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Venessa Sambai Usek & Lynda Dunlop

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Indigenous youth activism: the role of education in creating capabilities

Venessa Sambai Usek and Lynda Dunlop [ORCID]

Department of Education, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Globally, there has been attention to the role of youth activism in bringing about socially just change and the associated learning that occurs through this action. Young people in Malaysia have been found to be less likely to be politically active than their elders, but few research studies have focused on activism amongst Indigenous youth. This exploratory interview study focuses on motivations and challenges experienced by eight highly educated Malaysian Indigenous youth (aged 19–24). Youth took action for Indigenous rights in politics, education, development and health. We find systemic oppression and lack of control over their environment as key motivators for activism. These were associated with lack of representation in education and politics, and existential threats posed by major development projects involving dams, oil palm plantations and rice cultivation. Challenges faced by Indigenous youth in their activism included backlash from peers, tensions associated with maintaining true representation, fear of consequences of resistance, and the language of politics and legal knowledge. Education and social networking has an important – and currently under-utilised – role to play in enabling young people to live with dignity.

Introduction

Youth social movements have seen growing research interest, particularly in relation to environmental issues (Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022). Do-it-ourselves (Pickard 2022) and social media activism (Scherman, Valenzuela, and Rivera 2022) have been identified as playing a role in youth social movements. In addition to the approaches to activism, there has been attention to the learning that occurs through youth activism (Carey et al. 2021; Kirshner 2007). A recent study (Hilder and Collin 2022) included the role of Indigenous youth in climate justice movements in Australia. Fewer studies have been conducted in the Global South. The present study aims to investigate the experiences of Indigenous youth in Malaysia. In this context, research has found that young people are more reluctant to participate in the political sphere than adults (Mohd Hed and

Grasso 2020). This has been attributed to the use of laws and violent repression as barriers to participation in activism (Mohd Hed 2018). Young people reportedly prefer low-risk civil engagement through the virtual world (Mohd Hed 2017; Ting and Ahmad 2021). However, Malaysia is a diverse country and existing literature makes little distinction between the experiences of different youth populations, tending to focus on those located in Peninsular Malaysia (predominantly Malay, Chinese and Indian) and from urban communities (Mohd Hed 2020). There is a need for research to be more inclusive of all young people in Malaysia, particularly Indigenous youth from Sabah and Sarawak (Postill 2014). The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand activism amongst Indigenous youth, the challenges they face and the role of education in enabling activism. This is particularly important as the government currently aims to intensify rural development to bridge the economic gap between urban and rural areas (Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department 2022), a move likely to disproportionately affect Indigenous young people. In what follows, we set out the context (specifically, the relationship between research participants with the state and as members of Indigenous communities in the broader Malaysian context), the relationship between wellbeing and activism, and the place for education in developing capabilities to bring about wellbeing through activism. We use capability approach to investigate Indigenous youth activism because it allows us to identify motivations for activism, the influences of activism on lives and wellbeing, and the role of education in enabling young people to develop the capabilities needed in their activism. Whilst located in a single geographical context, the study contributes knowledge about experiences of activism previously absent from research literature regarding young people in this context.

Context: Malaysia and indigenous peoples' rights

As of 2017, Indigenous people made up around 13.8% of the population of Malaysia (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, IGWIA 2021). Malaysian Indigenous people consist of three main groups: *Orang Asli* (Aboriginal) of Peninsular Malaysia, *Orang Asal* (Indigenous*)* of Sabah and *Orang Asal* (Indigenous*)* of Sarawak, known collectively as *Orang Asal*. Although the majority Malay population is indigenous to Malaysia, this group of people is not categorised as Indigenous as they hold dominant control over politics, social and economy (IGWIA 2021). Indigenous people face political, social and economic challenges in Malaysia due to rights deprivation and structural discrimination (Pietsch and Clark 2014). The constitution, for example, privileges Malay people through Article 153, guaranteeing the special position of the Malay people and language (Pietsch and Clark 2014). The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in the 1970s aimed to alleviate poverty through societal restructuring (Doraisami 2012) but higher proportions of non-Malay Indigenous peoples now live in poverty: 4.7% of the population in Sabah experiences extreme poverty, compared with 1% of the population of other states. Indigenous Malaysians are also poorly represented in the Cabinet (Hutchinson 2020), professional roles in the civil service and in education admissions (Pietsch and Clark 2014).

