

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR HAPPIER HOUSEHOLDS: THE RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The government plays a very important role in providing for its people in terms of developing opportunities to improve the household's socio-economic development. But how far has the local government developments made the people happy? Finding a balance between the socio-economic development and the happiness of the household concern is important to sustain the development well. This paper discusses the government initiatives and perspectives from the residents of Batu Kawa on household happiness are also reported. Data were analysed using pictography and focus group discussions. The findings show that the local government is responsible for doing their part quite well in providing the basic needs of the residents, though some improvements and addition to amenities would be essential to contribute to happiness among the households in the studied area.

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable socio-economic development in emerging economies like Malaysia has shown an encouraging pattern over the years. By upholding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Kingdom, the Malaysian government is committed to providing and ensuring the citizens are given their rights and opportunities in economic activities, education and enjoy the quality of life in general. Nazry (2021) in his findings concluded that the Malaysian government is always showing good support for achieving the SDGs for the country. For Sarawak in particular, the local government dedicated its resources to support the needs of the people in various aspects (e.g., Voon, Wang & Teo, 2021). It is undeniable that the role of the government is vital to achieving these goals. However, do these socio-economic development initiatives meet the expectations of the households? What do the residents think about the developments taking place in their household area? This research uses Batu Kawa, a suburban area in Kuching Division, Sarawak as the case study to identify factors contributing to household happiness.

Batu Kawa is a suburban area located in the upper end of Kuching, Sarawak close to the Bau Division. The area covers within the 3rd Mile Roundabout to after the Datuk Chong Kiun Kong Bridge is under the responsibility of the Padawan Municipal Council. In the 1990s, the residents of Batu Kawa were mainly the Chinese Hakkas and Malays but in recent years, the population prosper into a diverse background. As Batu Kawa experienced rapid development for the past decade, the suburbs attracted many households to reside in the area. From then on, a lot more socio-economic activities have actively taken place in Batu Kawa. The households are provided with varieties of developments and amenities to suit their needs ranging from infrastructure, roads, shops, wet markets, common recreational ground, clinics, retail outlets and housing projects. These developments in Batu Kawa are not just beneficial to the households residing in the area, but also has a huge potential to be developed as one of the tourist spot for the tourists to explore this historical place, experience the local culture and lifestyles. Furthermore, the locality is very close to the city centre, making Batu Kawa easily accessible for all.



Figure 1. The location points of Batu Kawa from 3rd Mile, Kuching, Sarawak
Source: Google Map

The recent developments in Batu Kawa are enticing for economic developments in the area. A mega project such as the Batu Kawa Waterfront Project and the Batu Kawa Wetlands Project funded by the state government, for example, brings Batu Kawa to the next level which opens more opportunities for the households to take part directly in the economic activities. From an area known for being easily affected by floods during the monsoon seasons, Batu Kawa now is the next in line choice for people to settle in. The infrastructures especially the roads have been continuously repaired and the well-being of the residents has always been the best concern.



Figure 2. Road upgrading project by the local government in Batu Kawa
Source : Facebook page of DUN N.14 Batu Kawah Service Centre

Despite the promising developments in Batu Kawa, the opinions and how it is perceived by the people in the area are not known. Therefore, this paper reports on the perspectives of the residents on the socio-economic developments in Batu Kawa. The findings from the paper will contribute to understanding the factors of happiness among the household residing in Batu Kawa. With these valuable inputs, relevant parties may use the information to plan on appropriate developments needed by the residents. Identification of the factors contributing towards household happiness will not only benefit the policymakers but will also contribute to the literature of household happiness studies. The paper is organized into a few sections. The first section introduces Batu Kawa as the background of the study followed by a substantial amount of literature reviews in the second section. The third section describes the methodology used for the study. In the later section, findings and discussions, and conclusions are also provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-economic Development and Household Happiness

Happiness is defined based on one's satisfaction with life. Happiness studies covered various aspects since it was first discovered. Among the earliest happiness instrument widely used to measure happiness was the Oxford Happiness Index (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Using a six-point Likert Scale, the instrument consists of 29 statements to describe respondents' happiness state. To date, happiness studies have contributed an in-depth understanding of individuals' perspectives on quality of life and their well being. Happiness determinants vary among individuals. Life satisfaction is related closely to happiness (Shah et al, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose & Maslauskaite, 2012). Factors such as level of income, education and occupation, gender, age, social status, family size and locality leave significant impacts on how satisfied an individual is with his or her life. Being unemployed for instance means an individual lost his or her source of income. A study by Ismail, Hafizi and Nor (2014) found that people living in the rural areas are happier due to lesser stress compared to the ones living in the city. This shows that mental well-being is an important indicator defining individual happiness. However, whether the person

is living in the rural or the city, the residence of stay contributes to their happiness (López-Ruiz et al., 2021).

In a household context, happiness is understood as a collective satisfaction among individuals who are immediate family members who live together in a home. Past studies were conducted in various situations and locations have consistent findings on how socio-economic aspects influence household happiness. Rahayu (2011) found that Indonesian happiness is determined by income (total and relative), the level of education, views on health and some aspects of social capital which includes the qualities among people's behaviour in society and religion. Clark et al. (2017) also described income in both family and individual adult situations as one of the sources of life satisfaction while Sukiman & Basah (2021) highlights economic stability may cause distress and affect household happiness. However, in comparison to the importance of other factors such as mental illness, income is not on top of the list. As much as previous studies generally conclude that socio-economic factors especially, income level contributes to happiness, it is not necessarily the case that an increase in income will make a person or a household happier. Besides, other factors such as perceived social values as found by Ahmad et al. (2021) are also perceived as an important aspect to the people who live within a society. After careful reviews of the literature, a gap is present in the research information describing the situations in smaller sub-urban areas available, especially in Sarawak. Hence this paper will contribute to more insights into the said area.

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports the preliminary stage of research on socio-economic sustainability where inputs from the findings will be used to design a questionnaire for further assessment at a later stage. For this paper, the study employed a qualitative method, utilizing a netnography method as an approach to the study. As a precaution to the recent development of the pandemic COVID-19, a discussion session was conducted using Google Meet to collect data on the perspectives of the Batu Kawa households. A total of 12 household members of Batu Kawa participated and the following questions were asked during the session:

1) Are you happy staying in Batu Kawa? Why?

- 2) What are the challenges/problems faced? / (How do you feel about the development in Batu Kawa?)
- 3) How can your household be happier?
- 4) How can the government/others help to make your household happy?
- 5) What can you do to make your household (all family members) happy?
- 6) Any other suggestions to ensure that your household is always happy?

To ensure the members of the focus group are ideal to represent the selected population of households in Batu Kawa, the participants in the session were carefully selected based on their Batu Kawa addresses, occupations and cultural background. The responses were later analyzed by putting them into a set of meaningful themes for further discussions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 12 respondents participated in the first focus group session. The participants are the residents of Batu Kawa with various backgrounds. Below are the demographic details of the respondents.

Table 3.1. Demographic Table of the Respondents

Variables	n	%
Gender		
Male	4	33
Female	8	67
Age		
25 years and below	1	8
between 26 – 50 years old	9	75
Above 51 years old	2	17
Race		
Malay	2	17
Chinese	4	33
Iban	3	25
Bidayuh	3	25
Marital status		
Single	3	25
Married	9	75
Occupation		
Government servants	5	42
Private sector	1	8
Self- employed	4	33
Student /fresh graduate	2	17
Total	12	100

Source: Author

The majority of the participants were female (67%). In terms of age, most of the participants (75%) were aged between 26 years old to 50 years old. On the respondents' race, the participation of different racial groups was quite evenly distributed between the Malays, Chinese, Iban and Bidayuh. The majority of the respondents were Chinese (33%) while the least percentage is the Malay participant (17%). In regards to marital status, 75% of the participants were married while were single (25%) living in Batu Kawa with their family members. 40% out of the total participants were civil servants and only 8% were working with the private sectors while the rest are either self-employed or student/ fresh graduates.

A total of 25 responses were recorded as the reasons contributing to happiness among the respondents staying in Batu Kawa. The 25 responses were later analyzed into a category and 10 happiness factors were gathered as a common theme. The happiness factors are listed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. The Happiness Factors living in Batu Kawa

Happiness factors
1. Comfortable living environments
2. Close proximity to government facilities (schools, hospitals)
3. Close proximity to commercial facilities (market, shopping)
4. Harmony multiracial neighbourhood
5. Friendly neighbourhood
6. Freedom for social activities
7. Logistic convenience for workplace
8. Rapid developments
9. Well taken care facilities (road)
10. Family members reside in Batu Kawa

Source: Author

The respondents are generally happy staying in Batu Kawa due to the pleasant and comfortable living environment allowing them to carry out social activities around the neighbourhood. One of the responses is as follows;

“I think living in Batu Kawa is good because the environment is quite safe. Though during the Movement Control Order(MCO), I can still do activities like jogging around my area with my family .”

Other reasons contributing to the happiness are because of the convenience of staying in the area in terms of logistics, availability of

facilities, and distance from workplaces. Respondents highlighted that the availability of government facilities like hospitals and schools and commercial facilities make it convenient and cost-saving for the residents. Besides, having family members staying in the same area was stated as one of the reasons for being happy staying in Batu Kawa. Most of the respondents are staying with their family members and having their other relatives who are also staying in Batu Kawa. In short, being around a social group like family does make a difference in how a person feels. In terms of development, the respondents are quite pleased with the rapid developments happening in Batu Kawa in recent years. The new townships, housing projects are booming and other attractions are made available for the residents to enjoy. Moreover, some of the respondents also pointed out that the local authorities do take good care of the public facilities, especially the road. This is evident by the fast action taken by the authority when there was a complaint regarding the road condition in Batu Kawa.

The participants pointed out 18 responses to their frustrations or challenges. The responses are later grouped and 6 prominent pain points emerged. The pain points are listed below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. The Pain Points Living in Batu Kawa

Pain points
1. Traffic condition during peak hours
2. Road condition (small and dark)
3. Safety issues
4. Criminal activities
5. Poor public transportation service
6. Irresponsible pet owners

Source: Author

Firstly, the respondents expressed their utmost frustration with the traffic condition during peak hours. Most participants mentioned that though the distance to most locations they go to daily such as schools, workplaces and markets can be reached within 5 to 15 minutes approximately, the heavy traffic during peak hours doubled the time. This caused a lot of dissatisfaction with the situation and some believed that if the road can be widened, the traffic flow may be improved. The one-way roads in front of MJC, to and from Batu Kawa to Kuching are also believed to be the source of the massive jam during peak hours. The busy traffic flow shows the population of Batu Kawa has increased tremendously from previous years while those who

do not stay in the area use the road that connects Kuching with other areas such as Bau and Lundu. A respondent pointed;

“ The jam is very bad. I have to find an alternative road to escape the jam ”.

Though the roads in Batu Kawa are conveniently connected, the alternative route is often slightly further than the main roads. Besides traffic issues, the condition of the road was also mentioned. Some roads are without lights and can be extremely dangerous for users. The safety issues were also discussed. Robbery and snatch thieves cases happened around the commercial area and neighbourhoods in Batu Kawa causing worries over security and safety among the residents. A few respondents shared:

“ My neighbour’s house was broken into a few times during broad daylight. Our children’s scooters we kept at the car porch was also stolen. ”

“A few snatch thieves cases also happened in our residential area. The easily accessible roads made it easier for these criminals to escape from getting caught. ”

Besides traffic, the respondents also pointed out their frustrations over the inefficient public transport services in Batu Kawa, typically referring to the bus services. During the discussion, many agreed that public bus services are still needed by the people as not everyone in Batu Kawa knows how to use e-hailing services such as Grab. However, the current public bus service was said to be quite disappointing as very few buses move around the area, unlike before. Another pain point shared by the respondents is the selfish attitude of some neighbours with pets. The irresponsible act pointed out was not caring enough for the pets and letting the pets free around the neighbourhood. The problem arose when the pet pooped in front of the other neighbour’s gate. Another problem discussed was some neighbours who rear livestock (chicken) in the residential area. This caused discomfort due to the unpleasant smell and noises. The respondents agreed that if these challenges were overcome, Batu Kawa will be an even more pleasant place to stay in.

The next discussion question posted to the participants was on the government roles to contribute to household happiness living in Batu Kawa. On this subject, the participants stated 23 responses which are

categorized into 3 themes listed below in Table 3.4. The first role expected of the government to contribute happiness for the residents of Batu Kawa is to provide more amenities. These amenities range from essential services such as hospitals, schools, fire stations, banks, training centres, and higher institutions. For the latest development in Batu Kawa Waterfront, a respondent suggested that government allow a night market to operate around the area to attract visitors and provide an opportunity for the locals to engage in business as one way to improve their family income.

Other than that, respondents also pointed out the amenities provided should also include recreational places such as parks and centres, with the building of modern design for the aesthetic view. Respondents shared that around Batu Kawa, they are many buildings built however they are left vacant and not very welcoming to see. Moreover, the respondents felt that they would be happier if government take action to improve traffic and road safety in the area. A systematic road system is needed to improve the traffic flow and reduce traffic congestion. The heavy traffic caused a lot of stress and is risky to road users. At night, as some roads are still without street lights, the government should allocate some budget to provide street lights for the sake of users' safety and security. Lastly, the government is expected to ensure effective enforcement of safety and security in Batu Kawa. For instance, the police car actively patrols around the neighbourhood and commercial area to combat crimes in Batu Kawa.

Table 3.4. Government Roles to Contribute to Household Happiness

Government roles
1. Provide more amenities 2. Improve traffic and road safety 3. Enforcement of safety and security

Source: Author

The next question asked was on how the respondents make their household happier. 21 responses were collected from the respondents and arranged 4 common themes as listed in Table 3.5 below. Among the four themes, family bonding recorded the highest number of responses. The respondents mentioned that family bonding makes the household happier. This can be achieved through spending time together engaging in social activities and interactions among family members. Some respondents shared that hosting family events, cooking and sharing meals, doing shopping

and other activities like watching movies do make the household happy as it provides the chance to unwind. This finding is supported by Park & Joshanloo (2021) who found that family relationships contribute to happiness among the household members. The household is also happier when there are positive moral values among the family members. The finding shows that the respondents emphasized the importance of high tolerance, cooperation, and respect to be a happy family, besides living a healthy lifestyle which includes exercising regularly together and getting enough sleep. A few respondents also agreed that achieving work-life balance makes the household happy. This also caters to the social aspect in terms of religion and social support among religious group communities in the housing area. One of the statements from a respondent on the matter is quoted as follows:

“It is very important to have a work-life balance, when we are happy, we can contribute more.”

Table 3.5. Responses on How to Make the Households Happier

How to make a household happier?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family bonding 2. Positive moral values 3. Work-life balance 4. Being healthy

Source: Author

Finally, the respondents were invited to name one socio-economic development in Batu Kawa that would make the household happier. Out of the 12 respondents who participated in the session, 9 provided their responses. The responses are listed in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6. Suggestions on One Socio-economic Development in Batu Kawa for a Happier Household

Suggestions on one socio-economic development in Batu Kawa for a Happier Household
1. Strengthen internet connection provided by internet providers
2. Improve the traffic
3. Mini stadium and sports centre
4. Recycle centre
5. Facilities at Batu Kawa, the public park
6. Pathway for a cyclist for their safety and motorcycle path
7. Walkway from Batu Kawa to Kuching Waterfront for a nice jogging path
8. An affordable recreational club for kids and elderly
9. Engage local council and government to match the budget with the wish list

Source: Author

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the socio-economic developments in Batu Kawa are closely related to the happiness of its residents. From the responses gathered, the inputs given by the respondents discussed earlier are found to be driven by the five dimensions of sustainability which are economic, environmental, institutional, and technical. It is safe to conclude that the household of Batu Kawa would be happier if the problems highlighted such as the traffic conditions are addressed. This also means that government plays a very important role in ensuring household happiness in Batu Kawa. Apart from that, the residents also believe that household happiness can be achieved by socializing with family members. These findings and observations have contributed another useful perspective for the research to proceed to another stage.

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All authors made significant contributions to this article. Vloreen Nity Mathew, Professor Dr. Voon Boo Ho, Kelvin Goh Tee Hiong, Dr. Abang Muhamad Azlan and Dr. Grace Phang Ing contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the result and in writing the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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