eKasih System as a Medium to Implement the Malaysia's Policy of Poverty Eradication

Puteh Soraya A Rahman
Department of Public Administration Faculty of Business and Economics University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur

Puteh Noraihan A Rahman[1]
School of Liberal Studies (Pusat Pengajian CITRA Universiti) National University of Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor

Abstract
This paper is an empirical study on the use of the eKasih System (eKasih) as a medium to implement the country's policy of poverty eradication. The study was conducted by interviewing government officials who were using eKasih data to plan, implement and monitor poverty eradication programs at the central, state and district levels. The study found that eKasih was very helpful to the officials at all administration levels instead of its usage. eKasih helped the central agency plan, monitor, and evaluate the program but did not assist in the program implementation. Meanwhile, the state and district officials mentioned that eKasih helped them plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the programs, but they faced constraints in various ways, making eKasih-based programs implementation not comprehensive and not optimal. eKasih helped them plan programs based on the followings: identifying target groups, distributing allocations to state and district levels and drafting programs based on the target groups' needs analyses. eKasih helped them distribute assistance directly to the target groups, check the status of prior aid distribution and avoid redundancies. eKasih also helped them monitor and evaluate with its real-time reporting capabilities. It also helped with inputs and data to answer questions in the Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly and prepare for national and international reports. The validation and utilization of the eKasih data should be streamlined to ensure data sustainability and avoid duplication of assistance.
Keywords: Ekasih, Poverty Eradication, Poverty Database, Poverty Program, Real-Time Database

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[1] Corresponding author: Puteh Noraihan A Rahman (ann@ukm.edu.my); Puteh Soraya A Rahman (putehsoraya@gmail.com)

Introduction

Service delivery serves as the initial phase for the implementation of the policy of the government. According to Walter Williams in his book, *The Implementation Perspective: A Guide for Managing Social Service Delivery Programs* (1980), "the implementation shifts away from the glamour of making decisions toward the details of putting them into the field." An obscured, and disorderly service delivery system may prevent any program, project and assistance from being effectively conducted for the people. Most government service delivery systems worldwide have shifted to electronic media, so service delivery is more effective and efficient. However, in the context of service delivery involving human services, continuous involvement of service providers and policymakers in delivering services at the grassroots level is very crucial to ensure that all programs, projects and assistance envisaged by the government through a policy can be rendered well and entirely to the target group (Williams, 1980). Consequently, service providers and delivery systems require specific features and criteria to ensure effective and efficient service delivery.

The mass media, such as print, electronic and social media frequently cite the poor and unfortunate people, who are often considered inadequate, undereducated and misinformed, have no fixed monthly salary, are disempowered from society and marginalized from any kind of assistance that should be obtained from the government (Hairunnizam et al., 2004). This controversy refers to not only the implementation of the programs and the management and distribution of the finance and resources, but also the systems applied by the government for service delivery, such as registration, screening, and recommendation of target groups who are eligible for aid from the government before the aid is given to them (Eardley et al., 1996; Bakar & Abdghani, 2011). Besides, the masses also argue about the management of the assistance at the lower levels, which is often linked with the lack of transparency in the selection of target groups, injustice in the distribution of allocations, and the shortcomings in the service delivery program to the target groups (Eardley et al., 1996; Buang & Said, 2014). The situation is further aggravated by the service delivery that does not fulfil the needs of the target group and the assistance that are irrelevant (Aisyah et al., 2015).

The History of eKasih

eKasih was created in 2008 by the government under the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU JPM) pursuant to the Cabinet's decision on 31 October 2007 and the Meeting of Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers on 1 November 2007. The first phase of eKasih merged the data from the People's Welfare Development Scheme (SPKR) under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW) and the data from the Urban Poverty Information System (UPIS) under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT). Both the SPKR and UPIS databases contained a list of poor people based on the rural and urban strata at the time. eKasih was created to keep track of the efforts being made by the government to eradicate extreme poverty by the year 2010, the rate of which at that time was 0.7% compared to the national poverty rate of 3.6%. The systems tracked by eKasih included the aid distribution and the income increment for the poor families registered. The creation of eKasih was also merged with the Poverty Eradication Focus Group Meeting at the central, state and district levels. The Poverty Eradication Focus Group Meeting was created as a forum to serve as a platform that keeps track and monitor of several issues, namely the planning of poverty eradication programs, the implementation of poverty eradication programs and the achievement of the aim to eradicate extreme poverty by 2010 (ICU JPM, 2012).

