

Addressing inequality in Malaysia through corporate social intrapreneurship

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Abstract. Inequality has been a long standing issue in Malaysia, although the situation has been statistically improving over the past 40 years. From a Gini coefficient of 0.51 in 1970, the government has done considerably well to bring the figure down to 0.39 in 2016. Efforts toward improving the situation are aplenty, but there is room for improvement in terms of the coordination and collaboration of initiatives that are carried out within the public, private, and social sectors. This paper explores the idea of corporate social intrapreneurship as a potential vehicle to mitigate inequality in the country for the long term. Through the analysis of existing literatures and data on the subject, the aim is to first of all, provide a historical and global context on how the roles of corporation have evolved over the years, discuss the transformative views on social intrapreneurship against traditional corporate social responsibility, and offer considerations to further corporate social intrapreneurship initiatives through public-private partnerships in Malaysia.

Before any discussion can be made on the idea of corporate social intrapreneurship, it is important to form a common understanding of why corporations exist, and how they have influenced society as it is today. This analysis could then provide context on how early corporations or business organisations were originally formed, why were they established, and how they have evolved over time. The past, present, and future perspectives on the functions of corporations in the social, economic, and political context are crucial indicators on their importance in shaping the world as we know today. As the engine of world economy and vehicle of capitalism, it is natural to form a hypothesis that supports the significant role that corporations play in influencing the accumulation of global wealth, and the inequalities that occur as a consequence. This presumption, however, needs to be further justified and contextualised.

The observations and researches that have been made on corporations have led to suggestions on how they should operate, both in the traditional and progressive sense. A holistic assessment of these opinions can facilitate the formation of ideas to be adopted towards the ideal and sustainable operation of corporations. For instance, proponents of social intrapreneurship assert that the concept provides a platform for individuals from within the corporate setting to make global impact or change for the better. The philosophy behind this idea can transform the roles that corporations play and redefine the values that they create. At the end of the day, any inequality that corporations have a hand in creating can never be fully undone. But minimising this factor and reversing its impact is worth exploring, even if it might take some time.

1 Capitalism: A historical context

There is wide body of work surrounding the origins of capitalism, which provides the foundation for the formation of corporations. The conventional view on capitalism history prior to its modern-day form, broadly chronicles it to the periods of agrarian (14th century), mercantilism (16th century), and industrial (18th century). Together with this evolution, is the development of differing functionalist views on the roles that capitalist organisations play in shaping society. From the division of farmed land, to early international trade, to the emergence of systematic production lines, the precursors of corporations as we know today have undergone massive shifts in serving individuals, governments, and society as key stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Despite these significant transformations over the past eight centuries, one common denominator across all iterations is the objective of generating wealth. This traditional view remains largely true in present day business organisations, and in its simplest form, capitalism can be universally understood today as a system that facilitates the process of turning of investments into profits (Appleby, 2010). Arising from this monetary motivation, is another 'derived' common denominator which is societal impact, both positive and negative. While agrarian capitalism restricted wealth generation to land owners only, and mercantilism led to global imperialism and war, the Industrial

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Revolution created job for the masses -- although this development did not come without its own set of challenges such as variances in working conditions.

While the functionalist view focuses on the dynamic of roles within society in shaping the world, the conflict view on the matter is skewed towards the tension created between different social groups. This perspective provides the foundation to the theories of Karl Marx, whom together with Friedrich Engels, published 'the Communist Manifesto' in 1848 which discussed the dynamic between bourgeois (middle class) and proletariat (working class). These 19th century ideas can be viewed as the framework to explain the inequality that is being observed today. Capitalism, with corporations as its vehicle, is seen as the root cause behind the prominent aphorism, "the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer". Nevertheless, while Marx and Engels envisaged a proletariat triumph in the future, Jeffries (2012) argues that the exact opposite is happening today. "The proletariat, far from burying capitalism, are keeping it on life support," he says.

