support. 24 participants were older adults who struggled with the technology used in SDP projects. Ageism, a form of discrimination based on age, resulted in younger participants receiving more assistance, as FELDA officers perceived them to be more adaptable and capable of handling modern agricultural techniques. The following statements illustrate this issue:

*I did not understand the seminar that the contractor conducted to explain the project because they only showed slides without practical demonstrations. As a senior citizen, I found it difficult to understand.*

*(Participant 32)*

*The officers were more likely to assist younger participants because they were more knowledgeable about the technology used in the SDP.*

*(Participant 34)*

Approximately 68% of participants highlighted that FELDA officers assumed older settlers were less capable of adapting to new technology, leading to unequal treatment. Instead of offering additional guidance or tailored support to older settlers who might need more hands-on training, the officers chose to focus on younger participants, reinforcing the perception that only a specific age group could succeed in the programme.

As a result, older settlers faced significant barriers to full participation in the SDP initiative. Many felt left out and struggled to keep up with programme requirements due to a lack of guidance and technical support. The failure to accommodate older participants discouraged their involvement and weakened the inclusivity of the programme. While technology and modernization played a crucial role in SDP projects, excluding older settlers from receiving adequate assistance undermined the programme's overall effectiveness.

Moreover, this form of discrimination created an unfair advantage for younger participants, who gained more access to training, resources, and mentorship. Older settlers, despite their extensive experience in traditional agricultural practices, were often overlooked simply because they were perceived as being less adaptable to change.

This further widened the gap between different generations within the programme, fostering resentment and frustration among older participants who felt that they were not given equal opportunities to thrive.

#### 4.5 The Empowerment of the Settler Development Programme (SDP) in Improving Their Well-Being

This section focuses on the third research objective, which is to investigate whether SDP empowers the settlers in improving their well-being. In explaining the empowerment of the settlers in the SDP, the findings were generated based on the interviews with both settlers and FELDA officers. Furthermore, it would also be integrated with the capability approach model. The findings revealed several themes that characterised the extent of settlers’ empowerment, such as a lack of capability to act, power dominance by the FELDA officers, and limited information. These factors have limited the empowerment of settlers in the SDP.

##### 4.5.1 Lack of Capability to Act

From the findings, the first theme describes that there was a disempowerment of the settler in which they lacked the capability to act. Figure 4.8 shows the sub-themes associated with a lack of ability to act, which include poor health conditions, wild animals, unsuitable land, and no free time. These factors contributed to the settlers’ inability to participate effectively in the development programmes.

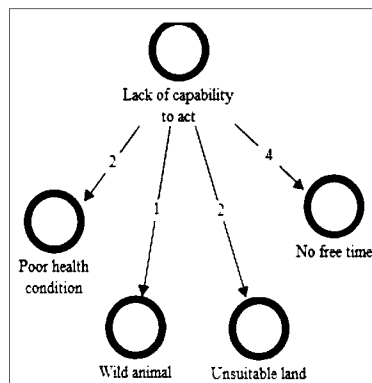


Figure 8 The sub-themes of Lack of Capability to Act  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

The lack of ability to act refers to a situation in which a person participates in a programme but faces constraints that limit their capacity to engage effectively. In this study, although settlers were involved in the SDP, many were unable to fully participate or benefit due to several limiting factors. Empowerment and participation are essential

to making informed decisions and achieving positive outcomes, yet these participants encountered challenges that reduced their capabilities.

From the interviews conducted, it was found that participants had varying experiences with empowerment within the SDP. While they were aware and involved, many faced significant barriers that hindered their ability to act meaningfully in the programme. Awareness alone was not sufficient, as their actions were constrained by structural and personal limitations.

One key barrier was the lack of suitable land. 2 out of 35 participants reported that unsuitable land limited their ability to implement SDP projects effectively. For example:

*I participate in the SDP, but the condition of the land is not really suitable because the chilli centil fertigation project rack is too close to my neighbour's house, and they became upset, saying that the chemicals or pesticides might enter their home.*

*(Participant 22)*

Another participant described similar environmental challenges that affected their involvement. Despite planting bell guava trees as part of the SDP, unsuitable sloped terrain, swampy conditions, and constant disturbances from wild animals such as boars and monkeys led to crop damage and a lack of yield. The participant reported:

*I participate in the SDP and planted Jambu Loceng Merah trees, but the land near my house is not suitable because it's on a slope and behind my house there's a swamp. Wild boars and monkeys often come and destroy the plants. FELDA gave me three trees, but now only one is left. I'm still participating, but there's no yield at all.*

*(Participant 19)*

These statements demonstrate that although participants were actively engaged in the SDP, land-related issues such as steep terrain, proximity to neighbours, and exposure to environmental risks created tension and limited their ability to implement projects successfully. Environmental constraints including community concerns about pesticide use and threats from wildlife reduced participants' real capabilities to act effectively.

Health-related limitations were also significant. Many settlers were older adults, and their declining physical health impacted their ability to sustain active participation in the programme. For example:

*I still participate in the SDP, but after a few months of joining, my health condition worsened, and I could no longer concentrate on the project.*

*(Participant 21)*

This statement illustrates that even though the participant initially joined and engaged with the programme, worsening health became a barrier to continued involvement. It highlights how physical well-being can significantly affect an individual's capacity to participate meaningfully in development initiatives. In the context of the capability approach, health constraints reduce functional capabilities and, consequently, the empowerment potential of such programmes.

Time constraints also emerged as a major challenge. 4 participants reported difficulties in balancing programme activities with their existing livelihood responsibilities. For example:

*I joined the SDP because I know it can help improve my living condition, but I don't have enough time to manage the project properly because I have to make kuih every day to earn a living.*

*(Participant 30)*

This statement reflects the tension between participation in empowerment programmes and the demands of daily survival. Although the participant was involved in the SDP, their economic obligation to produce and sell food items consumed the time and energy needed for full commitment to the programme. In summary, while participants were enrolled in and aware of the SDP, their ability to act and benefit meaningfully from the programme was constrained by unsuitable land, environmental threats, poor health, and limited time. According to the capability approach, these factors significantly limit an individual's real freedom to achieve the outcomes they value. Merely being part of a programme does not guarantee empowerment if individuals lack the necessary conditions and resources to transform participation into actual benefits.

#### **4.5.2 Power Dominance by Public Officers**

The second theme highlights the disempowerment of settlers due to the power dominance by FELDA officers. Figure 4.9 shows the sub-themes linked to power dominance by the FELDA officer, such as advice from officers and decision-making by the officer.

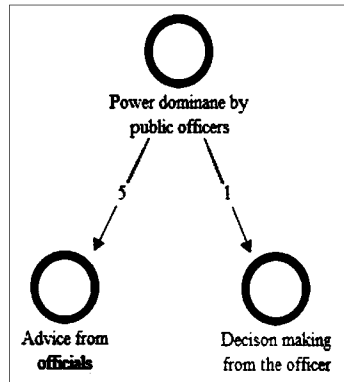


Figure 9 The sub-themes of the Power Dominance by FELDA Officers  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Power dominance describes a situation in which one person or group has significant control over others, including the decision-making process. The FELDA officers hold the authority to make decisions, and the people are required to obey and adhere to these decisions. From the findings, this power dominance from the officers has prevented the settlers from having the right to protest. In this situation, all the decisions were made by the officers, not the settler. Below is the remark:

*The officer helps me to find a distributor and he always frequently accompanies me, and I always follow officer plan.*

*(Participant 6)*

From the statement above, it can be illustrated that the participant did not have the power to decide on their own. All the decisions were made by the FELDA officers, who just helped the SDP participants to make good decisions, but surprisingly, only for those they favoured. Due to that, there was no empowerment for the settlers themselves in the decision-making process. The empowerment of the settlers can be seen when they are involved in the whole process of participation, but from the findings, there was no participation, let alone empowerment, among the settlers in the SDP. It was because, to be considered empowered, the settlers must be able to plan and make decisions on their development affairs. For instance, the settler should be able to plan and decide on their own. However, the findings showed that the settlers cannot survive without assistance from the FELDA officers. Here is what the participants shared:

*If we let them decide on their own, there will be no progress after that.*

*(Officer 2, FELDA officer)*

*Participant cannot survive if we let them do their own project.*

*(Officer 7, FELDA officer)*

The statement suggests that the FELDA officers hold the belief that continuous assistance will empower the SDP participants. However, if the officers control the participants' decisions, this dependence could be a manifestation of power dominance, where the officers exert control over the decision, thereby limiting the participants' potential for empowerment within the SDP. Hence, social factors can impede individual capabilities through the manipulation of power relations.

### 4.5.3 Limited Information

Another theme identified is limited information, as shown in Figure 4.10. The three sub-themes related to this are joining a seminar, less exposure, and no seminar. Despite the SDP's goal to develop and enhance settlers' confidence, skills, and knowledge, these sub-themes indicate significant gaps in information and learning opportunities.

