

# Youth Development in Muar Parliamentary Constituency Through ‘The Room’ Projects

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## Abstract

The All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on the Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) is a bipartisan party that works with constituencies to combat the issues to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Muar is one of the constituencies collaborating with APPGM-SDG in developing Muar youth. The objectives of ‘The Room’ project is conducted in Muar to promote youth engagement in creative and arts activities. The problem statement is that youth encounter various obstacles that might restrict their personal development, limit their chances, and impede their capacity to contribute to society. These obstacles can be associated with education, jobs, mental health, and social concerns, among others. During issue mapping, the youth’s need for a creative space was raised. The methodology used is grounded research through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions (FGD). Pudipang Industries, the solution provider, introduced 11 activities for this ‘The Room’ project related to Sustainable Development Goals to achieve the SDG 17 goals. They have been awarded a RM40,000 grant to address youth engagement issues within the next four months. The finding shows that the projects successfully attracted 175 youth participants in various 11 activities, and nine SDGs involved with the project, such as SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 14 and SDG 16.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Youth, Creative and Arts Activities, Self-Identity Development, APPGM-SDG

## Introduction

A parliamentary constituency is a geographical area where a seat represents the electorate. A representative who won the election for a parliamentary constituency will sit in the House of Representatives on

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behalf of the constituency. The Election Commission decides where a parliamentary constituency's borders are located. In Malaysia, there are 222 seats for parliamentary constituencies representing the whole of Malaysia, including East and West Malaysia. This article focuses on the Muar Parliament as it focuses on youth development. The population of Muar is 314,776 and consists of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other stateless people who are undocumented.<sup>1</sup> Muar is a semi-rural-urban town located in Johor. These cities are 150 kilometres (93 miles) southwest of the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. It is 50 kilometres north of Batu Pahat and 179 kilometres north of Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 90% of the land is used for agriculture, primarily oil palm plantations, which dominate the landscape. Sg. Muar Basin, one of the three river basins, is where Muar is situated. Lembangan Kecil Muar and the basin of Sg. Sarang Buaya. The former, which spans Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang, is the largest river basin in Johor and is also transboundary in nature. The youth are the biggest population in Muar, as shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 The age group of Muar community**

Age Groups	Population
0-14	71,991
15-64	222,120
65 and above	20,665

The Muar Member of Parliament (MP), Syed Saddiq, is known as a young leader who believes that youth can be the Malaysian 'Kingmaker' one day. After winning the 14th and 15th elections, Syed Saddiq is now the Muar MP. He is very optimistic about quality jobs for youth, a dignified salary, affordable housing, good public transportation, and climate change.

Due to this, the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) came up with the suggestion to improve the engagement of youth through creative and arts programmes. APPGM-SDG is a bipartisan initiative driven to implement the SDGs in Parliamentary constituencies. The SDGs are put into action by analysing

1 City Population. [https://www.citypopulation.de/en/malaysia/admin/johor/0106\\_\\_muar/](https://www.citypopulation.de/en/malaysia/admin/johor/0106__muar/)

2 Muar Municipal Council. <https://www.mpmuar.gov.my/en/visitors/muar-background/page/0/1>

problems and possible solutions, doing policy research, facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships, raising awareness, and building capacity at the local level.<sup>3</sup> The APPGM-SDG team comprises parliamentarians, academics, solution providers, and civil society activists. In this project, the APPGM-SDG will focus more on young people's development in Muar.

## Methodology

During the initial discussion with YB Syed Saddiq, Muar's preliminary issue mapping work began. APPGM-SDG found that Muar district has the potential for developing youth talent and inspiration. A preliminary virtual community profile exercise was then conducted to identify concerns, regional players, and important destinations. The issue mapping field visits were conducted from May 1–3, 2021. The research team and MP officer reached out to a range of stakeholders, including *penghulu mukim* and *ketua kampungs*, local communities, government organisations, the community of fishermen, youth organisations, NGOs, and single mothers. Due to the pandemic, the visits were also carried out during the period of the Movement Control Order (MCO). The APPGM-SDGs members and MP's officer followed the SOP to the greatest extent feasible and took the appropriate precautions, including keeping physical distances, avoiding physical contact, and donning masks. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions (FGD) in an unstructured manner due to MCO. The discussion themes revolved mainly around social, economic, and environmental issues and the unique challenges faced by the target groups. Potential solutions and ways forward for these issues were also explored.

