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## **CONCEPTS, PRACTICES AND LEGAL AWARENESS OF ETHICS AND INTEGRITY AMONGST KG. SEBERANG TAKIR'S COASTAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS, KUALA NERUS, MALAYSIA: THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER.**

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# CONCEPTS, PRACTICES AND LEGAL AWARENESS OF ETHICS AND INTEGRITY AMONGST KG. SEBERANG TAKIR'S COASTAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS, KUALA NERUS, MALAYSIA: THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER.

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## ABSTRACT

Ethics and integrity are important to community development because they influence the success of numerous forms of public and private development assistance programs. However, there is inadequate research on ethics and integrity in the context of coastal community development in Malaysia. Hence, this preliminary research's main objective is to get an initial picture of the state of understanding of the concepts, practices and legal awareness on ethics and integrity amongst Seberang Takir's coastal community members; where downward mobility is prevalent among inshore fishermen, labourers and small traders. Intense urbanization and drastic increases in tourism and commercial activities means that the success of community development programs depends on the recipients' ability not only to uphold ethics and integrity in their daily lives, but also to monitor actions and decisions of other stakeholders as well. This preliminary study uses convenience sampling comprising 23 participants who are government officials, university students and committee members of a mosque at Seberang Takir in the Kuala Nerus district. A Google Form questionnaire comprising seven questions specifically on ethics and integrity, and seven questions on law reveals notable findings, showing that: (i) professing to ethics and integrity does not prevent respondents from ethical misconducts; (ii) 41.1% of respondents are ambivalent, in agreement and strongly in agreement of unqualified people getting various types of government assistance; (iii) 52.2% agree and strongly agree that leaders of organizations/

community groups should compromise ethics and integrity if doing so means that the quality of life of their members/subordinates can be improved; and (iv) there is a clear splitting of views amongst respondents on transgressing against ethics and integrity even if no law is broken. This explains why despite the high level of trust that they have in the law, more than 90% agree and strongly agree that the law in Malaysia is still not effective and must be amended. Hence, it is imperative that participants' levels of understanding on ethics, integrity and law be increased through knowledge transfer so that the concerns identified above can be rectified.

Keywords: Knowledge transfer, ethics, integrity, law, coastal community

## Introduction

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia's development efforts have reduced widespread poverty and transformed a rural and traditional society into a prosperous capitalist and multi-racial one of the 21st century (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018). However, uneven regional development as well as inequality of wealth and income distribution between the different racial groups remain (Abdul Khalid & Li Yang, 2019). The prevalence of these issues can be seen in the areas

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along the country's 4,800 km coastline; of which 244 km are in the state of Terengganu. It is one of the country's most ethnically homogeneous states (about 94% of the population is Malay), and is the fifth poorest with a 12% incidence of absolute poverty (Department of Statistics, 2022). Its main economic activities are agriculture, services, marine fisheries, and manufacturing (chemical and petroleum-related products) (Department of Statistics, 2022). It is imperative to note that coastal communities in Terengganu have undergone a social transformation over the past few decades. This situation has led to the formation of new social clusters as a result of structural and social mobility changes that have transpired; whereby distinct "upper", "middle" and "low" classes can now be observed. While those in the administrative and entrepreneurial sectors are able to move upward socially, continuous downward mobility is prevalent among inshore fishermen, followed by labourers and small traders (Sa'at, 2011). Various poverty eradication programs have been implemented, such as Fishermen Development Area Program in the 1980s, Poverty Eradication Program for the Destitute (late 1980s to mid-1990s), Fisherwomen Groups Program or KUNITA (from 1983 onwards), numerous one-off and continuous financial assistance, various forms of subsidies, courses and training by the Malaysia Fisheries Development Board (LKIM) to upgrade skills, fishing equipment assistance, and fishing communities resettlement projects. However, the success of these measures in addressing poverty among the target groups above is questionable.