2 Contemporary views on the role of corporations

The literature on the role of the modern corporation is wide and diverse. As capitalism is commonly seen as the driving factor behind global inequality, corporations are becoming more susceptible to unfavourable critique and judgments. Despite this preconceived observation on the corporate world, the awareness on corporate citizenship seems to be gaining momentum over the past decades. This development signals the effort among corporations to move away from the negative views on them, and be more involved with the communities where they operate. To facilitate discussion, Danley (1994) adopts the view of two common ideologies in discussing the roles of corporations: Classic Liberalism (economic freedom) and Managerialist (organisational responsibility).

To elaborate further, Classic Liberalism can be related to the concept of 'maximising shareholder value', which is commonly attributed to Jensen and Meckling (1976). The idea revolves around increasing returns to shareholder investments, and is one of the most widely adopted conventional concepts globally. This view limits the goals of a corporation towards creating monetary value only, for the benefit of those who have invested in the organisation. In recent years, however, this belief has received its fair share of criticisms. Stout (2013) attempted to debunk the shareholder value myth through historical, legal, and empirical perspectives. Kramer (2012) highlighted the irony of the concept as it "enriches senior executives at the shareholders' expense". At a more extreme end, former GE CEO Jack Welch once famously cited shareholder value as the "dumbest idea in the world" asserting that it is a result instead of a strategy.

On the other hand, the Managerialist view can be related to the concept of Shared Value (Porter and Kramer, 2011) which focuses on the "connections between societal and economic progress". There are the internal responsibilities of individuals within a corporate organisation that managerialism advocates, but the Shared Value perspective views the corporation as an ecosystem that interacts with society and the environment in its operations thus requiring it to ensure that the value chain is run efficiently, responsibly, and sustainably. As much as encouraging and progressive the idea appears to be, it does not escape criticism. While acknowledging the appeal of Shared Value, Crane, Palazzo, Spence and Matten (2014) claim the idea to be unoriginal and naive about the challenges of business compliance, among others.

Opposing views on the role that corporations should play have certainly added colour to discussions on the topic. And if the volume of emerging literature related to the subject is any indication, there is a long way to go before any consensus is reached. These strong views, however, suggest that the ideal corporation should strike a balance between the two schools of thought. A stable and sustainable corporation should be able to manage the expectations of its internal and external stakeholders, while constructively coexisting with the communities within the environment that it operates in. The question that corporate leaders need to address is how to embed these complex elements across the many facets of their organisations.

3 Global wealth, inequality, and corporations

In the 2017 edition of its Global Wealth Report, Credit Suisse indicates that total global wealth today has reached GBP 207 trillion, a 27% growth over the preceding decade at the onset of the global financial crisis. During the same period, 8.7 million new millionaires were created, and the global mean wealth per adult reached a new record high of GBP 41,839, an 8.5% increase from 2007. The first 12 months of 2017 recorded the fastest growth in total global wealth at 6.4%, faster than the rate of increase for world population. These indicators reflect how global wealth remained on a growth trajectory despite a tumultuous start at the back of the financial meltdown of 2008, with some figures indicating 'pre-crisis' trends.

It is important, however, to have a holistic view on this perceived progress of the global economy. In the same report produced by Credit Suisse, it was highlighted that the wealthiest 1% of world population owns over 50% of all household wealth; an increase from the 45.5% recorded at the turn of the millennium. These data provide a high-level indication of how lopsided global wealth is becoming. In its 2016 report on income inequality, the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests that arising from the 2008 global financial crisis, economic rivalry has not reduced inequality. This assertion was made based on the uptrend of average worldwide Gini coefficient of disposable household income.