Provision for the Department of *Orang Asli* Affairs (JAKOA) was created in the Aboriginal Peoples Act (APA) 1954 of the Federal Government of Malaysia (FAO 2021). JAKOA oversees *Orang Asli* affairs in Peninsular Malaysia including land usage, education,

employment, political structure and information circulation by and for the *Orang Asli* (Nah 2008; Nordin and Witbrodt 2012; Subramaniam 2015). Conflict between '*adat*' (traditional customs) and state law means that Indigenous peoples' customary land is not always recognised by government agencies (Cooke et al. 2017; IGWIA 2021). Loss of land to development projects such as the Bakun Dam in Sarawak (Cooke et al. 2017) and oil palm plantations in Sabah (Nuar and Lunkapis 2019), which use land in less sustainable ways, results in displacement and resettlement of Indigenous populations. Although Malaysia voted in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2017, Amnesty International (2018) reports that the Malaysian government fails to protect Indigenous peoples' rights to natural resources, lands and security. It has been argued that Malaysian Indigenous people shoulder the price of development in the country, and yet are denied basic rights such as education, healthcare, clean water, food security, physical and digital infrastructure and political rights (Aiken and Leigh 2011; IGWIA 2021 Nelson, Muhammed, and Rashid 2016; Saifullah, Masud, and Kari 2021). The activists we focus on in this study are working to establish and protect rights in these areas.

Activism, education and wellbeing

Activism is a contested concept and can be interpreted in a number of ways (Peterson et al. 2020). It is often considered collective action directed toward (and often against) a ruling regime (Weiss et al. 2012), or put differently, behaviour performed by young people with political intent (Hart and Gullan 2010). We interpret these definitions to include individual or collective forms of civil or political participation directed toward or against the government. Previous research in this journal has centred on young people and political participation in environmental activism (Sloam, Pickard & Henn, 2022), looking at young people's motivations and the different ways in which they participate. Here, we add to this rich literature by introducing perspectives from Indigenous youth from a context in the Global South centred not on specific environmental issues, but on the lived experiences of young people. Resistance or activism amongst Indigenous peoples has been reported to focus on securing rights (Sium and Ritskes 2013) in order to pursue tribal sovereignty, autonomy, self-identification and self-determination (Brayboy 2005) and achieve a sense of inclusion and belonging (Idrus 2010). This connects activism to the desire for wellbeing and ability to live a dignified life. Activism, as politically motivated behaviour, suggests a lack of freedom to achieve wellbeing and to lead a life one has reason to value. In order to achieve wellbeing, people must have capabilities to do or be what they have reason to value, for example, to be educated or to travel or to settle (Nussbaum 2011).

There is an uneasy relationship between activism and education. Wheeler-Bell (2014) argues that because the society that young people will most probably enter is far from desired, a civic education should attempt to provide young people with the collective sensibilities necessary to bring about transformations needed to create the desired society. Peterson et al. (2020) observe that youth activism and related educational efforts are sensitive to and informed by context in terms of relations between citizens, and between citizens and the state. In the Malaysian context, Mahmood (2014) argues that civic and citizenship education is concerned with developing good personal and

patriotic citizens rather than politically literate and active citizens, and perhaps connectedly, Weiss (2012) has observed a decline in youth (student) activism, attributed to a focus on civil society rather than politics, and a moderately coercive regime. These studies include little reference to diverse types of youth activism, or to the specific ways in which education can enable young people to secure a dignified life. In the following section, we outline the contribution of capabilities approach to understanding motivations for activism and associated educational needs.

Conceptual framework

The framework for this research, Capabilities approach (Sen 1999; 2005; Nussbaum 2011) is defined as 'an approach to quality of life assessment and to theorising about basic social justice' (Nussbaum 2011, 18). Capabilities approach is concerned with the question 'what are people able to do and to be?' and emphasises that quality of life is made up of qualitatively different and non-reducible elements (Nussbaum 2011) presented in Table 1, which are needed to achieve wellbeing and to lead a dignified life. It has been used widely in international scholarship in a range of contexts, from understanding child and youth activism in school (Ward 2022), to community acceptance renewables projects (Velasco-Herrejon and Bauwens 2020). Drawing on case studies from Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua, Binder and Binder (2016) argue that the capabilities framework can be useful legally and practically in defending indigenous rights and interests while allowing people to pursue their own life trajectories. This suggests that the capability approach is a suitable framework for understanding *Orang Asal* narratives in relation to activism – what motivates Indigenous youth activists, what challenges they experience, and the role of education in developing capabilities for activism. Here, we use it in two main ways: to identify motivations for activism and to identify the role of education in this activism.

