

A study on participation as individual empowerment in Malaysian welfare reform

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Abstract: *Participation in productive welfare programmes, a social innovation for welfare reform in Malaysia, provided opportunities to welfare recipients for individual empowerment and financial sustainability without depending on welfare aid. The challenges for the government however, lies in sustaining the interest level of welfare recipients to ensure effective and continued participation in the productive welfare programmes which is a form of self-employment for financial stability and self-sufficiency. Hence, this study aims at measuring the perceived attributes based on Roger's Model of Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) namely, relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, observability and trialability of productive welfare and its effect on participation and the empowerment outcomes of the programme participants This quantitative study was carried out among 266 productive welfare participants selected non-randomly from 11 districts in Selangor and findings were supported by informal interview with these respondents. The relationships between variables and the contribution of the five dimensions of perceived attributes that influenced participation as well as the economic and psychological empowerment outcomes among the participants was analysed using SPSS (Version 20.0) for descriptive statistics and AMOS Structural Equation Model (SEM AMOS 18). The Pearson correlation analysis result shows that all the five perceived attributes had a significant positive and high relationship with participation and empowerment outcomes with trialability being a significant predictor of psychological empowerment, while compatibility, trialability and participation were unique predictors for economic empowerment.*

Keywords: *Perceived attributes, social innovation, participation, empowerment, welfare reform.*

I. Introduction

Welfare reforms in Malaysia

The debate on the benefits of social-welfare policies has been on-going since the last thirty years. Recent studies on welfare reforms in developed countries prove that there is a positive outcome in welfare provisions as they empower poor individuals to become self-sufficient, increase positive empowerment outcomes and improve the quality of life and subjective well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Narayan, 2005). In Malaysia, the Social Welfare Department (SWD), an agency under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Ministry (Ministry) was given the mandate to improve the quality of life of welfare recipients through empowerment programmes. SWD introduced productive welfare in 2008; an entrepreneurship or self-employment program as a form of social innovation. The early programmes included the disbursement of financial grants to welfare recipients on an individual basis or in community groups for entrepreneurial activities. In 2010, this programme was further expanded by incorporating 1 AZAM programme which provides business equipment to individual welfare clients to venture into entrepreneurship activities.

Welfare dependency is a source of concern to the Ministry as statistics from the SWD show that the number of welfare cases and the cost incurred to provide financial assistance increased more than double from 221,602 cases (RM372 million) in 2008 to 493,076 cases (RM1.6 billion) in 2013 (SWD Statistic, 2013). The state of Selangor saw a fourfold increase from 9,248 cases (RM16 million) in 2008 to 45,307 (RM120 million) in 2013, a jump of more than 400% (SWD Statistics, 2013). This increase in welfare case load could be due to the migration of the population into the state of Selangor due to its status as an industrial state as well as the displacement of unskilled workers in the manual and service sector where the jobs were given to foreigners particularly in the manufacturing, plantation and construction industry (Ismail & Yuliyusman, 2014). The increasing number of welfare cases annually saw the need for the government, particularly the Ministry, to introduce new social innovations in the form of empowerment programmes in line with the strategies of the developed countries worldwide to reduce welfare caseloads. This programme hopes to decrease the government's financial burden on welfare spending and focus on developing human capital and providing better infrastructure that could further contribute towards upgrading the economic status of the poor instead.

Productive welfare is the first major initiative undertaken as a social innovation programme by the Ministry to assist welfare recipients to instill individual awareness and change of attitudes to generate their own

income for financial sustainability. Thus, the Ministry, set a Key Performance Index (KPI) of an annual 5% “exit policy” of welfare recipients to reduce welfare caseloads and enhance the recipients’ lifelong empowerment (Guidelines for Productive Welfare, SWD, 2012). Despite the government’s vigorous poverty reduction effort and SWD’s promotional efforts in creating awareness about productive welfare, the participation rate was not encouraging and only less than 2% was successfully removed from the welfare list. This number had little impact on the overall caseload reduction or the 5% (KPI) exit policy set by the SWD department. This became a main source of concern to the Ministry’s stakeholders and timely measures to review and reinforce the existing guidelines must be undertaken. Given this background, this study was therefore undertaken with three specific aims to gauge the welfare recipient’s perception about productive welfare, particularly:

- (i) To identify the level of perceived attributes, participation and empowerment outcomes of the recipients
- (ii) To establish the relationship between the perceived attributes, participation and empowerment outcomes of the recipients
- (iii) To determine the unique predictors of perceived attributes, participation and empowerment outcomes of the recipients

II. Review of Literature

Conceptualising Participation and Empowerment

The Euro-American Welfare Models and the East Asian Welfare Models were seen as new empowerment programs that can foster positive change in individual welfare recipients as they work to meet and overcome unfamiliar and difficult challenges that often result in personal growth (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Holiday, 2000; Ramesh, 2004; Giddens, 2006; Kwon & Holiday, 2007). Hence, the Malaysian government’s vision for welfare reform initiated positive developmental programmes to enhance the empowerment of the poor to improve their quality of life (Abdul Halim et al., 2014) by fostering adaptability, flexibility, security and employability. Thus, Malaysia adopted The Third Way perspective of ‘a social investment state’ which is a mid path between The Social Democrats and The New Right perspectives to embark on its Vision 2020 to achieve developed status nation by creating a framework to reduce poverty from 3.8% in 2009 to 2.0% in 2015. In addition, Malaysia hopes to improve the income inequalities by reducing the Gini coefficient from 0.441 in 2009 to 0.420 in 2015 (UNDP Country Report for Malaysia 2013-2015). However, societal changes such as technological advances, globalisation, unemployment and a rapidly increasing ageing population (Samad & Mansor, 2013) has posed great challenges for the country’s welfare reform.

This new phase in welfare reforms in the developed countries were classified by scholars into three main theoretical perspectives (Esping-Anderson, 1990). The first perspective, The Social Democrats view poverty as the result of the lack of the state’s commitment to provide the minimum standard of living to the poor due to the structural defects in the economic and social structure present in the society. The welfare hand-outs guarantee an individual or families with minimum income to narrow the income disparities between the poor and rich to meet certain contingencies such as sickness, old age and unemployment that can contribute to family crises (Briggs, 1961; Lowe, 1993; Giddens, 1998; Handler, 1995; Street, 1998). The second perspective, The New Right views that redistributive programmes of providing monthly financial aid foster dependency on benefits from the government and creates a ‘culture of dependency’. In some cases, it leads to intergenerational poverty that discourages people from leaving the welfare roll to seek employment or indulge in business ventures (Anderson, 1978; Butler & Kondratas, 1987; Lee, 1987; Mead 1986 & Murray, 1984). This perspective propose introduction of social policies for behavioural change of the welfare clients through a maximised free and competitive market rather than increasing their social benefits and opportunities (Mead, 1998; Friedman, 1962; George & Wilding, 1994; Barry, 1981). The Third Way perspective likewise, believes that in exchange for public assistance, the government should impose demands on welfare recipients like time limits for welfare aids as well as guide them towards responsibility and active participation in work force or self-employment through entrepreneurial programmes for long term self-sufficiency and financial sustainability. This model, also known as the “enabling state” aims to achieve human capital development and an inclusive society (Friedman & Friedman 1980; Browning & Johnson, 1984; Lee, 1987; Lindbeck et al. 1994; Okun 1975 & Tullock 1991; Alesina & Perotti, 1997). Studies on welfare assistance have shown that for any welfare reforms to be successful in reaching and helping the disadvantaged, a broad spectrum of services should be offered by the coordinating agencies to their clients (Foulks, 1996).

This study will help in integrating behavioural theories to practitioner’s perspective to enhance participation for significant empowerment outcomes. In addition, this study also provides practical recommendations for the SWD to enhance the role of case workers as effective facilitators and to motivate the participants of productive welfare. The conceptual framework of the study was based on Rogers Diffusion of Innovation (1995) theory and is illustrated below in Figure 1.