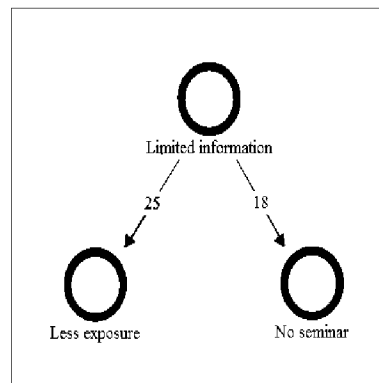


Figure 4.10 The sub-themes of the Limited Information  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

Kolb (1984) argued that individuals learn through active experimentation and concrete experiences, allowing them to utilize their knowledge and explore opportunities within programmes. Similarly, Pérez-Rivas et al. (2023) noted that learning emerges from individuals' active involvement in solving problems, with theory reinforcing practical engagement. In line with this view, individuals could learn by doing, enabling them to navigate and benefit from programme participation. Limited information pertains to a scenario where an individual lacks comprehensive knowledge on a particular subject or matter. There are several features that can explain limited information, such as less exposure. Originally, the SDP was initiated by the government. All information related to the programme belongs to the government. Thus, to ensure the SDP can be implemented effectively, the information related to the programme should be disseminated to the settlers. From the findings with FELDA

officers, they claimed that every settler had received enough knowledge and skill on the SDP. The comments expressed by the officers are as follows:

*Every of them are required to joining the seminar when they participate in chilli centil fertigation project.*

*(Officer 1, FELDA officer)*

*Every participant who participates in chilli centil fertigation project and rabbit farming are required to joining the seminar that has been managed by the contractor.*

*(Officer3, FELDA officer)*

This statement illustrates that the FELDA officers and the contractor have arranged the seminar for the settlers. The officers' claims that this seminar will provide participants with knowledge and skills that can enhance their capabilities in managing the SDP. However, the official's statements differed significantly from those of the settlers. From the findings, the research revealed that not all project has a seminar before they start. The officers did not organize the seminar for the participants when they did the project replacement in FELDA A. The failure to plan the seminar results in the participant having limited knowledge to manage the project. In addition, the limited information regarding the project leads participants to make erroneous decisions, diminishes the yield of the *jambu loceng merah*, and hampers their effectiveness in managing the SDP. The statements from the participants are as follows:

*When I participated in the chilli centil fertigation project, there are seminars that have been consulted by the contractor, but after the FELDA replaces the jambu loceng merah tree, there are no seminars or programmes on it. Lack of exposure from FELDA makes me frustrated and the no one guided me, including the person who has been appointed as sifu.*

*(Participant 8)*

*Since I participated in the SDP, FELDA lacks exposure to the knowledge on how to take care of the jambu loceng merah. They just expect that the sifu will help us, but the sifu is also busy managing their own project, and they are not responsible for the project.*

*(Participant 10)*

*Since I participated in the SDP, there were no seminars or programmes. The officer tells us that, if we have any problems, we can consult with the person who has been appointed, but the person is also busy on the project.*

(Participant 17)

The preceding statement demonstrated that most of the participants get less exposure from the FELDA officers in managing the SDP. Out of 35 settlers, 18 reported that there were no seminars or programs to help them improve their knowledge and skills for the *Jambu Loceng Merah project*. It also showed how the officers take the project for granted and fail to organise a seminar for the settlers due to a variety of factors, including assumptions of knowledge and historical practice. As highlighted by FELDA Officer 1, she stated that *jambu loceng merah is a familiar tree in this settlement, and several settlers have already cultivated it*. Due to that, the officer assumed that all the participant knows how to manage the project, whereas all participants have limited knowledge about that. Assuming without monitoring makes the settler less exposed to the project. Therefore, less exposure from the officer hampered the settlers' ability to participate and be empowered to improve their well-being, which was influenced by the social factor.

Hence, based on the findings, it can be concluded that the SDP does not fully empower the settler who participates in the programme, even though some of the participants are from the *Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Rancangan* (JKKR) Committee and GPW Committee. This indicates that the position of the settler cannot encourage them to fully participate and be empowered. The programme appears to be ineffective in harnessing the leadership potential of these committees, and it also fails to provide the necessary resources or opportunities for settlers to effectively carry out their roles when they participate in the SDP. Overall, the SDP fails to achieve its goals of empowering the settlers. The fact that it reveals a lack of participation and no empowerment of the settlers in improving their well-being. It also emphasises that improper implementation by FELDA officers undermines the SDP's effectiveness, contributing to the failure to empower settlers. This mismanagement not only undermines the programme's intended outcomes but also erodes participants' trust and confidence, limiting their engagement and development.

Overall, the findings have presented the themes that emerged from the inductive analysis of the interview data. The findings reflect the lived experiences of settlers and FELDA officers in relation to participation and empowerment within the SDP. The themes and subthemes were identified directly from participants' narratives, highlighting recurring patterns across the data. The analysis has shown that while the

themes are diverse and interconnected, they remain consistent throughout the dataset, with no additional themes emerging beyond those identified during the coding process.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter presents the findings on participation and empowerment in the SDP in FELDA A and FELDA B. The findings of the research have answered the research objectives and research questions. There were 44 people willing to respond and accept full responsibility for answering all the questions posed. The findings indicate that the settler is not actively participating in the SDP. On the other hand, the findings also demonstrate that the improper implementation of the SDP negatively impacts the settlers' participation and empowerment. In addition, the findings revealed that there was no empowerment, let alone the participation of settlers in the SDP and their well-being. All the answers from the participants are useful for a better understanding of participation and empowerment in SDP. Overall, the analysis across all themes indicates that the findings are consistent with the purpose framework, and no new themes emerged during the study. This suggests that the framework was sufficient to capture the key aspects of participation and empowerment examined in this research. The next chapter discusses the overall findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the main research findings that address the research questions and objectives of the study. It also includes a discussion of the findings, recommendations of the study, limitations, and recommendations for future research, and a conclusion that summarises the key insights regarding participation and empowerment in the Settler Development Programme, or *Program Pembangunan Peneroka* (SDP) (SDP will be used onward in this study).

#### 5.2 Discussion of Findings

To address the three research questions, this section presents the findings of the study from Chapter 4, structured in alignment with the objectives outlined in Chapter 1. This study examined FELDA settlers' participation in SDP projects across two settlements, FELDA A and FELDA B, with 44 participants, including 35 settlers and nine FELDA officers. The participants, aged 33 to 75, were predominantly between 40 and 69, indicating a middle-aged to older population. The main SDP projects, chilli *centil* fertigation, *jambu loceng merah*, and rabbit farming, were allocated based on settlement suitability and FELDA's strategic goals. FELDA headquarters managed project selection, while contractors handled implementation, and FELDA officers provided monitoring and support. Gender distribution among participants was nearly equal, with 18 female and 17 male settlers.

However, participation challenges were shaped not only by demographic and economic factors but also by a lack of clarity regarding settlers' roles and responsibilities. Many participants expressed uncertainty about their decision-making power and involvement in project implementation, highlighting a gap in participatory engagement. Although the presence of nine FELDA officers, six males and three females, provided some level of guidance, it was insufficient to address the underlying structural issues affecting the long-term sustainability of SDP projects.

Despite these efforts, the findings reveal significant challenges in SDP implementation, particularly in terms of economic sustainability and settler engagement. While some projects, such as *jambu loceng merah* and rabbit farming,

were implemented successfully, not all participants experienced positive outcomes. The chilli *centil* fertigation project faced major setbacks, resulting in lower-than-expected income among settlers. FELDA had initially estimated substantial additional earnings per participant through SDP. However, many participants fell short of these expectations, providing evidence of implementation challenges. This economic shortfall led to settler disengagement, as many struggled to justify their continued participation in the programme (the details will be discussed in the next section).

### **5.2.1 Settler's Understanding of Their Participation in the Settler Development Programme (SDP)**

The findings of the first research question revealed that the settlers did not fully understand the concept of participation in the SDP, leading to their passive involvement. This lack of understanding aligns with Stiefel and Wolfe's (1994) argument that participation is a complex concept with multiple meanings and is often ambiguous. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) emphasised that participation is not merely about inclusion but also involves the nature and purpose of involvement, highlighting the need for active contribution rather than passive presence. Similarly, Sen (1999) argued that people are less likely to exercise their capabilities, such as expressing their ideas, unless they have a clear understanding of what participation truly means. Expanding on this perspective, recent studies continue to highlight the complexity of participation. Santosa et al. (2024) stressed the importance of understanding who is involved, how participation takes place, and why it is necessary for fostering meaningful engagement. Likewise, Irawan and Setiawan (2024) underscore the need to recognise who is included or excluded, how participation is effectively structured, and why it matters in decision-making processes. Without clarity in these aspects, participation can become passive or ineffective, reinforcing exclusion and limiting its overall impact.

This complexity is also evident in broader discussions on participation. Parfitt (2004) asserted that participation can function both as a means and an end, making its interpretation highly context dependent. The ambiguity in its meaning often led to varying levels of engagement, which explained why the settler's remained passive during community discussions, refrained from making suggestions for development projects, and showed little interest in decision-making.

Additionally, Sulistyowati et al. (2023) highlighted how participation can be misleading, creating the illusion of involvement without genuine empowerment.

