



The experiences of young people in social entrepreneurship: Insights from Malaysia

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The significant numbers of young people globally are seen as a “[demographic dividend](#)” in relation to economic growth and [sustainable development](#). Young people, who represent a majority of the population in many countries in the Global South, are portrayed as innovators, [entrepreneurs](#), and peacebuilders who can positively contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals with their creativity, ambitions, and expectations. Yet, they are also forced to be self-initiating due to precarious forms of livelihood associated with low pay and few worker rights and increasing potential of [insecurity and instability](#) due to the climate crisis and conflict.

In this context, young people engage in social entrepreneurship to identify and deliver creative solutions that can catalyse positive social change, while moving beyond (and often challenging) the binaries of work vs. non-work, paid work vs. unpaid work, social value vs. economic value. Social entrepreneurship is the process of using market mechanisms to catalyse positive social change, which may result in social enterprises as new organisations led by young people. For example, as a youth-led social enterprise, [Biji-Biji](#) Initiative in Malaysia makes sustainable living more accessible through products, services, and initiatives that enable individuals, organisations, and industries to re-think and re-imagine their consumption and production.

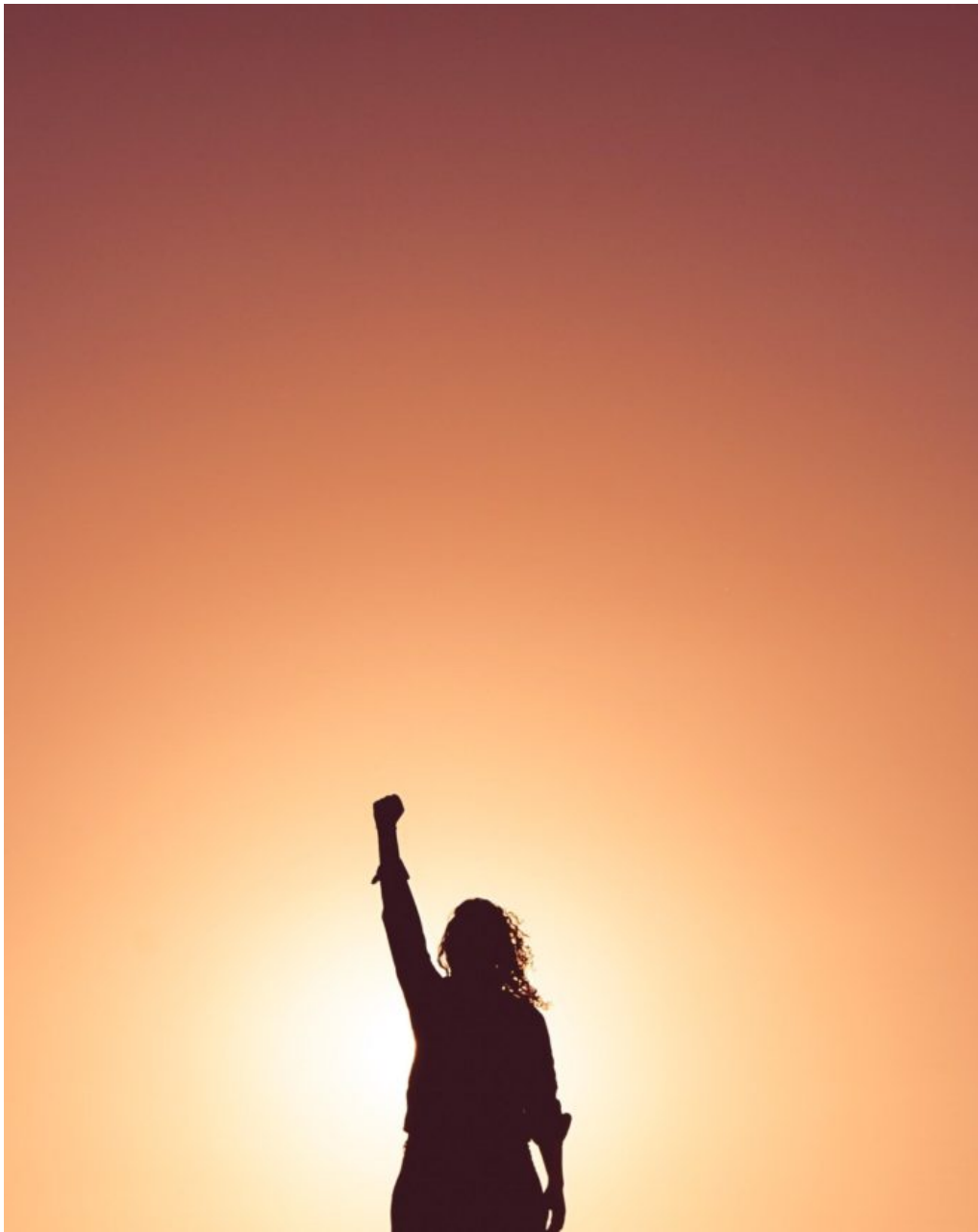


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While youth-led social entrepreneurship is gaining more prominence and attention, there is little understanding of the experiences of young people in social entrepreneurship. What does it mean to be a young person in a social entrepreneurship ecosystem? Why and how do young people engage in and sustain their engagement in social entrepreneurship? These are the questions that our team has been asking over the past several months in Malaysia through 1) co-design events with young social entrepreneurs and young people interested in social entrepreneurship, 2) case studies with youth-led social enterprises related to economic empowerment and sustainability based on interviews with founders, employees, volunteers, and beneficiaries, 3) interviews with social entrepreneurship ecosystem builders, and 4) conversations with young people. The following paragraphs summarise the preliminary findings from these efforts.

What does it feel to be a young person engaged in social entrepreneurship?

Young people are involved in social enterprises for diverse reasons. Social enterprises offer young people a creative outlet for self-expression, pursuit of personal and community goals, and a sense of community and belonging. They offer vibrant and energetic work environments where meaningful work and learning opportunities go hand in hand. For young people who are disappointed by corruption, inequality and injustice, social enterprises can offer a way to make a difference and to keep the fruits of their hard work in the form of diverse career pathways, reputation, and potential financial rewards. While young people's energy, passion, skills, and efforts fuel their social entrepreneurship activities, the invisible work and support of families, friends, and social networks is invaluable in

enabling these activities. Young people's families, friends, and social networks provide emotional support, financial assistance, and access to market opportunities.

Yet, entry to social entrepreneurship is not equally available to all young people based on background, location, and education. Simply put, not all young people can afford to take the risk to start or work in a social enterprise. For example, a young person from an underprivileged background simply may not have family members who can offer legal or financial guidance, let alone financial support when starting a social enterprise.

Beyond family background, young people's location also limits their opportunities and capability to engage in social entrepreneurship because awareness of the phenomenon and support for it is centred in urban areas. While universities in Malaysia are increasingly engaging with social entrepreneurship, not all young people are in university. While there are increasingly more resources published online by ecosystem builders and more opportunities available, these are usually provided in English. Yet, not all young people in Malaysia feel confident to learn about social entrepreneurship or to submit applications for development opportunities in English, all of which take access to the internet for granted. At the same time, social entrepreneurship is even more relevant for young people who are marginalised because they have fewer opportunities to begin with.

Even for those who have access to the safety nets, opportunities, and support that make entry into social entrepreneurship possible, remaining in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem should not be taken for granted. Challenges in recruiting talent, financial pressures, a "Work First" culture in the sector, and blurred lines between work and non-work make it difficult for individuals to maintain their wellbeing and to attend to everything that is important to them – from family and friends to leisure and spirituality. As virtually all young people we engaged with laughed at the notion of work-life balance, some of them also questioned whether they can continue this work in the future if they want children or face other responsibilities. Beyond the work pressures, the lack of mainstream awareness of social entrepreneurship sometimes also means high levels of loneliness and lack of understanding and empathy from others toward young people in social entrepreneurship.

Thus, the experiences of young people in social entrepreneurship are marked by tensions, strain, barriers to entry, and challenges to personal sustained engagement in social entrepreneurship. At the same time, the insufficient lack of focus in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem toward inclusion and wellbeing hinders the performance of individuals and social enterprises, while limiting the talent pool available.

How do young people and ecosystem builders make social entrepreneurship more inclusive?

The young people we engaged with in Malaysia used a variety of personal, peer, and organisational strategies to cope with the above challenges related to wellbeing and inclusion once they had already engaged in social entrepreneurship. Some of these strategies included:

- Formal and informal buddy systems for individuals to look after each other within a social enterprise and across the ecosystem.
- Developing a culture of psychological safety and openness for individuals to share when they need support within the social enterprise.
- Sharing wellbeing issues openly internally within the social enterprise and externally in the ecosystem to lessen the stigma associated with issues related to poor health.

Yet, these strategies can work only for the young people who are already in social enterprises and do not make social entrepreneurship more inclusive for young people who do not have the opportunities to engage with social entrepreneurship in various roles (as entrepreneurs, employees, volunteers, supporters). Thus, the young people we engaged with also recognised the important role ecosystem builders can play in making social entrepreneurship more inclusive and accessible. Social entrepreneurship ecosystem builders can:

- Develop venture support initiatives that embed wellbeing support and encourage young social entrepreneurs to consider their wellbeing and the wellbeing of others along with business decisions.

- Develop social entrepreneurship awareness and support initiatives for less urban areas and beyond university environments.
- Provide increased access to diverse role models and resources online and offline in languages additional to English.
- Promote the multiple roles young people can play in social entrepreneurship, such as employees, volunteers, and advocates, beyond being social entrepreneurs.

As a team, we are also committed to making social entrepreneurship more inclusive and accessible. Building on these preliminary insights, our next step is the development of a [social entrepreneurship toolkit](#) by and for young people from Cambodia and Malaysia.

TAGS: MALAYSIA SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT YOUTH