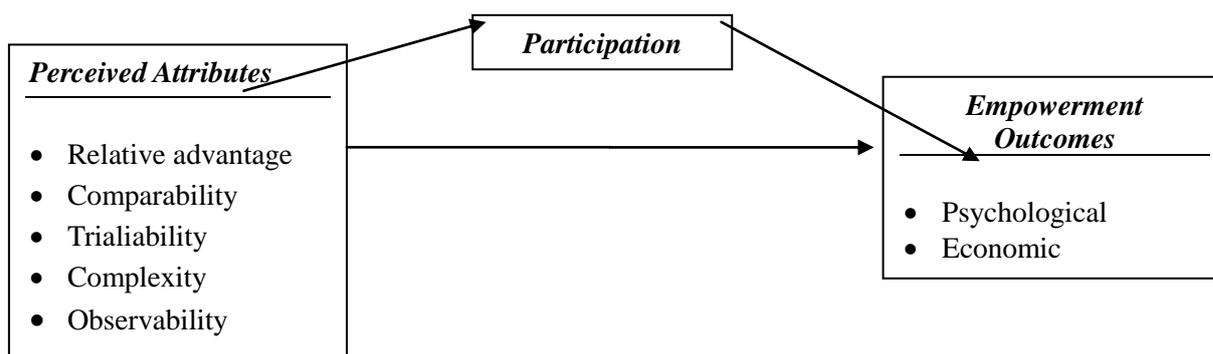


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of study

The underlying hypothesis for this framework is that there is an existing correlation between variables perceived attributes of an innovation, participation and empowerment outcomes. When there is a positive perceived attributes (opinion) among welfare clients that productive welfare is a social innovation to improve their livelihood through business ventures, then there is a high level of participation by them in this program. A high participation rate has a consequential increase in the empowerment outcomes particularly in the psychological and economic aspect as hypothesised in this study.

According to Cohen and Uphoff (1997), participation is seen as a process of empowerment where individuals' time, resources, understanding and perseverance are utilised to see the end results of a development program introduced for them. This process involves decision-making, implementation, benefits sharing and evaluation of a program by participant's to ensure sustainability of that program. By participating in the program the individual sees participation as a means where he or she goes through a process of cooperating with the relevant authorities and getting involved in the activities to observe the final outcome; often described as 'participation as an end'. Rogers's (2003) theory states that when an individuals' perceived attributes of an innovation is positive, then the adoption rate or participation level will be increased which means adoption rate is influenced by the characteristics of the innovation.

Empowerment, likewise, is a process by which individuals, organisations and communities gain mastery over issues which are of concern to them (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Literature on empowerment across disciplines has demonstrated that there is no clear definition of this concept (Zimmerman, 1984) though its importance has re-emerged in social work practice as it generally includes, either the expansion of assets and capabilities of the poor to participate in; negotiate with; influence assess to information and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Nelson & Wright, 1995; Malhotra, 2002). In this study two elements of empowered namely psychological and economic empowerment were analysed. Empowerment helps to increase their capacity building in terms of skills and experience which in turn helps in effective participation and vice versa. Individual empowerment is the process of internal and external change (Parsons, 1991). Internal change is the person's self-esteem or belief in one's ability to make decisions that affect their life and to solve the problems arising, a variable considered as psychological empowerment in this study. The external change is the ability of the individual to use the skills and ability gained through their psychological empowerment to achieve their intended outcomes; considered economic empowerment as depicted in this study.

Theories related to individual behaviour change

This study is based on three theoretical underpinnings; mainly Rogers's theory of Diffusion of Innovation (1995, 2003), Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (1975) and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986). Rogers's theory of Diffusion of Innovation (2003) stipulates that individuals will adopt an innovation if they perceive the innovation to bring about positive changes in their lives (Nutley et al. 2002; Rogers, 2003). However, there are five prerequisites for this to be attained. Firstly, the innovation must have some relative advantage over an existing innovation or status quo. Secondly, it is important for the innovation is compatible with existing values and practices of the social system of the individual. Thirdly, the innovation cannot be complex to comprehend and the innovation must have a trialability period that can be tested for a limited time without compulsion for adoption. Finally the innovation must have observable results (Rogers, 1995).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (1975) which is closely related to Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (1991) also focuses on individual behaviour that is strongly related to their perceived attributes that shapes an attitude towards an innovation. Attitudes result from an individual's belief about the consequences for themselves whether they have a positive or negative perceived attribute about the innovation. An individual's attitude influences their behaviour through the formation of intentions to behave in certain ways. TRA which

emphasises on behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs, attitude, subjective norms and intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) says that behavioural belief component is expected to be positively correlated with attitude, while the normative belief component is expected to be positively correlated with the subjective norm. Both attitude and subjective norms are predictors of intentions which in turn affect their behaviour (Parminter & Wilson, 2003).