It is argued that the success of community development rests on the community's ability to address collective challenges, difficulties or hurdles by working together on the required actions and solutions (United Nations, 2022). For

community development to take place, principles of equality, human rights, embracing diversity and social justice must be upheld as these will facilitate self-determination, empowerment and collective action (Kenny, 2007). However, all of these can only be realized if key, primary, and secondary community development stakeholders (community members, government departments, lobby groups, donors, funding agencies, local businesses, cultural and gender groups, technological companies, professional services, legal and environmental related entities) appreciate the importance of ethics and integrity by translating them into action. This is because ethics and integrity are fundamental to prevent misconducts, inappropriate or unlawful actions as well as instilling and ensuring virtuousness, accountability, and exemplary moral character among all involved (Werbel & Balkin, 2010; Dobel, 2016).

The erosion of ethics and integrity in government and governance involving politicians, key government agencies, as well as other development stakeholders has been well documented through major scandals that have caught national and international attention (e.g., the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) resulting in RM42 billion debt, the Islamic Pilgrims Fund Board RM9 billion shortfall and the Sabah Water Department involving federal allocations worth RM3.8 billion for rural areas water projects, being some of the notable cases in point). However most research that have been undertaken focus on ethics and integrity of civil servants, government agencies as well as corporate and business entities (Hashim, 2019; Zainal, Md. Som & Mohamed, 2020; Kok & Mui, 2021). However, there is a dearth of information on issues of concepts, practices and legal awareness of ethics and integrity amongst the intended beneficiaries of development

programs. Hence this preliminary research's main objective is to get an initial picture of the state of understanding of concepts, practices and legal awareness on ethics and integrity amongst Seberang Takir's coastal community members. This is because it is believed that a pilot study and an actual study on the subject matter can only be implemented if more background information and types of data sources available, be better identified before specific research parameters are formulated. Therefore, a university-community knowledge transfer program has been used for this purpose.

### Literature Review

Ethics and integrity are fundamental moral philosophy concepts that are prevalent throughout human history because of their important functions to social relations (Schlenker, Miller & Johnson, 2009). First, ethics enables moral judgments to be made on the type and nature of action/behaviour (right/good and wrong/bad) that a rational person should make; so that individual and societal benefits (e.g., justice, equity, fairness, safety, wellbeing, happiness) can be attained (Lane, 2017). Ethical behaviour promotes accountability for individual and group's actions and decisions because of their moral implications; not only to the individual concerned, but also to the society at large. Werbel and Balkin (2010) state that ethical misconducts are actions that are inappropriate, incorrect and/or unlawful because of transgressions to organizational and society's policies, procedures, rules, regulations, or laws. However, research in behavioural ethics have shown that ethical misconducts occur because people do not always act or decide rationally by analysing the contexts and impacts of their actions or decisions. Instead, they are guided by intuition, internal biasness, pressures from peers, organizations and social groups as well as situational constraints (Mitchell, Reynolds & Trevino, 2020; Houdek, 2019).

Second, integrity refers to a state of being perfectly virtuous, free from blemishes, corruption, impairment, dishonesty, and possessing exemplary moral character and good judgment (Dobel, 2016). Integrity is manifested when a person displays "consistency between beliefs, decisions and actions, and continued adherence to values and principles" (Malan, 2007, p. 278). In the context of community development, stakeholders make decisions, take actions, and use valuable communal resources; sometimes resulting in abuse of power, bribery, conflict of interest, corruption and misappropriation. Hence integrity is considered a prerequisite for the development of a democratic society; whereby knowledge on integrity, the creation of role models, community-constructed rules and regulations, training activities and community feedbacks are essential elements for enhancing community integrity. Indeed, only through the integration of society's structural systems (family, educational, commercial and religious entities, government agencies), and a socialization process that is continuous and based on integrity values, can community integrity be strengthened (Bureekul, Subkhampang, Ponok & Sintupong, 2017). Without ethics and integrity, the leadership, effectiveness, standing and moral credibility of community development programs, public agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community leaders and other organizations/individuals involved in community development, will be compromised because of legal and professional issues that may ensue (Center for Community Health and Development, 2022). As a result, the enhancement of members' livelihoods, empowerment, knowledge, self-efficacy, skills and the wellbeing of the community as a whole, cannot be sustainably attained.

