

## Research Paper

## Effectiveness of Rural Centres in Enhancing Community Empowerment and Social Well-Being

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### ABSTRACT:

Rural Transformation Centers (RTCs) have been established to significantly enhance the social well-being and community empowerment of rural dwellers, ultimately aiming to improve their overall quality of life. Given the pivotal role these centers play, it is crucial to assess their effectiveness in achieving these objectives. Despite their importance, the current literature lacks comprehensive studies on the specific dimensions that determine the effectiveness of rural centers like RTCs. This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring and proposing a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of rural centers in enhancing community empowerment and social well-being. The proposed framework identifies four key dimensions of effectiveness: access and infrastructure, service provision, community engagement and empowerment, and economic impact and sustainability. Access and infrastructure examine the accessibility of essential facilities such as public transportation and connectivity to nearby communities. Service provision evaluates the range and quality of services offered by RTCs, including types of services provided, health and wellbeing as well as education and skill development. Meanwhile, community engagement and empowerment focus on the involvement of community members, social cohesion, empowerment and capacity building. Economic impact and sustainability assess the economic benefits generated by RTCs on local economy such as job creation, income generation, and the long-term viability of these benefits. By understanding and harnessing these dimensions, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can formulate effective strategies and interventions to maximize the impact of rural centers. This holistic approach ensures that RTCs can fulfil their mandate and contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Rural transformation centres, community empowerment, social wellbeing, infrastructure, service provision, engagement, economic impact

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many governments have been focusing on rural revitalization strategies in order to promote rural development (Han, 2020). Rural areas in Malaysia have shown positive advancement in line with Malaysia's government's rural development plans and the country's strong economic

growth (Nghah, 2012). Among the initiatives of the government is the establishment of Rural Transformation Centres in Malaysia. The Rural Transformation Centre (RTC) was formed as part of the National Blue Ocean Strategy 4 (NBOS4) of the former Malaysian government. It is a place where some integrated projects for rural areas within 100 kilometres of the site can be carried out. Under the RTC implementation programmes, there are eight major initiatives consisting of training for the rural population, setting up 1Malaysia information kiosks, high-value agriculture initiatives, processing of agro-food products, managing the supply chain for agricultural products, university cooperation, food safety and pharmaceutical services, and financial facilities for the rural population. Different ministries oversee the execution of these plans into action, with the help and cooperation from other appropriate ministries.

RTCs were set up primarily to enhance social well-being and community empowerment of rural dwellers which ultimately aims to improve their quality of life (Shahriar *et al.*, 2014). Among others, these centers play a vital role in empowering rural communities by fostering social cohesion, inclusivity, and community participation. By providing platforms for community engagement, knowledge sharing, and capacity building, RTCs enable rural residents to actively participate in decision-making processes and take ownership of their development. Thus, among its important objectives is the role RTCs play in enhancing sustainability of socio-economic impact on surrounding communities.

According to MyGovernment Portal ([www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/content/15019](http://www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/content/15019)), RTCs contribute to promoting community empowerment in rural areas of Malaysia. In a way, RTCs can create a sense of belonging and unity among community members, thus leading to increased social well-being and improved quality of life. Apart from that, RTCs aim to provide opportunities for rural residents to voice their opinions, contribute ideas, and actively participate in activities that affect their communities. Through various programs and initiatives, RTCs can facilitate skill development, entrepreneurship, and community-led initiatives, resulting in increased self-reliance and empowerment among rural populations. Furthermore, the importance of RTCs is also in fostering inclusivity in rural communities. RTCs serve as inclusive spaces that bring people from diverse backgrounds together, promoting social integration and reducing social disparities. By providing equal access to resources, services, and opportunities, RTCs can help bridge the gap between different segments of society, empowering marginalized groups and promoting social cohesion.

Given the crucial role of RTCs in promoting socio-economic well-being of the surrounding communities, there is a need for evaluating the effectiveness of RTCs in achieving its objectives. Understanding of the dimensions of effectiveness is important since it is expected to facilitate decision-making services for rural revitalization plan implementation (Wang *et al.*, 2022). A review of extant literature revealed that there are currently very limited studies that investigate the specific dimensions of effectiveness of rural centres such as the RTCs. Hence, this paper aims to discuss the various dimensions of effectiveness of RTCs by taking into account the multiple stakeholders involved.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW / THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

Effectiveness Theory is concerned with the assessment of an organization's effectiveness in delivering desired outcomes. Hall (1980) defines effectiveness of an organization as the “degree to which an organization realizes its goals”. By analyzing these factors, researchers and practitioners can gain insights into the organizational aspects that contribute to the effectiveness of rural centers

and make informed decisions to enhance their performance. Despite the importance of assessing organisational effectiveness, there is a lack of consensus on its definition, and consequently on measurement parameters of organizational effectiveness Sharma and Singh (2019). This view is consistent with Cameron (2015) who noted that “no single and correct definition of organizational effectiveness exists”.