In his 2014 publication, 'The Drivers of Economic Inequality', Dr. Nicholas Galasso of Oxfam America outlines a range of factors that influence inequality around the world. Derived from a range of past and current literature, Dr. Galasso categorises the drivers as geography, technology, globalisation, wage structure, and politics, among others. Across these diverse groups, linkages to industries and corporations can be observed. The literature cites Kusnetz (1955) who argues that technological change leads to wage inequality between skilled and unskilled workers. The same can also be observed through globalisation as foreign direct investments favour workforce with existing skill sets which waive further expenditures on training and development. In terms of political influence, the paper argues how rules controlling the 'revolving door' between government and the private sector can be "weak or ill defined".

The understanding of emerging trends in global economy and linking them to key drivers to inequality provide a map that can facilitate the identification of roles that corporations play in wealth distribution. The influence appears to be sporadic across the fabric of society, with varying degrees in terms of direct and indirect impact. Nevertheless, it can be observed how economic inequality can be attributed to corporations through the creation of the wage gap, employment imbalance, and unfair advantage gained through political influence. These outcomes might differ in terms of significance between developed and developing countries, but common traits exist in defining ways of intervention, mitigation, and solution.

4 Social intrapreneurship and the CSR dilemma

The origins of social intrapreneurship can be tracked down to the municipal socialism and public enterprise movements in the UK and North America respectively between the 19th and 20th century. One of the most famous proponents of these movements was Joseph Chamberlain whom British Prime Minister Theresa May regarded as a "political hero" and Winston Churchill called "the man who made the weather". As the mayor of Birmingham in late 19th century, Chamberlain saved the city from "choking on its own filth" (Goodall, 2016) by taking over the gas and water supplies. Together with his housing and education reforms, he transformed Birmingham into an advanced city, which provides the foundation for it to be claimed as one of the second cities of the United Kingdom.

These transformations made by Chamberlain indicate early influence of structured and systemised management of basic civil requirements to society. Through effective delivery of basic amenities to the public, the overall quality of life enjoyed by a certain community can be viewed as being more equal. Such an improvement is a reflection of how the philosophy behind social intrapreneurship can lead to a seemingly more just distribution of wealth, both in tangible and intangible forms. It can be argued that these services are expected of an entity with authoritative powers, but it is worth appreciating that during its time, the changes brought forward by Chamberlain can be considered as progressive if compared to his contemporaries.

In the modern context, the definition of social intrapreneurship covers a broader range of activities. The term is attributed to Pinchot (1985) who refers it to the formation of new ventures from within an established organisation. Although potentially similar in nature, Stewart (2013) strongly argues that social intrapreneurship should not be confused with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which she claims only serves to "protect the company from risk or improve its brand". The debate over the definition of CSR, in itself, is a subject of high contention among both academics and professionals. As a result of this subjectivity, the definitions and subsequently, action plans of CSR programmes across different business environments remain broad and expansive. It can also be argued that the term 'CSR' is generally more widely known by the public compared to 'social intrapreneurship'.

The debate over the validity and legitimacy of CSR can drag into an exhausting discourse. Opinions seem to be strong to support the importance of CSR as a vital component of an organisation's competitiveness (Porter and Kramer, 2006). On the contrary, there are equally strong views against the categorisation of CSR as a nobility but instead as a form of 'greenwashing' (Alves, 2009). Within this perspective, CSR is merely a widely misleading reputation management tool to balance out any unfavourable view held by the public on a corporation. A view that fits the narrative of corporate entities being inherently evil, or, as pop culture commonly perceives it, "a supporting player in the war against individualism" (Allan, 2016).

Social intrapreneurship provides an alternative perspective for organisations to do good to society and the environment. Furthermore, CSR excellence should firstly be attained through responsible business practices. From the provision of conducive working environment, to sustainable sourcing and procurement, elements of highly responsible corporate citizenship should already be embedded within a corporation's operations. These practices are fundamentals that are expected to be strengthened from within an organisation, before they even reach out to external stakeholders via extravagantly branded CSR programmes that might not last beyond three to five years. Some of these programmes even change almost overnight with the change of leadership. Focusing on social intrapreneurship, as a discipline, can

facilitate sharper focus and line-of-sight in bringing change to society and the environment. But it should be done only after core and basic business practices are conducted with the highest compliance to environmental standards and formal or informal social regulations.