Third, it is imperative to note that the law of a country has several important

functions: (i) protecting the rights and liberties of individuals from criminal and other unlawful activities perpetrated by other individuals, entities, organizations and the machinery of government; (ii) providing a common framework of rules for conflict resolution and a means of seeking justice between aggrieved parties in society; (iii) providing enforceable rules, regulations and protections regarding employment, taxation, commerce, insurance, transport, and so forth; and (iv) maintaining social order by regulating the conduct of members of society (Mather, 2011). These functions are important because ethics have numerous sources (e.g., religion, culture, social conventions); all of which have different interpretations of what constitute “good/right” and “bad/wrong”, as well as what sanctions can be meted out in cases of transgression. The numerous sources of ethics mean numerous standards of expectations and sanctions are used when judging human conduct, unlike in the legal context where very specific standards are used. Moreover, not all actions and decisions based on the principles of ethics and integrity are legal and vice versa. As such conflicts between ethics, integrity and law arise because not all conduct deemed ethical and executed with integrity can be enforced by law without imposing unreasonable demands on people, and infringing their rights in the process (UNODC, n.d.).

Fourth, coastal communities depend primarily on marine and fisheries activities for their socioeconomic welfare; whereby their social vulnerability and resilience are influenced by the vagaries of environmental, commercial and seasonal conditions. In addition, previous researches have shown that different coastal communities’ economic strata groups, cultural norms and values, as well as levels of confidence, experience, knowledge and trust among their members, can affect their ability to

effectively participate in decision-making processes involving other stakeholders in community development programs (Phuk Tjilen, Ririhena, Jalal, Antonio, Teturan & Jeujan, 2018). Indeed, members of the community must have adequate understanding of the concepts, practices and legal awareness of ethics and integrity so as to ensure the accountability of key stakeholders for community development programs. Hence, knowledge transfer on ethics and integrity is an important means to address the limitations or inadequacy of understanding amongst community members. This is because knowledge generated through research conducted at higher education institutions can be used to assess, detect and improve community members’ understanding of the concepts, practices and legal awareness of ethics and integrity, resulting in facilitating the enhancement of the quality of life within the community. In the context of this study, knowledge transfer is a process where a body of knowledge (ideas, experiences, findings and new discoveries) moves from subject matter experts and academics at higher education institutions to recipients of that knowledge, namely students and coastal community members living in Kg Seberang Takir, Kuala Nerus. The goal of this exercise is to provide recipients with the knowledge on ethics, integrity and law that can be effectively implemented in their daily lives. This will also enable them not only to make wiser actions and decisions, but also have better scrutinizing and monitoring capability of other stakeholders, as well as community development programs implemented for enhancing their welfare.

Fifth, Kuala Nerus is one of eight districts in the state of Terengganu, with a population of 153,700 people scattered over an area of 40,815.69 hectares. The main economic activities of the people are agriculture (paddy, rubber, palm oil, fruits

and vegetables), fishing (515 fishermen in zones A, B and C), aquaculture, livestock (buffaloes, cattle, goat, sheep, chicken and duck), services, manufacturing and construction (UPEN Terengganu, 2020). Kuala Nerus is being developed as a prestigious, progressive and exciting administrative city that is modern and green (Rancangan Kawasan Khas Terengganu, 2014). Kg. Seberang Takir itself is one of the many villages in Kuala Nerus. Known for its cultural heritage, it is located along the Terengganu estuary, where the primary economic activities are fishing (55%), arts and craft (25%), shuttle boat services ferrying passengers from Seberang Takir jetty to Kedai Pasar Payang (5%), and other activities (e.g., roadside vendors, laborers) (Mohd Rozadi, Baharuddin & Ibrahim, 2021). Its rate of urbanization and development is more intensive compared to other villages, in line with the objectives stated for the Kuala Nerus district in the 2014 Rancangan Kawasan Khas Terengganu; whereby numerous development programs involving tourism (seafood centre, floating market, rural homestay, fishermen wharf, resorts and recreation activities), place of worship (a new mosque) and housing (new housing estates) are being realized. In August 2014, the Kuala Terengganu Drawbridge was constructed, linking Tanjung in the south of the estuary with Kg. Seberang Takir in the north of the estuary of the Terengganu River. The immediate impact of this development is the decline in the use of shuttle boats as a means of transportation across the river (Mohd Rozadi, Baharuddin & Ibrahim, 2021). More positive and negative impacts of this development will be evident in the future. For the time being, the coastal fishing community of Kg. Seberang Takir is rapidly changing because of intense urbanization and drastic increases in tourism and commercial/entrepreneurial activities that have continued to take place until the present day (Abu Kaslan & Jusoh, 2020).