The Development of eKasih

ICU JPM created eKasih by using its internal expertise, manifested by its information technology and policymaking officers who had extensive experience developing poverty eradication systems and programs. A special team from two divisions in the ICU JPM, namely the National Data Bank & Innovation Centre (NADI), which was responsible for the technical development of the system and the People's Wellbeing Division (BSR) which was responsible for the policy, input and output of eKasih data usage, was formed to create eKasih. These two divisions cooperated to gather the needs for the system development that was able to meet the requirements of the stakeholders in terms of the records of the poor family profile, the monitoring of cases, the records of the distribution of assistance and the generation of poverty reports based on states, districts, parliamentary constituencies and state assemblies (ICU JPM, 2012). The development and application of eKasih were conducted in stages, and improvements were being made from time to time.

The Process of Data Entry for eKasih

The profiles of the Malaysian households living in poverty and extreme poverty registered in eKasih were required to undergo several screening stages to ensure the sustainability of the data of eKasih. Complaints about poverty incidents obtained at the district level were screened in the Focus Group Meeting on Poverty Eradication at the district level to be listed for visit and census. The census was conducted by trained enumerators using the Poverty Household Census (BIRM) form. Complete profiles of Heads of Household (KIR) and Household Members (AIR), including data related to income, academic status, diseases, living conditions as well as existing or adjacent essential infrastructure and facilities, were obtained and recorded in the eKasih system to process the data to categorize these households as living in either extreme poor or poor. The updated profiles were used by the ministries and aid provider agencies to plan and implement relevant programs. The justification for the method use is to ensure that all households in Malaysia be included in this system.

Table 1
*The working process of eKasih*
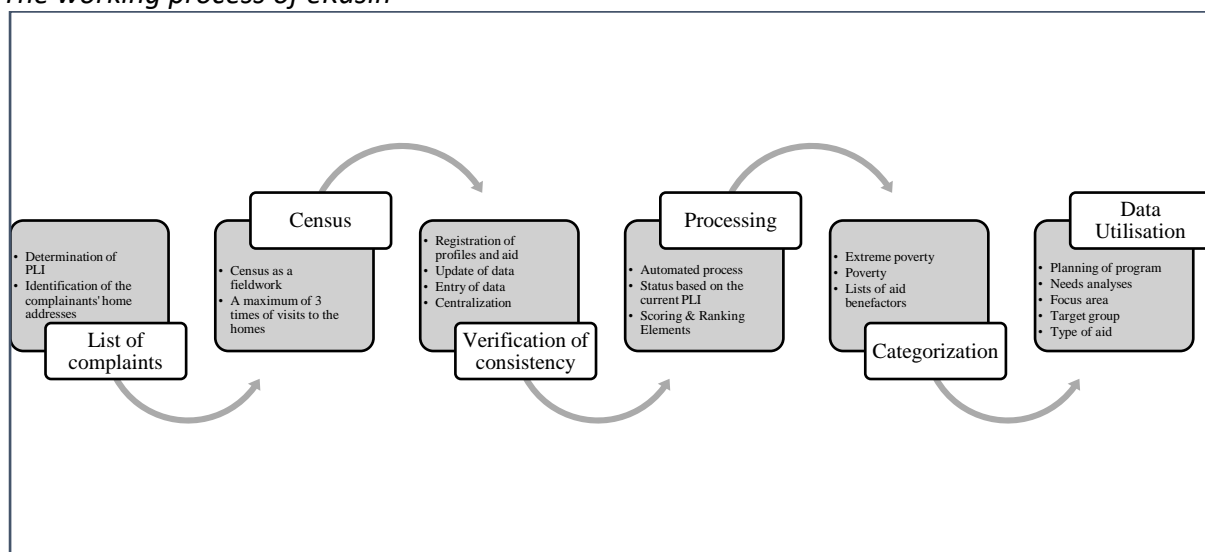
Source: Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU JPM), Paper presentation entitled "*Poverty Eradication Program in Malaysia; eKasih As Tool of Monitoring*" to the delegates of the

program named Malaysian Technical Cooperation-Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (MTCP-SLIDA) on 16 August 2016.

