

POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR (PEB) IN MALAYSIA

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Key Insights

- ❖ Pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) provides an important complement to policy interventions to reduce environmental degradations.
- ❖ Participation in environmental organisations often entails costs that may discourage lower-income households. Policymakers should consider measures to reduce these barriers.
- ❖ Education plays a critical role in shaping environmental awareness and civic engagement.
- ❖ Governments must be transparent in environmental policymaking to ensure trust, which is vital for PEB.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's economic development has improved living standards; however, it has placed considerable pressure on the environment. Recognising these challenges, the Malaysian

government has introduced various policy initiatives to promote sustainable development, including long-term strategies, regulatory reforms, and fiscal incentives for green technologies and renewable energy.

Despite these initiatives, environmental protection cannot rely solely on government action. Environmental quality is a public good, meaning that individuals benefit from it regardless of whether they contribute to it. This creates a collective action problem, in which individuals underinvest in environmental protection because they can free ride on others' efforts.

Pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) provides an important complement to policy interventions. PEB includes activities that individuals undertake voluntarily to protect the environment or reduce environmental harm. These actions may range from everyday conservation practices to participation in environmental organisations and advocacy groups. When individuals engage in collective environmental action, they reinforce public support for environmental policies and help sustain broader social norms that favour sustainability.

Understanding the determinants of PEB is therefore essential for policymakers seeking to design policies that encourage civic participation and long-term environmental stewardship.

2. DETERMINANTS OF PEB

Mainstream neoclassical economic theory explains environmental degradation as a consequence of negative externalities and the public good nature of environmental quality. Since individuals do not bear the social costs of environmental degradation, they may lack

incentives to reduce environmentally harmful behaviour. Under this framework, government intervention through taxes, price subsidies, or regulation is required to correct the market failures.

However, empirical evidence shows that individuals often support environmental protection even when it involves personal costs. This suggests that environmental behaviour cannot be explained solely by economic incentives.

Behavioural and sociological theories provide additional insights. The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory and Norm Activation Theory (NAT) argue that PEB is affected by personal values, beliefs about environmental consequences, and moral obligations to protect nature. Individuals who internalise environmental values are willing to make sacrifices for environmental protection even in the absence of economic incentives.

Nevertheless, moral motivations alone cannot fully explain PEB. Socio-economic conditions and institutional factors also play a crucial role in shaping individuals' willingness to participate in environmental activities. For example, individuals may support environmental protection in principle but hesitate to take action if they face economic constraints, lack access to environmental organisations, or distrust institutions responsible for implementing environmental policies.

Consequently, PEB emerges from the interaction of psychological motivations, economic resources, social networks, and institutional trust.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIA

This study analyses survey data from the World Values Survey covering three survey waves between 2005 and 2022 using an ordered logit model to examine the determinants of PEB. The analysis focuses on membership in environmental organisations, which serves as the indicator of collective environmental engagement.

Membership in an environmental organisation reflects a meaningful commitment to environmental protection because individuals must invest their time, personal effort, and sometimes financial resources to participate. Individuals may be actively involved in activities, maintain a more limited or passive membership, or choose not to join at all.

Distinguishing between active members, inactive members, and non-members helps capture these different levels of engagement and provides a clearer picture of how individuals participate in environmental initiatives.

The empirical model includes a range of explanatory variables reflecting socio-economic characteristics, demographic factors,

institutional trust, and structural conditions. The results and insights are summarized below.

Insights on Education

Education is positively associated with environmental participation. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to join environmental organisations. Education improves environmental knowledge, enhances civic skills, and enables individuals to understand policy trade-offs better. As a result, more educated individuals may view environmental protection as an investment in long-term welfare rather than a short-term cost.

Insights on Income

Income also positively influences participation in environmental organisations. Higher-income individuals are more able to bear the financial and opportunity costs associated with environmental engagement. Since environmental participation often entails costs such as membership fees, travel expenses, and time commitments, individuals with greater economic resources are more likely to participate.

Insights on Demographics

Age is negatively related to environmental organisational participation. Younger individuals are more likely to engage in environmental activities, possibly because they have been socialised in an era of greater

environmental awareness and have longer time horizons for environmental benefits. Older individuals may face greater time constraints or perceive environmental improvements as less relevant to their immediate welfare.