Similarly, participation in development projects like the SDP may have been influenced by external forces that limited true engagement. As a result, the settlers did not engage in collaborative problem-solving, missed opportunities to influence project outcomes, and ultimately felt disconnected from the development initiatives. Their sense of exclusion reinforced their misunderstanding of participation, further limiting their ability to engage meaningfully. These findings underscore the importance of clarifying what participation entails to ensure more active and effective involvement in decision-making processes.

Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Bell and Reed (2022) contended that a misinterpretation of the concept of participation can create the illusion of active involvement in decision-making when, in reality, no meaningful engagement occurs. This illusion often results from processes designed to appear inclusive while lacking mechanisms for genuine power-sharing or influence. In the case of SDP, instead of voicing their ideas, FELDA settlers often lack meaningful influence or control over the actual decisions made, primarily due to their limited participation and understanding of the SDP framework. This situation also demonstrates that the FELDA settlers lack the ability to be both present and active, making decisions based on their personal values within the SDP.

In extreme cases, settlers frequently misinterpret the concept of participation, especially when their involvement is purely symbolic and has no genuine influence. For instance, the settlers believed they were actively participating in the SDP by attending meetings with FELDA officers, but instead, their roles were restricted to passive listening, with no opportunity to contribute meaningfully to decision-making. However, this action amounted to non-participation (Arnstein, 1969; Verloo, 2023). This lack of meaningful involvement hinders efforts to improve settlers' socioeconomic conditions, ultimately limiting poverty alleviation initiatives under SDG 1 (No Poverty).

This contrasts with the concept of empowerment and participation, which suggests that individuals, such as settlers, should have the necessary capabilities to realize their innate potential and achieve meaningful outcomes (Nussbaum, 2011). Similarly, providing individuals with real opportunities to develop these capabilities is essential for enabling them to reach their full potential (Robeyns, 2019). However, the lack of actual participation in SDP decision-making weakens FELDA's poverty reduction efforts, undermining SDG 1, which emphasizes inclusive participation as a means to lift communities out of poverty. Without an active role in shaping policies that

affect their livelihoods, settlers remain trapped in a cycle of limited economic mobility and dependency, contradicting the goal of sustainable poverty reduction.

Instead of actively participating in the SDP programme by making decisions about their affairs and collaborating, the settlers' understanding, on the other hand, only focuses on income generation. This contrasts with Sen (1999), who stated that income was only a means and not the only factor that can improve the well-being of people. The settler only understands the surface aspects of the SDP, such as the possibility of increasing income through participation. However, very few of them understand the attributes of the SDP and the real reason for the programme's introduction. As a result, most participants were unable to increase their income, leading them to become frustrated as the sole focus was on monetary gains.

Previous research findings in South Africa found that few of the participants did not generate any income when they participated in the development programme because of their limited understanding of the programme (Kaeane and Ross, 2012). Therefore, their participation has not resulted in any significant changes. Similarly, in this study, many settlers were unable to increase their income, primarily because they did not understand the purpose of their participation in the programme. The findings conclude that the settlers joined the SDP due to government initiative, income generation, and personal interest, but they did not fully understand the purpose of joining, which hindered their ability to engage in meaningful participation. This finding is also consistent with Ahmad (2021), who argued that the *Gerakan Daya Wawasan* programme failed to empower local communities or improve their income levels. Similarly, a recent study by Buang et al. (2023) found that although local communities were formally involved in the Desa Lestari programme through cooperative governance structures, such participation did not translate into meaningful empowerment or economic improvement.

Their lack of participation was attributed to the implementers' preference for focusing solely on settlers with formal positions. According to Sebola (2016), public officers found it easier to heed the voices of individuals in positions of authority, which often shaped decision-making processes to prioritize the needs and perspectives of these individuals. This study revealed that settlers with positions in the settlement had more opportunities to participate in the SDP than those without positions. A more recent study by Mkhize and Naidoo (2024) found that people with formal roles or positions in governance were frequently prioritised in participatory decision-making. Conversely,

settlers without positions reported feeling excluded from meaningful participation in the SDP, resulting in low engagement and a limited understanding of the programme. This exclusion undermined the initiative's inclusivity and effectiveness.

Interestingly, individuals in positions of power, such as members of *Gerakan Persatuan Wanita FELDA (GPW)*, initially resisted participation, citing mistrust in the programme's objectives and potential misalignment with their priorities. Nevertheless, their eventual involvement was compelled by their roles, underscoring how their authority rendered their participation non-negotiable, despite initial hesitations. This pattern suggests that the SDP selection process inherently favoured individuals with formal positions, thereby overlooking the potential contributions and perspectives of ordinary settlers.

The findings also suggest that the settlers may not have clearly understood the SDP participation requirements. They simply followed their friends, who were also involved but did not engage deeply in the activities, relying on other decision-makers instead of making their own choices. Freire (1970) and Gogoi et al. (2024) asserted that a lack of consciousness and understanding leads to disempowerment, as individuals with limited awareness and recognition of their challenges are more likely to experience marginalization and reduced agency. Similarly, Raza et al. (2023) stated that a lack of awareness and understanding limits people's effectiveness in adapting to organizational changes, leading to increased stress and workplace incivility.

Both studies emphasize that genuine empowerment and effective participation require participants to be informed and actively engaged. As a result, participation in a programme without a clear purpose negatively impacts its effectiveness. Carpentier (2011) points out that many people wrongly assume that participation simply means being present or interacting with a programme or decision-making process when it requires deeper involvement and influence. For participation to be genuine, individuals must be meaningfully involved in decision-making processes and understand power dynamics. This entails more than mere presence or superficial engagement. It necessitates active and informed participation in influencing outcomes and decisions. Previous studies support the observation that the settlers lacked a comprehensive understanding of participation, and their lack of genuine involvement significantly hindered their meaningful engagement in the SDP programme (Vivier and Sanchez-Betancourt (2023).

Hence, based on the above discussion, this study concludes that the settlers' lack of understanding regarding genuine participation, coupled with their superficial engagement in the SDP programme, undermines its effectiveness. The findings highlight the critical importance of fostering awareness, agency, and meaningful involvement among participants to ensure the success of participatory initiatives. Without addressing these gaps, programmes risk perpetuating disempowerment and inefficiency, as participants remain disengaged from the decision-making processes central to true participation.

### **5.2.2 The Implementation of The Settler Development Programme (SDP) At A Local Level**

local level

The second research objective aims to explain the implementation of the SDP at a local level. The findings disclosed that the implementation of the SDP is centralised at the FELDA officers' level, in which all decisions were made by the FELDA officers. The process shows that the implementation was done using the top-down approach. This was because the decision-making on the SDP was centralised at the management of FELDA, and the settler-only needed to follow all instructions given. This was carried out by the FELDA officers, who provided insufficient information to the settlers, which resulted in a significant information asymmetry between the FELDA officers and the settlers. In such a scenario, FELDA officers possess the knowledge and power to dictate the terms of participation. At the same time, settlers remain largely uninformed about their options and the implications of the decisions made. This situation indicates that the SDP implementation is shaped by social and environmental factors, particularly the roles of FELDA officers and government intervention.

From the findings, FELDA officers often used centralised decision-making in implementing the programme. All decisions related to the SDP were made by the FELDA officers, not by the settlers. In this case, the SDP employed a top-down approach, where a FELDA officer was responsible for decision-making regarding the programme. Sen (1988) defined this as 'capability deprivation,' a situation in which the settlers were left with no choices. A recent study by Fragoso (2024) explained that capability deprivation happens because people lack resources and because of unfair social systems and relationships. These issues make it harder for settlers to take control of their lives and make good decisions.

Consequently, these issues limited the settlers' ability to make decisions. Any settler who desired to participate in the project was required to comply with these decisions. The mode of implementation clearly shows that the settlers had fewer opportunities to participate and be empowered in the SDP due to limited autonomy in decision-making. Additionally, the settlers also lacked the power to influence the planning and implementation of the programme. This left them unable to voice their concerns. A previous study by Gao (2016) asserted that a top-down approach to rural development is a hierarchical process in which decisions are made by higher authorities and implemented at the local level. Due to that, people often feel suppressed, believing that their voices and needs are ignored in the decision-making process imposed by these authorities.

This creates an environment of one-way communication, where feedback from the community is neither sought nor valued, leading to further disempowerment. In this situation, the limited information from FELDA officers exacerbates the information asymmetry, as settlers are left to navigate complex decisions without adequate guidance or support. The problem currently exists among the settlers, where they are not given full decision-making autonomy in the planning and implementation of the SDP.

Although FELDA officers may claim to have shared all relevant information through channels such as WhatsApp or meetings, settlers frequently express concerns about the transparency and detail of the communication they receive. For instance, while the officers often focus only on potential participants in the SDP, other settlers who are not considered potential participants are left confused about the practical aspects of project management, such as timelines, responsibilities, and implementation on the ground. This disconnect exemplifies the limitations of one-way communication, wherein information is transmitted without facilitating meaningful response or engagement precisely what Jantti et al. (2023) describe as "artificial" participation caused by ineffective communication structures.