Capabilities approach is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where development projects often come into conflict with Indigenous people's lives and land, impacting on the freedoms that Indigenous people have to function in a way that is valued. It is also consistent with Malaysian Indigenous communities' notions of poverty, which is defined

Table 1. Nussbaum's 10 central capabilities.

Capability	Description
Life	Ability to live a normal length of life without being reduced to be not worthy
Bodily Health	Ability to receive at least adequate shelter, sufficient nourishment and reproductive health to live a good life
Bodily Integrity	Ability to move freely and receive security against dangers or assault
Senses, Imagination and Thought	Ability to find meaningful life by using one's reasoning and imagination through an adequate education
Emotions	Ability to experience feelings such as joy, anger, grief and love for others
Practical Reason	Ability to be critical on what is wrong or right through one's reflection
Affiliation	Ability to (a) empathise towards others, and (b) live a dignified life without any discrimination due to one's race, gender, class, sexuality, religion or nationality
Other Species	Ability to show concerns for and live with the environment and living things such as animals and plants
Play	Ability to entertain oneself through play and leisure
Control over one's environment	Ability to (a) exercise political agency through freedom of expression, and (b) secure properties or material things and seek employment on equal footing

not in economic terms, but in terms of being able to practice culture and traditions. Capabilities approach can therefore be used to identify the capabilities that Indigenous Peoples need to flourish.

Methodology

Study design

An exploratory qualitative research design is employed to understand Malaysian Indigenous youth activism. Capabilities approach enables researchers to identify the action needed to improve quality of life (Nussbaum 2011) – here, for Indigenous youth activists. The study addresses the following research questions:

- What motivates Indigenous youth to engage in activism in Malaysia?
- What are the challenges faced by Indigenous youth in engaging with activism in Malaysia?
- What is the role of education in Indigenous youth activism in Malaysia?

We use Nussbaum's central capabilities (Table 1) to identify motivations for youth activism, the challenges they experience, and the role of education in building capabilities.

Participants

Participants were recruited via social media platforms (*Instagram* and *WhatsApp)* and were interviewed remotely because the research took place at a time of travel and social contact restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Purposive snowball sampling was used to identify potential participants. Snowball sampling was used because of the challenge associated with finding Indigenous youth activists with access to technology and located in areas with reliable internet access, and also because networks are often mediated by adult activists who act as gatekeepers to safeguard youth.

Purposive sampling required the use of inclusion criteria. To be included in the study, participants had to (i) be *Orang Asal* or *Orang Asli* (ii) be aged between 19 and 24, using the upper age limit used by the UN (UN, n.d.); and (iii) have experience of individual or collective forms of civil or political participation directed toward or against the ruling regime, as defined by Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology (Table 2 provides examples of civil and political actions identified by participants).

Table 2. Examples of civil and political participation in Ekman and Amna's typology.

Type of participation	Civil participation	Political participation
Examples of actions	● Writing articles ● Donating money to a social cause ● Involvement in political discussion ● Getting updates about politics via newspapers or TV	● Making contacts with political officers or representatives ● Strikes, protests or demonstration participation ● Membership registration of political organisations ● Distributing political-related posters and brochures

Table 3. Participant information.

Participant	Ethnicity	Sex	Areas of Activism	Age	Language of Interview
1	*Orang Asal* of Sarawak	Male	Political advocacy	23	English
2	*Orang Asal* of Sarawak	Female	Education, Political advocacy	23	English
3	*Orang Asal* of Sarawak	Female	Education, Political advocacy	20	Malay
4	*Orang Asal* of Sabah	Male	Education, Development, Mental health	24	Malay
5	*Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia	Female	Education, Development	22	Malay
6	*Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia	Female	Environment	22	Malay
7	*Orang Asal* of Sabah	Female	Development, Education	24	English
8	*Orang Asal* of Sabah	Male	Development, Education	24	English

A total of eight *Orang Asal* and *Orang Asli* youth aged between 20 and 24 took part. Details of each participant are presented in Table 3. Whilst the sample is small, it includes an under-researched group of Malaysian Indigenous youth, all of whom were highly educated (to university level). Nevertheless, we must be alert to potential absences, notably of Indigenous teenagers and those who have not accessed higher education.

Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to allow for flexibility to explore participants' individual perceptions, insights and experiences of youth activism, regardless of their specific cause. Although a focus group would have facilitated network building and support for participants, interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to share their experiences under confidential conditions.

Author 1 is Orang Asal. Author 2 is neither Orang Asal or Malaysian. All interviews were conducted virtually by Author 1 during a period of international restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Sharing the same values and identity as research participants promotes relatability and trust-building but also presents conflicts to the researcher who is at the same time an 'outsider' as a researcher. Yakushko et al. (2011) describe the tension between extracting resources (in the form of stories, traditional knowledge, participation, networks) and contributing to the community. There is a responsibility that a researcher from the researched community has to bear in ensuring research integrity is upheld for validity, while providing spaces for 'othered' voices to be heard. The British Educational Research Association's (2018) guidelines for ethical conduct in research were followed and approval granted by the relevant institutional ethics committee. All participants consented to take part. After piloting with two volunteers, the interview schedule was edited and the guide was translated into Malay to suit participants' preferences.

The interview guide included open questions, theory-driven questions and confrontational questions to elicit participants' insights (Flick 2014), to probe motivations, challenges and the role of education in activism. Questions included: 'what kinds of issues are important to you and why?', 'what actions have you taken?', 'is there knowledge or skills from your education that you have applied to pursue this or fight for this issue?' and 'what challenges do you experience in your work as an activist? What do you find missing?'

Data analysis

Whilst it was only possible to reach a small number of participants, sufficient data (and depth of data) exists to identify some of the enacted and absent capabilities of a group of young people under-represented in research on activism in Malaysia. Their experiences of civil and political participation in contemporary Malaysia provide insights into capabilities that are needed to enable young people to achieve wellbeing, and the role that education and activism might play in bringing this about.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and when conducted in Malay, translated by Author 1. During and following data collection, Authors 1 and 2 engaged in reflexive dialogue online and during walks to reduce biases, negotiate meaning and to think critically about the research process, responsibilities to the participants, power relations and the rigour and quality of the data collection and analysis (Smith 1999). The analytical approach used was reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020), allowing us to bring theory (capabilities approach) into play with our own interpretation of the data.

Interview transcripts were read by both authors. Transcripts were imported into NVivo, anonymised and analysed using Nussbaum's 10 central capabilities (Nussbaum 2011) as codes, applied deductively to the transcripts. Patterns across the dataset were identified according to similarity and difference (Collins and Stockton 2018), with present and absent capabilities identified and discussed amongst authors. Finally, coded data were organised into themes and used to answer the research questions, identifying the capabilities informing their motivation as activists, the challenges they faced and how education enables them to achieve various capabilities. There is a risk that a deductive approach might risk missing participants' perspectives. We therefore re-read transcripts with reference to the research questions to ensure no perspectives were missed and identified quotes to illustrate key points in participants' own words. The findings of the analysis are presented below.

Findings

Participants were working on different causes (political advocacy, environmental justice, basic human rights) and had different approaches to activism, but had in common experiences of collective action directed towards the ruling regime. These actions included writing articles, involvement in political discussion, running for office, demonstrations, making contact with political officers or representatives, membership of political organisations and distributing political materials.

What motivates indigenous youth to engage in activism in Malaysia?

Amongst the participants in this study, systemic oppression and existential threat was a key motivator for Orang Asal youth to engage in civil and political participation. Participation was often described as an act of compassion and care for others (including subsequent generations) and for traditions, cultures and ways of life that were under threat.

Oppression came in different guises: from individual discriminatory language ('just stay in your trees') to use of laws to exclude young people from some educational pathways,

to the use of administrative processes around customary land laws to preclude access to governmental assistance (which limits access to electricity and clean water). These systemic barriers made Indigenous youth feel like 'second-class citizens'. This motivated some participants to work on increasing representation of Indigenous people in government:

> I believe that if we are able to bring out the voices of these Orang Asal through my activism, through our activism, through our advocacy, we might be able to … bring the underrepresented people into the higher stage, for example the Malaysian Parliament. Because at the moment as you can see a lot of cases of, especially Sarawakian and Sabahan natives, which have a lot of difficulties in their life in terms of socio-economic, healthcare and education. Participant 1

This relates to the capability of affiliation – being able to live a dignified life without discrimination – which several participants identified as a reality they wanted to bring about through their activism. Relatedly, participant 8 discussed the need for practical reason amongst their community, and concern for other species in describing his work to raise awareness of the consequences of a dam project:

> What I want to do is to give some awareness, especially to the villagers, not to take this issue lightly. And not just bring this thing up whenever there's a pilihan raya [election] … my main reason to get involved in this issue is because of indigenous punya rights … I think as long as they're staying there, the area, the surroundings, the environment where they live, can actually be preserved. And when all these outsiders came, they promised to bring goods to you, and do this project and it will bring benefits to everyone. But actually it will just destroy the environment, just like the Bakun Dam … they think that this project is actually good because they will have road access to the village. But I think for the long term, the village will totally sink out, it will be tenggelam [drowned]. Personally for me, I'm totally against it because the project itself will destroy a lot of resources, especially the jungle and the animals and all the habitats.

Social justice, particularly the defence of Indigenous rights – and raising critical consciousness amongst their communities, was an important motivation:

> You visit someone who you know they're being oppressed by the system and they can't recognise it because they never had the luxury to choose or to question it. Participant 2

Indigenous youth talked about awareness-raising as important within their own communities (as above) but also of raising awareness of Indigenous cultures, traditions and ways of life amongst the wider Malaysian population, and about the tension between tanah adat (traditional customs) and state law. Awareness-raising actions were described by several participants as resisting cultural erasure:

> Our own community is already erased from the history books, erased from textbooks. People don't learn enough about us, which also means that it's so much harder for us to advance in society because of the understanding of our community has always been the basis that 'oh you guys are tribal indigenous and that's where you belong' Participant 2

> For now the biggest issue in Malaysia is tanah adat [customary land] because their big corporations are gazetting their land and taking their lands away. Because they take their land away … they cannot get electricity. If you are in a forest reserve you cannot have any kemudahan [facilities] because it will ruin the ecosystem. For me, it goes back to land ownership. Participant 7

Whilst these motivations relate to control over one's environment and what Nussbaum (2011) describes as the capability of 'senses, imagination and thought', they also relate to cultural integrity – whilst not identified as one of Nussbaum's capabilities, ability to protect ways of life and practice cultural traditions was an important motivation to the participants in this study. Participant 7 described observing and learning a handicraft from an elder and realising that modernisation within the community meant that this tradition was being lost.

> It just dawned on me that I may be the third person in the whole world to be given that access to this knowledge. I'm just like oh I have to do this properly, you know, I cannot let these people down, this is perhaps their very last hope of their culture to survive in modernity.

In common with Participant 7, others described their activism as a responsibility, privilege and a calling, relating to affiliation with other Indigenous people. We see despair and urgency in youth's motivation to defend customary land for their tribe for future generations by protecting ties to the land, forest and its resources:

> Actually, I didn't get anything from this. This is a common interest for our grandchildren in the future. That's why I feel the need to defend my customary land because that's where my mother was born, my grandmother was born, in this village. Participant 6

> If we do not defend it (the customary land), our village will be destroyed and we will not be able to find food. Participant 5

Connectedly, participants were driven by emotions, expressing anger, fear and joy in their activism. For example, Participant 3 described her frustration of vaccination denials for some villagers in rural areas of Sarawak who were unable to show identification documents:

> I started to find out who else is angry about this issue and push to do a press statement … only few people were working on it. Not everyone in the group ada [have] the same mindset, I mean, the same opinion. Some believe yang otherwise and kami orang [we] really push lah, okay we need to say something.

In summary, missing capabilities such as control over one's environment, concern for other species, affiliation – in the sense of being and feeling represented – and the need to act on negative emotions were stimuli for Malaysian Indigenous youth to become involved in activism. Participants wanted their communities to flourish and cultural traditions to survive and be recognised in broader Malaysian society. Next we turn to the challenges participants faced in taking action.

What are the challenges faced by Indigenous youth in engaging with activism in Malaysia?

