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**EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT IN SOCIAL  
SERVICE DELIVERY: A PRELIMINARY FINDING OF  
SELECTED VOLUNTARY WELFARE ORGANISATIONS IN  
MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract:**

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are recognised for their contribution to society. This paper aims to provide policymakers, leaders, and social work managers with an initial overview for developing appropriate policies and a better understanding of the sustainability of welfare-related organisations, especially in the Malaysian context. NGOs monitor and address public concerns. They work with the government and private sector. NGOs provide communities with knowledge and services, monitor the government and private sector, and empower communities to participate in decision-making. They play a vital role in achieving sustainable development goals, such as eradicating poverty and improving health. This study examines the challenges encountered by NGOs in Penang, Malaysia, focusing on Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) or specialised NGOs. It also explores the societal support needed by these organisations in delivering better social services to the community. This study adopted a qualitative approach. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with four representatives of four VWOs to better understand the challenges in delivering social services to the community. Next, we analysed the data by categorising it into identified themes. Challenges identified related to funding, organisation performance, shortage of personnel, lack of volunteers and standard compliance. The study identifies various sources of societal support for VWOs, including the government, private sector, volunteers, other NGOs, individual donors, and the surrounding community.

**Keywords:**

Non-Governmental Organisations, Sustainability, Welfare, Social Service, Societal Support, Sustainable Development Goals

**Introduction**

NGOs, or civil society organisations, are well recognised for their work in our society. NGOs work collaboratively with the government and private sector. NGOs existed even before the formation of the United Nations and remain relevant in our community. NGOs flourish in a country with a democratic system, such as Malaysia, and play an integral part in upholding democracy. There are various NGOs in Malaysia, each with unique backgrounds and intricate organisational structures. The government provides various social services in Malaysia to meet basic needs and address social issues. NGOs independently monitor and address public concerns (Bunbongkarn, 2001; Ratnam, 2003). According to the Societies Act 1966, all organisations in Malaysia must register with the Registrar of Societies. NGOs with a welfare focus have specific obligations, including submitting annual reports, holding general meetings, and contributing to the Employee Provident Fund. Failure to comply with these regulations may result in legal action. The country's development depends on the government and the significant contributions made by NGOs and the commercial sector to ensure sustainable development that benefits the general population. NGOs play an essential role at the grassroots level as they possess the knowledge and abilities to provide the communities with the required services (Ahmad & Arshad, 2022). NGOs must continue to exist and contribute to the country's and society's development. This involves providing the necessary support to promote the growth of the third sector.

However, there are still significant gaps in research regarding understanding their struggles in fulfilling their social mission and remaining effective. NGOs must maintain the ability to carry out their programmes and sustain their organisations. While various studies have been conducted, they all have limitations, especially in Malaysia. Several studies have been carried out from the perspective of non-profits on different issues. However, NGOs have diverse backgrounds in terms of history, governance, operations, and the communities they serve (see, for example, Amagoh & Kabdiyeva, 2012; Appe, 2019; Denison et al., 2019; Hasnan et al., 2012; Okorley & Nkrumah, 2012; Omar & Ismail, 2019; Singh, 2014; Stanovci et al., 2019). This study explores their challenges in serving the community, specifically from the perspective of Voluntary Welfare Organisations or specialised NGOs in the Malaysian context.

**Literature Review**

This section will discuss a few important points about NGOs. These include how NGOs are defined and their role as social service providers. NGOs perform multiple societal roles, including social, economic, and political functions. They are actively involved at all levels of society, from grassroots campaigns to policy development. Their contributions to the community are widely recognised, including by the United Nations. However, the literature also shows that the term NGO remains controversial. Stanovich et al. (2019) summarise various definitions of NGOs that broadly refer to autonomous, not-for-profit, self-governing, and activity-oriented organisations focused on the well-being of others. Several works on categorising NGOs, as presented by Vakil (1997), such as by type of funding received and type of activities. Lorente-Ayala et al. (2020) have proposed combining both works to identify four

large groups of NGOs: charities, services, defence, and participatory. These four groups or categories of NGOs can be simplified into two broad blocks based on the number of activities carried out by NGOs. A group of generalist NGOs characterised by many different fields of work and services, even becoming broad and diverse. The second group consists of specialised NGOs, defined as organisations specialised in one sector of activity. Therefore, this article focuses on the basic definition of NGOs as it helps understand NGO sustainability.