Freire (1970) critiqued such one-way communication in governance and development contexts, arguing that it disempowers people by treating them as passive recipients rather than active participants in decision-making. As a result, settlers feel disempowered, unable to ask questions, and struggle to make informed decisions about their participation in the programme. This lack of clarity hampers their ability to engage with the SDP and increases the risk of misinformation, resistance, and ultimately, reduced programme effectiveness (Mefalopulos, 2008). Moreover, it contradicts best

practices in participatory governance, which emphasize the need for continuous dialogue and community engagement (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2008).

The suppression contributes to a culture of disempowerment, where local communities are excluded from meaningful participation and experience structural failures that perpetuate counterproductive learning and hinder the development of community resilience (Imperiale and Vanclay, 2020). Rather than fostering genuine engagement and transformation, such an approach prioritizes profit and short-term gains, ultimately undermining efforts to build sustainable and resilient communities. Similarly, Choudhury and Shahidullah (2024) emphasized that the top-down approach operates as a rigid structure where decisions are made by higher authorities without input from lower levels. This often leads to a disconnect between policies and the actual needs of local communities. As a result, the effectiveness of initiatives is compromised, limiting their ability to address the real challenges people face.

Globally, there has been a shift from a top-down approach, which prioritizes centralized control and decision-making, to a bottom-up approach that emphasizes community involvement and engagement in the planning process (Arnstein, 1969; Cleaver, 2001; Gargano, 2021). This shift is particularly relevant in rural development contexts, where studies such as Saja (2015) highlighted the ineffectiveness of top-down approaches. Saja's study emphasized that these frameworks should either be enhanced or replaced by more appropriate bottom-up strategies that better align with the needs and agency of local communities. A successful approach often requires a balance between top-down and bottom-up efforts to ensure long-term success and sustainability. The failure of top-down approaches has been observed in various countries, including Africa, the United States, and Italy (Easterly, 2007; Imperiale and Vanclay, 2021; Moyo, 2010; Rist, 2009). Therefore, FELDA officers should integrate a bottom-up approach rather than relying solely on a top-down model, as this can better promote long-term development for settlers.

In the case of the SDP at FELDA A and B, it demonstrates that a lack of a bottom-up approach prevents settlers from making their own decisions. Alkire (2002) contended that individuals should be free to choose their path, provided they have the necessary skills and abilities. However, the findings indicate that settlers have limited autonomy to act. This situation was also examined in Ahmad (2021), who found that villagers were not involved in decision-making or empowered, as leaders wielded

power and control over the village. This study reinforces the fact that limited autonomy can minimize settlers' ability to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the SDP.

The FELDA officer's control over decision-making further reinforces this dynamic, allowing settlers only minimal independence in their choices, thereby undermining their capabilities and freedoms that are essential for development (Sen, 1999). Settlers were expected to take on more responsibility and make decisions independently. However, they were denied the authority to make significant decisions (Ribot, 2003). According to Sen (1999), individuals should be free to make choices that impact their well-being, but in this study, the settlers had little control over their development and outcomes, as decision-making was mainly undertaken by FELDA officers.

The same situation was also found in the research conducted by Taylor (2007). In that case, the community was expected to participate. However, public officials retained central control. This pattern of governance exposed the settlers to disempowerment, where their ability to make meaningful decisions was constrained. Despite expectations for increased responsibility and autonomy, the settlers were effectively marginalized from the decision-making process, limiting their opportunities to influence their own development. This lack of control over their own destinies undermined their ability to fully capitalize on the benefits of the SDP, as FELDA officers continued to maintain a central role in shaping the outcomes of the initiative. As such, the settlers remained dependent and passive, unable to exercise their freedoms, which contrasts with the principles of participatory governance and inclusive decision-making. This contradiction highlights a fundamental flaw in the implementation of the SDP, while it is designed to promote economic growth and community empowerment, it instead perpetuates a hierarchical structure that limits genuine autonomy and self-determination.

Another significant finding regarding the implementation of the SDP was the issue of favouritism. Favouritism occurs when specific individuals receive better treatment or unique benefits while equally deserving individuals are overlooked. According to Suleiman and Othman (2017), favouritism refers to the preferential treatment granted by an entrusted officeholder based on biases such as family relationships, ethnicity, party, or religious affiliations, or even friendships. In the case of the SDP, the selection of contractors responsible for guiding settlers was made by the central officers at the FELDA Headquarters rather than the officers at the settlement.

This practice often resulted in the appointment of contractors with personal or political ties to decision-makers, regardless of their qualifications or capabilities to fulfil the role effectively. This reflects the influence of power relations in participatory processes (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Such actions created resentment among settlers and the FELDA officers, who felt excluded from a process that directly impacted their development.

Furthermore, this lack of transparency not only undermined trust in the SDP but also reduced its overall effectiveness, as settlers were sometimes left with inadequate guidance from contractors chosen for reasons unrelated to merit. This was not surprising, as favouritism is a form of cronyism that involves granting benefits and privileges to acquaintances (Khraim, H. S., 2025). The decision-making process not only reinforced favouritism but also introduced cronyism and patronage. Favouritism and cronyism were not limited to the central level. They also occurred at the settlement level, where the FELDA officers tended to favour individuals who showed potential. As a result, only settlers perceived as having the most promise were chosen. Mousa et al. (2023) stated that cronyism can lead to unethical practices, such as the unfair distribution of resources and the hiring of unqualified individuals. Consequently, many capable settlers were excluded from the programme, limiting their opportunities for development.

Moreover, this practice of favouring a select few over others undermines fairness and disempowers the broader community, preventing equal participation and support. Recent research by Selvam et al. (2022) and Zulmasyhur and Avianto (2019) identified government cronyism as a significant factor contributing to the failure of community programmes. Cronyism prioritizes certain individuals over broader community needs, weakening the effectiveness of initiatives and ultimately leading to disempowerment and a lack of trust among the people.

In this study, cronyism unfairly favoured selected participants over settlers. Many SDP participants were settlers who held positions, yet some were forced to join despite lacking interest. Consequently, the programmes failed to empower the settlers, as they were not chosen based on their qualifications, interests, or readiness to participate. Instead, favouritism and cronyism influenced the selection process, which has been shown to undermine fairness (Khraim, 2025; Mousa, Althalathini, & Abdelgaffar, 2023). This aligns with recent findings that cronyism leads to inefficient organizational practices, diminishing trust and commitment among employees (Selvam

et al., 2022). As a result, the selected participants lacked the motivation and commitment necessary for the programme's success.

Further, the selection process reflects a controlled form of public participation, where the FELDA officers favour individuals who have already achieved success, positioning them as role models while side-lining others with relevant experience. This aligns with Arnstein's (1969) concept of tokenism, which highlights how authorities create an illusion of inclusion while maintaining control over decision-making. Recent studies also support this, showing how favouritism and exclusion in decision-making create superficial inclusion (Bayram et al., 2024; Çelik and Razi, 2023). The prejudice and discrimination in selecting only those participants who had already achieved success as role models hindered active participation by the settlers.

Centralized decision-making by FELDA officers led to favouritism and cronyism, and disempowered the settlers by removing their ability to make decisions or influence the process. As a result, settlers lacked the autonomy to participate actively and meaningfully. This, combined with limited access to information, further hindered their capabilities and reduced their chances of benefiting from the programme. Therefore, the discussion shows that centralized decision-making, favouritism, and cronyism significantly hindered the success of the SDP by disempowering settlers and excluding them from meaningful participation. These practices undermined fairness, created resentment, and eroded trust among settlers and the FELDA officers.

This finding also corresponds to Gaventa (2004), who argued that unequal power dynamics in participatory programmes often reinforce social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. In his study on power and participation, he found that when decision-making is centralized, marginalized groups remain excluded, limiting their ability to shape policies that affect their lives. Similarly, Cooke and Kothari (2001) discussed how participation can become a tool for control rather than empowerment, especially when authorities selectively include participants based on biased criteria. The settlers' lack of autonomy and limited opportunities to contribute actively to the programme led to a failure to harness their full potential. Furthermore, a lack of transparency in communication and the selective inclusion of participants based on prejudiced criteria exacerbated the problem, reinforcing structural inequalities and perpetuating a cycle of disempowerment.

### **5.2.3 The Empowerment of The Settlers in The Settler Development Programme (SDP) in Improve Their Well- Being**

The third research objective seeks to investigate whether the SDP empowers the settlers to improve their well-being. Based on the findings and along with the integration of the capability approach, it shows that the settlers' lack of ability to act, the dominance of power by the FELDA officers, and limited information were factors that hindered their participation in the SDP, thus affecting their empowerment. These factors collectively constrained settlers from effectively converting resources provided through the SDP into meaningful opportunities for improving their well-being.

For instance, limited access to information left settlers unaware of available support, whereas the dominance of the FELDA officers often prioritised bureaucratic objectives over community needs. This observation resonates with Sen (1999), who argues that empowerment is fundamentally tied to an individual's ability to convert available resources into valuable opportunities and outcomes that improve their well-being. Building on this, Robeyns (2005) identified three conversion factors within the capability approach that shape an individual's capacity to participate and gain empowerment: specifically, personal, social, and environmental conversion factors. These conversion factors influence an individual's ability to transform available resources and opportunities into meaningful outcomes.