Due to that, this project was proposed to APPGM-SDG with funding of RM40,000.00 for four months. This proposal was given consideration based on the previous performance of Pudipang Industries. After a tedious review and deliberation, the proposal was approved by the APPGM-SDG committee. Once the proposal is submitted, it is reviewed by the APPGM-SDG team and external experts. The solution providers will then be briefed on the project flow and get approval to start the project after the first payment is made.

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3 APPGMSDG Annual Report 2021.

## Issues

After completing the issue mapping, several youth-related issues in Muar were identified. The issues of self-identity development and mental and physical endurance that the youth themselves faced created a gap in their development. Other than that, the issue of the minimum wage of RM1,200 per month needs to be studied as soon as possible because of the high cost of living and the many commitments. The youth were stressed by the minimum wage rate and guaranteed employment opportunities. Apart from that, the atmosphere of creativity in Muar is not lively and is receding. Some parties, like Pudipang Industries, intend to run youth and creativity programmes in Muar with grants from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Cendana and the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA). Compared to other districts in Johor, there is a gap between the organisers and government agencies because getting approval from the local government is difficult. There is a lot of bureaucracy and long approval periods. Government agencies were found to be more supportive of government programmes and did not welcome outside programmes. It is difficult for the youth to get a grant from the private sector to run the programme because they lack confidence in the youth.

Besides, the Internet problem in Muar is critical and affects the People Housing Projects (PPR) area when doing business online. Having access to the Internet is crucial in modern society. Internet use is correlated with creating a sizable number of new jobs, making it a key driver of economic growth. The Internet has a profound effect on everyone's daily lives. Every generation, from children to seniors, has seen their lives changed by the Internet. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most well-known, socially accepted, and widely used Internet applications. The Internet gives us access to and knowledge of what is happening in the world; for instance, through the Internet, everyone follows up on political issues and keeps up with the news every day.

## Analysis

As the backbone of society, young people represent a new generation. Though it has been said countless times, youth have the most influence over leaving a legacy. Every generation has its struggles that lead to people living under pressure. Today's youth, Gen Y<sup>4</sup> and Gen Z,<sup>5</sup> are evolving

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4 Refers to people born between 1981 and 1996.

5 Refers to Zoomers born between 1997 and 2012.

in a world beset with challenges. The primary distinction between Generations Y and Z is that Generation Y refers to those Millennials born between 1981 and 1996, while Generation Z refers to Zoomers born between 1997 and 2012. Both of these generations are referred to as "digital natives." Their exposure to technology, however, differs since Generation Y witnessed the advent of technology and the Internet, but Generation Z has never lived without advanced technologies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, when compared to prior generations, Gen Z spends less time reading books and indulging in outdoor activities such as sports or gardening. It can be said that youth nowadays need unique activities to sustain a better life. As they are Gen Z, the approach to their involvement should be different. We have to win their hearts before we listen to them, which is why there should be a place where they can gather and express their feelings with us.

APPGM-SDG recognises Pudipang Industries as a potential solution provider for resolving the issues of youth engagement. Pudipang Industries is a creative community that plays the role of an independent movement focused on arts and culture as well as community development in Muar, Johor. Pudipang began his adventure in 2006 and functions as the driving force behind independent teenagers, especially in the fields of art, creativity, education, and entrepreneurship. In addition, Pudipang has consistently offered exciting and engaging arts material to the community through the organisation of music events, concerts, and visits to Jakarta and other Asian countries to expand and develop the integration of arts into people's daily lives in Malaysia.

During the analysis, a few challenges towards youth were considered problems that relate to the issues in Muar. The socio-economic structures of the past have endangered the viability of the earth and prevented far too many people from living healthy, happy and fulfilling lives. The youth encounter the problem of being unable to find a productive place in society, either within the conventional education system or in satisfying employment. Lack of employment opportunities, academic failure, negative self-perception, family strife, peer pressure to conform, substance abuse, a dearth of affordable housing, negative stereotypes, the constant availability of social media, and criminal activity round out the top ten problems that today's youth face.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Anuradha, 'What is the Difference Between Generation Y and Z' (2021).

