UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTIONS OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF PLANTATION WORKERS (NUPW): A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG UNION MEMBERS IN KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

Adilah Othman*
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu, Malaysia
adilahothman@uitm.edu.my

Siti Noor Aishah Mohd Sidik
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu, Malaysia

Mohd Saad Mohd Yusoff
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: This qualitative study aims to examine the understanding among NUPW members regarding the actual functions of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW). Established in 1946 in Malaya, NUPW serves as a labor union representing the interests of plantation workers. Today, the union operates through 8 branches across Peninsular Malaysia and has played a crucial role in strengthening the voice and rights of workers in the plantation sector. Through various initiatives and ongoing efforts, NUPW functions as the primary channel for plantation workers to advocate for social justice, improve living standards, and ensure the protection of their welfare. This research was conducted in two East Coast states, namely Kelantan and Terengganu. A total of 20 participants were selected to take part in in-depth interview sessions. The findings revealed noticeable differences between the two states. NUPW members in Kelantan demonstrated a broader understanding of NUPW's functions, particularly in terms of social support, welfare, and safety. In contrast, NUPW members in Terengganu primarily associated NUPW with welfare and safety aspects only. Based on previous research, the core functions of NUPW include providing support in economic empowerment, social development, welfare protection, and workplace safety. Therefore, the varying levels of awareness found in this study suggest gaps in communication and engagement between the union and NUPW members. Overall, this study highlights the need for enhanced union outreach and educational initiatives to ensure plantation workers fully understand and benefit from the union's roles and services.

Keywords: Functions, members, NUPW, plantation, understanding

1. Introduction

The National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), established in 1946 under P. P. Narayanan, was formed to protect plantation workers from exploitation and social injustice. Initially based in Selangor, it expanded to Kelantan and Terengganu in the 1960s and now operates eight branches across Peninsular Malaysia, excluding Sabah and Sarawak due to differing labor laws. NUPW advocates for workers' welfare, including wages, housing, and education, while ensuring rights are recognized and protected through formal representation and negotiation, serving as a key platform for improving living standards (NUPW, 2024).

Based on previous studies, numerous researchers have highlighted that the core functions of trade unions primarily revolve around assisting workers in several key areas, including economic, safety, welfare, and social aspects (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ngah & Yaacob, 2024; Loisulie, 2024). Economically, unions play a critical role in advocating for fair wages, ensuring job security, and improving overall working conditions. From a safety perspective, unions help safeguard workers by promoting adherence to occupational health and safety standards, providing training, and addressing workplace hazards. In terms of welfare, unions are instrumental in facilitating access to housing, education, healthcare, and other benefits that improve the quality of life for workers and their families. Socially, unions foster a

sense of community, solidarity, and collective representation, enabling workers to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making, and influence organizational and policy outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to reexamine these four aspects economic, safety, welfare, and social within the context of the NUPW. As a result, it aims to gain a deeper understanding of how NUPW functions in practice to meet the needs of its members, particularly among plantation workers in Kelantan and Terengganu.

1.1 *Problem Statement*

According to records from the NUPW, as of December 2024, the registered membership in the two East Coast states totalled 900 members in Terengganu and 1,400 members in Kelantan. Although the data indicate a relatively high level of worker enrolment in NUPW, interviews with the union's management reveal that only a small proportion of members are actively engaged in attending meetings and discussing issues related to workers' welfare and rights. Consequently, this study aims to assist NUPW in identifying the primary causes of this limited engagement and in formulating more effective strategies for promoting member participation. Such measures are essential to enhance plantation workers' understanding and awareness of NUPW's core functions, particularly regarding economic, safety, welfare, and social matters. These efforts are expected to strengthen NUPW's role as a principal organization advocating for the rights and well-being of plantation workers in Malaysia.

1.2 *Research Questions*

RQ1: To what extent do NUPW members understand the union's primary functions concerning economic, social, welfare, and safety aspects?

RQ2: What are the key expectations held by NUPW members regarding the future roles, services, and support provided by the union?

RQ3: What are the most effective media platforms and communication channels for promoting NUPW's core functions and disseminating information to its members?

2. Literature Review

Previous research on trade unions highlights that unions perform multiple essential functions that support workers across economic, welfare, social, and safety dimensions. According to Gaong, Ahmad and Yussof (2022), collective action by trade unions is essential in improving employment terms and conditions, particularly in advocating for better wages and benefits, which demonstrates the economic function of unions in advancing workers' financial security. Furthermore, studies illustrate that trade unions are central to safeguarding employee welfare by facilitating access to social support mechanisms such as health care, financial assistance, and other welfare programs that enhance workers' quality of life, underscoring the importance of welfare functions in union activities (Ramle & Ahmad, 2023). Unions also play a significant role in fostering social solidarity and collective representation. According to Ismail et al. (2018), unions help unify workers in advocating for shared interests and enable stronger communication channels between employees and employers, which reflects the social function of unions in building worker unity and voice. Another important function of trade unions is ensuring workplace safety and health. Trade unions provide a platform for workers to voice safety concerns, participate in discussions related to occupational hazards, and negotiate for safer working conditions with employers. Through representation and collective engagement, unions can contribute to improving workplace safety practices and protecting workers from potential risks and exploitation (Nor & Selamat, 2020).