### ***NGOs as Service Providers***

NGOs can promote social inclusion by empowering and mobilising marginalised groups. The importance of NGOs in creating social value is widely recognised (Weerawardena et al., 2010). NGOs are increasingly dominating the execution of social services. The need to report to donors and the public on the execution and impact of their programmes has increased along with this recognition (Bach-Mortensen & Montgomery, 2018; Maier et al., 2016). NGOs have been praised for being adaptable change agents that directly address the demands of civil society without being constrained by bureaucratic or corrupt official systems. They are involved at all levels of society, from providing services to policy formulation, including monitoring the government and private sector. Besides that, NGOs represent the community as a movement, empowering them to participate in decision-making involving their well-being and desire for a better world. Regardless of where NGOs lie on this spectrum, NGOs play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), including eradicating poverty and improving health.

### ***Volunteerism***

Volunteering is an essential aspect of modern society and has been widely researched across various disciplines, including social work. A volunteer is someone who freely offers their time to assist others without receiving any financial compensation. While volunteers are crucial to NGOs, there is room for increased utilisation. Management should find ways to recruit and retain volunteers by providing motivation and incentives.

According to Lorente-Ayala et al. (2020), volunteers from specialised NGOs tend to be more motivated than generalist NGOs. Volunteer motivation is a significant factor in improving NGO outcomes. In the past, NGOs have employed market-oriented strategies to improve volunteer recruitment and retention. These tactics include focusing on demographics, developing a unique brand identity, offering rewards and recognition, providing training and development opportunities, and creating a positive volunteer experience. Techniques such as creating a supportive and uplifting atmosphere, providing opportunities for social interaction and networking, and demonstrating the impact of the organisation's work can help foster loyalty and encourage volunteers to support the organisation over time (Zollo et al., 2017).

Organisations should create a robust volunteer programme that includes clear communication, training and development opportunities, and recognition and appreciation for contributions to enhance a volunteer's sense of belonging to the organisation and their tasks. This can boost motivation and retention rates. Frequent check-ins and feedback can also help locate and resolve problems or issues before they result in volunteer turnover (Zollo et al., 2019). NGOs must understand volunteer motivations to develop a more pleasant and meaningful volunteer experience. By doing so, they can attract and retain more committed volunteers.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with four representatives of four VWOs to better understand the challenges and support received from the community. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with four representatives from the administrative level. Each interview session lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. The interview sessions were voice-recorded with the respondents' consent. We then examined the data based on the identified themes.

## ***Sampling***

Penang is a small state in Malaysian Peninsular, with a population density estimated at 1.7 million people in 2022 (PENANG INSTITUTE, 2022). Local communities participate by establishing VWOs to find solutions to social problems in their multicultural community. VWOs refer to NGOs receiving grants from the Department of Social Welfare (DSW). Four VWOs in Penang were selected for this study. The selected VWOs are based on a few criteria, namely: (1) registered with the DSW, (2) more than five years in operation, and (3) providing services to DSW's range of clients.

## ***Data Collection***

All interviews were recorded using a recording device. The researcher identified emerging themes. The strength of the qualitative research approach is that the researcher could adjust data collection based on emerging themes. All quotes included in this writing are taken verbatim from the informants.

## **Findings**

Four informants were interviewed. The findings of this study were organised by themes. This preliminary data identified challenges for VWOs to operate in the community, namely: (1) inadequate funding; (2) lack of facilities; (3) lack of staff; (4) high workload; (5) dependence on volunteers; and (6) overlap in services.

### ***Inadequate Funding***

Participants in the study reported using multiple funding sources to support their operations, including donations, service payments, and product sales. However, respondents in this study unanimously expressed challenges in obtaining funds to cover operating costs. Lack of sufficient funds will affect their operations. This is because the government allocates limited funds, and there has been a decrease in donations. Respondents claim that the funds from the government need to be increased compared to the total operational costs. Several respondents reported expecting their organisation to receive less funding in the current year. This is due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that has hit the country. Therefore, VWOs need to obtain other sources of funds to cover the entire operating cost. This continues with income-generating activities or programmes delayed or cancelled due to movement control mandated by the government. Although donation appeal activities are being actively carried out, there is no guarantee that the number of donations to the organisation will increase. Respondents also reported using various channels to collect donations and sponsorships from the community, such as social media, donation appeals, setting up donation counters, and organising events.