The main challenges participants discussed were the issues that motivated them into activism, including the defence of communities against dams, oil palm plantations and rice cultivation projects. All participants had taken action beyond themselves, including participating in social movements, joining political parties or groups, issuing media statements and speaking in public forums (face-to-face and online). Participants tended to speak not of being an activist but of the necessity to do

something in response to a situation. This was often described as exhausting work. For example:

> it gets really tiring because of … when we don't have the platform, people don't understand how important it is for us, right. And because of this, it becomes the most lonesome and most tiring kinda fight. There are days where I can't anymore, then there are days I still can keep on doing it. Participant 2

Others talked about feeling like 'an ant, a drop in the sea' and the need for a 'ripple effect' for societal recognition and validation, and the difficulty of finding research to support their work. There was a sense amongst participants that activism was not socially acceptable, and that their status as Indigenous people means that they were often not listened to:

> I have faced quite a lot of backlash, especially from my friends. It is very unfortunate that a lot of Malaysian youths do not feel the need to be active in politics. Participant 1

> I think the prejudice here stops me from wanting to reach out sometimes. I've been constantly told that because I'm Sarawakian, I'm not Malaysian. And they have the confidence to tell me that … It's understanding that there are people out there that have that view of you and you sometimes doubt the work you do. But you also remember the importance of the work you do. Participant 2

However, challenges also came from within indigenous communities. Participant 2 described being the person 'in-between' and the importance of remembering the people she was fighting for, taking care not to misrepresent villagers or their desires.

> I was the only Orang Asal person from Sarawak in my organisation, which also means that I became the main voice for these kinds of issues.

There was also a challenge associated with expectations of communities and what individual activists or their organisations could deliver. Participant 6 described resisting rice cultivation projects proposed for her village and at the same time resisting demands for farmland from other villages whose land had been taken for oil palm plantations. There was also a tension between maintaining traditions, resisting attempts to take customary and ancestral land, and obtaining access to support.

> If they disagree with the decision, their living allowance will be cut, they will not get help from JAKOA or any governmental help … Some of the villagers are really scared so they don't want to get involved with anything and just stay away. It can be said that our villagers are experiencing depression. I myself feel like I can't sleep because we receive a lot of threats. Participant 6

> In Malaysia, politics controls everything. If you support your Prime Minister, you will get whatever you ask for. If you don't support your Prime Minister, even if you ask for a kilo of rice, you won't get it. Participant 5

This shows that actions of governmental aid or agencies might deter Malaysian Indigenous communities from exercising their capabilities. Relatedly, the language of politics was considered to be a barrier to activism, as was linguistic skill amongst activists. Participant 2 explained the pressure she faced explaining Orang Asal struggles to her organisation, and reported that at times her activism made her feel more distant from her own community. She also insisted on the need for two-way communication

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Other activists experienced similar challenges:

> [The organisation] has been releasing infographics in English and they think that we're English-speaking community, but we're not really … I pushed for an Iban translation but they ignored it. Participant 3

> Language skill is very important … we have 32 ethnics in Sabah. There's 32 languages. At the same time, there are different dialects. In those different dialects, there's different variation. That's actually a big obstacle for me to do my work. Participant 7

Finally, challenges came from knowledge of law:

> The second is mostly my knowledge in tanah adat because I really want to get into this. Because it does pose a really bigger problem than basic necessities itself. Because without a land that you can own, you're basically stripped off from everything else. That's like literally your foundation. I need to know the intricate law behind it. Participant 7

> Our application [for this citizenship-based initiative] is merit-based. So those from rural areas won't be able to apply because they don't have any experience in advocacy. Also, I don't think the news goes out to them either. Participant 3

One participant described being worried about the future of her village if she decided to move away because she was not confident that her community had sufficient legal knowledge to both secure access to basic services and to resist development projects.

Challenges faced by activists had an impact on their capabilities including bodily integrity (ability to move freely and be free from threat) and affiliation with others – both within their communities and with the dominant population.

What is the role of education in Indigenous youth activism in Malaysia?

The key finding here is that education is important in securing and expanding self-determination for Indigenous youth and their communities. Participants were highly educated activists, and where they were positive about education, it tended to be in relation to experiences in higher education rather than school, for example:

> The expertise and the guidance of people who have studied your chosen area for so long means that I felt like I was equipped to be able to talk about these things. For the majority of seven years, all of my academic work focused on indigenous, minority communities. Participant 2

> Formal education really teaches me to read news, I did not read news before. It started during my year in the Foundation programme, since I read Law and I need to keep updated with things. Participant 3

> In Political Science, I learned about the past struggles, the past leaders and also Socrates with his philosophy. I learned from these activists. Participant 4

All participants agreed that political knowledge was important for activism. One participant described how she linked her tribe's traditional knowledge to formal and non-formal education to inform her activism. Another who found formal education to be beneficial quoted concepts from Science class as affirmation of her traditional knowledge.

Despite acknowledging the benefits of education in terms of literacy and knowledge acquisition, some participants argued that formal education can be disempowering due to lack of agency and non-inclusive content and pedagogies. Participants stressed the need for the schooling system to encourage students to question authority. As Participant 3 reflected:

> I did not have those (public speaking) opportunities when I was in high school.

However, she mentioned that her tertiary education has provided her with opportunities to develop her communication skills and be politically aware. Another mentioned that activism related to customary lands runs in her community:

> Formal education helped me to read and write. However, my Elders have started their own activism long before that. They don't need to go to school to know the importance of activism. Participant 6

One participant mentioned the use of traditional indigenous knowledge in her work as an activist, whilst others described the application of research and documentation skills, for example:

> I feel like you would mistreat what you want to do if you don't do your research. If you really don't fully understand the landscape then you might be heading in the wrong direction. Participant 2

Most participants stated they need to gain extensive knowledge on their causes to be able to make informed decisions, identify allies and speak substantive truths. This is an area where education has potential in supporting the Malaysian Indigenous youth to build agency and secure their functioning.

Most participants expressed discontent with the lack of representation of Malaysian Indigenous peoples in the national curriculum. Participant 3 described her school experience:

> My teacher taught us about role models in civic education, but you never saw any representation from Sarawak. It's always those in West Malaysia.

Some participants questioned the rigour of their primary and secondary education in building critical thinking, which they found necessary in their activism:

> None of the higher order thinking questions in secondary schools actually makes you think for yourself or the country … it kind of suppresses us. Participant 7

> There is nothing within our History textbooks that instils a sense of activism. We have been taught that you must always submit to those in power. Participant 1

Most participants reported that their tertiary education helped them more than primary or secondary education. They credited their involvement in debates, mock forums or class presentations during their university years in finding their voice which enabled them to represent tribal needs through activism.

Discussion

In this section, we first discuss how absent capabilities motivate Indigenous youth activists, and how activism puts their capabilities further at risk. We then discuss participants'

activism in terms of collective capabilities which go beyond Nussbaum's central capabilities. Finally, we discuss the under-utilised role of education in expanding young people's capabilities and ability to advocate for their communities.

Motivations identified by youth Indigenous activists included lack of control over their environment, concern for other species, affiliation – in the sense of being and feeling represented – and the need to act on negative emotions. The participants found control over their environment to be politically difficult to exercise, with loss of customary land for 'development' impeding people from practicing their ways of life and resulting in fears that traditions will be lost. This study demonstrates that activism is part of the Indigenous young people's way of life, stimulated by loss of land and inaccessibility of quality education, infrastructure and economic opportunities. In common with other researchers, we identify a need for greater representation and participation of Indigenous youth in decisions about their own wellbeing and in decisions about the desirability of 'development' (Bockstael and Watene 2016).

This study contributes to the empirical understanding of youth activism using the lens of capability approach (Sen 1999, 2005; Nussbaum 2011), which is centred not on specific causes, but on how activism can be seen as a way for each individual to live a dignified life. The capabilities approach has helped to identify how missing capabilities motivate activism, and how social structures and norms in turn further corrode capabilities of youth activists. Participants in this research decided to be civilly and politically active because of limited choices resulting from their circumstances, for example, loss of land, lack of political power, and access to education and health. Whilst these findings might not be generalisable to youth activists in Malaysia more broadly, they do shed new light on an under-researched population. The findings also suggest why it might be difficult to engage Indigenous Malaysian youth in research on activism: their work is often not seen as socially acceptable, they experience fear of threats, and their work is often emotionally charged and exhausting.

Activism, regardless of cause, puts some of the participants' capabilities at risk. The main challenges they experienced had an impact on their ability to move freely and be free from threat and affiliation with others – both within their communities and with the dominant population. Participants shared the impacts of activism on their emotions (feeling lonely and tired), affiliation (tension in relationships between themselves, their communities and broader Malaysian society) and bodily integrity (feeling threatened or unable to move in order to protect customary lands). Participants perceived that they were seen as anti-development where preservation of lifestyles and values was put into conflict with economic priorities which serve the interests of the dominant population, a situation which exposes them to risk. Furthermore, the participants in this research described themselves as lacking strong support systems, in contrast with the environmental activists connected by a global generational movement reported in Pickard (2022). The participants were aware of the importance of alliances and solidarity in securing their functioning to flourish, but this was not always easy to access, particularly in rural areas. This missing capability of affiliation currently functions as a corrosive disadvantage (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007; Da Silva, Fraser, and Parry 2021) to them in achieving other capabilities such as control over their environment. This suggests the need for appropriate support systems. Support for rights defenders might include trust building, alliance forming, security and solidarity through the use of counter narratives and community

support (Bennett et al. 2015). This would have the potential to build or restore confidence to navigate oppressive systems and rally community members to defend their rights – especially amongst the beginning indigenous youth activists.