5 Social intrapreneurs as change agents

The body of literature on theories and concepts of social intrapreneurship is growing as it gains further interest from academics. Pinchot (2011) who has been attributed to coining the term, published 'The Intrapreneur's Ten Commandments' which include, among others, 1) Come to work willing to be fired, 2) Circumvent any orders aimed at stopping your dream, and 3) Do any job needed to make your project work regardless of your job description. These commandments suggest the determination and dedication required of social intrapreneurs in executing their respective projects. It also indicates the resistance that they might face in going against the grain of traditional corporate culture.

Further to these challenges, Patel and Gong (2017) assert that social intrapreneurs are bound to be asked questions in their corporate journey. Tough questions like whether their time is effectively used, or how their efforts are contributing to the company's bottom line. It can also be queried if these differences are down to generation gap, as corporations are commonly comprised of individuals from across different age groups, from Baby Boomers to Millennials. This conflict is further amplified by the wide array of definitions that companies have on the meaning of CSR, some of which, use the term interchangeably with social intrapreneurship. These scenarios signal how it can be a mountain to climb for social intrapreneurs in convincing management to permit their causes to be operationalised, and provide the necessary funding and resources.

One hurdle that is limiting social intrapreneurs from gaining support from within the organisation is the intangible nature of their causes. Social impact is not easily measured even if it can be quantifiable in terms of value created for the brand or company reputation. This challenge is further aggravated when they are faced with traditionalists in management who only believe in bottom line figures as the main indicator of a company's wealth. It is therefore crucial for social intrapreneurs to reach out and collaborate with the public and social sectors so that their efforts are better consolidated and coordinated. Before any programme is implemented, it is crucial for a screening of existing initiatives by the public or social sectors to be done, to avoid any duplication of approaches on the same issue.

Realising the gap that exists between corporate changemakers and their management, Lodge and Wilson (2006) propose that with the resources that they have, multinational corporations have got the opportunity to restore their legitimacy by playing a role in reducing poverty in developing countries where they operate. Legitimacy, in this context is not limited only to compliance to the rule of law, but also acknowledgement of public opinion over how ethical the company is operating. Corporations are expected to not only adhere, but also listen to the feedback that society have towards their ways of doing business. This perspective solidifies the view that corporations are best partnering with the public and social sectors if they aim to effectively executive their social goals. In the modern business arena, corporations of all scales are carefully and meticulously implementing their respective strategies through various partnership models.

An understanding of social intrapreneurship among the people in a corporation would then provide the platform for the formation of corporate social innovations or CSI. As proposed, the terms CSR and CSI are still considered interchangeable by certain quarters in the corporate world, which calls for a more streamlined distinction between the two. One proposal is to view CSI as a deviation from the traditional method of charitable acts by corporation. It can be viewed as an alternative that moves away from simply giving to the needy. Corporations should approach CSI as a mean of better integrating with communities, given that they have been historically viewed as a key factor behind the shaping and segregation of society.

6 Malaysia: A case study

To illustrate the interrelation between corporations and social wealth inequality, a localised view can be taken on Malaysia, a developing country in the heart of Southeast Asia.

Inequality has been a long standing issue in Malaysia, although the situation is statistically improving over the past 40 years. From a Gini coefficient of 0.51 in 1970, the government has done considerably well to bring the figure down to 0.39 in 2016. Despite this empirical proof of inequality reduction, Dr. Muhammed Abdul Khalid (2014), one of the foremost Malaysian scholars on the subject, the wealth gap between the urban and rural communities in the country has not changed since gaining independence from Britain in 1957. Further, he alerts how the gap, if left unchecked, can lead to social and political instability and stifle long-term economic growth. Further, Dr. Khalid discussed how complex the inequality situation in Malaysia is, stemming out of colonial policies, political drives, as well as cultural differences. These varying reasons indicate how inequality can be viewed as a 'wicked problem' in Malaysia.