Insights on Family Attributes

Individuals with more children are slightly more likely to participate in environmental organisations. This suggests that concern for future generations may motivate environmental engagement.

Insights on Social Capital

Trust emerges as the most important predictor of environmental participation. Individuals who trust others and believe that institutions will enforce environmental regulations fairly are more likely to engage in collective environmental action. Trust reduces concerns about free-riding and increases confidence that individual contributions will produce meaningful outcomes.

Insights on Ethnicity

The analysis finds some variation in PEB across ethnic groups, where Indian respondents are more likely to participate in environmental organisations compared to Malays or Chinese. However, these differences likely reflect variations in community mobilisation and social networks rather than inherent cultural preferences for environmentalism.

4. KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide several important insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen pro-environmental behaviour in Malaysia.

Expand Environmental Education

Education plays a critical role in shaping environmental awareness and civic engagement. Policies should strengthen environmental education not only in schools and universities but also through community programmes and public awareness campaigns.

Universities can play an important role by integrating environmental sustainability into academic curricula and community engagement initiatives. Programmes that connect students with local communities and environmental projects can foster both environmental knowledge and civic responsibility.

Reduce Barriers to Participation

Participation in environmental organisations often entails financial and logistical costs that may discourage lower-income households. Policymakers should consider measures to reduce these barriers.

Possible interventions include grants for community environmental groups, subsidies for environmental activities, and tax incentives for individuals who donate to environmental organisations. Supporting local environmental

initiatives in smaller towns and rural areas can also promote more inclusive environmental participation.

Strengthen Institutional Trust

Trust in institutions is critical for collective environmental action. When individuals believe that environmental policies are implemented fairly and effectively, they are more willing to support the government's environmental initiatives.

Governments can strengthen trust by improving transparency in environmental policymaking, ensuring consistent enforcement of environmental regulations, and expanding opportunities for public participation in environmental decision-making processes.

Support Youth Engagement

Younger individuals are more likely to participate in environmental organisations. Policymakers should therefore support youth-focused initiatives such as campus environmental networks, digital engagement platforms, and youth-led sustainability programmes.

At the same time, policies should create alternative engagement opportunities for older individuals, such as community-based environmental projects and family-oriented environmental activities.

Promote Inclusive Community Networks

Environmental participation often occurs through social networks and community organisations. Policymakers should work closely with civil society organisations (CSOs), community groups, and local leaders to promote inclusive environmental engagement across different social and ethnic groups. Environmental issues should be framed as shared national concerns rather than issues affecting specific groups.

5. CONCLUSION

Environmental sustainability in Malaysia requires both effective public policies and active citizen participation. While government regulations, fiscal incentives, and environmental programmes are important, they cannot fully address environmental challenges without broader civic engagement.

The evidence suggests that pro-environmental behaviour depends on a combination of socio-economic resources, institutional trust, and social networks. Education and income help individuals overcome practical barriers to environmental participation, while trust encourages cooperation and collective action.

Policies that strengthen environmental education, reduce participation costs, and build trust between citizens and institutions can significantly increase civic engagement in environmental protection. By promoting

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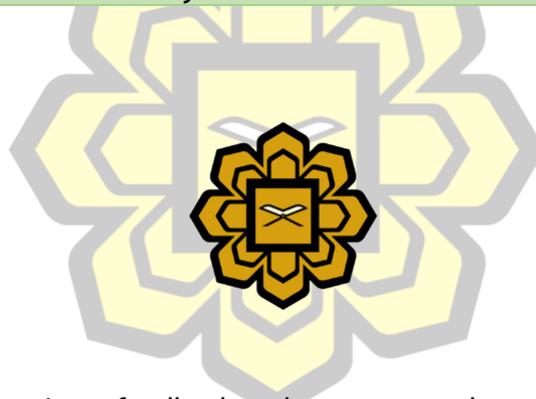
inclusive participation and strengthening cooperation between government, civil society, and communities, Malaysia can enhance its capacity to address environmental challenges and achieve long-term sustainable development.

Environmental Behaviour and Their Policy Implications in Malaysia”.

Note: This article is based on the study “Socio-Economic and Institutional Drivers of Pro-

Policy Recommendations in a Nutshell

- ❖ Expand Environmental Education
- ❖ Reduce Barriers to Participation
- ❖ Strengthen Institutional Trust
- ❖ Support Youth Engagement
- ❖ Promote Inclusive Community Networks



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