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BRIDGING THE EDUCATION DIVIDE: MALAYSIA'S PATH TO ACHIEVING SDG 4

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Introduction

Education is the backbone of any progressive society, and in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Malaysia has made significant strides in ensuring quality education for all. SDG 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable education, aiming to provide lifelong learning opportunities.

However, despite Malaysia's commendable efforts, several challenges hinder the country's ability to fully achieve this goal. Issues such as urban-rural disparities, socioeconomic gaps, marginalized communities' access to education, gender disparities and teacher quality continue to pose significant barriers to educational equality.

Urban-Rural Disparities: A Persistent Challenge

One of the most pressing concerns in Malaysia's education system is the stark contrast between urban and rural educational opportunities.



Figure 1: Orang Asli schoolchildren faces hurdles in accessing quality education (Source: The Sun, 2022)

Students in rural areas, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, and among the indigenous Orang Asli communities, face significant hurdles in accessing quality education.

Poor infrastructure, inadequate school facilities, and a lack of trained teachers contribute to the widening educational gap. The government has introduced initiatives to improve rural

education, such as increasing the allocation of resources and deploying more trained educators to these regions. However, these measures are often insufficient due to logistical difficulties and budget constraints.

Without sustained intervention, rural students will continue to lag behind their urban counterparts in academic achievements and career opportunities.



Figure 2: Children from low-income families are unable to go to school or fully benefit from our education systems (Source: UNICEF, 2015)

Socioeconomic Barriers to Learning

Education should be a tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, but in Malaysia, socioeconomic status continues to dictate access to quality education.

Children from low-income families struggle with the financial burden of education, including the costs of tuition, school supplies, and transportation. The disparity becomes more apparent when wealthier families can afford private schooling and additional tutoring, thereby widening the achievement gap between students from.

different economic backgrounds. The government’s financial aid programs, such as *Bantuan Awal Persekolahan* and the *Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin (KWAPM)*, aim to support underprivileged students.

However, ensuring that these funds are adequately distributed and reach the most vulnerable communities remains a challenge. More targeted policies and consistent monitoring are necessary to address these economic inequalities in education.

Marginalized Communities: The Forgotten Learners

Malaysia’s education system still struggles to provide adequate learning opportunities for marginalized groups, including stateless and refugee children. Without legal documentation, these children are often denied access to public schools, forcing them to rely on informal education centers that lack standardized curricula and qualified teachers. Similarly, students with disabilities face inadequate support, as special education facilities and trained personnel remain scarce.

Although policies exist to promote inclusive education, implementation remains inconsistent. A more inclusive framework, accompanied by increased investment in special education programs, is necessary to ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to quality education.

Gender Disparities in STEM Education

While Malaysia has successfully achieved gender parity in overall school enrollment, gender disparities persist in specific fields of study, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Male students dominate these disciplines, while female students are often underrepresented due to societal stereotypes and a lack of encouragement to pursue STEM careers. To address this, targeted programs aimed at promoting STEM education among girls must be strengthened. Scholarships, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in breaking gender biases and fostering a more balanced representation in STEM fields.

Teacher Training and Quality Education

The quality of education is directly linked to the competency of teachers. In Malaysia, teacher training



Figure 3: Women’s achievement has surpassed men in the educational attainment in Malaysia (Source: Malay Mail, 2023)

programs vary in effectiveness, leading to disparities in teaching quality, especially in underprivileged schools.

Many teachers face high workloads and administrative burdens, reducing their ability to focus on student engagement and innovative teaching methods.

Professional development programs must be continuously enhanced to equip educators with modern teaching strategies, particularly in digital education.

Reducing bureaucratic constraints and providing teachers with adequate support can significantly improve the quality of education nationwide.

Moving Forward: Policy Recommendations for SDG

Achieving SDG 4 in Malaysia requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the systemic challenges within the education sector. Expanding rural education initiatives should be a priority, with increased investment in infrastructure, technology, and teacher deployment to rural and indigenous communities. Enhancing financial aid distribution is essential to ensure that assistance programs effectively reach low-income students who need them the most. Bridging the digital divide must also be a key focus by expanding internet access and incorporating digital literacy programs within schools to better prepare students for a technology-driven world.



Figure 4: Stateless children in Malaysia are often denied access to public schools (Source: Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), 2022)

Inclusive education policies should be reinforced to provide equal opportunities for stateless, refugee, and disabled students through legal reforms and improved resource allocation. Standardizing curriculum policies will help create a more consistent and inclusive education system that caters to the needs of all students. Encouraging gender equality in STEM education requires providing scholarships, mentorship programs, and targeted initiatives to support female students in these fields. Lastly, improving teacher training programs is crucial to enhancing professional

development, reducing administrative burdens, and fostering innovative teaching strategies to ensure a higher standard of education for all students.

Conclusion

Education is a fundamental human right, and Malaysia must continue its efforts to bridge the existing gaps in the education system. While significant progress has been made, challenges remain in ensuring that every child, regardless of location, economic status, or background, has equal access to quality education.

Education is the nation's future, and no child should be left behind in the pursuit of knowledge and opportunity.

By addressing these disparities and implementing inclusive policies, Malaysia can move closer to realizing SDG 4, ultimately fostering a more equitable and knowledgeable society. Education is the nation's future, and no child should be left behind in the pursuit of knowledge and opportunity.