In the context of the SDP, the conversion factors help to explain the challenges settlers face. In this context, these factors not only limit how settlers access resources but also restrict the extent to which they can leverage these resources to improve their well-being. For instance, individual conversion factors, such as poor health conditions, limit settlers' ability to engage in the programme. In addition, social factors, particularly the dominance of the FELDA officers, limit the decision-making power of settlers, leading to dependency instead of empowerment. Environmental factors, such as unsuitable land, further impede settlers' ability to benefit from the resources offered by the SDP. These barriers prevent settlers from fully utilizing their available opportunities, thereby impeding their potential for empowerment and improved well-being. Together, these conversion factors highlight how structural barriers within the SDP hinder settlers from transforming resources into meaningful outcomes.

Empowerment is often tied to the ability to act and make decisions. However, in the context of the SDP at FELDA A and FELDA B, settlers struggled with this

fundamental requirement, as many needed more resources, skills, and autonomy to participate effectively. This statement is in line with previous studies, as Phologane (2014) emphasises that rural development projects frequently face challenges related to limited resources, poor health, age-related factors, and socio-economic barriers. These constraints significantly impact community participation and empowerment, limiting individuals' ability to engage fully and effectively in development initiatives. Specifically, these barriers hinder people from making autonomous decisions and taking active roles, which are essential for sustainable development and empowerment within rural communities.

Steiner and Farmer (2018) highlighted that limited decision-making autonomy in disadvantaged rural communities significantly hinders their active participation in development initiatives. This lack of autonomy restricts individuals' capacity to engage meaningfully with available resources and opportunities, thereby reinforcing existing structural inequalities and sustaining cycles of disempowerment.

In the context of SDP, a lack of capability to act reflects a frustrating reality where individuals, despite being aware of potential opportunities like SDP projects, are blocked from taking meaningful steps due to numerous limitations. For instance, these constraints include unsuitable land, threats from wildlife, and health conditions, all of which severely hinder their ability to engage with the programme. Unsuitable land conditions exacerbate the challenges faced by the settlers to participate and be empowered in the SDP.

According to Gomiero (2016), unsuitable land often results in poor agricultural yields, which leads to economic instability for people. From the findings, unsuitable land due to hilly terrains and contaminated lands is frequently cited as a significant challenge for the settler to participate and be empowered. Moreover, unsuitable areas hinder the productivity of settlers, which in turn affects the overall productivity of the SDP. This aligns with the findings of Ahmadzai (2021), who stated that marginal areas exhibit lower productivity due to various factors, including the presence of wild animals, poor soil quality, and other challenges. These factors limit agricultural productivity and hinder settlers' ability to engage meaningfully in SDP initiatives. Due to that, their potential for economic growth and community development is severely restricted.

Moreover, poor health conditions hinder people's participation and empowerment in development programmes. Health issues significantly reduce physical

capacity, overall well-being, and self-confidence, which are essential for active engagement in personal and community activities. Recent studies highlight that individual living with chronic illnesses often face challenges in maintaining motivation and participating in empowerment initiatives. For example, a scoping review by Nguyen et al. (2022) emphasized that empowerment-based support programmes tailored for vulnerable populations with chronic diseases improve self-management but that poor health remains a barrier to full participation. Similarly, Smith et al. (2023) found that empowerment interventions, especially those delivered in group settings, increase engagement and confidence among those with chronic conditions, yet physical and mental health limitations continue to restrict active involvement. Furthermore, digital platforms have been identified as promising tools to enhance empowerment and participation among chronically ill individuals (Lee et al., 2024), but sociotechnical challenges in eHealth technology deployment may further limit accessibility and engagement (Brown and Wang, 2021). Additionally, qualitative research by Gholipour et al. (2023) revealed that systemic barriers and cultural factors further impede community participation in health-related development programmes, reinforcing the complex interplay between health status and empowerment. Collectively, these findings illustrate that poor health not only diminishes physical ability but also undermines confidence and limits active participation, ultimately hindering empowerment and opportunities for growth.

This issue becomes even more pronounced when considering chronic health challenges, particularly among ageing settlers in the SDP, who face additional barriers to meaningful participation. When individuals face chronic health challenges, their capabilities are significantly restricted, as noted by Kim and Choi (2024) and Thompson et al. (2024). The impact of chronic illnesses can also cause individuals to miss out on important developmental opportunities within the SDP. Similarly, Ma et al. (2024) emphasized that poor health conditions may hinder people's participation in the programme. In this study, most of the settlers are of elderly age, which often means they lack the physical strength to be active participants rather than passive ones. The age factor, along with a lack of relevant skills or education, further diminishes their ability to participate effectively in initiatives that require active decision-making and physical effort.

Furthermore, prior studies have shown that health issues prevent elderly participants from effectively engaging in physically demanding activities (Meredith et

al. (2023). Galea and Tracy (2007) also suggested that health conditions limit individuals' capacity to participate effectively. Health issues are particularly common among older settlers, preventing them from participating in the SDP, even though they may recognize its potential benefits. Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2015) highlighted that community participation often depends on an active, younger workforce, while ageing populations may lack the physical capability or resources to engage fully in the programme.

Other studies also state that older adult participants may have physical limitations, which can significantly hinder their involvement in development programmes. This aligns with previous findings that poor health conditions and ageing reduce individuals' ability to participate effectively in initiatives like the SDP. The younger generation, with their physical ability, is more likely to contribute meaningfully to the programme (Lindsay-Smith et al., 2019). Moreover, beyond physical challenges, older adults also struggle with adapting to technological advancements, adding another layer of exclusion. The younger generation is generally more adept at understanding and utilizing technology compared to the older generation, who often struggle with technology adoption. Harris et al. (2022) noted that technology can act as a barrier for older adults, many of whom find it challenging to understand and feel overwhelmed by complex digital systems. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many older adults show little interest in adopting new technologies, often due to a fear of making mistakes.

In the context of the SDP, these technological barriers became evident. The findings revealed that the programme integrated technology through hydroponic farming systems, which use an automated water supply mechanism, allowing water to flow effortlessly at the press of a button. However, despite its potential benefits, many older settlers struggled to use the system due to unfamiliarity with technology and a fear of making mistakes. FELDA officers failed to provide settlers with hands-on training, leaving them inadequately prepared for the project. Simply delivering slide presentations was insufficient for settlers to fully understand and effectively engage with the SDP. These challenges significantly restricted the empowerment of elderly settlers and limited their contributions to the sustainability of rural development projects. Ultimately, these findings reinforce that both environmental and individual factors, such as age, health, and technological adaptability, shape an individual's ability to act, directly impacting their participation and empowerment in development programmes like the SDP.

Next, according to Sen (1999), an individual is empowered when they have the freedom to choose what they want to do and be. However, beyond the physical and technological barriers previously discussed, settlers at FELDA A and B also face structural constraints imposed by the FELDA officers, which further restrict their choices and limit their autonomy. This lack of choice means that settlers cannot achieve various valuable functions in their lives (Sen, 1993). For instance, even when settlers are willing to adapt to new technologies or overcome physical limitations, their ability to make decisions is often restricted by the FELDA officers, who dominate the decision-making process. When the officers hold unchecked power, they impose their own choices and restrict settlers' ability to shape their lives and pursue their own goals, thus narrowing the settlers' capability to be empowered in the SDP. As noted by many authors, people can only achieve empowerment when they possess the authority to make decisions and manage their own affairs, free from excessive government intervention (Abbott, 1996; Batliwala, 2007; Eerdewijk et al., 2017; Kabeer, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000).

Moreover, the dominance of the FELDA officers limits settlers' decision-making power, as discussed earlier, and serves as a broader structural barrier to empowerment within the SDP. This situation poses a significant obstacle to settler participation, reinforcing the hierarchical control that prevents meaningful engagement. Power dominance is one of the most critical barriers to settler empowerment. A previous study by Ahmad (2021) found that leaders' power dominance in rural villages significantly contributed to the lack of public participation. Similarly, in this study, findings reveal that the officers, rather than settlers, hold decision-making authority and control critical aspects of the SDP. Settlers are expected to comply with the officers' directives, further limiting their autonomy in shaping the programme. This reflects what Ahmad (2021) and Ahmad et al. (2024) described as elite capture and power dominance, both of which have contributed to the failure of development and participation programmes. When FELDA officers hold excessive power, participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive, ultimately preventing settlers from achieving real empowerment.

In addition to power dominance, excessive intervention by FELDA officers further weakens the potential for settler participation and empowerment. Research has shown that when government officials exercise overwhelming control, development and participation programmes often fail to achieve their intended objectives (Ali, 2022).

Findings from related studies reveal that the dominance of officers in participatory programmes leads to poor collaboration between settlers and officials. When officers control the decision-making process, government priorities overshadow the needs of settlers, leading to disengagement and limited participation. Mansuri and Rao (2012) argue that elite capture and centralized governance marginalize local voices, as decision-making remains concentrated in the hands of a few powerful actors rather than being inclusive of settlers or community members. This exclusion discourages active engagement and weakens participation in development programmes.