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) posits that individuals learn or gain knowledge either by personally participating in an activity, by verbal persuasion or by observing others (vicarious learning) they identify themselves emotionally with and form their own expectations about the consequences of the activity basing on the concept 'seeing is believing'. Their behaviour or participation is influenced by consequences of reward/punishment. Their self-efficacy beliefs influence their choice to make decisions on activities they feel confident and competent to participate in. When related to Rogers's concept of perceived attributes, observability and trialability compared to the othe attributes are closely related to the concept of self-efficacy that affects their behaviour intentions and actual behaviour when deciding on participation in productive welfare. Thus the participation level in productive welfare will be closely correlated with observability and trialability. The consequence is that the individual has a feeling of long-term benefits such as experiencing improvement in their quality of life as well as have the benefit of feeling empowered.

III. Methodology

Sampling and sample size

The study population in this research only included productive welfare clients who had participated in productive welfare for at least two years. This time frame was based on the proposed duration for welfare aid by the US Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act, 1996 (PRWORA, 1996), that minimum duration of two years was deemed sufficient for welfare recipients to receive welfare aid and have enough time and experience to seek employment in the labour market. In social work empowerment concept, with proper facilitation by the social case workers, attention to powerlessness, systems and methods to empower individuals, clients would be able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals through self-help to maximize their quality of lives (Adams, 1996). Thus by participating in productive welfare for a duration of at least two years, the welfare recipients would have acquired enough knowledge about their business entrepreneurship, make comparisons and gain experience or skills to enhance their business venture for increased financial stability and quality of life.

From the sample frame two hundred and ninety eight (298) samples were selected non-randomly from the eleven districts in Selangor as shown in Table 1 below. However during the survey period only two hundred and sixty-six (266) respondents participated in the survey.

Table 1: Study population of productive welfare participants in Selangor

DISTRICTS	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS IN PRODUCTIVE WELFARE	PARTICIPANTS ELIGIBLE FOR STUDY	SAMPLES SELECTED FOR STUDY
Petaling Jaya	76	26	24
Shah Alam	44	22	22
Subang Jaya	34	18	18
Klang	68	31	31
Gombak	39	17	17
Hulu Langat	159	44	44
Kuala Selangor	58	33	32
Sabak Bernam	67	32	31
Hulu Selangor	48	13	13
Sepang	94	36	34
Kuala Langat	75	32	32
Total	762	304	298

(Source: Productive Welfare and Community Division, SWD Selangor, 2013)

Pilot test

During the pilot study, overall all variables show a good level of reliability Cronbach's Alpha >0.8 (Sekaran, 2000) as shown in Table 2. After the pilot study an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was done to interpret the data and regroup the observed variables according to the latent constructs in this newly developed questionnaire (Nunnally, 1978; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Items for individual constructs with lower than 0.5 factor loading were deleted from the construct. After EFA, total number of items dropped from 72 to 61 items. In this study, the hypothesised or causal relationships were presented in the form of a path diagram as shown in Figure 2.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha level achieved for pilot test (n = 100)

Constructs	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived attributes	25	0.901
Participation	12	0.828
Psychological Empowerment	12	0.805
Economic Empowerment	23	0.932