Collective identity was important to participants, who described their activism as a collective action with and for their communities or organisations, and explained how their identities were perceived by others. These perspectives of Indigenous young activists have been absent from research on youth activism in Malaysia to date, perhaps because the focus has until now been on young people from urban, middle class backgrounds with strong support networks (Mohd Hed 2020). The findings of this study support Murphy's (2014) claim that 'collective capability for political self-determination is not only compatible with the capabilities approach, but is in an idea that it cannot do without' (320–321), noting not only the interdependence between individual and collective capabilities, but also the instrumental value in collective capabilities in relation to political empowerment. For example, Lebmann (2020) argues that collective capabilities that are viewed internally (collective identification) or externally (assigned membership) can affect the commitment and interpretation of collective intention. For the young people in the present study, both collective identification and assigned membership as Indigenous were important in terms of their activism, from providing motivation as a result of not feeling represented in education or government, to being an approach to protecting customary lands and cultural traditions. In defending their rights, the *Orang Asal* youth have to consider the collective impact of their activism, not only the individual effects. For example, reliance on governmental aid is perceived to be placed in jeopardy when villages fight for better conditions or against development projects. This collective capability presented a tension that participants expressed in representing their communities, managing expectations and preventing themselves and their communities from harm.

Participants mentioned the connections between low political literacy, low voter turn-outs and lost ownership of customary lands and lack of basic necessities amongst Indigenous communities. They recognised an important role for education. In their experience, higher education was where they could develop skills necessary to act for their communities. High school was seen as lacking in representation of Indigenous peoples and histories, with few opportunities for critical thinking or public speaking. Education can play a role in equipping communities with knowledge and skills to enable them to defend their rights. Formal education, for example, can pay greater attention to representing Malaysian Indigenous people, narratives and worldviews in the curriculum and classroom, and by creating spaces for discussion (to understand tensions between communities) and public speaking. This is likely to be challenging in the existing context, where access to educational opportunities can be limited and Citizenship as a school subject is framed around 'developing good personal and patriotic citizens' (Mahmood 2014). Furthermore, existing research on citizenship education in Malaysia (Balakrishnan 2018; Mahmood 2014) makes little explicit mention of Indigenous perspectives or issues. In the non-formal sphere, education for the activists might include the development of skills such as persuasion, advocacy, campaigning, customary land rights law and for communities might include knowledge of basic and customary rights, negotiation, and building political awareness. Securing practical reason through education amongst the Malaysian Indigenous communities could enable the exercise

of other capabilities (such as control over one's environment or affiliation). In these ways, education has a potential to act as a 'fertile functioning' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2013) to expand the capabilities of participants and their communities. This will require greater representation of Indigenous knowledge, rights and traditions in curricula, and a reframing of what it means to be a good citizen.

Conclusion

This study researched perspectives of marginalised Indigenous youth involved in civil and political action. Capabilities approach allowed us to identify missing capabilities that motivated youth activists, and to identify how wellbeing is further threatened through activism. It also allowed us to identify a role for education in supporting young Indigenous activists in developing political agency. The study found Indigenous youth activism motivated by desire for affiliation and representation, and for control over their environment. The latter – control over the environment – was found to act as a corrosive disadvantage on the *Orang Asal* youth activists. Participants supported different causes, which made it possible to identify common capabilities that were present and absent in their activism and education. Barriers faced by activists, regardless of cause, included legal and linguistic skills and exhaustion brought about by their activism, communication with organisations and government agencies and being poorly represented in decision-making processes. The research draws attention to the need for greater inclusion of diverse young people to be represented and listened to on matters which affect them. Action can be taken within the educational sphere, from greater representation of indigenous narratives in educational materials, to attention to developing political literacy, and also in the non-formal sphere, where there is potential to support activists through social networking, so that they can better collectively exercise capabilities for self-determination.

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ORCID

Lynda Dunlop http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0936-8149

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