2.1 *Underpinning Theory- Mobley Turnover Model*

Mobley's Turnover Model (Mobley 1977), originally developed to explain why employees leave organizations, can be applied to understand union member disengagement within the NUPW. In this context, turnover refers not to leaving employment, but to members reducing participation or

withdrawing from the union. The model views disengagement as a process that begins with dissatisfaction, followed by cognitive evaluation, intention to leave, and ultimately withdrawal behaviour. Dissatisfaction may arise when NUPW is perceived as failing to fulfil its four core functions: economic (wages and benefits), safety (occupational health and safety), welfare (housing, education, healthcare), and social (participation, representation, solidarity). When expectations in these areas are unmet, members may begin to question the value of their membership and consider alternatives, such as remaining passive. This evaluation may lead to an intention to leave, which strongly predicts actual disengagement, including reduced participation or formal withdrawal. Applying Mobley's model provides a useful conceptual framework to understand union passivity and turnover. It highlights that effective delivery of economic, safety, welfare, and social functions is crucial for sustaining member satisfaction, engagement, and overall union effectiveness.

3. Research Methodology

According to Barrett (2018), qualitative research typically employs three primary approaches to data collection: interviews, focus groups, and observation. Among these, interviews are considered the most direct method for obtaining rich and comprehensive insights into a particular phenomenon. Similarly, Creswell (2014) notes that interviews are highly effective for data collection, as they allow participants to provide detailed historical information while giving the researcher control over the flow and pace of questioning. In line with these perspectives, this study utilized interviews as the primary data collection method to gather in-depth and precise information regarding employees' understanding of the functions of NUPW.
A total of 20 union members were selected as respondents, comprising 10 members from Terengganu and 10 members from Kelantan. The qualitative study was conducted in collaboration with researchers using the interview method. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and to explore plantation workers' understanding of the core functions of the NUPW.

This study employed a purposive sampling approach involving 20 participants from the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), comprising 10 participants from Kelantan and 10 participants from Terengganu. The participants were selected based on their relevance and experience with the research context. The sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as it aligns with the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was continued until no new themes or insights emerged. The inclusion of participants from two different states allows for broader contextual insights while still maintaining a relatively homogeneous background in terms of organizational affiliation and roles within NUPW. This balance enabled the study to capture both shared and context-specific experiences. Furthermore, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, this study prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalization. The use of a manageable sample size facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. Prior methodological literature suggests that data saturation in qualitative research is often achieved within a sample size ranging from 6 to 12 participants per group (Guest et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the selected sample size is deemed sufficient to generate credible and insightful findings within the context of NUPW.

4. Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore members' understanding of the NUPW functions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 members (10 from Terengganu and 10 from Kelantan) to gain in-depth insights into perceptions of union roles, challenges, and welfare issues. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and generate codes, which were grouped into four main themes: economic, safety, welfare, and social. The economic theme covered wages, benefits, and job security; safety focused on occupational health and workplace protection; welfare included housing, education, and additional worker support; and social encompassed activities and platforms that promote solidarity, collective representation, and communication among members. The relationships between themes were examined to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among respondents within and across the

four thematic domains. This comparative analysis provided deeper insights into how NUPW's functions are interpreted and experienced by members. Together, the themes offer a comprehensive understanding of union engagement, operational challenges, and perceived effectiveness, contributing to knowledge of trade union functions in the plantation sector. This study employed a purposive sampling approach involving 20 participants from the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), comprising 10 participants from Kelantan and 10 participants from Terengganu. The participants were selected based on their relevance and experience with the research context. The sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as it aligns with the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was continued until no new themes or insights emerged.
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5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings structured around the three research questions

5.1 *Research Findings (Kelantan)*

RQ1: To what extent do NUPW members understand the union's primary functions concerning economic, social, welfare, and safety aspects?

NUPW members in Kelantan show a broader understanding of the union, linking it to welfare, safety, and social functions, including peer support and community activities. *"NUPW helps us a lot in terms of welfare, security, and social aspects. We feel more protected/cared for when there is a union."* (Respondent K1-K10). "Every year, NUPW organizes study visits that include social programs and educational tours to places such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka, Kapas Island, and Thailand." (Respondent K3). Such activities enhance cohesion and engagement, reinforcing members' sense of protection and belonging (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021; Ngah & Yaacob, 2024).