7 Emma Finamore, 'The Top 10 Challenges Facing Young People Today' (All About School Leavers, 30 April 2019).

Apart from that, another upcoming challenge that worries the youth is the change of political ideologies and accelerating climate change,<sup>8</sup> the radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism<sup>9</sup> and the unequal distribution of economic benefits. A generation of young people is dealing with underemployment or the fast-changing job market, stagnating income, and rising city property costs.<sup>10</sup> The study about current sex orientation found that up to 19% of teenagers oscillate between and within heterosexual and sexual minority identities, and up to 21% of adolescents experience variations in other- and same-sex attractions.<sup>11</sup> This is the youth challenge of identifying their sexual orientations.

The challenges that youth face can not only lead to poverty but also significantly impact their mental health. Mental health support, in particular, is critical to supporting today's youth's well-being.<sup>12</sup> The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) reported that one of the main causes of illness and disability among youth is behavioural disorders, followed by anxiety disorders and depression.<sup>13</sup>

It cannot be denied that youth nowadays love to share their knowledge and opinions with others. But then, digitalisation has kept the youth away from confronting people, including going out, resting, and spending time physically with their friends and family. The requirement to leave the house or even their bedroom is being replaced by digital. They can shop for food, clothing, books, and music, communicate with friends, study, play games, use the bank, and entertain themselves with social media. The effects of challenges have a profoundly damaging impact on sustainable living. For example, digitalisation has the harmful impact of increasing crime. Social media allows young people to share personal

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8 Karen O'Brien, Elin Selboe & Bronwyn M. Hayward, 'Exploring Youth Activism on Climate Change: Dutiful, Disruptive, and Dangerous Dissent' (2018) 23(3) *Ecology and Society* 42.

9 Alpaslan Özerdem & Sukanya Podder, 'Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism' (2012) 4 *Journal of Strategic Security* 63.

10 Faiz Zaidi, 'An Emergence of Youth Participation in Malaysian Politics' (Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), 24 August 2021).

11 Stewart and others, 'Developmental patterns of sexual identity, romantic attraction, and sexual behavior among adolescents over three years' (2019) 7 *Journal of Adolescence* 90.

12 Ercell Charles, 'How to Motivate Gen Z and Overcome Challenges in Remote Work' (Dale Cernege, 24 February 2022).

13 World Health Organization (WHO), 'Mental health of adolescents'. (17 November 2021).

information, making it easier to perpetrate crimes such as kidnapping, robbery, and rape against women. This has created fear among the youth, especially women. The majority of them are aware of crimes committed using social media, but only 28% of them have limited their use of social media out of fear of becoming potential victims.<sup>14</sup>

Besides, the political ideologies that keep changing from time to time will impact the youth's perceptions towards politicians. The current voting age of 18 and above will help the youth decide which government to choose. Youth may perceive this as an impediment to their freedom of expression and ability to choose a better administration. However, the growth of social movements such as Undi18, which advocated for the bill's approval, demonstrates how eager the youth are to participate in decision-making.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the youth are forced to find ways to combat all the issues mentioned, including climate change, radicalisation and extremism, underemployment, stagnating income, and rising city property costs, to maintain a sustainable life in the future. There should be a better channel for people to market themselves and express their thoughts. More forums and opportunities should be provided for youth to express themselves and contribute to Malaysia's democracy. More than that, the youth should be allowed to develop themselves economically, socially, and environmentally.

From this analysis and issue mapping, researchers found that the SDG's related to the issues in Muar as follows:

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

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14 Suriati Ghazali and Norhayati Mat Ghani, 'Perception of Female Students towards Social Media-Related Crimes' (2018) 26 *Pertanika Jurnal* 769.

15 Faiz Zaidi, 'An Emergence of Youth Participation in Malaysian Politics' (Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), 24 August 2021).

- Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12: To ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

With the potential effects of Pudipang Industries in mind, APPGM-SDG implemented a few programs to encourage youth involvement in Muar. Pudipang Industries has approved 11 programmes under the project named 'The Room'. This programme is not just a better solution to filling the youth's time with some activities, but it also helps in combating the issues of digitalisation; the lack of confidence in the public; the protections for dealing with bullies or criminals; and the fact that there is no centre for youth to channel their views and input. For youth to address issues and make decisions that significantly affect them, they should be involved in empowering young people as valuable partners. Through these projects, the teenagers in Muar will band together and work as one under a movement or hub with a collective way of working that will positively affect them from various directions while also transforming Muar into a harmonious district with a competent society.

Moreover, the programmes involving youth in discussions will significantly invest in a wide range of community issues.<sup>16</sup> There will be advantages for both local communities and the youth themselves when they get the chance to voice their opinions and share their thoughts. Youth input is beneficial not only for youth programmes but also for programmes and policies that influence the general public.

For instance, a programme in Australia gives youth skills and a voice called 'Bridge Awards'. This programme is stimulating and demanding for the development of youth. It allows youth to learn new skills, enhance physical fitness, participate in community service, and foster an adventurous spirit. 'THE ROOM' from Pudipang Industries has similar goals in youth development, but the programme differs in

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16 Jan Brennan, 'A Guide to Capturing Youth Input' (2021) 110 National Civic Review.



that there are no restrictions on participants joining any programme and no strict guidelines. The participants willingly join without any force from some groups, and it is free without charge. Among the 11 featured programmes are *seni silat*, BMX, hip-hop, story-telling, book writing process, multiracial discussion, and a mural art workshop. These various programmes have varying effects in a wide range of areas, such as race mixing, youth voice, sports skills, youth confidence, and self-defence training.

## Impact

The engagement of youth in 'THE ROOM' by Pudipang Industries promotes positive outcomes by providing opportunities, cultivating positive relationships, and imparting the necessary support to help young people develop their assets and avoid at-risk behaviours. This programme encourages enjoyment as well as good health and well-being to live sustainably. For example, mural art workshops by 'THE ROOM', which can be a therapy for mental health, have been quite popular. Soldiers returning from the battlefields of World War II in the mid-20th century were treated by therapists using art as a form of treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The advantage of art therapy is that it is a complementary treatment that promotes artistic self-expression to improve mental health and well-being.<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately, the programmes can improve interpersonal skills among the participants. Interpersonal skills are characteristics that come into play while engaging and talking with people. They cover a wide range of situations in which communication and collaboration are essential. These skills include the capacity to interact with other people and to develop meaningful connections with other individuals. People skills, as commonly known, involve your basic personality qualities and how you have learned to handle particular social circumstances. Effective interpersonal skills have a beneficial impact on professional progress. For example, the sharing and telling stories sessions can help with interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is sharing thoughts, ideas, sentiments, and emotions between two or more people in person. This involves both verbal and non-verbal aspects of interpersonal communication.

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17 Sarah Kuta, 'How Making Art Helps Improve Mental Health' Smithsonian Magazine, (11 July 2022).

*... 'I'm impressed with this programme because we never had a chance to sit down and discuss any issues, especially because we are from different races. Before this, The Room was not really utilised by youth for any forum or discussion, that's why I was so happy to meet all of the participants ...' – Kok Keong, The Rekan participant.*

*... 'This programme helps me to express my feelings because, all this time, I haven't known where to share my thoughts and ideas. Even though people can't help me solve my problems, when I share what is hidden in my thoughts, I feel so relieved. Besides, through this programme, I can point out my comments towards the school's homework and the education in Malaysia ...' – Fatin, Story telling participant.*

*... 'This programme is unique because we stood up as a community and had a verbal dialogue on what to do in Muar and discussed the development of youth in terms of social, economic, and cultural heritage and all the uniqueness of Muar with both Malays and Chinese ...' – Farhan, The Rekan participant.*

This demonstrated that the programme positively impacts youth's feelings and will benefit their mental health. The programme also creates a space for communication among youth from different backgrounds. The discussion of Muar's history and heritage among the youth is unique because not many youths love to share and know the history. This can also develop and maintain a love for their place of origin.

Apart from that, the female youth learn how to defend themselves from any harm through the martial arts programme provided. During puberty, most females experience feelings of insecurity, severely undermining their confidence. And if they do not restore the confidence in adolescence that they lost throughout puberty, they will always feel uncertain and unconfident for the rest of their lives. The most significant benefit for the martial artist is that confidence is developed, which benefits one in all aspects of life. Martial arts can help ladies discover their inner power and sharpen their skills. It is thought that a matriarchal civilisation existed throughout the bronze period in the primordial era. No strict societal constraints on females would confine them to low-power roles in domestic affairs. Over time, through martial arts, the youth can develop the ability to think quickly and come to wise decisions in an instant. These abilities transfer to real-life situations where quick action is necessary to salvage a bad situation. The best part is that these situations

do not necessarily have to involve physical fights. Hence, women have an equal right to practise martial arts, which will reduce all forms of violence against women.

Moreover, these programmes were founded on the concept that young people can accomplish and grow artistically and personally through creative expression and skill development in the arts. They built their programmes mainly on their own, improving their methods via reflexivity. These programmes stay committed to artistic excellence while claiming to be involved in youth development through the arts.

**Table 1.2: The issues, projects, participants and their impacts.**

Issues	The projects	Participants	Impacts
The socioeconomic systems of the past have put the planet's survival in peril and hindered far too many people from living full, healthy lives.	THE WALL	9	The participants get new knowledge on how to expand their businesses through vlogging, mural arts, writing fiction, agriculture, and t-shirt printing.
	RAPAT RIPTA	38	
	PADU BEB	15	
	TANAH KITA TANAH SYURGA	6	
	BUDAK PRINTING	9	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The problem of self-identity development and mental and physical endurance.</li> <li>● The issue of youth not having a place to manage their creative and artistic activities in society.</li> </ul>	REKAN	15	The youth have a place to share their stories, opinions, express their feelings, participate in creative sports, and express their opinions in education.
	IKRAR PERWIRA	19	
	SATRIA BERBASIKAL	16	
	STEP BY STEP	14	
	MARI BERCERITA	25	
	SEKOLAH KITA	9	

Overall, the programme conducted by Pudipang has achieved its targets and objectives. The Muar youth are actively engaged in good activities, which can strengthen their bond with the communities, improve their confidence, overcome their shyness, and, most importantly, show their leadership. Leaders with genuine, strong, and trusted relationships with their teams and recognise that spending time creating these relationships makes them more effective leaders and lays the foundation for success.

## Sustainability

The Pudipang Industries have already moved to another level, as they currently own the Muar Youth Hub, which also functions as a regional SDG implementation centre called MAPO. Muar Youth Hub is a long-term project that includes five sub-programmes. The five sub-programmes are MAPO Radio, Akademi Silat Ophir Pantera, RCG Studio, MAPO Kiosk, and MAPO and Asia. These programmes involve various groups with different specialisations. In addition, these programmes require collaboration from various communities, agencies, and individuals as implementing partners.

Furthermore, Pudipang has allied with Yayasan Hasanah in promoting activities that relate to youth involvement. Yayasan Hasanah (Hasanah) was established as an independent grant-making foundation to have a more substantial impact that supports Khazanah's efforts to advance Malaysia.<sup>18</sup> Yayasan Hasanah focuses on Malaysia's pressing community, social, and environmental challenges. They seek to bring politicians, civil society organisations, corporations, and local communities together to collectively influence people and the environment.

Pudipang Industries has already completed the first phase of the projects. The second phase also attracts youth to join the activities without forcing them to do so. In the long term, MAPO will collaborate with the Singapore-Jakarta Youth Hub, which shows they have already hit the ASEAN standard. MAPO will also assist other leaders, agencies, and non-governmental organisations to maintain their capabilities to improve youth engagement in activities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the ideas passed from youth to youth have a positive impact on society, especially the young generation. By developing programmes and connecting young people to projects, they will be able to interact in society and re-engage in the routes of civic participation while finding new methods to channel their passion and ideas. The programmes are effective and will help Malaysia achieve its Sustainable Development Goals. Hence, the programmes should be applied to the whole country to ensure the SDGs' goals are achieved. Young people's empowerment is an essential aspect that motivates them to engage in the country's decision-

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18 Yayasan Hasanah, 'Who We Are' (2019).

making processes. Their involvement in all policy-making and approval procedures is required. Empowerment can occur at both the individual and collective levels, and empowerment is a tool that not only brings about changes at the personal level but also at the collective, political, and social levels.<sup>19</sup> The youth's challenging situation, characterised by dire economic conditions and a lack of work prospects, will lead to their disinterest in contributing to the country's success and progress.<sup>20</sup> The APPGM-SDG shows the solution regarding the importance of youth engagement in many activities performed through Pudipang Industries. This can help in achieving the SDGs' goals in the long term. This is aligned with the United Nations Partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals effort through Youth 4 Global Goals (Youth4GG). Youth4GG is an initiative that attempts to mobilise young people to help accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>21</sup>, commonly known as the Global Goals and Agenda 2030. Youth will be activated in three stages: awareness, comprehension, and action. The straightforward structure enables organisations from all industries to discover entry points for working with youth on the SDGs. The initiative's fundamental goal is to inspire young people to take action to make the world a better place, moving beyond the conventional role of lobbying.

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