As of 31 December 2017, the eKasih system had collected a total of 603,326 profiles of KIR. Out of this, 200,766 KIRs were living in extreme poverty and poverty. Meanwhile, the rest were excluded from the categories. These profiles had already been rated and visited by enumerators and were verified at the district level. Besides, eKasih also had 6,775,011 profiles of the recipients of assistance, including the recipients of Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) and the welfare assistance recipients who were registered with the Social Welfare Department (JKM). These recipients were listed individually and included in eKasih using data transfer via the BR1M system and the eBantuan system. These profiles were screened based on the unique number of the identity card to ensure no duplication of profiles occurred in eKasih. As on 31 December 2017, a total of 4,902,963 profiles out of 6,775,011 profiles in the List of Beneficiaries (SPB) in eKasih were above the Poverty Line Income (PLI) level, while 1,872,048 profiles were below the PLI level. Consequently, 1,872,048 profiles needed to be censused and verified before categorised as living in extreme poverty or poverty. The census and verification of the profiles and data were necessary to ensure their qualification to be categorised as extremely poor or poor and listed as the recipients of poverty eradication assistance program.

Table 2
Data for eKasih until 31 December 2017
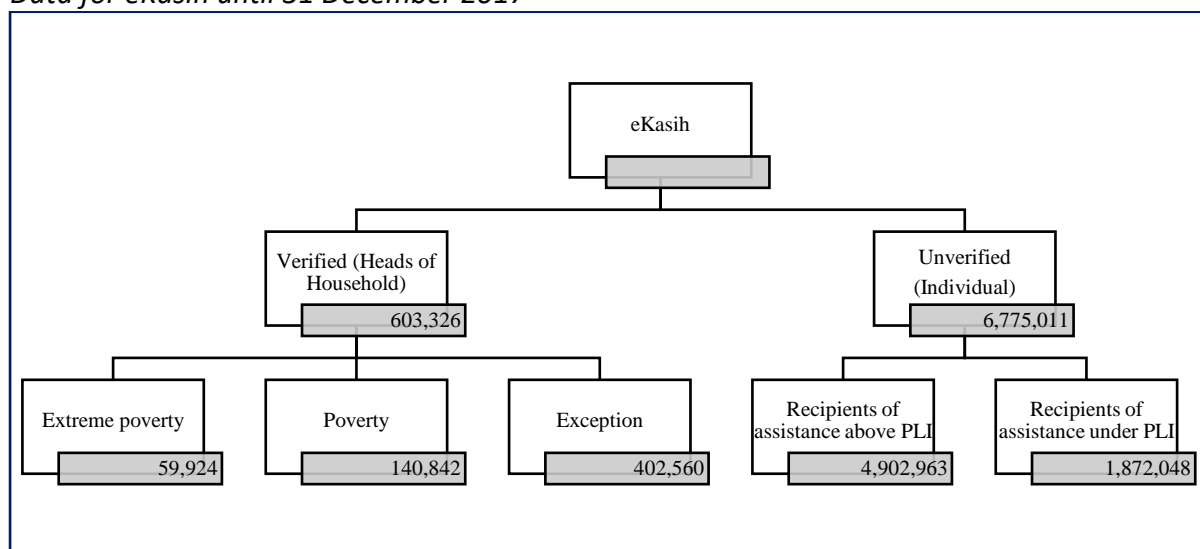
The Paradigm Shift of eKasih

At the beginning of the application of eKasih, user agencies often faced problems in terms of the system speed. This included the time taken to download information and profiles of poor families, upload profiles collected through census, access the system, understand the system application, select the program's participants based on locality and actual needs, and ensure the data validity in eKasih. However, these problems were addressed by the ICU JPM by doing the following: improving and upgrading the system, conducting eKasih understanding workshops, organizing poverty eradication workcamp to discuss solutions to the implementing agency's problems, holding flying squad sessions at states and districts levels to monitor the activities of data processing and organizing strategic collaborations with other central agencies to obtain allocations and inputs to improve the system.