## Methodology

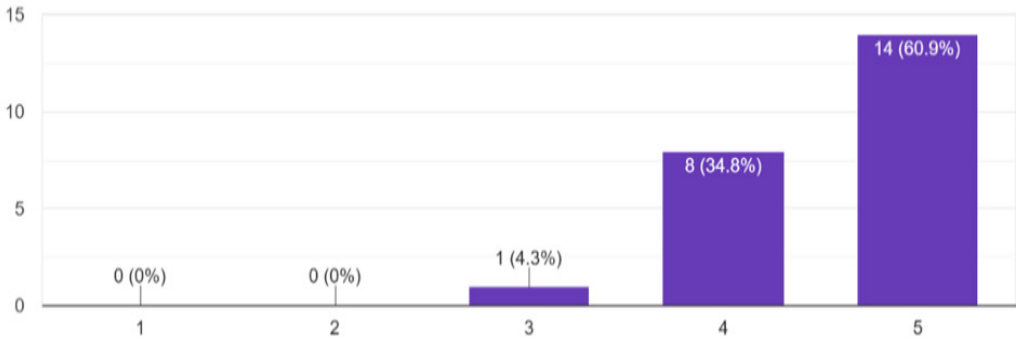
This preliminary study comprises 23 participants who have been chosen using convenience sampling. They are government officials, university students and committee members of a mosque at Seberang Takir in the Kuala Nerus district. The participants were invited to attend a three-hour knowledge transfer session on "Ethics and Integrity" delivered by subject matter experts from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Universiti Utara Malaysia and an officer from the Terengganu State Department of Environment. A question-and-answer session was conducted at the end of the talk to answer queries, clarify concepts and provide additional examples to ensure that important points are effectively communicated. The participants were then asked to fill out a Google Form questionnaire comprising seven questions specifically on ethics and integrity, and seven questions on law using a 5-point Likert scale [(1) strongly disagree; (2) disagree; (3) neither agree nor disagree; (4) agree; (5) strongly agree]. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents are asked to rate their level of understanding of ethics and integrity before and after attending the knowledge transfer session. Findings presented below are used to gauge their understanding of the concepts, practices and legal awareness of ethics and integrity.

## Results and Discussion

The respondents are 65.2% female and 34.8% male. Their age ranges from 51-60 (43.5%), 21-30 (39.1%), 41- 50 (8.7%) and 61 and above (8.7%). The majority are students (34.8%), followed by civil servants (26.1%), unemployed (21.7%), retirees (13%) and self-employed (4.4%).

Chart 1: I understand what “ethics” means

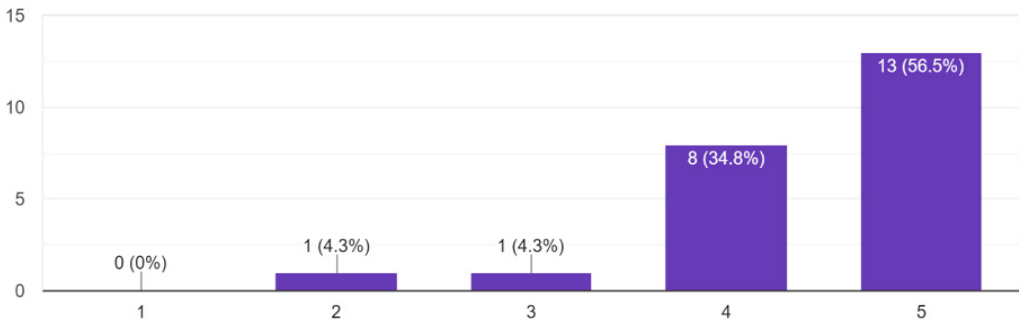
23 responses



Majority of the respondents (22 respondents or 95.7%) have a good understanding of what ethics entails; the exception being 1 respondent (4.3%) who is still ambivalent about this.