Several others have voiced similar views on the subject. Kana (2015) argues that while overall Gini coefficient has decreased, the Gini of the Bumiputera (Malay indigenous) majority is lower compared to that of the Chinese and Indian population. This observation can be attributed to the many advantages that are given to the selected group in terms of education, housing, and working opportunities. He suggests that an aggravation of this seemingly marginal difference can lead to racial tension if not managed carefully by the government. Similarly, Faizli (2016) warns that if inequality is not addressed comprehensively, the country is at risk of “dragging its feet into the future”. Coming out of the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, the country has also undergone widening political divide, which can compound on the pre-existing socioeconomic gap.

While critical views over inequality management in Malaysia are aplenty, the opposing end of the argument is just as strong. Grewal (2016) attributes the government’s achievement in reducing poverty and inequality to date is down to government-led micro credit programmes for the ‘Bottom 40%’ group of the country, together with cash assistance provision to the hardcore poor. This notion is further supported by Lee (2016) who opposed the narrative of worsening inequality in Malaysia arguing marginal income gap between the rich and the poor. He also asserts that the gloomy perspective is merely driven by perception, compounded by poor communication by the government on the effectiveness of their poverty eradication programmes. The advent of social media, while seen as an effective tool for government advocacy, can also be a medium that negates efforts put in by the authorities in clarifying their position on poverty eradication.

Within the Malaysian public sector, the reduction of wealth gap is under the purview of the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. Among its core functions are to develop infrastructural and logistical projects for rural development, and to formulate upskilling programmes to equip rural communities, mostly underserved, with the skills required to enter the job market. There are some overlaps observed between efforts that are put forth by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, with those led by other ministries namely the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Human Resources -- especially in the area of human capital development. One example is the large number of vocational institutions run by many different federal and state agencies that can potentially confuse the public. The initiatives are nonetheless noble, but there is room for streamlining.

In between the public and private sectors in Malaysia, there exists a hybrid sector which comprise of government-linked companies (GLC). GLCs are mostly initiated and backed by the government, and formed to stimulate economic growth while providing social services to the public. They are mostly run with the governance and system of a private entity, and the vision of nation-building. For the purpose of discussion, focus shall be given on a company that has been at the forefront of social intrapreneurship towards empowering society, PETRONAS.

7 PETRONAS: Leading social intrapreneurship in Malaysia

Established in 1974, PETRONAS is the national oil company of Malaysia formed as custodian of the country’s petroleum resources. Since its founding, PETRONAS has grown to become an integrated energy company which operates both upstream exploration and downstream processing and refining activities. As a business entity, PETRONAS contributes to the government in the form of annual dividend. In terms of social investment, the company has been focusing primarily in the education sector. Since 1975, the company has sponsored over 20,000 students from primary, secondary and higher education amounting to over RM 3 billion in total. Their focus on education and human capital development has been further exemplified through their network of learning institutions which includes a university, a vocational training institution, a marine academy, and a professional leadership centre.

PETRONAS’ foray into social intrapreneurship began in 1992 when they initiated a programme that is now known as the Vocational Institution Sponsorship & Training Assistance (VISTA) programme. Through the VISTA initiative, PETRONAS collaborate with vocational colleges around Malaysia to enhance the delivery of their training programmes through sponsorship of equipment, curriculum development, and training of trainers. Leveraging on its wealth of experience in the fields of engineering, PETRONAS deploys its technical professionals to provide academic consultation and advice in delivering courses that are relevant to the needs of the industry. The VISTA programme is managed by the company’s Education Division as its non-profit arm, and bridges the gap between vocational education and the industry which is crucial to ensure employability of the graduates.

Vocational education is viewed as a secondary alternative in the Malaysian education landscape. It is catered mostly for students who have not performed well academically during primary and secondary schooling. A high percentage of these students come from the underserved rural communities, some from families who live within the poverty line. Vocational education in Malaysia is seen as a fast route to acquiring skill and qualification for employment. To date, over 5,000 students have graduated from the VISTA programme, many of whom have joined the industrial workforce or began their own technical service firms, subsequently improving the lives of their families. VISTA is an example of how corporations can work together with the public sector in lending their expertise and resources in helping the underserved to get out of the cycle of poverty.

8 Conclusion

The diverse range of views over the roles that corporations should play in society signal a highly mixed and debatable stand on the subject. The rationale and reasoning for the formation of early corporations indicate how property division, imperial expansion, and national growth were the main drivers of history's pioneering companies. The evolution of these business organisations over time, however, led to the widely varied categories of corporations from public cooperatives to private entities. This expansive development has shaped the corporate landscape as we know today, together with the unique objectives that they have respectively as their reasons for being. And this diversity of functions marks greater challenges in pinpointing whether corporations are obliged, or otherwise, towards the betterment of society.

Zooming into the accumulation of global wealth, however, a clear link can be observed between the existence of corporations and their influence on how societies are shaped. From the benefits that are gained by modern corporations, through their utilisation (or exploitation) of resources, it can be argued that corporations are responsible in re-balancing the imbalance that they have created as a result of their pursuit of growth and profits. This attribution then raises the question of whether CSR is an add-on element to a company's operations, or an expectation that should be met through their business practices. After all, there are companies that consider improved working conditions, responsible sourcing, and environmental protection as CSR when these are basic requirements that they should already meet. Responsible business practices should already be incorporated within an organisation's DNA, which then allows social intrapreneurship to become the vehicle for corporations to make actual change globally.

The primary advantage that social intrapreneurs have in leading their causes is the access that they have to resources such as funding and manpower, being a part of their respective organisations. Commonly, the main challenge for them is convincing management to channel these resources towards the causes that they are driving. As most of the key targets of social intrapreneurship are social change, the key result indicators are less tangible and more qualitative. Therefore, the objectives of social intrapreneurship are often viewed as 'removed' from the company's bottom line or quantifiable value creation. In addressing this situation, it is imperative for social intrapreneurs to effectively link the roles of their organisations to societal motives such as human capital development, education, and poverty eradication.

It can be observed how through its VISTA programme, PETRONAS has demonstrated how a company's technical capabilities can be bridged with the education sector through social intrapreneurship. By deploying their highly qualified engineers to vocational colleges around Malaysia, PETRONAS has succeeded in equipping underserved students with the necessary skills to increase their employability, consequently making a difference in the future livelihood of their families. VISTA is an example of how a company utilises its strengths and resources in providing opportunities and opening doors for those in need. This model provides a framework that can be adopted by companies in other industries to identify and map the resources that they have with relevant community-building initiatives.

The PETRONAS example provides three considerations for social intrapreneurs in strategising and developing their respective programmes. First, a connection needs to be made between the core competencies of the corporation to the cause that it intends to support. This linkage can provide further justification in convincing management to approve the necessary funding or manpower required. Second, to ensure success, social intrapreneurs should reach out and collaborate with the public and social sectors. This is to ensure effectiveness in implementing a social impact programme, and to avoid overlapping of efforts. Third, the involvement of social intrapreneurs towards their causes should go beyond monitoring. The longevity of the VISTA programme can be attributed to the continued and frequent engagement between the benefactor and the beneficiaries.

History has shown how corporations and society interrelate in evolving into the forms that they are in today. The role of business organisations in global accumulation of wealth provides an indication of how they influence the demarcation of society. It is therefore vital for corporations to uphold their social contract in mitigating this situation, and social intrapreneurship is evidently an effective approach to meet this target.

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