Similarly, Crabtree (2007) highlights how government-controlled decision-making in Peru led to clientelism, where officials prioritized bureaucratic objectives over community interests. This created a disconnect between policymakers and local populations, reinforcing limited participation. Ntsebeza (2006) found that local government structures in South Africa failed to empower communities because public officers-controlled decisions without meaningful consultation, resulting in policies that did not reflect local needs.

Additionally, Guijt and Shah (1998) emphasized that decision-making processes that exclude marginalized groups, whether based on gender, social status, or lack of political influence, reinforce structural inequalities. This top-down approach limits settlers' agency, reducing their ability to make informed decisions about their livelihoods and future. This heavy-handed intervention creates barriers to active participation and reinforces dependency on FELDA officers, rather than fostering autonomy among settlers. As a result, settlers become passive recipients rather than active contributors, which contradicts the fundamental principles of participatory development. Therefore, the lack of collaboration and the prioritization of government objectives over settlers' needs directly hinder both participation and empowerment.

A lack of information is another factor contributing to settlers' disempowerment. The SDP is a government-led initiative aimed at enhancing settlers' economic stability by encouraging their participation in structured activities. However, findings reveal that despite the programme's objectives, settlers at FELDA A and FELDA B remain inadequately informed about the SDP. In practice, this lack of information limits settlers' involvement and independence. Oakley (1991) argued that individuals cannot effectively participate in programmes if they lack sufficient information.

Similarly, Somanje (2021) provided evidence from rural farming communities, showing that the dissemination of agricultural knowledge through extension services empowers farmers to engage with programmes and improve their practices. This issue arises because FELDA officers fail to adequately convey the necessary information about the SDP to settlers. For instance, FELDA officers often neglect to arrange seminars for individual projects, assuming participants are already familiar with the programme.

Furthermore, insufficient information significantly limits settlers' ability to fully participate in and feel empowered by the SDP. Settlers with limited knowledge about the programme often lose interest in participating altogether. Abdulai et al. (2023) highlighted that rural farmer are less likely to engage in agricultural modernization programmes when they lack adequate information about the benefits and processes involved. Similarly, FAO (2021) found that limited access to agricultural extension services, especially digital advisory, negatively impacts smallholder farmers' participation in rural programmes. In the context of the SDP, inadequate information dissemination by FELDA officers prevents settlers from fully understanding the programme's objectives and potential benefits, leading to disengagement. Consequently, when settlers do not receive sufficient information, they struggle to recognize the relevance of their participation, further limiting their participation and empowerment.

Viewed through the lens of the capability approach, as popularized by Amartya Sen (1999), the lack of information in the SDP is closely tied to social factors. It restricts settlers' access to crucial knowledge, depriving them of the ability to make informed decisions and fully engage in the programme. As a result, their capacity to feel empowered and benefit from the SDP is constrained. An analysis of the factors influencing settlers' empowerment and overall well-being suggests that the SDP must take further steps to improve their quality of life.

The settlers' participation in the SDP remains severely constrained by a top-down approach, lack of autonomy, and power dominance by the FELDA officers, which limit their ability to make independent decisions. This imbalance restricts their opportunities and prevents genuine empowerment since participation without decision-making power does not lead to real progress (Sen, 1999). Despite being framed as an initiative to support settlers, the SDP has instead reinforced a cycle of dependency. Settlers' involvement is largely superficial because their input is rarely considered in

meaningful ways. FELDA officers retain control over key decisions, expecting settlers to comply rather than contribute. This structure limits their ability to take ownership of their development and reduces them to passive recipients rather than active participants (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Genuine empowerment requires more than just participation. It requires shared decision-making (Cornwall, 2008). When settlers are excluded from shaping policies, their well-being remains dependent on the FELDA officers' decisions rather than on their own agency. This lack of autonomy contradicts the programme's goal of fostering economic stability and independence. Instead of being given the tools and authority to improve their livelihoods, settlers remain trapped in a system where they must wait for directives from those in power (Gaventa, 2004). To achieve true empowerment, the SDP must move beyond tokenistic participation and adopt a more inclusive model. Decision-making should be decentralized, allowing settlers to have greater control over the policies that directly affect them. Transparent communication must be prioritized so that settlers fully understand their roles and the potential benefits of the programme. Without these changes, the SDP risks remaining a mechanism of control rather than empowerment, leaving settlers without the ability to influence their own futures (Arnstein, 1969).

From the capability approach perspective, it explains that empowerment involves the individual's ability to make their own decisions without any intervention from others. Moreover, Alkire (2002) highlighted that the capability approach improves individual capabilities, which refer to the absolute freedom of the settler to achieve their goals. This means that settlers should be free to choose and decide on their own. However, in the context of the SDP, the settlers do not feel empowered to decide. FELDA officers already make all decisions.

The lack of participation and disempowerment among the settlers has led to stagnation in their quality of life, preventing any progress or improvement. The settlers' situation remains unchanged before and after their participation in the SDP. Despite many programmes attended by them, they frequently experience frustration and a sense of disillusionment, as they feel that their involvement in the SDP does not lead to tangible improvements. Despite attending many programmes and receiving resources, their ability to use these resources effectively is hampered by the structural barriers within the SDP. The persistent lack of understanding and misinterpretation of participation, lack of autonomy, power dominance by the FELDA officers, poor access

to information, unsuitable land conditions, and health challenges prevent the settlers from realizing the full potential of the programme. Consequently, instead of experiencing meaningful progress in their well-being, the settlers remain stuck in a cycle of dependency, unable to fully capitalise on the opportunities provided by the SDP. This reflects the critical need for a more inclusive, bottom-up approach where settlers have a greater role in decision-making, empowering them to transform available resources into opportunities that truly improve their well-being. Without such changes, the potential of the SDP to empower settlers and enhance their well-being remains unfulfilled.

Based on the findings, the study identified significant factors that hinder participation and empowerment within the SDP. The discussion illustrates how these barriers affect settlers' ability to actively participate and achieve empowerment. The study emphasised factors such as a limited understanding of meaningful participation, overemphasis on income generation, personal interest among settlers, centralised decision-making, one-way communication, favouritism, lack of capability, power dominance by the FELDA officers, and limited information. Besides, the proposed initiatives aim to empower settlers by providing knowledge on meaningful participation, introducing a bottom-up approach, improving access to information and communication, establishing two-way communication channels, and regularly monitoring and evaluating the programme's inclusivity. Figure 5.1 below summarises the key issues identified in the study, including the challenges faced by settlers in achieving meaningful participation, the policy adequacy, and the suggestions for improving the SDP.

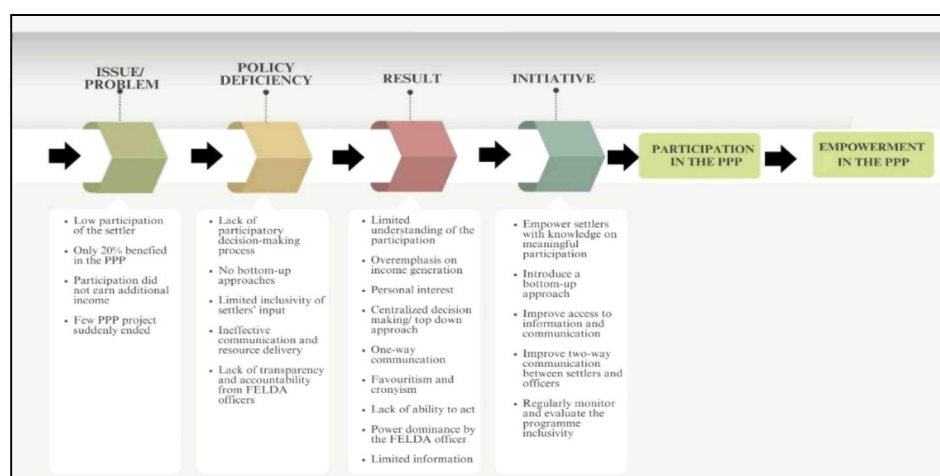


Figure 5.1 The Key Findings for Participation and Empowerment in the SDP  
Source: Fieldwork data, 2024

### **5.3 Recommendations of the Study**

Following an in-depth discussion of the findings for each research objective, this study proposed several recommendations to the ministry, policymakers, government agencies, and the Malaysian government. By addressing these issues, the proposed changes aim to improve the effectiveness of development programmes, increase community participation and empowerment, and improve the overall well-being of FELDA settlers. The recommendations outlined in this study offer a pathway for more inclusive and sustainable policies. The following are several recommendations of the study:

The first recommendation of this study is to enhance awareness and understanding of the SDP on real participation. This study reveals that many settlers lacked awareness and understanding of the SDP, highlighting the need for a more effective approach, such as hands-on training. Since most settlers are older adults who are less familiar with seminar-based learning, they are more comfortable with practical methods such as hands-on training. The findings reveal that settlers need hands-on training in practical project management and decision-making processes. This could include practical sessions on planting, watering, fertilizing, and pest management techniques specific to the crops they are cultivating. The organiser should consider training and activities such as demonstrations and supervised practice on preparing soil, applying fertilizers, and learning methods to retain soil nutrients. Additionally, since some of the SDP projects involve hydroponic plant cultivation, the settlers could learn how to install drip irrigation, monitor water levels, and adjust systems based on crop needs and local water availability. This hands-on training could focus on technical skills and operational knowledge to enhance settler engagement and productivity.