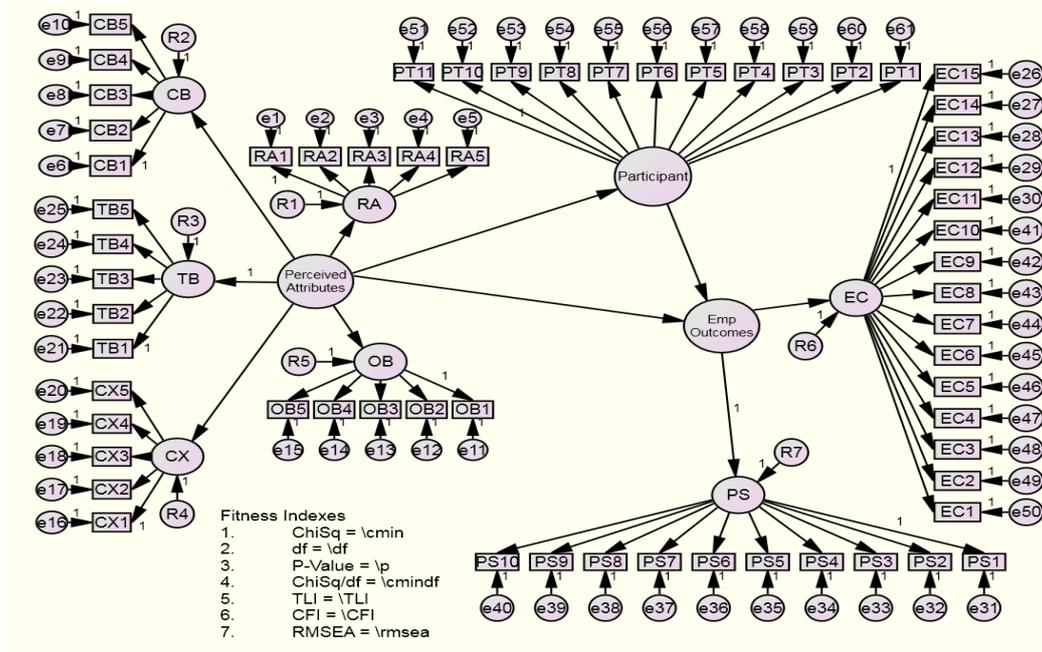


Figure 2: Hypothesised Framework and path diagram after EFA

SPSS version 20.0 was used for descriptive statistics while SEM AMOS 18 was used for the correlation and regression analysis. The quantitative aspect for data collection was done using a self-developed questionnaire with a Likert-scale of 1-5 scores and findings were also supported by informal interview with respondents.

For the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), taking into consideration suggestions from Anderson & Gerbing (1982), Dunn et al., (1994) and Hair et al., (2010), unidimensionality assessment was conducted prior to testing the reliability and validity of each construct. In this study, the researcher used a factor loading of 0.5 and recommended Goodness-of-fit indices (model fit) to decide on the deletion of items in a particular construct.

Convergent validity a set of items (indicators) that presume to measure a given construct was measured through testing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) by assessing the individual items which had a high factor loading of ≥ 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker (1981), Kline (2005) and Hair et al., (2010).

Construct reliability greater than .7 was applied to individual constructs in the research questionnaire as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

For the measurement model of the study after several adjustments were made based on the first and second order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), the Goodness-of-Fit indices were as follows: Chi-square (χ^2) = 988.471, df = 467, Relative χ^2 (χ^2/df) = 2.117, p = 0.000, AGFI = .776, GFI = .813, CFI = .904, IFI = .905, RMSEA = .066 and RMR = .037.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive data analysis showed that the respondents had achieved a high level of perceived attributes for all five items of relative advantage (Mean score 22.75 ± 4.93), compatability (23.71 ± 4.14), trialability (21.85 ± 5.11), complexity (20.08 ± 2.52) and observability (19.20 ± 2.54), as well as for participation (49.91 ± 4.85) and psychological empowerment (37.30 ± 4.67). However for economic empowerment, participants achieved moderate level with an overall mean score of 37.03 ± 8.75 .

4.2 The Pearson correlation analysis conducted to examine the relationship between the five perceived attributes showed there is a significant positive and high relationship between:

- a) Relative advantage and psychological empowerment ($r = .804, p < .01$), compatability and psychological empowerment ($r = .833, p < .01$), trialability and psychological empowerment ($r = .816, p < .01$), complexity and psychological empowerment ($r = .839, p < .01$), observability and psychological empowerment ($r = .709, p < .01$), and for participation and

psychological empowerment ($r=.891, p<.01$)

- b) Relative advantage and economic empowerment ($r = .767, p <.01$), compatibility and economic empowerment ($r=.700, p<.01$), trialability and economic empowerment ($r=.801, p<.01$), complexity and economic empowerment ($r=.749, p<.01$), observability and economic empowerment ($r=.700, p<.01$), and for participation and economic empowerment ($r=.842, p<.01$)