One of the early works on organisational effectiveness was by Weisbord (1976). Six broad categories for looking at an organization were suggested, consisting of purposes, structure, relationships, rewards, leadership and helpful mechanisms (Weisbord, 1976). Meanwhile, Cameron (2015) suggests that there are different models of looking at organizational effectiveness including:

- ideal type or bureaucratic model (effectiveness means matching the ideal characteristics of a bureaucratic organization),
- goal model (effectiveness means accomplishing goals),
- natural systems model (effectiveness means obtaining needed resources),
- strategic constituencies model (effectiveness means satisfying important stakeholders)
- internal processes model (effectiveness means high quality internal processes)
- paradox model (effectiveness means the presence of simultaneous opposites)
- abundance model (effectiveness means producing flourishing and virtuousness).

In another study by Mwai *et al.* (2018), effectiveness is viewed from three perspectives, namely, goals attainment, stakeholder satisfaction and process efficiency. Sharma and Singh (2019) offered a unified view of OE and conceptualizes organizational effectiveness as “the degree of achievement of participant led integrated goals – measured comprehensively through a mix of financial, operational, structural and attitudinal/behavioral measures – that lead to their satisfaction and enable the long-term survival and sustainability of the organization.” They proposed a unified framework as shown in Figure 1.

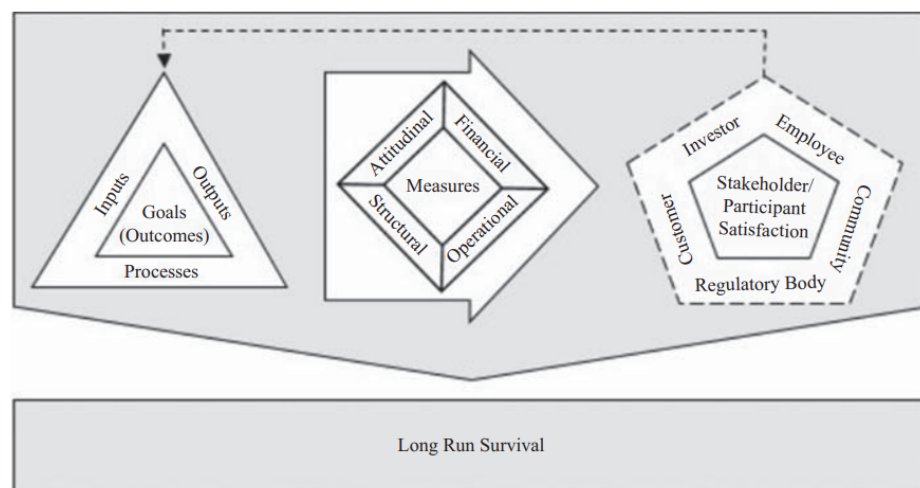


Figure 1. Unified organizational effectiveness model  
(Source: Sharma and Singh, 2019)

In the context of rural centers, overall effectiveness can be viewed as a multi-construct factor consisting of factors such as access, service provision, community engagement, and economic impact. For instance, Wang *et al.* (2022) examined rural development status using three distinct dimensions, consisting of: (1) production effectiveness (agricultural and non-agricultural

perspective); (2) living effectiveness (primarily concerned with the village's facilities and the residential environment) and (3) ecological effectiveness (village's natural ecological condition as well as the village environment). On the other hand, Liu *et al.* (2022) suggests that effectiveness of rural revitalization needs to take into account both material and spiritual life factors.

## Proposed Conceptual Framework

In the context of rural centres, the definition of organizational effectiveness is still the same i.e., effectiveness is viewed as the condition whereby such centres achieve its intended objectives. However, based on the literature and considering the financial and non-financial goals of rural centres, four factors that relate to the organizational effectiveness of rural centres are advanced in the following proposed framework. The four factors are (1) access and infrastructure, (2) service provision, (3) community engagement and empowerment, and (4) economic impact and sustainability (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Proposed framework of effectiveness of rural centres

### 3.1 Access and Infrastructure

The accessibility and infrastructure of rural centers play a crucial role in determining their overall effectiveness in serving the local community. This category encompasses evaluating transportation options, proximity to communities, and the availability of basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply, and telecommunications. In this paper, we delve into the importance of enhancing accessibility and infrastructure for rural centers and explore the various dimensions that contribute to their effectiveness. By understanding the significance of this factor, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can formulate strategies to optimize rural centers and improve their impact on rural communities.

#### Accessibility

Assessing the ease of access to rural centers is crucial. This dimension involves evaluating transportation options, proximity to communities, and availability of basic infrastructure. Transportation connectivity is a key dimension that influences the accessibility of rural centers. It involves evaluating the availability of public transportation, road networks, and connectivity to

nearby communities. Studies have shown that improved transportation access enhances the utilization of rural center services and promotes community engagement (Berg & Ihlström, 2019). The geographical location and proximity of rural centers to the target population are critical factors. Research has found that the closer the rural center is to the community, the higher the likelihood of its utilization, as it reduces travel time and costs for residents (Goodman *et al.*, 1997).

### *Infrastructure Development*

Examining the role of rural centers in facilitating infrastructure development is crucial. This dimension includes evaluating the availability of basic amenities such as roads, electricity, water supply, and telecommunications. Basic infrastructure, including roads, electricity, water supply, and telecommunications, forms the backbone of rural center operations. Studies have emphasized the importance of reliable infrastructure to ensure the delivery of services and sustainable functionality of rural centers (Salemink *et al.*, 2017). To improve the effectiveness of rural centers, it is crucial to focus on enhancing accessibility and infrastructure. Potential strategies and interventions that can be employed include improving transportation networks, establishing satellite centers in underserved areas, and investing in infrastructure development projects (Fox & Porca, 2001).

### **3.2    *Service Provision***

Service provision is a critical dimension in evaluating the effectiveness of rural centers, as it directly impacts the well-being and development of the local population. This category encompasses various aspects, including healthcare services, education, employment opportunities, social welfare, and other essential services. In this paper, we explore the dimensions of service provision, namely healthcare and well-being, as well as education and skill development, and their significance in determining the effectiveness of rural centers. By understanding the importance of these factors, policymakers and stakeholders can implement strategies to optimize service provision and enhance the overall impact of rural centers on the local community.

#### *Services Provided*

Examining the range and quality of services offered by rural centers is essential. This dimension includes healthcare, education, employment opportunities, social welfare, and other essential services. Service provision, encompassing healthcare and well-being, as well as education and skill development, is a crucial dimension for evaluating the effectiveness of rural centers. By focusing on providing quality healthcare services, promoting well-being, offering educational opportunities, and fostering skill development, rural centers can significantly contribute to the overall development and empowerment of rural communities. It is essential for policymakers and stakeholders to recognize the significance of these dimensions and implement targeted strategies to enhance service provision in rural centers.

#### *Health and Well-being*

Evaluating the impact of rural centers on the health and well-being of the local population is essential. This dimension includes healthcare services, health education, disease prevention, and overall improvement in the quality of life. Access to quality healthcare services is crucial for the well-being of rural populations. Rural centers play a vital role in providing primary healthcare, preventive care, and healthcare outreach programs. Research has shown that the availability of healthcare services in rural centers positively impacts the health outcomes of rural residents (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). Rural centers can contribute to improving health literacy and promoting disease prevention through health education initiatives. These programs can empower individuals to make informed decisions about



their health and adopt preventive measures. The effectiveness of rural centers can also be evaluated based on their contribution to enhancing the overall quality of life in rural communities. Research has highlighted the importance of comprehensive well-being approaches in rural centers to address the unique challenges faced by rural populations. This includes factors such as access to recreational facilities, mental health support, and social welfare programs (Allan *et al.*, 2007).

### *Education and Skill Development*

Assessing the effectiveness of rural centers in providing educational opportunities and skill development programs is important. This dimension reflects the center's contribution to enhancing the knowledge and capabilities of the local community. Rural centers have the potential to provide educational opportunities that enhance the knowledge and capabilities of the local community. This may include formal education programs, vocational training, and adult education initiatives. Studies have shown that access to educational opportunities through rural centers positively influences educational attainment and socio-economic development (Shaturaev & Bekimbetova, 2021). In addition to formal education, rural centers can offer skill development programs that equip individuals with the necessary skills for employment and entrepreneurship. These programs contribute to increasing employability and promoting economic growth within the rural community. Research has emphasized the importance of skill development initiatives provided by rural centers in empowering individuals and fostering local economic development (Trivelli & Morel, 2021).

### **3.3 Community Engagement and Empowerment**

Community engagement and empowerment are critical dimensions that contribute to the effectiveness of rural centers (Ullah, 2017). Rural centers are more effective when they actively engage with the local community, foster social cohesion, and empower individuals. In this section, we provide an overview of the significance of community engagement, social cohesion, and empowerment for rural centers, highlighting their potential impact on the overall effectiveness and well-being of the community. This category involves evaluating the level of community involvement, social cohesion, and the center's efforts in empowering individuals and building their capacities. In this paper, we explore the importance of community engagement, social cohesion, and empowerment in rural centers, highlighting their role in enhancing effectiveness and promoting sustainable community development. Understanding and prioritizing these dimensions can inform policies and strategies that foster active participation, cultural preservation, and personal growth within rural communities.