Through such training, settlers can gain the practical skills and confidence to participate in the SDP. Additionally, hands-on training will help settlers better understand their roles and responsibilities in the SDP by actively involving them in the decision-making process, enabling them to learn by doing rather than passively watching a slide show. Past research by Iyamuremye et al. (2023) explored the effectiveness of hands-on training in engaging community members in public projects. This study emphasises that participatory training programmes increase understanding of public issues and empower citizens to contribute actively to decision-making processes.

The same strategy was also proposed by Holstermann et al. (2009) in their study, highlighting that hands-on training can significantly increase participants' engagement and understanding, which aligns with the recommendation to implement practical, hands-on training for settlers in the SDP. Hands-on training enables participants to construct their knowledge through experiential learning, and this approach ensures that settlers can directly apply what they learn in real-world situations. Through practical activities, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the SDP while also developing the necessary skills to contribute to its success actively. As a result, hands-on training may be a better recommendation for helping settlers actively participate in the SDP.

Secondly, in view of the findings regarding the implementation of the SDP at the local level, the study proposed adopting a bottom-up approach to enhance the implementation of the SDP through participatory decision-making. This study emphasises how centralised decision-making restricted the settlers' autonomy, hindering their ability to participate effectively and achieve empowerment. In the implementation of SDP, shifting from a top-down to a bottom-up approach could provide settlers with more autonomy, enabling them to make better decisions. A bottom-up approach involves a more decentralised decision-making process, offering settlers greater input and authority over decisions that impact their well-being. This aligns with Odoom et al. (2024), who noted that a bottom-up approach is participatory and decentralised, which can be more effective for the people. By decentralizing decision-making and ensuring participants have control over their choices, FELDA officers can better align with the principles of the capability approach, thereby fostering greater engagement and empowerment among participants. These approaches can enhance their empowerment and social inclusion (Be-Ere, 2023).

Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of the bottom-up approach in regional development and policy-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Healey, 2010). This policy asserts that local people are best positioned to drive the development of their own regions. This bottom-up approach means that the local community and local players can help define a development pathway for their area consistent with their needs, expectations, and plans. As highlighted in the capability approach, people should have the freedom to make decisions that impact their own lives, as these decisions have a significant impact on their quality of life (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2002). Due to that, FELDA officers need to give settlers who participate freedom and make their own decisions

because real participation requires a genuine and active involvement in the SDP without any intervention from the FELDA officers.

Participatory decision-making through a bottom-up approach enhances transparency and accountability in SDP projects. Past research by Kaiser (2020) stated that bottom-up approaches emphasise the involvement of local communities in decision-making. Involving settlers in the decision-making process enhances oversight and scrutiny of resource allocation and project implementation. Moreover, a bottom-up approach effectively captures local community knowledge, increasing the relevance and effectiveness of projects. Their findings demonstrate that directly involving community members in decision-making processes incorporates local perspectives and yields more impactful outcomes for the people. In the SDP, participants need to have the autonomy to make decisions independently. This ability and power will provide participants with opportunities to engage and be empowered in the SDP actively. Therefore, the strategy must be viable and practical since the transition from a top-down to a bottom-up approach will improve SDP implementation in the future.

The third recommendation of the study is to monitor and evaluate the SDP programme. This study has revealed no monitoring and evaluation as discussed in Chapter 4, which has led to persistent issues, including a lack of participants and no empowerment. With proper oversight, it is easier to address these problems effectively and make necessary adjustments. Thus, regular monitoring and evaluation are essential to identify and resolve issues, ensure active participation, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the SDP. This lack of oversight prevents settlers from voicing their concerns or providing feedback, which hinders their empowerment and limits the effectiveness of the SDP. Participants should have the autonomy to make their own decisions, thus enhancing their ability to engage fully in the SDP and potentially improving their well-being. This aligns with the capability approach, which emphasises expanding opportunities and fostering genuine well-being (Alkire, 2002; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2005) and provides a framework for assessing human development.

Furthermore, the FELDA officers must ensure an unbiased approach by regularly monitoring all participants and avoiding favouritism. The data imply that the FELDA officers may exhibit favouritism towards certain participants, undermining fairness. To address this issue, the officers should ensure fairness for all participants, regardless of age. Besides, the officers should develop and implement strategies that enable every participant to actively engage and feel empowered within the SDP. This

also includes allowing participants to express their opinions and provide feedback about the SDP.

Establishing two-way communication will help the participant feel supported by the FELDA officer. It was supported by the study from Zhang (2023), which supports the idea that shifting from one-way communication to two-way dialogue is a powerful strategy for enhancing mutual understanding within communities. As such, this approach helps people get involved and allows them to share their concerns more effectively. In the context of SDP, communication can make people actively participate and be empowered in the programme. This positive interaction encourages participants to participate and become empowered in the SDP programmes. To enhance SDP programmes, it is critical to implement regular monitoring and evaluation, ensure fair oversight, and encourage open communication among the settlers and the FELDA officers. This initiative and strategy will help FELDA officers improve the SDP and can make participants feel more empowered when participating in their programme.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Despite This study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. Firstly, it focuses solely on participants from FELDA in the northern regions of Peninsular Malaysia. Additionally, limiting the study to two village settlements (the ethical requirement prevented the disclosure of the FELDA's name) may create regional bias, meaning the findings may not be representative of settlers in other FELDA settlements. Even so, the result was not affected by this limitation. To obtain a broader understanding, future research should expand its scope to include settlements from different geographical, cultural, and economic backgrounds, including those in Sabah and Sarawak. A larger sample size would allow for more comprehensive insights into settlers' participation and empowerment in the SDP.

The second limitation is the study's demographic scope, as the participants were exclusively Malay. While Malays constitute the majority ethnic group in FELDA, excluding other ethnic communities may introduce cultural bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Since FELDA settlements are not restricted to Malays or Bumiputras, future research should include Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic settlers to ensure a more inclusive and comparative understanding of participation in the SDP.

To enhance future studies on participation and empowerment in the SDP, researchers should also consider theoretical and methodological improvements. This

study applied the capability approach to examine how settlers' well-being is influenced by their participation in the SDP. As proposed by Robeyns (2005), three key conversion factors, such as individual, social, and environmental, affect settlers' ability to participate and be empowered. Future research can further explore these theoretical aspects by assessing different frameworks or refining the measurement of well-being beyond economic indicators.

From a methodological perspective, this study employed a qualitative approach, which, while useful for in-depth exploration, limits the ability to generalize findings. Future research should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach to combine qualitative insights with quantitative data, providing a more comprehensive analysis of settlers' participation and empowerment.

Expanding the study area and integrating different research methods would strengthen the findings and improve their applicability to other FELDA settlements. Additionally, this study developed an interview protocol to guide data collection. Future researchers can refine and utilize similar protocols based on the Interview Protocol Refinement (IRP) framework suggested by Castillo-Montayo (2016). A well-structured interview process enhances data quality and ensures a systematic approach to understanding settlers' experiences. By applying these refinements, future studies can contribute deeper empirical insights into rural development programmes like the SDP.

By addressing these limitations and implementing these methodological and theoretical improvements, future research can offer a more holistic and representative analysis of settlers' participation and empowerment in FELDA's SDP initiatives.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to examine the participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP programme in Malaysia. The aim of the SDP is not only to increase the settlers' income through their active participation but also to contribute to the national agenda by ensuring National Food Security, which aligns with SDG Goal 1 (No Poverty). However, after several years of implementation, participation in the SDP is not encouraging and is decreasing yearly. Due to the issues highlighted in Chapter 1, the study was conducted to examine the factors contributing to the low participation rates and lack of empowerment observed among the settlers, despite the substantial budget allocated to this programme.

To enhance comprehension of participation and empowerment, Chapter 2 provided an overview of poverty and impoverished individuals, as well as programmes and strategies aimed at eradicating global poverty in Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia. Like other poverty eradication programmes, SDP also wants to help the settler generate better income. This study elucidated the implementation of poverty eradication programmes through a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. All successful programmes require people's willingness to participate. Using the capability approach, this study aimed to understand participation and empowerment in the SDP. The capability approach is important because it provides a comprehensive framework for assessing well-being and empowerment. There are also three conversion factors, such as individual, social, and environmental, which can influence the ability of the settler to participate and be empowered. It emphasises people's freedom to pursue their dreams and improve their abilities. In the context of SDP, the capability approach aided in determining whether the programme enabled settlers to improve their quality of life and realise their full potential. It emphasised the importance of meaningful participation, which leads to genuine empowerment and well-being.