4.3 The Regression analysis was done to determine the unique predictors of perceived attributes, participation and empowerment outcomes. It can be concluded that the only unique predictor for

a) Psychological empowerment is trialability ($\beta = 1.207, CR = 1.939, p = .049$)

b) Economic empowerment, three unique predictors, comparability ($\beta = -.899, CR = -2.097, p = .036$), trialability ($\beta = .781, CR = 1.945, p = .050$) and participation ($\beta = 1.016, CR = 2.045, p = .041$) have been identified.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Among the implication for management practice is to encourage participation in productive welfare by increasing the level of self-efficacy which is an individual's perception or confidence level in their ability to perform for behaviour change to succeed. Perry et al., (1990) believes that to induce behavioural change for increased self-efficacy, a series of progressive steps towards that approach are important in addition to providing resources and support to raise individual confidence. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory however, remarks that even when individuals have a strong self-efficacy they may not perform if there is lack of incentives for behaviour change. Hence, if the Social Welfare Department (SWD) wants to ensure sustained participation in productive welfare programmes, providing incentives and rewards for successful participation may be the right step forward. The case workers of SWD can induce or encourage behavioural change by offering some form of social support to remove personal barriers faced by clients such as arranging for childcare centres, day care centres for the older or disabled members of the family and help solve the transport and logistical issues.

The ultimate criterion for a successful innovation is that it should be routinely used by the welfare clients to become an integral part of the client's daily life and the social system they live until the innovation is no longer considered to be an innovation and is fully assimilated into an individual's life (Miles et al., 1987). Proper implementation of the guidelines by SWD should naturally result in routinisation or continuation of participation in productive welfare.

To ensure increased level of self-efficacy, routinisation and assimilation of productive welfare in the recipient's life, the SWD has to play a pro-active role in institutionalising changes in the department and among its clients. Effective communication between participants and case workers as well as with social networking agencies is essential. Evaluation should be a constant process which must be monitored and coordinated by well-trained case workers. Awareness and experience with the change process are essential for a successful outcome. This study recommends that case workers in SWD adhere to the six indicators identified by Lippit et al. (1958) and Eiseman et al. (1990) as a general rule of the thumb.

- 5.1. Assessing the motivation and capacity by increasing the acceptance and perception level among participants that the innovation can legitimately improve their financial status
- 5.2. Diagnosing the problems encountered by the clients, establishing strategies and action plans to ensure the innovation is stable and routinised through proper guidelines
- 5.3. Ensuring widespread use of the innovation throughout the community by proper communication channels, feedbacks and group coordinators
- 5.4. Ensuring the case workers have the motivation and commitment to ensure clients participation will continue with proper planning until they achieve the desirable and sustainable income
- 5.5. Ensuring that continuation of the success of productive welfare is a result of collective collaboration among individual clients through peer-peer communication and networking with NGOs
- 5.6. Ensuring routine allocation of time and money for the training programmes involving case workers and participants and reduce the turnover of key personnel involved in monitoring the productive welfare programmes

This study further helps to determine the enabling factors and challenges that may have contributed to the success or failure of the productive welfare programmes as well as assist in the planning and delivery of the programmes by providing diagnostic and evidence-based information beforehand for evaluation. This is principal because an empowerment programme is a process which involves many relevant stages, personnel and stakeholders. The effectiveness and the shortcomings of the programme need to be identified for further plan of action. Such a study will therefore provide crucial information and link valid data to explore effectiveness of the programme. More specifically, this study will help to investigate the possible causes of low enrolment in

productive welfare programmes, high rejection rate after participation in the programme as well as the low success rate of clients in achieving financial stability. Therefore, this study will also identify what contributes to the success or failure of the programmes in terms of encouraging welfare recipients to be self-reliant in their entrepreneurial endeavours and provide suggestions to overcome barriers to participation as well as formulate effective supervisory plans. It is also important to identify issues or factors that SWD may have overlooked in this programme to increase the success rate of productive welfare. The results of this study will benefit not only the SWD in identifying some weaknesses in programme implementation, but also enable the clients to explore the advantages in participating in such programmes and raise their awareness to acquire new skills to become financially independent to enjoy a comfortable living.

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