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The Case for Inclusive Hiring in Malaysia's PV Sector

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

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Introduction

Alright, let's pull back the curtain on the renewable energy world, which, for all its sunny solar panels and breezy wind turbines, has a serious diversity problem.¹ While it's a booming industry meant to power a greener, better world, many underrepresented groups are still struggling to get a foot in the door.²

That is why we need more inclusive hiring practices in the industry. By sheer necessity, inclusive hiring will be a key enabler of Malaysia's push for net zero. The National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR) envisions increasing renewable energy installed capacity from 4% today to 70% by 2050.³ This shift is estimated to need an additional 200,000 professionals in the renewable field in Malaysia by 2030. To provide contexts, as of 2019, the whole industry has only about 187,000 people.⁴ This means the industry needs to double its own total workforce in less than a decade, and then some. But it's not just about sheer numbers. This new, green workforce needs specific skills to set up, maintain, and innovate sustainable energy systems. New jobs and even entirely new professions sprouting up alongside cutting-edge tech.

Yet, current hiring practices could limit who's getting a seat at this table. Despite massive talent pools across Malaysia, conventional hiring often leaves out underrepresented groups, like indigenous communities and low-income youth, who may not have conventional qualifications.

This exclusion is especially detrimental at a time when whole economies are being completely transformed to achieve net zero. The renewable energy industry is poised to be one of the biggest growth areas in the coming decades—meaning that if we don't fix hiring practices now, existing social and economic disparities will only deepen. And the industry will be poorer for it due to a lack of diverse talents in its ranks.

This paper presents an approach by a social impact organisation in the solar industry in Malaysia (henceforth called the Organisation) to training, hiring and integrating marginalised groups into the renewable energy sector.⁵ It explores how inclusive hiring practices enables the Organisation to meet its labour needs and then also go some way in providing higher wages for low income

¹ M. Armiento, M. Lelli, C. Andrews, B. Idini, R. Ruff, *Analysing the global workforce dynamics of the energy transition: main findings from the World Energy Employment report 2023* summarizes key insights from the [International Energy Agency's \(IEA\) World Energy Employment \(WEE\) Report 2023](#). In terms of workforce diversity in the energy sector, gender diversity is the only dimension quantified so far. Women make up 18% of the global energy workforce compared to 40% of the global economy overall. WEE itself does not yet collect or report data on race, ethnicity, disability, or other identity-based factors—there is a recognition of the issue, but lack of systematic demographic data beyond gender prevents deeper analysis.

² Malaysia's installed capacity for solar went from 0.54MW in 2010 to 882MW in 2019. Source: [IRENA](#)

³ Ministry of Economy, [National Energy Transition Roadmap](#)

⁴ International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), [Renewable Energy and Jobs: Annual Review 2020](#)

⁵ The name of the organisation has been removed so that its practices can be discussed here objectively

groups. The Organisation defines this as Orang Asli (indigenous peoples in West Malaysia), Orang Asal (indigenous peoples in East Malaysia) and B40 (those in the bottom 40% of income bracket). It also discusses the risks of this model as well as existing shortcomings of this model as practised by the Organisation during the study period. The hope is that this model can be used and improved upon by companies who seek to address economic disparities by providing career pathways in the renewable sector for communities historically left out of formal employment, and in the process, improve the diversity in the sector as a whole.

This is an autobiographical case study written to provide contextualised understanding of how inclusive hiring practices can be implemented. It seeks to provide a practical demonstration of feasibility by documenting one alternative to traditional hiring practices in action. At the same time, the personal observation provides more nuanced details of the practical challenges faced by underrepresented groups seeking employment in this sector.

This view represents an observation by two ex-top management of the Organisation. Due to its autobiographical nature, the views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the official views of the Organisation.

A New Hiring Model for the Renewable Energy Workforce of Today

Mainstream hiring methods start with a position to fill, and proceeds to filter applicants by reviewing their CVs. This process tends to be inbound, where only those with access to relevant training or knowledge of the job opportunities in the field can apply. Those who do not meet minimum academic qualifications are automatically written off, even when certain technical roles may not require these qualifications. For example, the 4.7 million jobs advertised on MyFutureJobs—the national employment portal for job seekers and employers—86% required *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM or the Malaysian Certificate of Education) level qualifications⁶. So while there is no specific data on academic qualifications for renewable energy jobs, it can be inferred that jobs in the sector—which tends towards technical or management—require academic qualifications, of which SPM is the minimal standard for literacy and numeracy.

This process excludes talented individuals who lack formal qualifications due to systemic barriers. Indigenous and low-income youth, for example, often do not have access to high-quality education or professional networks that could provide them with relevant experience or certifications. For example, the Ministry of Education reported that 42.29 percent of Orang Asli students did not complete their schooling up to Form Five in 2021⁷.

Sometimes, companies are more proactive in their hiring, by creating a talent funnel for their current and future hiring needs. But such practices tend to translate into tapping into the networks of current staff, be it second, third or fourth degree connections. Therefore, it also perpetuates a

⁶ The Star, 6 June 2023, [Grads 'too good' for their jobs \(Poll Inside\)](#)

⁷ [Orang Asli: Poverty Forcing Children Out Of School](#)

cycle of hiring from similar backgrounds. If there aren't already people from marginalised backgrounds on the team, they're unlikely to even show up on the hiring radar.

To overcome this systemic barrier, the management in the Organisation adopts a different starting point: by focusing on the marginalised and underrepresented groups that it wants to be included in the renewable energy sector: that is, Orang Asli, Orang Asal and B40. The Organisation reframes traditional hiring practices by actively finding a way to enable these underrepresented youths to be part of the renewable energy workforce instead of asking if they were already qualified to be in it. Through active outreach to these underrepresented groups, the Organisation reaches groups that would not otherwise be actively looking to join the sector. They are then equipped to be in the workforce through a one-year training program tailored for those without conventional academic qualifications. From that point, the Organisation also takes into account cultural barriers that hamper an effective integration into the sector, by creating support networks to aid and facilitate a “soft landing” into their new roles and environment. The details of these will be discussed in the *Implementation* segment of this chapter.

Economic and Social Justifications

The economic background of the Orang Asli illustrates why inclusive hiring in the green sector is not just socially beneficial but is a moral imperative. In a review of 1,500 Orang Asli households in unelectrified villages, we see an average household income of around RM859—which is a tenth of the national average (the average national household income as of September 2023 is at RM8,479).⁸

As Malaysia embraces renewable energy to tackle climate change, there is an unprecedented opportunity to provide meaningful employment that increases their income and quality of life. In other words, we could be “multisolving”, where multiple problems are being addressed with one investment.⁹ The Green Revolution of the mid-20th century is a classic example of multisolving. This agricultural revolution aimed to increase food production globally, particularly in developing countries. However, it also addressed other issues, such as poverty, malnutrition, and environmental degradation.¹⁰

Given the sheer scale of investment in energy transition, it could uplift thousands from poverty: the NETR will bring about energy transition investment opportunities between RM435 billion to RM1.85 trillion by 2050¹¹. By harnessing climate investments to also address poverty, the

⁸ Primary source: from a survey of 6000 Orang Asli in off-grid villages. Department of Statistics Malaysia, [Household Income Survey Report 2022 \(Malaysia and States\)](#)

⁹ [Multisolving Institute](#)

¹⁰ Prabhu L. Pingali, [Green Revolution: Impacts, limits, and the path ahead](#)

¹¹ Business Today, 27 July 2023, [National Energy Transition Roadmap Secures RM25 Billion Investment Creating 23,000 Jobs](#)

Organisation is showing how multisolving can be a cornerstone of its approach to driving a more equitable energy transition in Malaysia.

Implementation of an Inclusive Hiring Model

a) Outbound not Inbound: Outreach to Marginalised Groups

The exclusion of underrepresented groups in the renewable energy space can be summed up in three words: capital, capital, capital.

The first is **social capital**, which is the network of relationships and connections that can help you find and secure a job. Many Orang Asli youths who end up being recruited by the Organisation hail from rural or even remote villages. The primary economic activities are agriculture, fishing and wage labour¹². As such, professional industry connections in the renewable energy space are almost non-existent. The absence of this social capital meant a dearth of information on opportunities and pathways to a job in the sector. The youths lack role models in the industry who can help them imagine careers in the sector, much less provide guidance, advice, and support.

Interestingly, from anecdotes, we know that once a particular industry has had a presence in a particular community, the path opens up for more youths from that community to be involved. Fahim (not his real name), a student from an Orang Asli village that was attached with the Organisation, explained how his sister managed to get a job at a factory, and if he wanted it, she could help him get a job there. She has helped others in the village do the same.

This means that the Organisation also manages to flip the script on exclusion. It does active outreach to indigenous and low-income communities, often utilising existing networks within the Organisation to spread awareness about employment opportunities. By tapping into current employees to establish trusted connections, it establishes a foundation of trust and reliability in communities where corporate opportunities may otherwise feel inaccessible or foreign.

Another crucial factor is establishing confidence among potential candidates for the training program. When we go to villages to speak of opportunities to be in the solar sector, one of the most common objections revolve around their own lack of confidence in their ability to stay in the program and do the job. So the experience of those that had gone before—they are able to explain the benefits and articulate why others from their village should join as well—act as a sounding board on the suitability of the program to these new potential candidates. This is especially important in a community that has experienced a fair bit of exploitation by “outsiders”, who may not know how a positive sounding program may work in practice. Word-of-mouth becomes the most powerful recruitment tool.

¹² Primary source: from a survey of 6000 Orang Asli in off-grid villages

b) Equipping Talent for Success

The second capital is the **financial** sort. Skill development often has costs for its participants, even when the training program itself is free. The Organisation sets up a year-long training program to train youths to be certified solar installers, with corporates funding scholarships to provide full room and board for each student. It even offers transportation from their home village to Kuala Lumpur where the program is held. Yet many youths we spoke to cannot give up their day-to-day work that is providing crucial financial resources for their families.

The Organisation recognises that financial constraints are a barrier and tweaked its program to incorporate a stipend after one month of full classroom study. Students who meet the criteria are attached with full time installation teams, typically three days a week, with a RM20 per day wage, while still continuing their classroom study. Their attachment to the teams provide extra manpower for active installation teams and other departments in the Organisation, but also doubles up as hands-on training for the students. This means that students can earn about RM200-RM300 per month, which is meagre by urban standards, but is seen as replacement for lost income while still on training.

The classroom lessons cover basic theory on solar and other hands-on training like going on a simulated rooftop. The curriculum also covers foundational English, digital literacy, and other soft skills that are expected in the workplace. The hands-on training attaches the students to active solar installation teams as mentioned, but some students who do not end up in the solar installation teams are attached to various other departments within the Organisation such as the Operations department, Procurement department, Warehousing and Energy Access.

After about three months of hands-on training, once the students meet certain criteria, they then transition to “apprentices” and earn a fixed salary of RM500 per month for full time work. This phase lasts about six months. Upon completion, the apprentices then “graduate” from the program and are usually offered a full time job within the Organisation¹³. The starting salary is RM1800 for those who are attached to installation teams and RM1500 for those in other departments in the Organisation. These figures are basic salaries without taking into account additional incentives for completed work.

The hands-on training is the most crucial factor to the readiness of these students to join the workforce full time. For example, Bahman (not his real name), who transitioned from working in farms to become a Head Solar Installer, cited the comprehensive training as critical to his success¹⁴.

¹³ There are exceptions, which will be discussed later in the paper.

¹⁴ Primary source: interview with eight current staff at the Organisation who went through its training program

c) *Mentorship and Support Network for Long Term Success*

For any youth joining the workplace, the transition from schooling to the workplace can be smoother if they understand workplace specific cultural norms and expectations. For example they are moving from school assignments which are very well defined (write an essay with certain number of word count, with clearly written instructions, deadlines and how it affects your final grade) to those that are more ambiguous—and hence he/she can benefit from outlining expectations with their manager before embarking on any task.

Those with insights into these have workplace **cultural capital**, allowing them to navigate professional settings with confidence.

For marginalised groups, especially those with exposure only in the informal work environments, it represents a vital yet often unseen gap that can hinder long-term success. Some Orang Asli youths enrolled in the program were in their late teens and were leaving their villages for the first time. They were transplanted in entirely unfamiliar contexts—with different communal living, fixed schedules and classroom and work expectations that are foreign to their experience. It is not easy to adapt while trying to learn new skills to be in an entirely unknown industry.

In my own experience working with apprentices from the program, I notice that some of them subvert the unspoken social cues and expectations in a professional environment. I provide some anecdotes here to give some texture to the issue. For example, when I requested one student to meet me in my office, he came, opened the door and walked in without knocking. In another instance, another apprentice in my department was copied in an email from an external stakeholder. When I emailed him alone on the next steps, he then forwarded the email to everyone in the original email thread. I had to gently point out to them what is expected in these cases.

Both of them subsequently became the best performers in my team. Clearly, these *faux pas* are not predictors of future performance especially if they continued to receive supportive coaching to grow in their roles.

Yet if they are working in organisations and for managers that are not aware of their own biases and not sensitive to the cultural challenges these youths face in their new environments, then they can appear “unprofessional” and struggle to thrive in the workplace. To address this, the Organisation has embedded mentorship into its program, pairing new recruits with experienced employees who serve as mentors. These mentors come from backgrounds similar to these youths, enabling them to be sensitive to their struggles. Having lived through the same adaptation process, they can walk newcomers through the unspoken norms of the industry—like the importance of consistent attendance and accountability. Mentorship also builds trust, enabling the newcomers to ask questions or seek help in ways they might not feel comfortable doing otherwise.

The director and instructors of the solar training program continue to be involved in the development of the youths during hands-on work phases, by working closely with the department supervisors with which the youths are attached to understand their strengths and weaknesses

	Salary (RM)	Salary in Previous Job (RM)	Salary Increment (RM)	Salary Increment %
A	2500	1200	1300	108.3
Bahman	4000	200	3800	1900
C	2200	1800	400	22.2
D	2001	1300	701	53.9
E	2200	700	1500	214.3
F	2000	1000	1000	100.0
G	2100	1000	1100	110.0

and how best to support their growth. They act as a sounding board for many of these youths who need a trusted confidante when navigating life in this new phase.

Their own managers also play a crucial part in developing their competency in their roles, both during the apprenticeship phase and subsequently when they join as full time staff. The on-the-job training is the “finishing school”, the bedrock of the success of the program. Many junior installers continue to learn the technical know-how in the field from their team leaders even after transitioning to full time roles.

d) Immediate Impact: Higher Income, Unclear Path for Progression for Most

The model has yielded tangible improvements in income and quality of life for employees. We did an interview with seven current staff at the Organisation that had graduated from the program. Among those interviewed, the average salary is **RM 2,428.71**. That figure meant that it rose by a whopping **358.4%** on average following their training and employment at the Organisation. While a significant increase, this level of earnings still places the graduates within the lower (B40) group of income earners.

Table 1: Earnings of seven current staff interviewed for this paper

The average here included Bahman’s salary who is the Head of Solar Installer. Even if we remove his data as an outlier, the increment is still **101.5%** and about **RM1000** of extra salary on average.

To be clear, the data set of the seven individuals interviewed is self selective to a certain extent since they are still employed with the Organisation. We have not taken into account those who have left, either for other companies in the same field or in another sector. Many have also left to go back to their villages (either dropping out during the program or after graduation) although the data is anecdotal. Should there be tracking of the entire cohort who graduated, chances are that the average increment will not be quite so high.

	Role	Duration in the Organisation (year)	Duration to promotion (year)	Salary (RM)
A	Solar Installer	3	0	2500
Bahman	Head Solar Installer	5	3	4000
C	Solar Installer and Wireman (Team leader)	4	2	2200
D	Solar Installer	2	0	2001
E	Solar Installer	3	0	2200
F	Solar Installer	1	0	2000
G	Solar Installer	2	0	2100

Many (five out of seven interviewed) also plan to eventually return to their hometowns, which is a good indication that those who went through the program do not feel trapped in a cycle of dependency on an exploitative labour system that they feel they are unable to leave. Many want to go back to work their land, some inspired by what they learn, to start small businesses in their own communities.

The picture on career progression for these graduates looks more uncertain. If we take the data from the interviewees, we see that only two out of seven have had a promotion, for a group with an average of 2.8 years in the Organisation.

Table 2: Duration in the Organisation and duration to a promotion

Bahman and C, both of whom have had promotions, had stayed in the Organisation five and four years respectively. Two more installers with three years in the Organisation each have yet to receive a promotion. From this, we can come to two conclusions:

1. Promotion is tenure related (those who stayed the longest are promoted)
2. There's a sense of stagnation: those who stayed for three years have yet to have promotions

The question that cannot be answered from the data set, but requires an answer is whether there is a formal structure for promotions, or are they largely subjective?

Then there's a question of whether there are too many graduates chasing too few spots. In recent years, the aim was to recruit 100 students per cohort for the solar training program. This target is largely donor-driven, as the Organisation receives funding for each student enrolled, and there is a certain economies of scale required to run the program cost-sustainably.

All the graduates were offered placements in the Organisation—mainly in the installation teams, but some were also offered spots in the various departments mentioned earlier. At the time of

writing there were three or four installation teams. Which means there were only so many Team Leader roles available. And even fewer roles as Head Installer, only at which point the salary gets to RM4000. This leaves the vast majority of graduates stagnant in their entry level roles should they stay on in the Organisation, making it impossible for them to exit the low-income (B40) group.

Invisible Chains: Where the Model Falls Short

a) Halo Effect Hiding Paternalistic Prejudice

One of the big dangers of organisations that publicise their work “helping the poor” is that it creates a halo effect that can obscure unseen prejudice or unethical practices. This bias arises when an organisation's positive public image leads people to overlook or excuse problematic internal behaviours, such as exploitation, discrimination, or corruption. Studies and analyses show that this effect can result in ethical blind spots, as both internal and external stakeholders assume the organisation's overall moral goodness negates the possibility of wrongdoing.¹⁵

When implementing inclusive hiring, the impulse is to play up the goodness of the cause to garner support for this movement. Yet in doing so, if unobserved, an organisation can slide into repeating stereotypes about “the poor” as a way to paint a grim problem that needs the organisation's interventions. When reinforced, it is actually detrimental to the demographics they seek to support.

This paternalistic prejudice is one continuity between colonialism and contemporary development policies in the post-colonial era. For example, Jawad Syed and Faisa Ali show that the modern development worker inherits the affective posture of the colonial civiliser—deriving moral worth from helping those cast as less capable.¹⁶ In Malaysia, this dynamic often persists even when the “helper” is no longer white. The local elites, educated in colonial institutions and fluent in donor discourse, re-enacts the same paternalistic hierarchy: seeing the poor as objects of improvement rather than partners in progress.¹⁷ These narratives also lead to a simplification of socio-economic backgrounds of marginalised communities, which in turn leads to offering simplified solutions.¹⁸ Even more perniciously, these binaries of the “helpers” vs “those in need” can be a self-serving emotional posture: it allows the privileged to feel good about themselves without surrendering any real power. Audre Lorde captures this enduring contradiction when she said, “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” Her warning reminds us that any project built on inherited hierarchies—however benevolent its intentions—cannot produce liberation. Instead, it risks reinscribing the very forms of dominance it seeks to redress.

¹⁵ Isabel de Bruin, *The Dark Side of the NGO Halo: Exploring moral goodness as a driver for NGO unethical behaviour*

¹⁶ Jawad Syed and Faisa Ali, *The White Woman's Burden: From Colonial Civilisation to Third World Development*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2011

¹⁷ Syaza Shukri, *Elite as Saviour of the Malays*, *Palgrave Studies in Populisms Elite Populism and Malay Political Leaders in Malaysia*, 2024, p. 31-53

¹⁸ Maïka Sondarjee, *White Savior Narratives in International Development: A Discourse Analysis of the Kony2012 Campaign by Invisible Children*, *The European Journal of Development Research* (2025)

b) “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”

I want to share an anecdote of one student who came to work directly in my team as I believe the episode to be revealing. This individual had not progressed to the apprenticeship stage despite coming to the end of the one-year program (more on that later) and was labelled ill-disciplined and “clumsy” (hence unsuited to the work of climbing roofs as a solar installer), etc. When he came in, he was a little rough around the edges (for example, foregoing the door knocking mentioned previously as well as, speaking in a rather unfiltered way) but showed tremendous work ethics from day one in my team. And given clearer work scope and support he became one of the best performers in the team, often taking initiative to ensure work that needs to be delivered within the team gets done. He struggled with punctuality or even grasping the importance of being on time for field work, but that became something we continued to work on. He also had a poor grasp of office software use, but he sought the help of his peers and he became competent at it later on. As he progressed, his leadership came through in how he coached younger apprentices that came into the team.

I wanted to offer him a full time role upon graduation and outlined the job description that he would be performing. Given the scope, I believe that RM1500 was too low and wanted to offer RM2000 as this role would probably pay this much even if I was to hire externally, and in the latter case, I would actually have to put in the effort to recruit and train. While some senior leaders agreed with this view, the person leading the training program was vehemently opposed as it would come across as “unfair” to the others. Since he was so ill-disciplined and performed so poorly when he was attached with the installation team, the fact that he would now earn more than the others would cause resentment and there would be “problems running the program in the future”.

For the Organisation, offering an education pathway to overcome poverty, it is highly problematic that it does not recognise growth mindset. Just because an individual used to be negatively labelled, does not mean that they cannot later thrive in a different environment that is more suitable. He seemed to be written off because he did not meet conventional notions of a “good student”. Some senior leaders also prioritised maintaining a sense of equity that doesn’t account for individual circumstances or growth. The reluctance to offer the student a higher salary appeared to stem from a concern about maintaining the integrity of the program, and concerns about creating division or resentment among students, which could disrupt the functioning of the program. When I offered the counterpoint that if this student is capable, rewarding his progress with a higher salary would encourage others to strive for excellence as well, I was told that I do not “understand the mentality of the poor” who “easily gets jealous” when their peers do better than them.¹⁹

This dim view of “the poor”, I find, is also one of the most pernicious. The expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies that leads to persistent under-achievement in marginalised individuals²⁰.

¹⁹ The senior leader who had initially objected, eventually relented on a technicality—he was offered RM1800 basic pay and RM200 incentive for the first few months so as to not to appear to earn more than others

²⁰ Lisa Delpit, *Multiplication Is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*

Lisa Delpit, an American educator who champions teaching practices that understand and value students' backgrounds, shows that educators' subtle biases against students' capabilities limit their educational experiences, leading students to internalise these low expectations, which contributes to widening educational disparities over time. If an organisation adopts a rational stance on pay, where there is a differential, it will have to communicate clearly why the pay is different, what the scope and expectations are for this individual with a higher pay. The same can certainly be done for students in the program, but in this case, the Organisation leaned towards maintaining "fairness" (a term it constantly used in this context) because it is assumed that "the poor" cannot accept such reasonable explanations. Delpit calls this the "soft bigotry of low expectations". In the long term, such a treatment will serve to strip proactiveness from the students and apprentices since such efforts do not actually yield better outcomes for them.

This mindset appears to be pervasive and often manifests in rather egregious ways. A senior leader who manages the training program spoke of certain students as "stupid" and "idiotic" in front of the whole class. Anecdotally and corroborated by other students within one cohort, at least seven students endured this name-calling. Another leader often used deprecatory language to speak of "the poor", being stereotyping of their mindsets, their poor attitude to work and often calling them "boys".

Such punitive interactions appear to be tolerated because they are normalised as a way to impose discipline or "high standards" on these marginalised students who "needed more rigid discipline". And this hierarchical system of control does not end when they graduate. If they go on to become full time staff, they are seen as needing surveillance and when they are not at their work stations, they could be questioned at will by other staff members. When an installation results in a roof leak, the incentives of the installation team are revoked, creating an atmosphere of blame that leads to fear of failure. This is why even when a graduate has been attached with active installation teams for years, they are not fully trusted to work on their own—tasks like site surveys prior to installations are done by team leaders. This hierarchical approach in turn affects the productivity of teams as they cannot do core installation work without their team leaders. Other department directors spoke of graduates as "lacking confidence" but this is certainly a rational behaviour given the hierarchical culture of the organization.

It is important to note that these measures appear to be put in place simply because of who they are, and not due to poor performance or non-delivery of work. Although senior managers believe that rigid control is needed to ensure the whole cohort performs well, such attitudes appear to be counterproductive for the development of marginalized students.

c) Lack of transparency and exploitation

Given these unequal power dynamics, the possibility for exploitation is very real. One such example is that a person leading the program gets a handful of students to clean their living quarters every month or so at no pay. Due to the hierarchical power structure, it can be assumed that students do not decline such requests and anecdotally, no student has in fact refused.

Again, this pattern is also repeated by another senior leader, who canvassed students to earn some extra pocket money cleaning his pool. Even with compensation, in an educational setting, tasks that fall outside of the students' educational or professional training goals—especially those that personally benefit school leaders—create ethical concerns. The senior leader's personal gain from students' work blurs professional boundaries, setting a tone that doesn't align with fostering a fair, supportive educational environment. When poor students perform tasks like pool cleaning for a wealthy authority figure, it reinforces socioeconomic disparities and may create a sense of "servitude" as they may feel compelled to comply due to financial need or limited options. This can also damage the students' dignity, sense of self-worth and belonging within the institution, particularly because such work is only offered to low-income students rather than being fairly distributed or replaced with relevant learning opportunities. A student who discussed this with me spoke with distaste of this practice.

While these practices look bad, the biggest exploitation is arguably the fact that the Organisation appears to benefit from the labour of these students at very low pay. During the hands-on training, the RM20 per day paid is below minimum wage and is certainly not living wage²¹. Some students do not move on to the apprenticeship phase because they have not "fulfilled the criteria". But these criteria are not pre-communicated or made clear during the course of the program. They are subjective, dependent on the judgement of a few senior managers. Some students did not have an apprenticeship at all throughout the program and have only been paid daily wages of RM20 all the way till their graduation. Many of these tasks they perform are entry level labour like packing in the warehouse, for which a company will also have to pay a minimum wage should they be filled externally.

This lack of transparency and certainty in the progression structure leads to dropout. The cohort where most students came to be attached to my team has a completion rate of about 60%.²² Rather than failing, some had to go back to getting a full time job as the RM20 a day arrangement was dragged out longer than communicated and the pay cannot support them and their families. While no program can have a perfect completion rate, the irony is that individuals who are targeted are those for whom conventional education systems may not have worked well in the past. The program risks repeating the same cycle of poor support leading to dropout leading to poor earning outcomes.

d) "What We Owe Each Other"

If we look at any regular company and ask, "what are its obligations to its employees?", we might say fair compensation, equal opportunity, safety etc. Say, a company wants to be more than any regular company and seeks to create a strong workplace culture, then it will have to go beyond the most basic obligations and commit to fostering transparency in feedback and communication, create clear career growth plans and reward employee contributions. For a company with an

²¹ Free Malaysia Today, 19 October 2024, [Minimum wage of RM1,700 also applies to foreign workers](#)

²² In a presentation to a funder of the program.

explicit social mission, I believe the burden of care is the strongest of all, because it professes to support the marginalised, those that are the most vulnerable to exploitation.

T.M. Scanlon, an American philosopher, whose famous work *What We Owe Each Other* emphasises fairness, mutual respect, and accountability as a moral obligation to one another. It is a framework that can be used to view the burden of care that a company has to its employees. In the case of a company in the smallest circle, applying Scanlon's framework meant;

- acknowledging the equal worth of marginalised groups as employees because Scanlon emphasise treating individuals as rational agents deserving of respect
- proactively dismantle structures that do not foster belonging
- holding leadership accountable for its actions in treating underrepresented groups

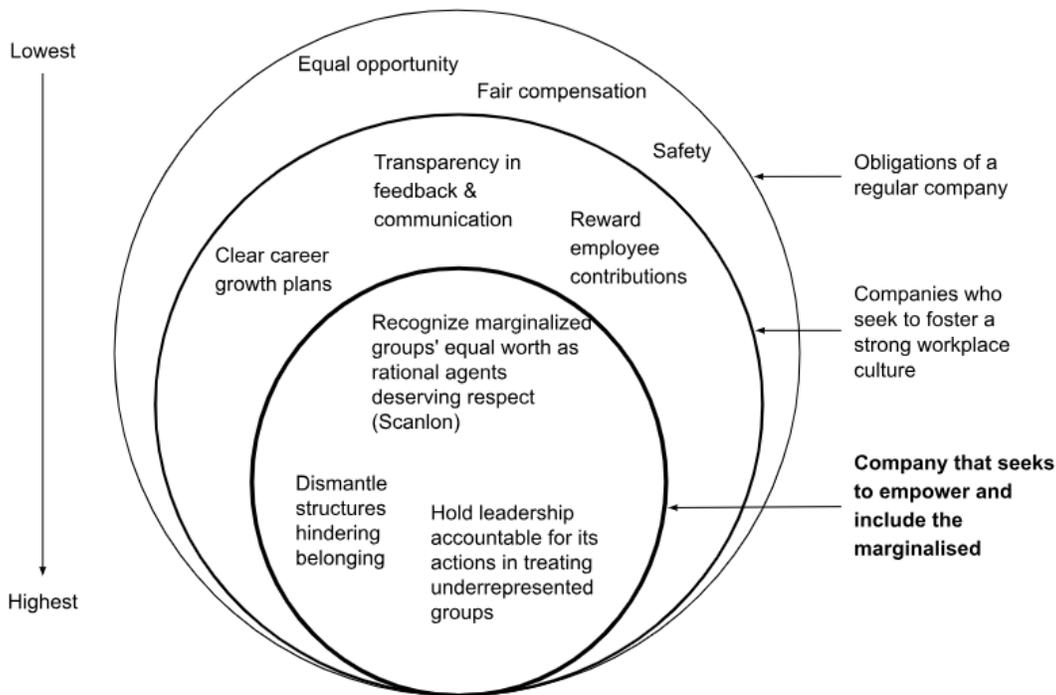


Diagram 1: The levels of burden of care that a company owes its employees

From my personal observation of the Organisation's practices, it appears to fall short of the smallest circle: it does not sufficiently foster belonging and leadership lacks accountability, involving practices like cleaning someone's pool, that undermine the dignity of the underrepresented groups it recruits. It does not appear to treat the marginalised as rational agents but rather appears to make decisions based on a prejudiced view of their mindsets ("they are easily jealous when their peers do better"). It does not appear to meet the criteria of the middle circle as it treats external hires and graduates differently. And sometimes it does not even appear to meet the standards of the biggest circle i.e. fair pay and safety from bullying language.

As we can see, progression is also messy. If the program had just started running, or even if it's been running three or four years in, the messiness is understandable. And to do something to address the existing disparity in employment of the underrepresented, even if imperfect, is better than not doing anything. But it has been 10 years in. The Organisation has benefitted from the labour of these graduates. But beyond that, what is the progression for *them*? From the data on promotion shared earlier, it is clear that career progression is not available for the majority of the graduates of the program. Should one aim to make a further dent in increasing earnings of these marginalised groups, the logical step is to collaborate with industry players to expand opportunities for career pathways for these graduates.

However, even after 10 years of running the program, such steps have not been undertaken. While the organisation has benefitted from the graduates' labour, they have been unable to find a pathway that allows graduates to increase their incomes to a level that would raise them into the middle class (M40). Instead, graduates are stuck with higher, but still relatively low incomes, and the Organisation's mission of bringing graduates into the middle class remains unfulfilled.

Moving Forward

The Organisation has done a commendable job in building a pipeline amongst underrepresented groups to participate in the energy sector with a deliberate outreach and training model. In addition, it has also successfully raised the incomes of a group of their existing employees, showing multisolving in action in the energy transition.

However, those aiming to replicate and improve on its model must be careful to avoid paternalistic prejudice, low expectations, and exploitative labour practices that undermine the mission to uplift marginalised youth. While well-intentioned, benevolence can mask harm when power goes unchecked.

This chapter concludes with some suggestions on what can be done to improve on the model, with hopes that others interested in having an impact here can expand on some of these suggestions that require more thought and refinement.

a) Guardrails

The potential downsides of the model highlighted in this chapter are not a universal problem for others wanting to adopt an inclusive hiring model. The temptation for any organisation or individual to overlook their own shortcomings and emphasise on their successes can lead to blind spots that are detrimental to the mission. To put in guardrails against such fragility, it is crucial to:

1. **Conduct regular audits:** perform audits to surface problematic practices that are not aligned with organisation ethical standards
2. **Encourage whistle-blowing culture:** due to the unequal power dynamic, it can be too high a barrier for students to give objective feedback due to fear of repercussions. Instead

a safe mechanism to report unethical behaviours should be set up, with complaints rigorously investigated and outcomes reported on

3. **Foster an independent oversight:** given that founders and other senior leaders can exert tremendous power and influence within such organisations, an independent ethics committee made up of diverse individuals (founders, community leaders, current student leaders, alumni, civic organisations) should be vested powers to investigate, intervene and make decisions that affect student welfare

b) Diversity is strength

Organisations that pride themselves on having a substantial workforce from the indigenous communities must be able to answer this question: what has this diverse workforce done to improve the way your business is run? I believe that to fully tap the potential of this diverse workforce is to shift the mindset from a deficit view of marginalised groups as places “full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts that often go unrecognised and unacknowledged”.²³ To enable the perspectives of these underrepresented groups to enrich the way the business is run is mutually beneficial to all. A successful solar training program should also adopt teaching practices that enable students to draw on their existing cultural capital to support their success as well.

c) Intentionality for the inclusion of women

IRENA reported that there are 4.9 million Solar photovoltaic (PV) jobs in 2022, which is also the fastest-growing sector, accounting for more than one-third of the total renewable energy workforce and of these, women hold 40% of the jobs.²⁴ Yet the Organisation has largely omitted women in its model so far: it starts with recruiting male youths by focusing only on installation jobs. Yet many of the graduates eventually work in other departments in the Organisation that is very much desk bound. If they are more intentional in recruiting women, the model can be tweaked to offer diverse pathways from the start. Around 2024, they started incorporating sales roles in the training, and they have managed to recruit 7 women out of 100 recruited in the latest cohort. Clearly it is nowhere close to parity or even at industry standard, but it is a start. Recruiting female students from indigenous communities presents its own challenges, but the barriers can be overcome with much more intentional effort to build trust among the communities.

d) How are they better off?

This chapter does not examine the cost of living for individuals recruited into the renewable energy sector, nor does it compare their purchasing power when transitioning to urban employment within the sector against maintaining their traditional economic activities in rural areas. It also does not

²³ Tara J. Yosso, [Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth](#)

²⁴ IRENA, [Renewable energy and jobs: Annual review 2023](#)

study the impact on the communities when these youths leave their villages. It will be useful for further studies to analyse if the youth are truly better off financially, and if their communities benefit in the long run.

e) Scaling the model for broader impact

The model presented in this chapter offers a blueprint for other organisations within the renewable energy sector and beyond. By adopting inclusive hiring practices and investing in comprehensive training, companies across Malaysia and other countries can expand their talent pools while also contributing to equitable economic development. However, for this approach to scale, those who adopt it should partner with others, both upstream and downstream: meaning partnering with other educational institutions to make the outreach and training widely available, while partnering with other hiring companies for placements to offer more opportunities for their graduates. Such a model can be one for companies and policymakers alike to consider and improve upon as they shape the future of renewable energy.