The transparency in the development of eKasih has made it a government system that has been capable of receiving various recognitions at the international level, such as the United Nation Public Service Award (UNPSA) under the category of Advancing Knowledge Management in Government in 2012; and the Asia-Pacific Information and Communications Technology Alliance (APICTA) Award organized by Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia in 2010. eKasih is also now used as a model government system capable of monitoring the transition of living standards and poverty level of a family. eKasih was acknowledged as a unique module to be presented to international delegates coming to Malaysia at the Malaysian Technical Cooperation-African Asian Rural Development Organization (INFRA-AARDO) program, Malaysian Technical Cooperation-Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (MTCP-SLIDA) program, and Malaysian Technical Cooperation-Bangsamoro (MTCP-Bangsamoro) program as well as special visits organized by foreign countries.

The Level of Application of eKasih
A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with officers at the central, state and district levels to intensify the eKasih application level and the problems encountered in the poverty eradication policy implementation. All informants did not allow the exposure of their personal data and identification. However, informants P1, N1, D1 and D2 allowed an audio recording for data collection and researchers' reference, while other informants only allowed manual note-taking. Each interview session lasted from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. The informants were chosen based on the department responsible for planning, implementation and monitoring of government policies, especially for poverty eradication programs.

Table 3
*The breakdown of the informants of the study and the application of eKasih*

Level	Respondent	The Planning of the Programs	The Application of the Programs	Monitoring and Evaluation of the Programs
Federal	P1	✓	-	✓
	P2	✓	-	✓
State	N1	✓	✓	✓
	N2	✓	✓	✓
District	D1	✓	✓	✓
	D2	✓	✓	✓

The study found that eKasih was very helpful at all administrative strata as it helped the officers at the central level to plan, monitor and evaluate programs. However, it was not as useful in terms of the program implementation, which was done extensively at the state and district levels. The state and district levels officials mentioned the significance of eKasih for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, as they had to face various aspects of constraints, the program implementation was not done comprehensively or optimally. eKasih was useful for identifying target groups, distributing allocations at the state and district levels and constructing programs based on the target groups' needs analyses. eKasih was beneficial for implementing the program in terms of channelling the distribution of aid directly to the target group and verifying the status of previous aid distribution to avoid redundancies. Also, eKasih was useful for monitoring and evaluation and

could generate real-time reports and provide input and data that helped prepare answers to questions in the Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly.

Table 4
The application of eKasih according to administrative levels
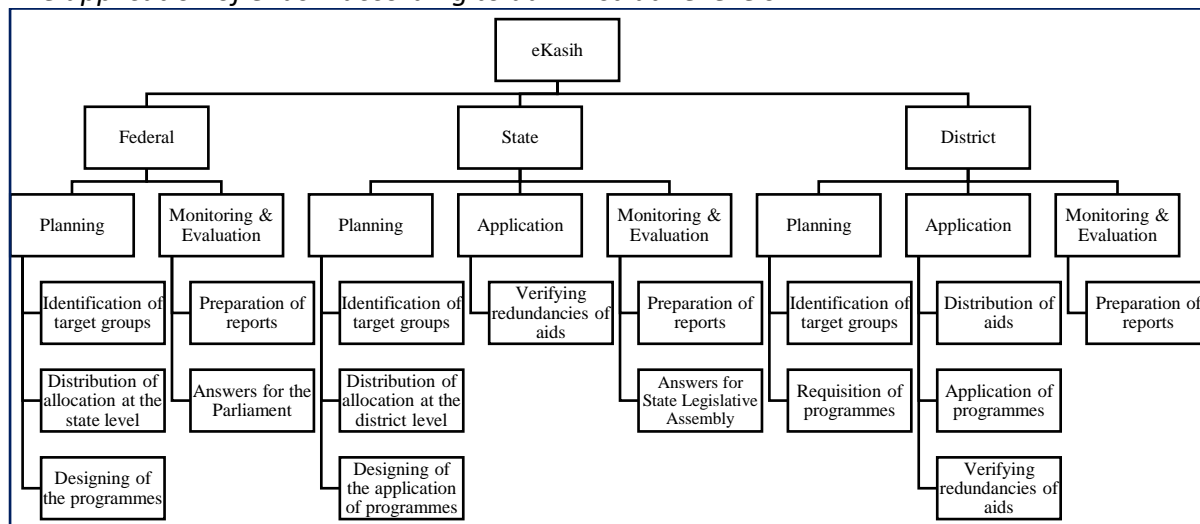
Nevertheless, some problems occurred during the planning stage when the allocation being distributed could not meet the requisitions received because of the financial allocation constraints due to inadequate planning by the central administration, which did not satisfy the target groups' needs. The officials at the state level had to tackle implementation issues when the government allocation through district agencies did not fulfil poor families' requirements. For example, most poor people mostly needed help to build new homes instead of income generation, such as agriculture and livestock. However, because of limited allocations and high demands, requisitions to construct new houses cannot be fulfilled by the implementing agencies at the district level. Monitoring on the distribution of aid revealed an increase in the number of people who had not received assistance because the census and the new data entry process were continuously implemented. The implementation conflict between top-down and bottom-up policies is evident when the policy implementers at the district level do not get the allocation as requested even though the state and central government have been informed about the program planning needs. This is a crucial factor to highlight as Malaysia has implemented a holistic approach in poverty eradication policy to eradicate poverty in Malaysia, such as income increment programs, productivity improvement programs, cost reduction programs and living standards programs. The continuity of all these programs would make Malaysia a country free of hardcore poverty

Table 5
The approach of poverty eradication program in Malaysia
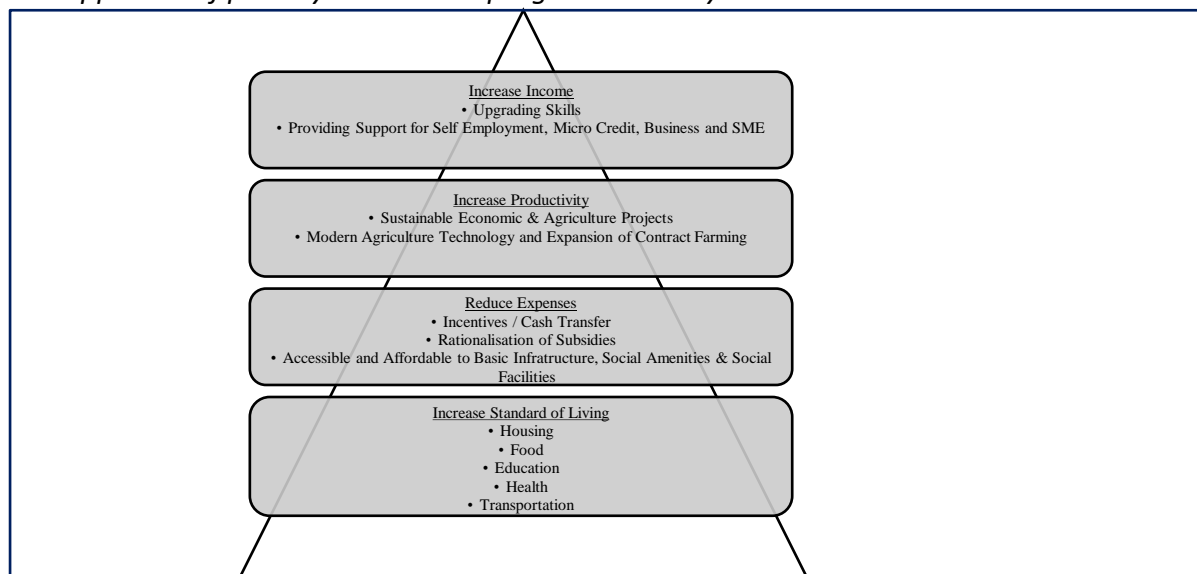
Source: Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU JPM), Presentation paper entitled "*Poverty Eradication Program in Malaysia; eKasih As Tool of Monitoring*" to the delegates of Malaysian Technical Cooperation-Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (MTCP-SLIDA) program on 16 August 2016.

Findings of the Study
Based on the interviews conducted with the implementing officers of the poverty eradication program in two districts, it was found that eKasih was helpful in sourcing information about poor families. However, it was less useful for the actual implementation of the programs. This is because the planning could not be implemented when the financial allocation channelled for the programs did not fulfil the needs and requirements of the applicants. This condition had frequently happened in most developing countries in the world. Nevertheless, the program planning and implementation should be more focused and people-centred with the accessibility of data from eKasih. The utilisation of the policy implementation theory from the bottom-up in the eKasih context must provide the government with more optimal results concerning the availability of data for program planning. Because of the insufficient allocation, the program implementation agencies at the district level could not channel the assistance required by poor families based on the need analyses carried out earlier.

Simultaneously, the agencies which provided aid at the district level did not receive clear instructions to fully utilise eKasih to channel the aid to poor families. They still distributed aid based on the applications sent to their offices by various parties, including individuals, local leaders and political leaders in the current year. The program implementation agencies which did not use eKasih data to implement their programs explained that they did not receive instructions from their respective headquarters to distribute assistance to the applicants registered with eKasih. Besides, they also did not have the guidelines for program implementation which authorised them to choose beneficiaries from the listing of eKasih even if they were aware of eKasih as a national poverty database and could refer to the listing of eKasih to select beneficiaries.

Challenges are bureaucratic in nature, which require the determination of the source of power possessed by the policy implementers and program implementers. Every layer of the

bureaucrats had received and understood well that the use of eKasih was necessary as a high-quality database to list poor families in Malaysia. Nevertheless, eKasih had not yet been fully utilized optimally as a tool or medium for the implementation of poverty eradication programs. Another reason given was the absence of verbal or written instructions from the headquarters obliging the beneficiaries to be selected from the eKasih listing.

Originally, eKasih was developed to serve as a medium to help the government to monitor the elimination process of extreme poverty by the year 2010. Later, it was established as a tool of planning, coordination, implementation, and monitoring of the country's poverty eradication program entirely while the usage of eKasih was set as a condition to be fulfilled before the distribution of assistance for the domestic poverty eradication. The use of eKasih was then extended to the district level, making it necessary for the government to improve broadband facilities to expedite the data entry and data updating processes. Besides, the dissemination of information and awareness of eKasih should be carried out comprehensively so that the people are not marginalized from any type of poverty eradication assistance provided by the government.

Suggestions for New Directions of eKasih
Firstly, to improve the eKasih System as a national poverty database, the government needs to take active measures to ensure the integrity and sustainability of data and the use of eKasih data is at an optimal level. Thus, it is recommended that SPB profiles below the PLI level of 1,872,048 be censused and verified. This will ensure information is truthful and with integrity before any form of assistance is channelled to them. This action needs to be done because these profiles are likely to be in extreme poverty or poor who need the government's attention while ensuring no fraud is done to obtain assistance. The data verification process will definitely take a long time as a large amount of data, and the number of counters at the district level is limited. However, with the increase in the number of enumerators, this process can be done because the profiles below the PLI level already have essential information such as identity card number, address and even phone number to contact.

Secondly, eKasih should also be utilised comprehensively by all public and private agencies as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to channel any type of assistance to families living in poverty to avoid duplication of aid to the same poor families which might cause restrictions in the distribution of aid to other poor families.

Thirdly, the planning of poverty eradication programs which were not properly coordinated would create fragments of programs implemented by various agencies to meet similar objectives on the same target group. Therefore, eKasih should be utilised as the main referential centre for all ministries before any type of poverty-related programs is designed, planned and implemented.

Fourthly, any type of assistance provided by any government and private agencies or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to any poor family must be updated and included in eKasih. This will enable the government and any other aid agencies to monitor the assistance received by these poor families so that it is not redundant.

Conclusion
As eKasih is improved and maintained, it will definitely be a high-quality poverty eradication system. Thus, the government will be able to continue to benefit from the transparency of this system.

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