### ***Lack of Facilities***

Some respondents reported that they continue to need more facilities. One respondent stated they still rent the premise that is in use now. They plan to have their own premise in the future.

However, acquiring a premise is challenging due to its location and the funds needed. Some respondents reported a lack of space for classrooms and beds. The respondents also mentioned a lack of equipment, such as beds, therapy tools, furniture, and computers.

### ***Lack of Staff***

Some respondents have acknowledged that they are currently operating at their limit. Several respondents expressed the various tasks available in their organisation regarding care services, such as cleaning and health referrals. The limited number of staff causes them to carry out multiple tasks. This includes recording the flow of money belonging to residents using standard forms. This puts pressure on organisations to meet the standards set by DSW. The staff had to work overtime during holidays to complete the documentation according to standards. Organisations are aware of the burden on existing staff and are doing their best to comply with the means to show transparency, especially involving finances. However, some respondents reported that staff are occasionally sent to undergo training by relevant agencies despite a staff shortage.

### ***High Workload***

Some VWOs need more staffing. This is due to the burdensome procedure. They must follow many processes to ensure transparency in the organisation's management and operations. This means there needs to be more attention given to the standards set by DSW, which can lead to a high workload for employees. Inadequate staffing levels combined with the staff's diverse roles often result in employees being forced to complete tasks outside their original duties. A high workload is usually due to staff shortages, which cause the workloads to be unable to be completed during working hours. This then results in working overtime during the weekend.

### ***Dependence on Volunteers***

Most respondents in this study stated that they received community volunteers to help at their organisations and were also involved in organised charity programmes. However, more volunteers are needed, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this is the demand for volunteers with particular skills. This is because some VWOs need volunteers with elderly care skills. The participation of volunteers from the youth group is also tricky for VWOs to obtain. Some respondents said they accept groups of volunteers to run specific programmes in their organisations. This is like tuition classes and religious activities.

### ***Overlap in Services***

Some VWOs reported other NGOs targeting the same group in their area. This causes fewer clients to get services from their organisation. VWOs in this study see this from a positive angle because their social mission is to help the target group. Furthermore, the services offered are unique, even though they target the same group. For example, some VWOs practice vegetarianism among their clients due to religious factors. This makes their services unique compared to VWOs targeting the children's group. However, a respondent does suggest this may threaten their organisation's sustainability in the long run as their facilities and services need to be more utilised. This is because they can accommodate more residents, but this option needs to be taken because these services are essentially the same as those offered by other organisations. Additionally, restrictions on healthcare and dietary preferences limit the number of individuals this service can assist.



## Discussion and Recommendation

The initial data for this study only involved four respondents representing their respective VWOs. This study's findings are likely familiar to anyone in a donor-funded NGO setting. In contrast, there are promising findings, such as VWO's willingness to recognise that funding is essential and to spend resources for this purpose. VWOs strive to generate sufficient funds, employ enough staff, adhere to standards, and retain volunteers. The ongoing effort towards improvement could lead to success for an organisation, which should include clear objectives and community involvement. Indeed, respondents unequivocally spoke to the need for continuous government assistance. At the same time, they are also actively looking for new sources of income. Therefore, the general sentiment remains that support from the Government is essential, including in monetary form.

As participants mention, even though they are non-profit entities, their organisations engage in income-generation activities (food festivals, collecting donations, and charity runs). Importantly, it is appropriate to expect that the social mission remains the organisation's primary focus, apart from the need to generate income. However, the organisation's current condition to generate income must be balanced with efforts to achieve the social mission and maintain the well-being of the staff (excessive workload, unrelated tasks, and unskilled staff). Findings from this study confirm limited funding for the government. A significant decrease follows in funding received due to the current state of the economy affected by COVID-19. Relying solely on donations may leave the VWOs vulnerable to the donor's specific interests. If the donor proposes a change, the organisation must comply or risk losing funds. In contrast, adjusting donor requirements based on project length and level of funding might also be a way for donors to alleviate the overall quality of VWOs. Improvement beyond fulfilling reporting requirements might help VWOs stay on a better path towards better governance of their organisation in the long run.

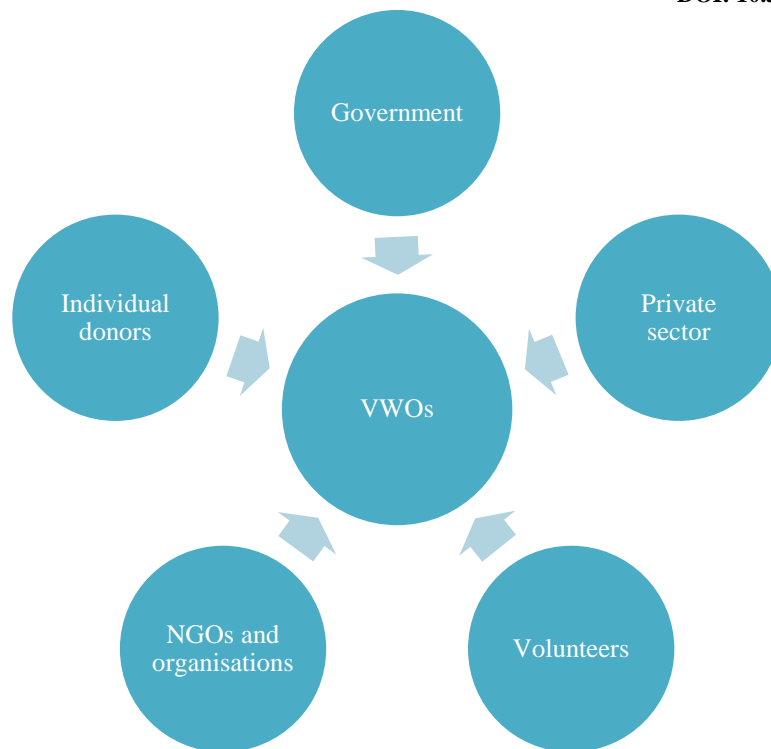
VWOs must go beyond intrapersonal factors (i.e., generosity, empathy, sympathy, utility expectation, religiosity, etc.) and strengthen organisational factors such as brand image to attract donors (Dogan et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2020). VWOs must create and nurture a staff team to accomplish this. VWOs must prioritise the human element at all levels to ensure that projects are sufficiently staffed and provided with the necessary training. Findings from this study confirm that staff are selected to undergo training provided by relevant government agencies and are up-to-date with current procedures. This finding echoes Micah & Luketero (2017), who found that appropriately trained staff with sufficient time resulted in more efficient M&E within NGOs.

Integrating technology in VWOs' operation and activities will bring benefits in many ways. The gap between the potential of technology and its actual adoption can limit an VWO's mission impact and fundraising potential. Technology can foster innovation and growth within the non-profit sector, allowing VWOs to achieve their philanthropic goals better. VWOs can better leverage technology to support their missions and enhance their operations by finding the right technology platforms and solutions for their needs (Chaudhari et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2019). As respondents mentioned, they utilise various channels for the community to donate to their organisation. However, it is suggested that VWOs expanding the donation channels according to recent trend. Online donation platforms will allow individuals to make monetary contributions online at their convenience without being physically present at the premises. This makes the donation process for VWOs more efficient, accessible, and secure (Bhoyar, 2023).

VWOs should actively adopt and leverage digital platforms and technologies to appeal to and engage with younger individuals interested in volunteering. By embracing the digital world, VWOs can effectively connect with the tech-savvy generation and create opportunities for them to contribute and make a positive impact. Various online platforms, social media channels, and digital communication tools will enable VWOs to reach a wider audience and effectively convey their mission and goals to potential young volunteers. VWOs need to recognise the importance of the digital landscape and adapt their strategies to effectively utilise its potential in attracting and involving young volunteers (Saura et al., 2020). Indeed, the need for more staff in the organisation can be filled by recruiting volunteers. However, there is a need to attract volunteers and retain them through attractive benefits. This includes initiatives from the government, such as tax relief and proper recognition.

Partnerships can be an effective tool for VWOs to connect with other entities and expand their resources. VWOs can effectively share resources and work towards common goals by collaborating with multinational enterprises, government agencies, and foundations. The government can play a pivotal role in supporting these partnerships and fostering collaboration among VWOs to ensure continued growth and development of the third sector in the community. This includes initiatives from the government, such as tax relief. By working together, these entities can significantly impact and promote sustainable development that benefits the general population. Therefore, partnerships can greatly enhance VWOs' impact and create lasting change in the community (Bano, 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Sarwar, 2015).

The challenges faced by VWOs reflect the community support received. VWOs rely on community support to achieve their goals and continue their work. Community members can contribute in many ways, such as by volunteering their time and skills, making monetary donations, and providing in-kind resources. Additionally, they play an essential role in promoting the VWO's mission and participating in events. By working together, communities and VWOs can create a more significant impact and make a positive difference in the lives of people who require assistance. VWOs must identify the parties that can provide the necessary resources, whether in finance, goods, or advisory services. Societal support is needed to help VWOs accomplish their purpose and objectives. It comprises various parties involving every level of society. This study also identified societal support for VWOs in the challenging Malaysian context, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Societal Support of Voluntary Welfare Organisations.**

The government plays a vital role in providing a friendly environment for VWOs. This includes developing policies that incentivise fundraising, giving tax exemptions, and encouraging corporate social responsibility activities. Through a reciprocal relationship, the involvement of NGOs is vital in shaping national policies to align with global community policies such as the SDGs (Jayasooria, 2016).

The private sector is separate from the government and the non-profit sector. It can assist VWOs in fulfilling their social objectives through corporate social responsibility programmes. However, some studies suggest that CSR practices in developing countries are less structured, primarily focusing on philanthropy and charitable efforts (Jamali & Neville, 2011). The private sector, encompassing businesses and enterprises, offers financial and non-financial assistance required by VWOs to operate programmes and accomplish their social mission (Ahmad et al., 2021).

VWOs greatly benefit from the support of volunteers who engage in hands-on work such as teaching, providing medical assistance, and promoting community development. In addition to their valuable skills, volunteers also aid in fundraising and outreach efforts, provide administrative support, and advocate for important causes. During times of crisis, volunteers provide immediate assistance to affected communities. Their long-term commitment and cross-cultural exchange further enhance their impact. Volunteers serve as inspiring role models, motivating others to join in creating positive change.

Collaborating between VWOs is highly advantageous and influential. This enables organisations to utilise their strengths, resources, and knowledge to tackle complex issues more efficiently (Bhojar, 2023). Some examples of collaborations are joint advocacy, resource



sharing, capacity building, and working on projects together. These collaborations also include sharing research, coordinating disaster relief, forming networks, seeking funding, and supporting each other's causes.

VWOs can receive donations in the form of money or goods from donors to support their operations. Regular donations, such as monthly contributions, can help VWOs plan and execute activities. In-kind donations, such as clothing, food, books, and medical supplies, can also benefit VWOs. Though technology simplifies the donation procedure, individuals might still favour more conventional approaches like checks or cash. To accommodate different donor preferences, VWOs frequently provide a variety of donation channels. In general, VWOs' use of technology in their donation processes has improved efficiency, widened their donor base, and increased donor participation, thereby assisting their goals and impact.

### Conclusion

VWOs are crucial in providing social services to underserved areas where government and private institutions may fall short. Unfortunately, limited funding can disrupt their operations, potentially halting services for the most vulnerable populations. To ensure long-term sustainability, VWOs must proactively build relationships with the government, private sector, and communities to cultivate broad societal support. Advocacy and awareness are key to engaging stakeholders, while sound financial management practices are essential for effective operation. VWOs must also maintain a dynamic team that is continuously learning new skills. Leveraging social media and online reporting can increase visibility, encourage donors to provide financial support, and encourage volunteers to offer their time and expertise. Technology can streamline operations and reach a wider audience, while transparency can reduce duplication and improve programme planning and implementation. Donors and VWOs must work together to address complex social challenges and develop impactful solutions. The involvement and feedback of beneficiaries are critical to ensuring that services meet their needs and requirements.

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