

***Ta'awun* (Mutual Cooperation) among Community Members in Sustaining *Infaq* (Perpetual Charitable Contribution) for Community Agriculture Projects**

Suhaimi Mhd Sarif
International Islamic University Malaysia
suhaimims@iium.edu.my

Yusof Ismail
International Islamic University Malaysia
yusof.education@gmail.com

Dolhadi Zainudin
International Islamic University Malaysia
dolhadi@iium.edu.my

Abstract

Any dedicated community project requires *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* (perpetual charitable contribution) to sustain the projects. *Ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* are spiritual driven with strong conviction, commitment, and passion from the community members. There must be a strong motivation to drive people to get into *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and to make *infaq* who love to achieve share common objectives and outcomes work together. When the community have decided to work on community agriculture projects for the sake of food security, *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* are necessary to operate community agriculture projects on a sustainable basis. This research obtained the views of the five groups within Mukim Setapak Daerah Gombak community who have been involving in community agriculture projects through conversational interview with note-taking about the influence of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) in giving *infaq* for community agriculture projects. The research uses qualitative conversational interviews. The research applies thematic analysis for the analysis of the interview results. The informants argued that the motivation for the common and share objectives has driven them for *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* creating, maintaining and sustaining the community agriculture projects. The participants gave full commitment in terms of efforts and funding for the community agriculture projects. *Ta'awun* has magical influence to get *infaq* and efforts. Future researchers may want to adopt a qualitative case study method involving

several communities with vegetable garden projects to deeply explore the influence of cooperation for the *infaq*.

Keywords: *Community development, ta'awun, infaq, community project*

Introduction

Community agriculture projects are important to secure food for the people. This work is never a trivial work. It is part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The global agenda requires people to work together to attain justice, prosperity and unity in society.

In any public project, there is a need to apply project management. Project management and funding of sustainable projects is always a challenge. There is no other shortcut for the society to implement any community project. The society must cooperate mutually in the management and funding of community projects. Community vegetable gardens need solid and structured management and committed funding. Community cooperative approach in project management and funding may be a solution for community vegetable gardens.

Public must cooperate mutually. They must practice *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) in the *infaq* (charitable funding) for the management and funding of community agriculture project. There is no institution ready to provide funding for community projects. Public projects are not similar to commercial projects, because the public projects do not have funding from the banks or investment companies. For public projects, it comes from public grants or crowd funding. Sources of funding are related to the outcome of the project.

Donation from the public is important. The funding for community projects needs continuous funding from committed donors. The spirit of charitable funding through *infaq* with *ta'awun* approach to project management and funding is based on mutual cooperation and understanding among members of the public.

Objective

The main purpose of this study is to explore the influence of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) among community members in making the *infaq* (perpetual charitable contribution) for the management and funding of community agriculture gardens. *Ta'awun* in the funding with *infaq* motivation allows members of a community to share a sense of responsibility and accountability for the community.

Literature Review

The world has a global agenda to include all members in the society to work in partnership in achieving sustainable development for peace, unity, and prosperity. The United Nations has initiated the Agenda 2030 with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to attain justice, prosperity and unity in society collectively (Lal, 2020; Nicholls *et al.*, 2020; Chenarides *et al.*, 2021).

In reality, community will have to work and manage together all community projects. This approach requires the community to create, maintain and sustain the community projects (Arrosi *et al.*, 2014; Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2017; Szetey *et al.*, 2021). There is no other shortcut for the society to implement any community project. The society must cooperate mutually in the management and funding of community projects (Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2017; Szetey *et al.*, 2021). Community vegetable gardens need solid and structured management and committed funding (Arrosi *et al.*, 2014; Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2017). Community cooperative approach in project management and funding may be a solution for community vegetable gardens (Strohmaier, Zeng & Hafeez, 2019; Testa *et al.*, 2019).

There is a need to understand *infaq* as a long term and committed funding mechanism for community projects. The literacy of *infaq* (charitable funding) as Islamic financial literacy allows for organizers and participants of community projects to sustain the projects. The financial literacy of *infaq* (charitable funding) offers knowledge, skills, and abilities in objective-driven projects (Gustman, Steinmeier & Tabatabai, 2012; Danna & Danna, 2017; Balios, 2021). In other words, a project needs both management and funding to make it operational and achieve its goals. Likewise, community projects also need *infaq* financial literacy with *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation).

The value of community projects depends on the contribution of the community. A community project may not promise material and monetary outcomes, but it can bring intangible benefits such as social bonding among members of the society. Even though a community project has no monetary outcomes, it still requires good management and literacy (Hastings, Madrian & Skimmyhorn, 2013). Every household should acquire financial knowledge and practice the knowledge (Gustman, Steinmeier & Tabatabai, 2012).

Financial literacy enables every household to make sound financial decisions and action (Bel & Eberlein, 2015; Xiao & O'Neill, 2016). There is a need for institutional and collaborative effort to create and sustain financial literacy in the community (Danna & Danna, 2017). The importance of finance literacy applies to both the community and large companies. Big companies need to align with current trends like big data, corporate governance and

sustainability (Balios et al., 2020; Balios, 2021). Small companies are struggling to survive and to prove themselves financially (Danns & Danns, 2017).

Ta'awun

There is no short cut for any outcome without commitment, effort and material contribution. When any task is driven by *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation), it reinforces social bonding among people to achieve collective social ends (Al-Haddad, 2015; Zar'um, 2016). Individuals might be able to face challenges in life and severe hardship with *ta'awun*, the mutual assistance that helps absorb the pain. Ultimately, *ta'awun* contributes towards social harmony and unity among members of the society. It has been observed that the practice of *ta'awun* has faded in urban neighbourhoods (Husin, Azahari & Ab Rahman, 2020).

There is a need for *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation and assistance) among members of a community is no longer a common practice. In the past, the community used to practice *ta'awun* in the forms of communal work (*gotong-royong*) due to the nature of traditional employment. However, the urbanized community has been occupied with multiple employments to meet multiple demands of urbanized life, thus could not spend much time in community activities.

People are becoming more motivated to restore communal work in the society. The individualistic lifestyle is not natural. Some people felt the need for socialization in the neighborhood. Community gardening provides an alternative for social bonding (Sharif & Ujang, 2021). In the lockdown orders due to COVID-19 pandemic, community gardening provides stress relief (Ugolini et al, 2020). The lockdown means people have to be confined at home (Theodorou et al, 2021). There is a need for physical activity during the confinement time (Pears et al, 2021). People are starting to spend time socializing with neighbors (Sharif & Ujang, 2021; Ugolini et al, 2020; Theodorou et al, 2021).

Ta'awun requires unity and solidarity among members of the society (Mhd. Sarif, 2015). One needs a noble heart to produce noble work (Mhd. Sarif, 2017). Taqwa (piety) mobilises noble hearts (Mhd. Sarif, 2020). The dynamism of *ta'awun* enables sustainability (Mhd. Sarif, 2018).

Community Vegetable Garden

Community vegetable garden is a platform for the community to get together. While there are many other projects that could be created in the community, the creation of vegetable gardens is an easy platform to enable socialisation among neighbours (Ghazali, 2013). People engage

in conversation and work together through common interest projects such as vegetable gardens.

Community vegetable garden is visible and physically available. The interaction among people in the community garden allows social bonding and creates food (Khor & Teoh, 2021). Vegetable gardens attract societal involvement (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2019). Some members of the community assess the perceived benefits for the activism in community vegetable gardening differently (Othman *et al.*, 2017; Othman *et al.*, 2020). People are expecting some transactional value in any activities (Othman *et al.*, 2017). However, many would still be supportive of universal values for community garden projects. For example, people would support community vegetable gardens that lead to a green economy and food security in the community (Ramaloo *et al.*, 2018). The green economy may have material and social bonding consequences to the community.

The organizers of vegetable gardens should plan for positive motivation and perception (Di Fiore, Specht, & Zanasi, 2021). People might have time and effort to participate in the vegetable garden project, but not by providing equipment and funding (Zainal & Rosmiza, 2021). Indeed, the community leaders should provide a big picture about the vegetable garden to manifest social responsibility in sustaining the environment for betterment of life (Ilias *et al.*, 2018). The sense of collective living among members is necessary (Mohamad Ali, Mohd Dom & Sahrum, 2018).

Infaq

Infaq is charitable funding. There is no limit of time. In other words, people can donate at any time. According to Alayrus (2017), *infaq* is one of Islamic social finance mechanisms to support community projects that are established by the community for example schools, amenities, and infrastructure. However, the most crucial element in *infaq* is the trust and good governance (Hermawan & Rini, 2018). The establishment of a formal organization with formal appointment of managers, executives or caretakers is very essential to gain trust from the people who made *infaq* (Indahsari, Burhan, Ashar, & Multifiah, 2014).

A community project needs trust and empowerment. The trust given with the establishment of good corporate governance and formal organizational chart should be accompanied with empowerment in the management (Saripudin, Djamil & Rodoni, 2020). *Infaq* is about giving and taking trust. The process of ta'awun with *ta'aruf*, *tafahum* and *takaful* eliminates suspicion and uncertainty (Yusof, Yusof, Hasarudin & Romli, 2014).

This research argues that *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) in *infaq* (charitable funding) allows community vegetable gardens to be sustainable. *Ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) through *infaq* (charitable funding) in the vegetable garden projects to be sustainable. *Ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) does not occur instantaneously but an outcome of solidarity among people after going through *ta'aruf* (get to know), *tafahum* (get to understand), and *takaful* (get to protect) processes.

In general, people are not warm and motivated to get to know other people without any reason. Even with a simple reason, one might not instantly get to know other people. *Tafahum* (get to understand) is the next stage of *ta'aruf* (get to know). After getting to know each other, people will focus on common objectives of the group and set aside their differences. After *tafahum* (get to understand), people will develop a sense of protection among them from any threat that could harm the unity among the people. Eventually, with *ta'aruf* (get to know), *tafahum* (get to understand) and *takaful* (get to protect), people will be ready for *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) among people. With the *ta'awun* in place, the participants of community vegetable garden projects need to acquire knowledge and skills of finance. In the finance literacy activity, participants will learn about project management and project funding.

Data/Methodology

The study uses qualitative research methods through personal interviews with community leaders who have community agriculture project. The personal interview was conducted with casual conversation. The researchers approached them due to close relationships in community engagement activities. Since the basis for the interaction is about engagement, the personal interviews use conversations with community leaders (MacDonald *et al.*, 2013; Ngozwana, 2018; Jimenez *et al.*, 2019). Even though the conversation is casual, the researchers still need to do preparation before the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Majid *et al.*, 2017), such as securing informed consent, research permits and validated interview protocol (Yeong *et al.*, 2018). The study used three phases in data collection and analysis.

The first phase is to have validated research instrument. The researchers developed special research instrument which comprised interview questions and protocol. The researchers have validated the research instrument with academics and community experts. The initial research instrument given to the experts was not according to context of the research. Another word, the interview questions were too difficult to be understood by the informants.

The second phase is to secure permission to conduct research. The researchers obtained the permission from the community leaders. After securing the permission, the researchers secured informed consent from the informants. The researchers managed to get direct contact from the informants.

The third phase was the data collection through personal interview. The venue of the interview was decided by the informants. The research used note taking approach. For validation purpose, the researchers approached the informants to verify interview notes. After the verification, the researchers approached independent researchers to validate the interview notes. This is the validation process in qualitative research.

The researchers analysed the verified and validated interview transcripts with thematic analysis. Firstly, the researchers assigned codes to the interview transcripts. Secondly, the researchers sorted the codes according to different themes. Finally, the researchers developed connection themes with the constructs of the research.

Results/Findings

The results of the study are based on the personal interviews with five community leaders, from Tebing Group, Padang Group, Kasih Group, Rizab Group and Pinggiran Group.

Tebing Group

Tebing Group started their community agriculture project with 10 participants in 2008. The first ta'awun (mutual cooperation) was through their efforts in converting the bush nearby their houses into an agriculture project.

The next *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) was *infaq* (charitable funding) of RM10 per month from each member, thus collecting RM100. Another *ta'awun* and *infaq* was when one of them offered himself as treasurer because of his banking background. The Tebing Group treasurer said: *"I do not use any bookkeeping to record this RM100. I just recorded it in the '555' notebook for the name, home address and amount contributed. The group leader claimed from me the cost of the purchase of seeds and polybags amounting RM80. So, I recorded it as an expense. We had no meeting for the purchase as we did in proper procurement. I did not insist on it until a member demanded proper procedure for financial records. However, I objected to doing so due to some clerical work required even to do some bookkeeping."*

Based on Tebing Group's *ta'awun* approach in *infaq* (charitable funding) for the vegetable garden project funding, the group adopted a gradual practice to transfer of knowledge and money among members. The group used a practical method for *ta'awun* and *infaq* records through "555 NoteBook."

The *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) to drive *infaq* (charitable funding) among members occurred at conceptual and practical levels. At the conceptual level, the group practiced "*usrah*" socialization (Mhd. Sarif, 2015, 2017). The group has a weekly study circle or "*usrah*" organized at the "port" (a designated location) of the group within the garden itself. The practical part of the *ta'awun* is at the fieldwork where all members are given specific tasks in a duty roster.

The *Usrah* platform allows for *ta'awun* development (Mhd. Sarif, 2015, 2017). The first step in *ta'awun* is *ta'aruf*. *Ta'aruf* is about getting to know or ice-breaking among members (Mhd. Sarif, 2017, 2018). The *ta'aruf* is not a one-off process. It requires a continuous process among members. After *ta'aruf*, members in the *usrah* will go through *tafahum* or getting to understand (*fahm*). This process allows members to 'give and take' and 'tolerate' for any differences but focuses on matters of common interest. The next step after *tafahum* is *takaful* (protection). In this step, members will protect the interest of members from any threat.

Padang Group

Padang Group has identified an empty area near a football field to grow some vegetables too. This group raised money with *ta'awun* and *infaq* from their neighbors who were interested to join the group. The money will be used to manage the vegetable garden.

One of the participants, a retiree, has offered to be a caretaker cum clerk. The group agreed to offer the job to the person with an allowance of RM100 per month. For this commitment, every participant is committed an *infaq* of RM10 per month for the allowance and other expenses. The clerk said: "*I offered my service because I do not want Padang Group to have quarrels over financial matters. I do my best in bookkeeping and preparing monthly financial reports. The group is happy with the clerical work and also the gardening work. This garden is a group project. My role is to maintain the garden during weekdays because the majority of the group is occupied during weekdays. We are happy to enjoy our fresh vegetables.*"

One of the members of Padang Group said: *“I don’t mind contributing RM10 every month because my family could enjoy fresh vegetables from our own garden. We do not use any chemical fertilizer or insecticide in our garden. Pak Mat, the clerk, spends every morning to weed out the garden. He uses compost fertilizer. Everyone will put our food waste in the compost bin.”*

Padang Group also emulated Tebing Group’s approach for project management and project funding with *ta’awun* and *infaq*. The main difference between Tebing Group and Padang Group is the role of the accounts clerk cum caretaker of the vegetable garden. Padang Group has developed specific *ta’awun* and *infaq*.

Kasih Group

Kasih Group developed its own *ta’awun* and *infaq* approaches in project management and funding with knowledge, abilities, socialization, innovation, and habit.

There are a lot of vacant spaces in the neighborhood. More groups are created. The immediate area to the Padang Group is also empty. A group of people from another lane of the neighborhood formed Kasih Group to have their vegetables and edible garden. Unlike Padang and Tebing Groups, Kasih Group planted edible trees like lime, coconut, *rambutan*, and mangosteen trees. Some parts of the place are grown with vegetables. Since a member of Kasih Group is a former plantation manager, the group used a plantation financial management method. Instead of collecting monthly contributions, Kasih Group used a profit-sharing method. Kasih Group offered investment packages to the neighborhood in the vegetable garden projects. The investors will receive return on investment. An investor of Kasih Group said: *“I love vegetable gardens. But I do not want to do it like other groups. I just invested some money and the group will manage the garden. We have been operating the project for two years now and have received some dividends. We purchased fresh vegetables from Kasih Group.”*

The group leader said: *“We have obtained permission from the local authorities. This is part of neighborhood activities with some grants. We have secured permission from the local authorities and neighborhood for the community vegetable garden.”*

Kasih Group uses functional structure in managing the community vegetable garden. Both project management and funding are included as part of functional areas of the group. The experience is until 2019 due to continuous lockdown orders from 18 March 2020 until now.

Kasih Group developed its own *ta’awun* and *infaq* approaches in project.

Rizab Group

Rizab Group uses project control and monitoring mechanisms in the project management and funding of its vegetable garden. The *ta'awun* and *infaq* experience laid in the entrepreneurship training provided by one of the participants who is a certified trainer.

Rizab Group uses empty spaces along kerbs in front of their houses to plant vegetables. The group does not relocate the trees planted by local authorities. In fact, the group cuts the grass in the area. It does not plant the ground with vegetables and edible plants. The group places flower pots and polybags among the trees. The group leader said: *"We have obtained permission to put flower pots in the spaces between the trees. Since the kerbs are not located along the main road, the local authority has no objection to our project."*

Rizab Group uses project control and monitoring mechanisms in the project management and funding of its vegetable garden. The *ta'awun* and *infaq* experience laid in the entrepreneurship training provided by one of the participants who is a certified trainer.

Pinggiran Group

Pinggiran Group has access to some empty spaces that act as a buffer to border the housing areas with river bank and private landfill. Pinggiran Group utilized the empty spaces near the neighborhood as a community vegetable garden project. Pinggiran Group follows a structured *ta'awun* and *infaq* approach in project management and funding.

Pinggiran Group has access to some empty spaces that act as a buffer to border the housing areas with river bank and private landfill. The river bank acts as a reserve for the river. During heavy rain, the river bank acts as a buffer from floods. However, an increase of the water level may cause floods in the area. There is the risk if the area is planted with vegetables or edible plants. Leader of the Pinggiran Group said: *"We have obtained verbal permission from the drainage caretaker who frequently cuts the grass at the river bank. With this understanding, the caretaker allows us to easily grow plants like tapioca or sweet potato. In case of flood, the plant would remain intact. The caretaker would not cut our tapioca and sweet potato plant. In fact, our group also organized gotong-royong with the drainage staff as part of river cleaning activities. We collected rubbish that was stuck at the river bank."*

Pinggiran Group utilized the empty spaces near the neighborhood as a community vegetable garden project. The leader said: *"To start off our socialization, we organized a barbeque party with our immediate neighbors. We called our activity an 'open table.' Sometimes we*

organized impromptu 'open table' meets without barbeque, only with some fruits like rambutan that we brought from our home town. This is the story before PKP [Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan or Control Movement Order in relation to Covid-19 pandemic] that commenced on 18 March 2020. Until today, we don't have any more socialization. Even the vegetable garden is abandoned. We have checked with the local authority that confirmed the community vegetable garden falls under social activity, thus should be suspended. However, each of us resumes planting vegetables in flower pots and polybags. We cannot socialize with our flower pot gardens because this is part of the negative sector in the full lockdown of PKP. We are not sure when we could resume our community vegetable garden. In fact, the drainage staff has sealed the area."

Pinggiran Group follows a structured *ta'awun* and *infaq* approach in project management and funding. The focal point of *ta'awun* and *infaq* is the group leader institution.

Implications for Research/Policy

The immediate implications for research is on the mode of social and community development with *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* that are spiritual driven with strong conviction, commitment, and passion from the community members.

In terms practice, the use of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* (perpetual charitable funding) in the community development should be customized based on the preferences of the community. For example, Padang Group and Tebing Group use objective-based *ta'awun* and *infaq* (perpetual charitable funding) for project management and project funding of community agriculture project. This *ta'awun* and *infaq* (charitable funding) approach enables preservation and protection of members and the project. As for Kasih Group, it has developed its benevolence *ta'awun* and *infaq* (charitable funding) approach in project management and funding with knowledge, abilities, socialization, innovation, and habit for literacy in project. Rizab Group uses project control and monitoring mechanisms in project management and Pinggiran Group follows an objective and structured *ta'awun* approach for financial literacy in project management.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to explore the influence of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) among community members in making the *infaq* (perpetual charitable contribution) for the management and funding of community agriculture gardens. *Ta'awun* in the funding with

infaq motivation allows members of a community to share a sense of responsibility and accountability for the community. The influence of *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) and *infaq* (charitable funding) in this study is driven by the preferences and structure of the groups. Most of the groups are driven by structured-based *ta'awun* and *infaq* (charitable funding). *Ta'awun* and *infaq* (charitable funding) with structure operate on a gradual development basis. Nevertheless, the uniqueness-based *ta'awun* and *infaq* (charitable funding) could be incorporated into both gradual and intensive basis in sustaining community vegetable gardens through financial literacy for project management and funding.

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