As described in Chapter 3, a qualitative approach was chosen as the most effective method for gathering detailed information from settlers and the FELDA officers. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to comprehend the study and allow interviewees to express their own opinions and speak freely. In this study, the interview is divided into two parts, starting with the settler and ending with the FELDA officers. This study also employed an interview protocol as a guide. In addition, to avoid providing false information, the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission using a digital recorder. Interviewees are selected from FELDA A and B and must be at least 18 years old. The FELDA officers interviewed were chosen based on their position, expertise, and experience with policy coordination and execution. This study has 44 participants, 35 of whom are settlers and nine of whom are FELDA officers. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis with the NVivo 12 software, ensuring a thorough and systematic examination of the collected information. Furthermore, the data analysis procedure was divided into three stages: developing themes, data coding, and theoretical coding.

In Chapter 4, the analysis was made, and several themes and codes in the data collection were identified. It was highlighted that there was a lack of participation and empowerment of the settlers in the SDP. The findings show that many of the settlers

did not understand the real meaning of participation. The settler most likely participates because of income generation. They tend to prioritize income generation over understanding the true nature of participation. This indicates that the settler did not receive adequate information about the SDP from the FELDA officers. This issue hinders the settler from fully utilizing the SDP opportunity, as the available information is limited. The study revealed that even among those who participated, not all settlers felt empowered. Several factors contributed to this, including the settlers' limited autonomy, the FELDA officer's dominance in power, centralised decision-making, one-way communication, cronyism, and many others. This factor leads to a lack of participation and empowerment in the SDP, as all decisions are made by the FELDA officers, and the settler must comply. Participation occurs when settlers are given the autonomy to make their own decisions without undue interference from the FELDA officers. As such, the programme failed to achieve the intended outcomes of empowerment and participation, as the settlers did not feel empowered or capable of enhancing their well-being.

Further discussion was then made in Chapter 5 regarding the discussion and conclusion. Overall, the findings identified three significant factors that hinder participation and empowerment in the SDP. First, settlers demonstrated a lack of understanding of meaningful participation. Second, the implementation of the SDP was heavily centralised, employing a top-down approach where the FELDA officers-controlled decisions without incorporating settlers' voices and ideas. This method diminished settlers' autonomy, reduced inclusivity, and limited the programme's overall effectiveness. Third, various structural and social barriers, such as the power dominance of the FELDA officers, inadequate access to information, unsuitable land conditions, and health challenges, constrained settlers' capacity to act independently and leverage the programme's resources to improve their well-being.

The study also outlines several limitations, such as its focus on only two settlements in the northern region and the fact that the participants were exclusively Malay. The researcher proposed recommendations to address these limitations, including expanding the sample size to include settlers from across Peninsular Malaysia, as well as from Sabah and Sarawak, and considering the inclusion of other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Indian, as participants. Overall, the study indicates that the SDP did not successfully facilitate settlers' participation and empowerment to enhance their well-being. Hence, the government, together with FELDA officers and

policymakers, must collaborate to reshape the programme in order to foster genuine participation and empowerment. This requires a paradigm shift from a top-down, directive approach to a more inclusive, transparent, and participatory model that values settlers' voices, autonomy, and Potential. Only through such a transformation can the SDP truly fulfil its objective of increasing settlers' income, strengthening food security, and contributing meaningfully to the national poverty eradication agenda. The success of any rural development programme ultimately hinges not merely on budget allocations or policies, but on the extent to which it empowers individuals to become active agents of change in their own lives.

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## **APPENDICES**

# APPENDIX 1

## Faculty Research Committee Decision No. 8/2023

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UNIVERSITI  
TEKNOLOGI  
MARA

Fakulti  
Sains Pentadbiran  
dan Pengajian  
Polisi

Surat Kami : 600-UITMKS/FSPPP(PT.34/6)  
Tarikh : 30 November 2023

### NUR RAIHAN ASILAH BINTI RASALI (2022430728)

Pelajar Pascasiswazah  
Fakulti Sains Pentadbiran dan Pengajian Polisi  
Universiti Teknologi MARA

Puan

### KEPUTUSAN JAWATANKUASA PENYELIDIKAN FAKULTI BILANGAN 8/2023

**TAJUK : PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE SETTLER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (PPP): A CASE STUDY FROM FELDA LUBUK MERBAU AND FELDA BUKIT TANGGA PENYERTAAN DAN PEMERKASAAN DALAM PROGRAM PEMBANGUNAN PENEROKA (PPP): KAJIAN KES DARI FELDA LUBUK MERBAU DAN FELDA BUKIT TANGGA**

Dengan hormatnya perkara di atas adalah dirujuk.

2. Mesyuarat Jawatankuasa Penyelidikan Fakulti bilangan 8/2023 bertarikh 30 November 2023 telah menilai dan membuat keputusan seperti berikut:

<b>Keputusan</b>	: Mesyuarat Jawatankuasa Penyelidikan Fakulti bilangan 8/2023 bertarikh 30 November 2023 bersetuju menyokong dan meluluskan permohonan ini untuk dimajukan kepada Sekretariat Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan UiTM apabila pemohon melaksanakan penambahbaikan dan cadangan seperti yang disyorkan oleh mesyuarat dikemaskini di dalam sistem RED.
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Sekian terima kasih.

Yang benar

**DR RADDUAN YUSOF**  
Pengerusi Ganti  
Jawatankuasa Penyelidikan Fakulti


s.k. 1) Fail Pentadbiran, FSPPP

Fakulti Sains Pentadbiran dan Pengajian Polisi  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Cawangan Negeri Sembilan  
Kampus Seremban  
Persiaran Seremban Tiga/1, Seremban 3  
70300 Seremban, Negeri Sembilan Darul Khusus.  
Tel : 06-634 2024/2026 Faks : 06-6345815



## APPENDIX 2

### Approval Letter- UiTM Research Ethics Committee

www.uitm.edu.my	
 UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA	<b>Pejabat</b> Timbalan Naib Canselor (Penyelidikan dan Inovasi)
Reference	: 600-TNCPI (5/1/6)
Our reference	: REC/01/2024 (PG/MR/27)
Date	: 1445H رجب 3 15 January 2024

**Ms Nur Raihan Asilah binti Rasali - 2022430728**  
(Supervisor: Dr Nor Ardyanti binti Ahmad)  
Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
40450 Shah Alam  
SELANGOR

سلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته and Greetings

Ms

**APPROVAL LETTER - UiTM RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). After considering your application, the Committee approved your proposal titled "Participation and Empowerment in the Settler Development Programme (PPP): A Case Study from FELDA Lubuk Merbau and FELDA Bukit Tangga (*Penyertaan dan Pemerkasaan dalam Program Pembangunan Peneroka (PPP): Kajian Kes dari FELDA Lubuk Merbau dan FELDA Bukit Tangga*)" at FELDA Lubuk Merbau, FELDA Bukit Tangga, Jabatan Pembangunan Pertanian & Ternakan FELDA, Pengurus Besar Wilayah, Felda Wilayah Alor Setar, Kedah, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Putrajaya.

Details of the approval are as follows:

<b>Ref. number:</b>	REC/01/2024 (PG/MR/27)
<b>Approval Period:</b>	15 January 2024 until 13 September 2024
<b>Authorised personnel:</b>	1. Nur Raihan Asilah binti Rasali 2. Dr Nor Ardyanti binti Ahmad 3. Dr Mahazril 'Aini binti Yaacob


The UiTM Research Ethics Committee operates in accordance to the ICH Good Clinical Practice Guidelines, Malaysian Good Clinical Practice Guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with these guidelines and declaration.

We draw to your attention the requirement that a report on this research, must be submitted every 12 months from the date of the approval or on the completion of the project, whichever occurs first. Failure to submit reports will result in withdrawal of consent for the project to proceed. Amendments, if any, to the study documents are to be submitted to the REC for approval.

If you require further information, please contact the REC Secretariat at 03-55448069/03-55442794 or email at recsecretariat@uitm.edu.my.





اوسنها، تكوي، موليا  
"MALAYSIA MADANI"  
"BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA"

Yours sincerely,



**EMERITUS PROFESSOR DATO' DR RAYMOND AZMAN ALI**  
Chairman  
UiTM Research Ethics Committee  
c.c.: Deputy Dean (PJI), Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, UiTM

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## AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Nur Raihan Asilah Binti Rasali obtained a Bachelor of Administrative Science (Hons.) in 2022 from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Merbok, Kedah. Currently pursuing a Master in Administrative Science at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor.

### LIST OF PUBLICATION:

- Rasali, N. R. A., Ahmad, N. A., & Yaacob, M. A. (2025). Examining factors affecting rural farmers' well-being: a case study of settler development programme or *Program Pembangunan Peneroka (PPP)* in Malaysia. *Journal of Administrative Science*, 22, 129-145.
- Rasali, N. R. A., Ahmad, N. A., & Yaacob, M. A. (2025). *Beyond intentions: Understanding the barriers to success in Malaysia's settler development programme (PPP) for FELDA settlers*. In Proceedings of the International Conference on Public Policy and Social Sciences – Student Edition (ICoPS-SE 2024) (pp. 70–76). Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA.