



## A reflection on the stakeholder theory: Impact of government policies

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### ABSTRACT

The stakeholder theory has been in use since 1984 and is one of the most crucial theories in discussing value creation and trade in the business world. This article explores the stakeholder theory in the context of government policies. The main firm here would be government agencies/institutions, whereas stakeholders would refer to people who are affected or have the power to affect policies and in this particular study; the professionals. The customers of the government policies are the public, especially eligible voters. Using the stakeholder theory, this research explores government policies and how it affects the different segments of communities, as well as the steps taken by the government to ensure that the government policies are well-received and well-executed for the sake of its stakeholders. The study, in its preliminary stage, found that different stakeholders perceive the success of the government policies based on their proximity to the policy.

Keywords: **government programme, stakeholder theory, government policy, professionals, public policy**

## INTRODUCTION

Deemed as founder of the stakeholder theory, Freeman (1984, p. 46), defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives”. Since then, the concept and theory of stakeholders have been widely studied in different perspectives and with diversified approaches. The fluidity of the word “stakeholders” itself makes it difficult to systemize the theory. The general consensus is that stakeholders can be divided into internal and external stakeholders that comprise mainly of customers, employees, shareholders, distributors, the industry and the community.

The stakeholder theory emphasizes on value creation and the symbiosis relationship between organizations and the public. The main premise of the theory is that by creating value for all stakeholders without compromising business would benefit organizations in the long run. Therefore, the concentration of the theory has always been on corporate social responsibility, ethics in business as well as creating shared values and business sustainability (Faridah et al., 2019).

The approach of the stakeholder theory has always been in understanding how corporate businesses should manage its stakeholders in ways that benefit the company (Freeman, 2004; Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti, 2015). However, with the notion that government should be sensitive towards the needs of people in recent years, Flak and Rose (2005) recommended that government should also be seen as a business entity with stakeholders in mind.

Many studies have examined how stakeholders are affected by an organization’s policy, the different stakeholder attributes and factors that affect stakeholders in their decision-making. Andriof and Waddock’s (2002) study was the catalyst that moved the corporate-centric focus of stakeholders as a mere subject towards engagement, relational and network-based connection with stakeholders. This shift is important as it emphasizes on the interdependence between the company and the stakeholders rather than treating stakeholders as an entity that is only there to be managed. Harrison et al. (2015) reiterated that the stakeholder theory, despite its many misconceptions, is an important theory for the effective management of stakeholders. This is especially so when the theory becomes the framework in understanding how to effectively manage different stakeholder expectations.

While research on stakeholders has been far-reaching and wide-ranging, the focus of these studies has been mainly on managing stakeholders of businesses entity and non-governmental organizations (Freeman, 2004; Lawler & Worley, 2006). Very few studies have used the stakeholder theory in understanding stakeholder perceptions and views towards government policies. To address the gap in the application of the stakeholder theory in the context of government-public relationship in Malaysia, this research hopes to shed light on the perception of a specific group of stakeholders in Malaysia, namely the professionals, towards government policies.

Government/public policy can be defined as purposive course actions by groups of people on matters which are of public interest (Meier & Bohte, 2007). In the implementation of public policies, there are two different groups of actors, namely the official actors and the unofficial policymakers. Olufemi (2016) defined the official actors as the ones who are empowered by law to engage in the formulation and execution of policy. The unofficial actors, on the other hand, are people who do not have legal authority to make policy decisions, but they derive their relevance from government policymaking. These unofficial actors can include interest groups, political parties and citizens. The role of the unofficial actors is often neglected

although it is pertinent to good policymaking. The opinion, ideas or information provided by them can assist the government in making decisions or updating an act, policy or plan that involves citizens' interest. From the perspective of the stakeholder theory, the implementation of programmes by a country or company will generate fruitful outcomes if the plans and programmes are well received by the stakeholders.

## BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Barisan Nasional has been the incumbent ruling government since independence in 1957 and contributed six Prime Ministers over its 60 years' rule. In 2018, Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> General Election heralded the first regime change from Barisan Nasional to Pakatan Harapan. This pivotal change called for drastic changes in government policies and transitions from old programmes to new programmes. It is of utmost importance to capture the perceptions of the professionals on these changes to ensure effective implementation of government programmes. With the change of government in Malaysia in effect over a year now, it is high time to gauge and understand the perception of stakeholders towards the new government. Therefore, the focus of this study is the perception of professionals in Malaysia in the implementation of government programmes (GP) initiated by the leadership of Pakatan Harapan, the Alliance that currently forms the government.

Ever since independence, policies have been formulated by the Prime Minister's Department, often as a centrally directed exercise; thus it is deemed as a "highly bureaucratic act" (Ho, 1992). Policymaking in developing countries, including Malaysia, is often seen as a top-down approach. However, recent research shows that public opinion and participation in policymaking is gaining traction in Malaysia (Mat Ariffin & Othman, 2018).

One of the important stakeholder groups in this context are the professionals who put their skills and knowledge into a profession and are considered as experts in their fields. Many discourses have transpired on the important role of professionals in policymaking (Powell, Garrow, Woodford & Perron, 2013; Amrita, 2018). Therefore, this study investigates the engagement of professionals with government policymaking and their perceptions with regards to those policies.

Various scholars have examined how different organizations use the stakeholder theory (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Harrison et. al., 2015). Even so, there lacks research on stakeholders and how they perceive the implementation of government programmes. In the context of this study, the stakeholder theory would be crucial in informing the government the perception of professionals towards their policies. The change of government in 2018 heralded drastic changes in policies. There is a gap in understanding how the new government policies is affecting its stakeholders, namely the public. This input is crucial for the new government administration that has been in place for more than a year. With major changes taking place, the views of professionals are important in ensuring that the government is moving on the right track. Using the stakeholder theory, this present study hopes to examine how one of the groups of stakeholders perceive government programmes based on the proximity of issues in their lives. This study is also interested in understanding how professionals express their opinions with regard to government programmes. To summarize, the present study addresses three research questions:

1. What are the government programmes identified by professionals?
2. Does proximity to the issue affect their perceptions on government programmes?
3. How do professionals express their opinions with regard to the government programmes?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholders are defined by an organization which decides the entities vital to their survival. Over the years, Freeman (2004) has updated the definition to reflect a new principle in the stakeholder theory, which is the importance of stakeholder perspectives and activities to the organization. The stakeholder theory is practical as it frames the way to efficiently manage stakeholders so as to induce a sense of positive reciprocal in the stakeholders to support the organization's mission and objective. This is especially useful in volatile environments as better stakeholder management would result in better grassroots-informed decision-making.

Harrison et al. (2015) stated that there is a gap of worldwide context for the theory of stakeholders. This is one of the gaps addressed in this study, whereby the use of stakeholder theory in the context of Malaysia can help paint a better picture of stakeholder theory application.

### *Stakeholder Theory and its Importance to Government Policies*

Very few studies have looked at the application of the stakeholder theory in the context of government policies. Flak and Rose (2005) argued that government agencies are managed like a business entity as they are required to make the best decisions for their stakeholders and ensure budgets are optimised. In this context, the stakeholder theory has proven to be a reliable and practical solution as it takes stakeholders' interests into consideration. The researchers found this to be an interesting gap, as there have not been many applications of the stakeholder theory in Malaysian government policymaking to enhance stakeholder engagement. Therefore, it would give a fresh perspective of the stakeholder theory with regard to government policies.

It is arguable that the perception of stakeholders can be subjective, biased and emotional, which brings the question, how effective it is to understand their perception? May et al. (2004) found that emotional experiences and well-being could lead to engagement. Studies also has shown emotional experiences can lead to stakeholder satisfaction and inspiration for organizations (Robinson, 2006). Emotional experiences can bring about perceptions of being valued, involved and engaged in a two-way communication. Therefore in this study, the researchers focused on the personal experiences of respondents with regard to policies to capture these emotional experiences.

Research has proven that the government decision-making process is heavily based on stakeholders as stakeholders influence the process depending on their powers and interests in the policy success and outcome (Lawler & Worley, 2006; Gomes, 2006). At the same time, stakeholder engagement can also be considered as pay-off for the resources that they received. Thus, the context of this study also looks at the benefits that professionals have reaped from government policies that could compel them to be more engaged in policymaking. In turn, failure of government in providing resources would lead to disengagement from the stakeholders who will withdraw from their roles.

In a study, Faridah Ibrahim et al. (2019) investigated the application of the stakeholder theory in government policies and the engagement of the Malaysian youths. Using the focus group discussion methodology, the study compiled the perspectives of respondents of different ethnicities in the age group of 20–29. The findings reveal that youths are very aware of government programmes and are consistent in monitoring the policies that affect them. Interestingly, the findings also found that youths are appreciative of government initiatives and have a positive reciprocal relationship with these policies. However, the question is, do other groups of stakeholders share the same views? This study therefore examines the perspectives of professionals to give a richer and more in-depth understanding of stakeholder engagement in Malaysian policymaking.

### *Policymaking process and the role of citizens*

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013), to improve the quality of policymaking, governments must work together with citizens, civil society organizations, businesses and also other stakeholders to ensure deliverable outcomes. Citizens are not mere receivers of policies, but rather they are contributors and resources to the policies.

Policymaking in Western countries has always actively engaged the public through various instruments and mechanisms. United States, for example, uses the Negotiated Rulemaking Act 1990 to enable committees represented by various groups to be involved in the formulation of policies. It is an indisputable fact that contemporary policymakers must engage in a consensus-based and collaborative policy process to encourage consensus-building (Fazni & Noraini, 2018).

In her study on the role of educators in education policymaking in Europe, Amrita (2018) highlighted the importance of understanding the viewpoint of professionals. The long-term sustainability of reform efforts is directly linked to the degree of inclusion in decision-making among professionals. In fact, the scholar pointed out that top-down issued policies stand little success in the long term even if they seem successful at first.

Powell et al. (2013), on the other hand, investigated the role of health professionals such as social workers in policymaking by identifying the policymaking opportunities that can be accorded to the “frontliners” of mental health services. Very often, the important role of professionals in enhancing policy outcome for the people that they serve is overlooked.

Reflecting on the work of Amrita (2018) and Powell et al. (2013), there is a clear lack of research specifically on the role of professionals in Malaysia; the few in the past focused on very specific areas of specialization. This study, therefore, looks at the views of professionals from different specialisations with regard to general government programmes. The researchers argue that there is a need for more general views of professionals from different fields to ensure the diversity of views are reflected in the study.

Ho (1992) captured the dynamics of policymaking in Malaysia by comparing the formulation of the New Economic Policy and the National Development Policy. Modelled from its colonial experience under the British, Malaysia policymaking has always taken the top-down approach where it is done systematically under the government’s bureaucratic ways. In addition, ethnic relations has always been an essential part of the policymaking due to the 1969 racial riot.

In this context, public policymaking in Malaysia has always been seen as a top-down approach and done behind closed doors with insufficient checks and balance (Hunter, 2013; Kanapathy & Hazri, 2013). Kanapathy & Hazri (2013) further commented that there is a

concentration of power within the executive in a highly bureaucratic system that determines policy inputs and outputs. While there have been efforts to engage the public in debates and discussions, the efforts are deemed insufficient.

Mohamad Aizi, Shahizan, Mohd Farhan and Azizul's work (2012) looked at the technological changes in public policymaking by dwelling into the effectiveness of e-Participation that was implemented for more effective communication between government agencies and relevant stakeholders. This is in agreement with the work of Flak and Rose (2005) who studied the adaption of the stakeholder theory into understanding e-government.

This study therefore hopes to contribute to more in-depth understanding with regard to stakeholder perceptions of the government policymaking process, in particular the current ruling one.

## METHODOLOGY

For data collection, the methodology used was focus group discussion (FGD) as it is the most accurate methodology for emerging themes, in this context, government policymaking. Further, Field (2000) described FGD as a powerful way of engaging with professionals, policymakers and end users.

In this study, FGD was conducted with two different groups of stakeholders. The sample was chosen using snowball sampling. The researchers selected the first batch of respondents and the respondents, in turn, introduced their friends who are also professionals. The first group comprised of young professionals within the age range of 30 to 44 years. The second group comprised of experienced professionals and activists within the age range of 45 to 55. All respondents were professionals in their respective fields, namely broadcasting, education and non-governmental organization work. Both groups consisted of male and female participants with a total number of five participants in each group. The following three theme questions were addressed to the respondents to elicit their responses:

1. What are some of the government programmes that they know of or are personally involved in?
2. What is their opinion on these government programmes irrespective of whether they were implemented under the rule of Barisan Nasional in the past or the current Pakatan Harapan?
3. How do they discuss or talk about government programmes?

The theme questions were discussed among the researchers to ensure that they met the requirements of the study. Moderators of the FGD were also well trained to ensure that the FGDs meet the objectives of the study.

Professionals were the stakeholders chosen for this study as they are deemed to be more vocal in expressing their opinions on political matters and government policies. The FGDs were conducted with different age range groups to determine if age is a factor in how stakeholders perceive government policies. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The respondents were also invited to elaborate on each question.

The responses were then analysed using thematic analysis to identify popular trends. The thematic analysis was done systematically using the open code system, whereby the researchers skimmed through the collected responses for recurring words and themes. The researchers then refined further the analysis through axial coding by correlating the codes to one another. For the

discussion of the findings, the respondents from the first group are categorised as younger professionals and respondents from the second group are categorised as older professionals. The data were anonymised and only the initials of the respondents' name are used in the discussion.

## FINDINGS

### *Government policies identified by the professionals*

The MRT project was identified by both groups of the professionals as one of the policies that is visible to them.

*“The MRT project that goes all the way to near my house in jln reko, I think that has impacted a lot on the way I travel to work because finally I don't face too much of a traffic jam because the commuters are now using MRT to go to work in KL so they don't clog the highway.” — Respondent SMM*

The older professionals also discussed the housing policy at length similar to the young professionals.

*“I think something has gone wrong somewhere that you know normal people cannot afford houses here in Malaysia, normal people cannot afford to have you know basic necessities.”*

— Respondent SMM

*“One of the most important thing is welfare of the people, welfare of the people from the aspect of ownership of house and job opportunities.” — Respondent NMZ*

Both groups mentioned safety and social illness as some of the main concerns within the country. It is interesting that both groups presented a wide perspective on the term of safety by looking not only at physical safety, but also environmental safety.

*“Malaysia really need to improve, I give the reason is because we can see Malaysia has a lot of problem with a social...” — Respondent T*

*“Ok, my concern about the future, definitely about our children, whether or not they can find jobs, whether or not they can have houses, but I think most importantly is for us to have a safe working environment you know, safe environment from the aspect of health, from the aspect of air pollution, from the aspect of crime because happy people make happy nation.” — Respondent SMM*

The younger professional group discussed their hopes for the education system extensively. The discussion on education system ranged from the need for better moral education, to tackling racial and social issues as well as the brain drain inflicting Malaysia.

*“But in Malaysia, we are so scared, we are living in fear, why is it are we need to live in fear, because it goes back to our education system. Really its broken down,*

*education must bring up people to realise how to be a good human being, it is not the subjects it is not really important, the subjects is to get a good job and all that, but how to be a human being.” —Respondent T*

*“I tell you why because the brains from Malaysia went to Singapore, my brother my brother was a straight A STPM scholar, he didn’t get a scholarship here, he got an ASEAN scholarship, so he’s now a Singapore PR. The respondents expressed their desire for transparency in the implementation of government’s programme.” — Respondent M*

*“One is sex education, and the other thing is nutrition for children needs to be improved a lot, I think we have a long way to go especially in schools. The education is one part, educating the kids about nutrition, and the nutrition in school itself.” — Respondent M*

The older professionals also discussed education policies at length. When discussing the current government policy, respondent SMM stated:

*“They are trying to improve access to education because the philosophy behind education is that everyone should be able to access education, so what they have done is that they have given voice to the teachers to the stakeholders to the parents and so on, now parents can link directly to the teachers, they can say things openly and so on, and then the latest one in the news they have also given voice to the lecturers you know especially the lecturers who have got opinions that are different from the ruling party.”*

It is interesting that the problem of lack of nutrition was also highlighted by the older professionals. Respondent SMM continued his statement with:

*“They (the government) are revamping the feeding the children program, because they notice the children who come from poor are so hungry, when they are in school they cannot learn. Even there is food program at school, but it is not nutritious enough to sustain their attention for the 5 hours that they are in school. So now they concern what they trying to do is trying to improve the quality of free food provided to the poor children in school.”*

One obvious difference noted in the older professional group discussion was that they related education policies to career opportunities for the younger generation, because their children are affected directly. This was an aspect that was not brought up among the younger professionals.

*“I’m looking at it it’s more concerned about the job opportunity for our younger generation.”*  
— Respondent CPK

*“Like me right now, I think how can my child buy home, when my child graduate, will my child get a job?” — Respondent NMZ*

For the young professionals, good policy implementation was reflected as

*“Policy makers need to formulate policy or implement programs based on needs.”*  
(Respondent M).

Another respondent concurred with this by adding

*“The government must remember that what is being done is for the people, so you can't do for political interest, he need to do for the people.”*(Respondent I).

The young professionals also discussed the need for transparency in future government programmes.

*“They demand for transparency in government contract tender. That is what we want to see the change lah the new government, we want to know the details, why this person got a contract, we want to know, there must be some benefit to us, not benefit for someone else.”* — Respondent T

The older professionals also brought up the fact that transparency would mean open tenders. This can be attributed to the fact that the older professionals work at the management level where they are personally involved in tenders.

*“Transparency I feel I see the tender system from close to open tender, that shows transparency lah from one of the ways to show that Government is transparent.”* — Respondent H

### ***Proximity of issues***

The younger professionals and activists group talked mainly about the activities that they were personally involved in or experienced as can be seen from the following responses.

*“To speak about is probably what I'm personally involved in which was the government's under BN which was the SEDIC program which is a program meant for the socioeconomic, to uplift the socioeconomic status of the indian community, because I'm heavily involved in NGO work and we received, my NGO received a grant...SEDIC is the main program I am personally involved in.”* — Respondent M

*“First thing is, my dad passed away, we never knew if you have a dad you can go claim the money, 2500 ringgit at that time, the state provides you, so which is funeral expenses they provide, then they got kad warga emas, for senior citizens, then you can go and get some benefits, my daughter was born in 2010, they gave a ... you go and get the card Selangor, they will put 100 dollars every year, so when she is 18 years old she will have about 1500 ringgit.”*  
— Respondent T

Grievances voiced by the young professional group were often related to their job. One of the respondents, DRH is a medical doctor. He voiced his dissatisfaction on the government salary scale for medical doctors, with low increments which are not equal to the amount of hours they work. He lamented, *“I calculated before, doctor’s salary by the hour, is lower than factory workers”*. One of the respondents shared her appreciation for the new policy whereby husbands can contribute to their wives’ Employment Provident Fund account as she is personally impacted by it.

*“So as a freelancer, I don’t have any EPF SOCSO nothing, no benefits at all, so the last 10 years I had no EPF contribution...so of course you have that options of wanting to do your monthly contribution on your own and all... it hit me recently that you know I had no backup emergency savings for myself, and to have something like this is a compulsory thing, I think it’s good.”*

— Respondent M

The older professionals also agreed on the notion that stakeholders usually are concerned with issues that are close to them. Their examples were often drawn from issues that affect their own identity. For example,

*“Still on education from a Chinese community aspect, I hope you don’t mind since I come from Chinese ethnic group, something that is actually put into the promise.”* —

Respondent CPK

### ***Channels of communication***

In terms of channel of communication, it is interesting to note that the younger professionals were less keen in expressing their opinions openly regarding government programmes for three reasons. Firstly, for fear of the effect on their career. Secondly, to avoid conflict and disagreement within their social circle.

*“We publish any idea, the critics, more than those that support lah.”* — Respondent WZ

*“I cannot because I work on TV.”* — Respondent M

*“I posted but I took it back. Because we have a letter, a memo, we can’t issue statements that contradict Government’s policies.”*—Respondent DRH

*“In social media we don’t say it there, because we fear there are implication, maybe next time they black mark you, or our children can’t get scholarship, or we think of the future, the consequences, so we keep quiet.”* — Respondent T

The older generation however were more open in sharing their opinions using channels such as Whatsapp and were more keen on meeting their assemblymen face to face to voice their grievances. It is interesting to note that the older professionals agreed that the social media should be used as a means to contact politicians rather than as an avenue to voice out their grievances to the public.

*“Usually we discuss in Whatsapp group, but if only Whatsapp, there is no suitable channel to voice it so that the people up there will listen to us.” — Respondent NMZ*

*“You go to the source of the problem, then that will be direct. Whether we email, we see face to face, we tweet but tweet secretly whereby not everyone get to see, but I don’t believe in using Facebook to air our grievances, I am totally against it, because I feel by embarrassing other people, how do you persuade people to do the things that you want them to do.” — Respondent SMM*

*“Say they do townhall discussion, surely we would ask question and we would voice out what we hope from the government.” — Respondent CPK*

The older professionals also resorted to their real-life social network in order to reach out to the particular government agency that they had issues with.

*“I use my network in the Women Ministry. Coincidentally I always follow the Women Ministry, so I try to get the contact of the Secretary or Special Officer...So InsyaAllah I get to meet them and voice out the difficult at the bottom [the grassroot].” — Respondent NMZ*

## DISCUSSION

A prominent finding across the different age groups reflects how stakeholders address policies that are close to them and people in their same age group. The finding analysis showed that recent government policy announcements positively echo the sentiments of the professional stakeholders.

In terms of education policies, both groups of professionals are concerned about the education system. The younger professionals’ focus is on quality education, issues of ethnic-based education and the brain drain of the country’s talents. In contrast, the older professionals are more concerned with the long-term effects of education policies such as job opportunities and also the salary scale when their children have grown up. They are also more concerned with global and national economic situation on the macro level compared to the younger professionals.

Recently, the Youth and Sports Minister of Malaysia, Syed Saddiq announced a task force, that includes the Prime Minister, Tan Sri Mahathir Mohamed, aimed at creating 1 million job opportunities for youths (Rena, 2019). In the 2020 budget, which Syed Saddiq has called the Youth Budget, a RM6.5 billion funds have been set aside to create 350,000 job opportunities for youths (Rena, 2019).

Interestingly, both groups of professionals emphasized on the importance of balanced nutrition for schoolchildren. On 26 August 2019, the Minister of Education announced a free breakfast scheme for primary schoolchildren starting from January 2020 which echo the sentiments of these stakeholders (Bernard, 2019). However, certain issues which the professionals believe are not being sufficiently addressed by existing government education policies include the ongoing brain drain and education loans for the future generation.

Both groups also emphasized on the importance of public safety especially crimes. Regardless of their industry, public safety is a major concern raised by this group of stakeholders. Suggestions from the respondents included relooking at the education system to reduce social ills and by extension, crime. At the same time, safety in terms working environment and health safety was also raised. In this aspect, the professionals disagree with the direction taken by the current government policies. In their efforts to reduce crime, the government's proposed initiatives such as setting police response time to eight minutes, getting more public participation for crime prevention and more cooperation among enforcement and security agencies ("Govt to improve", 2019) seem to have not gotten much support from this group of stakeholders.

Both groups of professionals equate transparency with open tenders as they believe the public should know of these tenders. It is noteworthy that this sentiment seems to echo with the recent announcement by the Works Ministry that it is working together with the Public Work Services (Anis & Mahadhir, 2018) to ensure that the open tender system is used for all large-scale government projects and public funds are put to good use.

Affordable housing was also discussed by both groups of professionals and this again, is in line with the government policy whereby the Housing and Local Government announced that it is committed to building 100,000 affordable housing by the end of 2019 and plans are being made to lower the prices of houses ("Government to build", 2019).

Public transportation such as the MRT project was also discussed by both groups. Bearing in mind that both groups were made up of respondents who were financially capable in owning cars, public transport nevertheless was one of the policy areas that they were concerned about. Any development in the public transport system therefore remains to be seen based on the National Transport Policy.

In terms of dissimilarities, the two different stakeholder groups differed in terms of their preferred means of communication to express their opinions. Both groups are not comfortable expressing their opinions in social media as they did not want to suffer from negative consequences such as arguments with other users or risk losing their jobs or promotion opportunities as companies do monitor their employees' digital footprint nowadays. However, the older professionals find Whatsapp and real-life social networks to be the most effective platforms to discuss policies whereas the younger professionals are more comfortable with just not expressing their views at all.

Nevertheless, the government should take note on how to address the constraints faced by stakeholders in voicing their opinions. This is especially so if the policymakers want honest and valid feedback from the stakeholders. In summary, professionals, whether young or old are not comfortable and are less inclined to express their opinions on social media.

The findings of the study concur with that of May et al. (2004) who found that positive emotional experiences and well-being leads to engagement. The respondents often shared their personal experiences of their family and friends as well as their work experiences. At the same time, their satisfaction or contentment with government policies comes from their personal emotional experiences as a result of a particular policy. For example, a respondent shared her emotional fulfilment of an efficient public transport system that eases her daily work commute. It can be concluded that regardless of profession, personal emotions play a huge role in the engagement of professionals with government policies.

The clear parallel between many of the government's announcements/initiatives and the sentiments of the professionals imply that the ruling government has been implementing more

grassroots-centric policies. The notion that the Malaysia government policies are often top-down approach (Hunter, 2013; Kanapathy & Hazri, 2013) and the insufficiency of public engagement can be negated if government policies continue to align with the public's sentiments as shown in this study. This study found that the professionals are very aware of government programmes and are consistently monitoring policies that affect them. This concurs with the findings of Faridah Ibrahim et. al. (2019) among the youths.

The findings also concur with Lawler & Worley's work (2006) that highlighted stakeholder engagement is a form of pay-off when stakeholders are satisfied with the resources that they receive from the government. The respondents in this study often expressed their gratitude when they spoke on resources they received which in turn encouraged them to become more engaged in that particular area of policy.

This study also demonstrates the importance of getting the buy-in from professionals of various industries in enhancing policy outcomes as they are often deemed influential within their own personal circle of family and friends as well as their colleagues.

## CONCLUSION

This study employed the stakeholder theory as a framework to understand the perception of the professional group towards government policies. The findings confirm that the stakeholder theory is an effective approach to understand better how policymaking is very much reflected on the stakeholders' emotional needs, personal interests and concerns.

Based on the perceptions of the two sample groups, the findings show that the government programmes recognised by professionals include those on public transportation, housing, education system, safety and social ills. However, the older professionals in discussing the education system, relate education to employment opportunities for their children as opposed to the younger professionals.

Findings also show that the proximity of an issue is a key factor for stakeholders. Stakeholders are often more aware and more keen to discuss policies that affect them or their family members directly. Generally, the professional stakeholder group hold a positive opinion on government policies when the issue is close to them. While the government policies can be deemed to be more grassroots-centric, more needs to be done for issues such as public safety, education loan concerns and also public transport.

Both groups of professionals differ slightly in the way they communicate about government policies with the younger professionals preferring to keep their views to themselves. In contrast, the older professionals are more vocal expressing themselves through real-life social network and town hall meetings.

This study is not a conclusive as it is confined to professionals only and it is much more exploratory in nature. Future research will need to expand to include different groups of stakeholders and their perceptions on government policies. Additionally, longitudinal studies should also be carried as a follow-up to determine if the perceptions of stakeholders have changed or display a steady long-term trend. The researchers also suggest quantitative research to measure the level of engagement by different stakeholders for different sets of government policies. The level of engagement can be used as yardstick for the government to formulate more precise policies that cater effectively to the people's needs.

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