RQ2: What are the key expectations held by NUPW members regarding the future roles, services, and support provided by the union?

Interview findings reveal that NUPW members in Kelantan have clear expectations for the union to enhance its services, communication, and support. Three main areas emerged: improving information delivery, strengthening social programs, and facilitating job opportunities.

5.1.1 Use of Social Media for Information Sharing

Members suggested using short videos via WhatsApp or TikTok for faster and easier understanding. "*If possible, provide the information in the form of short videos. It's easier to understand and reaches us quickly, because everyone uses WhatsApp and TikTok now."* (Respondent K2). Research shows that social media enables faster communication and greater member engagement (Adzharuddin & Nagamma, 2024).

5.1.2 Continuation of Educational Tours

Members emphasized the importance of educational tours for strengthening fellowship and providing exposure to new experiences. *"We hope these trips continue because that is when we can get to know and be close to other members. Besides, we rarely get the chance to travel far."* (Respondent K7). Studies indicate that union-organized social activities foster solidarity, interpersonal relationships, and participation in union programs (Tapia & Turner, 2021).

5.1.3 NUPW as a Job Opportunity Facilitator

Members expect the union to assist family members in accessing plantation jobs, acting as a bridge between employers and prospective employees. *"If there are children or relatives who want to work in the plantation, we hope NUPW can help connect them with the plantation management."* (Respondent K5). Research shows that trade unions often facilitate employment and labor market access, supporting members and their families through networking and organizational assistance (Baskaran et al., 2022)

RQ3: What are the most effective media platforms and communication channels for promoting NUPW's core functions and disseminating information to its members?

Interviews indicate that NUPW members in Kelantan prefer a combination of face-to-face (physical) methods and simple digital formats for information delivery.

5.1.4 Face-to-Face Sharing

Members find face-to-face sessions clearer and useful for immediate questions. *"If we meet face-to-face, it's easier for us to ask questions if we don't understand. It is much clearer."* (Respondent K4). Despite the growth of digital tools, research shows that in-person interactions enhance satisfaction, engagement, and relational quality by supporting richer feedback, emotional connection, and clearer message interpretation (Lee et al., 2025). This highlights the continued value of personal interaction for union communication.

5.1.5 Short Video Sharing (WhatsApp/TikTok)

Members suggested using short videos for quick and easy communication, especially during breaks (Respondent K6). Studies indicate that short videos on so. *"People watch short videos quickly. Sometimes even during breaks, we can just open WhatsApp."* social media effectively disseminate information and increase audience engagement due to their concise format and broad reach (Zhou, 2025).

5.2 *Research Findings (Terengganu)*

RQ1: To what extent do NUPW members understand the union's primary functions concerning economic, social, welfare, and safety aspects?

NUPW members in Terengganu primarily emphasize welfare and security, viewing the union as a source of assistance during crises and as a protector of workers' safety rights. The social function is less recognized, and both Kelantan and Terengganu members show limited understanding of NUPW's economic role, such as income growth or long-term financial support. Differences in comprehension between the states suggest that proactive state-level branches, through well-planned programs, enhance member engagement and awareness, while limited or inconsistent activities may reduce understanding and participation.

RQ2: What are the key expectations held by NUPW members regarding the future roles, services, and support provided by the union?

Interviews reveal that NUPW members in Terengganu have several expectations for the union to improve their welfare and well-being. These expectations cover facilities, social programs, member assistance, and administrative effectiveness.

5.2.1 A shortage of plantation housing

Some workers are compelled to rent accommodation outside the plantation and bear additional transportation costs. Members hope NUPW will raise their need for housing or fuel allowances. *"There isn't enough plantation housing, so many have to rent outside. If possible, we hope NUPW can help voice our need for a housing or fuel allowance, as we spend our own money daily."* (Respondent T4). This supports research showing that trade unions advocate for workers' welfare by negotiating housing and allowances to meet basic needs and reduce living costs (Ismail & Owaida, 2023).

5.2.2 Organizing Educational Tours

Workers stated that tours are not just recreational but serve to strengthen bonds between members. *"Organizing tours would be great; it allows us to get closer to other members. Plantation work is exhausting, so programs like that give us a bit of a boost."* (Respondent T2). Research indicates that participation in organized shared activities such as tours or team-building interventions can enhance social cohesion, strengthen interpersonal connections, and foster a sense of unity among group members (Mathew, 2024).

5.2.3 Contributions for New Members

Workers suggested providing a form of appreciation for new members to encourage participation. *"For new members, NUPW could provide a small contribution, like a hamper. It's not about the value, but about feeling appreciated."* (Respondent T7). Previous research indicates that recognition and small rewards for new members can enhance engagement, foster a sense of belonging, and strengthen commitment to the organization (Kim & Park, 2022).

5.2.4 Schooling Assistance for Members' Children

Awareness of educational needs led workers to suggest schooling aid at least once a year. *"Schooling for children is expensive now. If the union could help with even RM100 a year, it would be a huge help."* (Respondent T1). Research shows that trade unions play a key role in supporting members' welfare by offering educational aid, which can improve family well-being and strengthen members' attachment to the organization (Rahman & Ahmad, 2021).

5.2.5 Utilizing Membership Fees for Recreation and Academic Excellence

Workers hope their contributions are channelled back into welfare and family motivation activities. *"If possible, we want to see our fees reflected in activities, such as recreation or awards for children who perform well academically."* (Respondent T6). Trade unions not only engage in collective bargaining but also organise activities and services that support members' welfare and foster stronger social ties, which can enhance solidarity and participation within the union (Ramle & Ahmad, 2023).

5.2.6 Monthly Meetings at Factories or Plantations

Workers noted that face-to-face meetings at the workplace would improve engagement and understanding of current issues. *"If meetings are held at the workplace, more people can attend. Sometimes we lack info because we are far from the office."* (Respondent T3). Research on union participation shows that local union meetings that create psychologically safe, in-person environments encourage higher attendance and engagement, as members feel valued, can voice concerns, and perceive meetings as effective communication platforms (Mellor, 2023).

5.2.7 Increasing Branch Staffing

Some workers noted that service is affected because branch officers have to manage two states simultaneously. *"The Secretary isn't always around because he oversees two states. So, if we want to ask anything, the response is slow."* (Respondent T5). Research indicates that local union representation and accessible union personnel enhance member engagement and perceived union effectiveness, as union presence and proactive support at the workplace level encourage participation and satisfaction among members (Ngah & Yaacob, 2024).

5.2.8 Contributions for Retiring Members

Workers proposed an appreciation gift for long-term members as a mark of recognition for their loyalty. *"If retiring members receive a small contribution, it's enough to make them feel valued for being NUPW members since they were young."* (Respondent T8). Research shows that trade unions not only negotiate wages and conditions but also contribute to workers' welfare through non-wage benefits and support mechanisms that enhance member well-being and social protection (Clemens, 2026).

RQ3: What are the most effective media platforms and communication channels for promoting NUPW's core functions and disseminating information to its members?

NUPW members in Terengganu still lean toward face-to-face interaction over digital methods. *"If the Secretary visits often and explains things to us in person, that's what we understand best. It's easier."* (Respondent T3).

5.2.9 Face-to-Face Sharing

Members believe that direct meetings at the plantation deliver information more clearly and effectively. They expressed a strong desire to meet with the NUPW Secretary frequently to clarify issues and voice grievances. *Research supports that in-person communication fosters stronger engagement, clearer understanding, and higher member satisfaction compared to digital-only methods in union contexts* (Mellor, 2023).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings reveal a clear contrast between NUPW members in Kelantan and Terengganu. NUPW members in Kelantan demonstrated a broader understanding of NUPW's functions, particularly in terms of social support, welfare, and safety. In contrast, NUPW members in Terengganu primarily associated NUPW with welfare and safety aspects only In Terengganu, members maintain a traditional "crisis-only" view, seeing the union mainly as a safety net during accidents or emergencies. This suggests that without consistent social and educational programs, members remain less aware of the union's broader economic and social benefits.

To bridge this gap and harmonize the level of member engagement across both states, several strategic actions are recommended. First, NUPW should prioritize the replication of Kelantan's social model in Terengganu. Organizing educational tours is not merely a recreational luxury; it is a vital mechanism for building trust and unity among workers who often feel isolated in plantation environments. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for a "Digital Transformation" in communication. As suggested by members, transitioning from long-form text to short, engaging video content on platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp will ensure that information is accessible, especially for those with limited time or literacy. This digital shift should be complemented by a renewed focus on economic literacy, explicitly educating members on how union representation directly impacts their long-term financial stability and wage growth.

Lastly, the union must address the administrative and logistical bottlenecks that currently hinder member satisfaction in Terengganu. The study clearly indicates that a lack of physical presence and

slow response times due to staffing shortages have dampened member morale. By ensuring that each state has dedicated officers and increasing the frequency of face-to-face meetings directly at the plantations, the union can restore its visibility. Additionally, introducing tangible welfare incentives such as annual schooling assistance or retirement tokens would serve as a powerful gesture of appreciation. By combining these physical, digital, and social strategies, NUPW can evolve into a more robust and unified organization that is perceived by all members as an indispensable partner in both their professional and personal lives.

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