#### *Community Engagement*

Evaluating the level of community involvement and participation in the operations and decision-making processes of rural centers is important. This dimension reflects the center's ability to effectively engage with the local population. Community involvement in the operations and decision-making processes of rural centers is crucial for their success. This dimension encompasses assessing the extent of community engagement, including participation in planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs and services provided by the center. Effective strategies to promote community engagement in rural centers include regular community meetings, focus groups, surveys, and collaborative partnerships with local organizations. Research has shown that successful engagement leads to increased satisfaction, improved service utilization, and better alignment of center offerings with community needs (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020).

### *Social Cohesion*

Assessing the impact of rural centers on fostering social cohesion and community integration is significant. This dimension includes evaluating the promotion of social interaction, cultural preservation, and harmony within the community. Rural centers play a significant role in fostering social interaction among community members. This dimension includes evaluating the center's efforts to create spaces and programs that facilitate social connections, cultural exchange, and community integration (Ye & Yang, 2020; Khartishvili *et al.*, 2019). Centers that promote cultural events, heritage preservation, and intergenerational activities contribute to social cohesion and community well-being (Martínez Rodríguez, 2023).

### *Empowerment and Capacity Building*

Evaluating the effectiveness of rural centers in empowering individuals and building their capacities is essential. This dimension includes assessing the center's initiatives in providing training, entrepreneurship support, mentorship, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Effective capacity building programs offered by rural centers enhance individuals' skills, knowledge, and self-confidence (Yami *et al.*, 2019). These programs can include vocational training, financial literacy, leadership development, and support for small-scale entrepreneurship, thus empowering community members to pursue sustainable livelihoods.

## **3.4 Economic Impact and Sustainability**

The economic impact and sustainability of rural centers are essential dimensions that contribute to their overall effectiveness. This category involves evaluating the influence of rural centers on the local economy and assessing their long-term viability. Examining employment generation, business development, economic growth, financial stability, resource management, and environmental impact are crucial aspects of understanding the economic and sustainable contributions of rural centers. This paper explores the importance of economic impact and sustainability, highlighting strategies to enhance rural center effectiveness and promote long-term community development.

### *Impact on Local Economy*

Economic impacts refer to the anticipated increase in locational capital wealth and prosperity and how entrepreneurial ecosystems generate and create value (Audretsch *et al.*, 2019). Examining the economic influence of rural centers on the local community is significant. This dimension involves evaluating employment generation, business development, and overall economic growth. The impact on local economy mainly consists of employment generation, business development and economic growth. Evaluating the employment opportunities created by rural centers is vital. This dimension involves assessing the center's role in generating jobs, reducing unemployment, and improving livelihoods within the local community (Ouku *et al.*, 2022). Examining the impact of rural centers on business development is crucial. This dimension includes evaluating the support provided by the center to local entrepreneurs, fostering entrepreneurship, and facilitating the establishment and growth of small businesses (Bosworth, 2009). Assessing the overall economic growth can also involve evaluating factors such as increased local purchasing power, tax revenues, and economic diversification stimulated by the center's activities.

### *Sustainability*

Assessing the long-term viability and sustainability of rural centers is also crucial (Kesavan & Swaminathan, 2008). This dimension includes considering factors such as financial stability, resource management, and environmental impact. Three main dimensions are included in this category:

financial stability, resource management and environmental impact. Assessing the financial stability of rural centers is essential for their long-term viability. This dimension includes evaluating the center's financial management practices, funding sources, and financial sustainability strategies. Similarly, evaluating the effective management of resources by rural centers is crucial for sustainability. This dimension involves assessing the center's practices in resource allocation, utilization, and conservation, including human resources, facilities, and funding. Finally, considering the environmental impact of rural centers is an important dimension of sustainability. This includes evaluating the center's efforts in promoting environmentally friendly practices, minimizing carbon footprint, and enhancing ecological conservation (Chambers & Conway, 1992).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, rural centres such as the RTCs in Malaysia play a significant role in enhancing social well-being and community empowerment. Through their engagement platforms, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and capacity-building programs, RTCs should enable rural residents to actively participate in decision-making processes and take ownership of their development. These centers have the potential to be successful in fostering social cohesion, inclusivity, and community participation, leading to increased empowerment and improved quality of life for rural communities. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should prioritize these dimensions and implement strategies that maximize economic benefits while ensuring long-term sustainability of RTCs.

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