Chart 2: I understand what “integrity” means

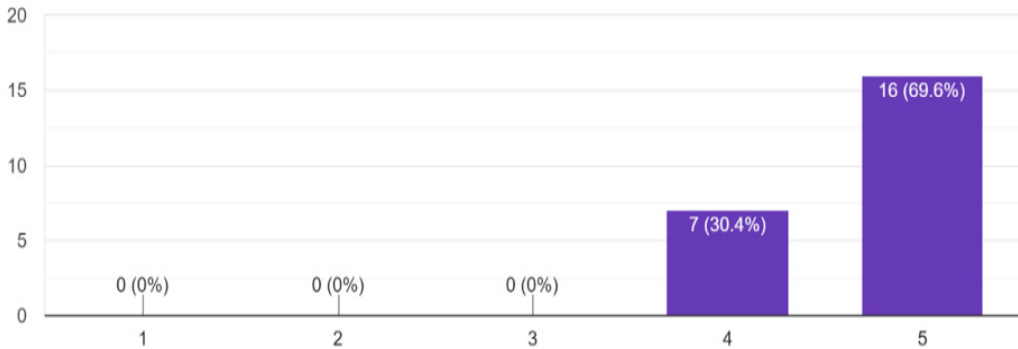
23 responses



Majority of the respondents (21 respondents or 91.3%) have a good understanding of what integrity entails; the exception being 1 respondent (4.3%) who is unsure and 1 respondent (4.3%) who has very little understanding of the concept.

Chart 3: I practice honesty, accountability and fairness when making decisions

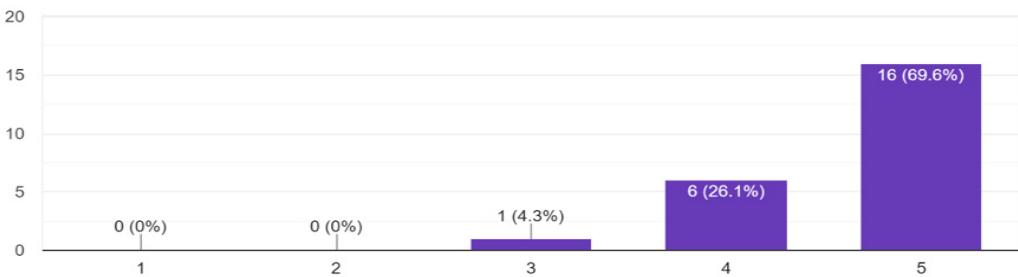
23 responses



All of the respondents strongly agree or agree that they practice honesty, accountability and fairness when making decisions in their daily lives.

Chart 4: All of my actions are guided by the teachings of Islam on doing what is good and refraining from doing what is bad

23 responses

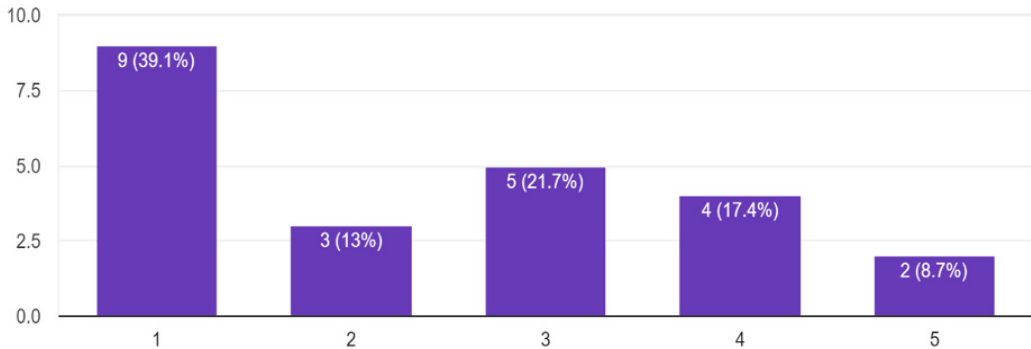


22 (95.7%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree that their actions are guided by the teachings of Islam on doing what is good and refraining from doing what is bad. Only 1 respondent (4.3%) is ambivalent about this.



Chart 5: In today's society, sometimes one must cheat or circumvent rules in order to succeed

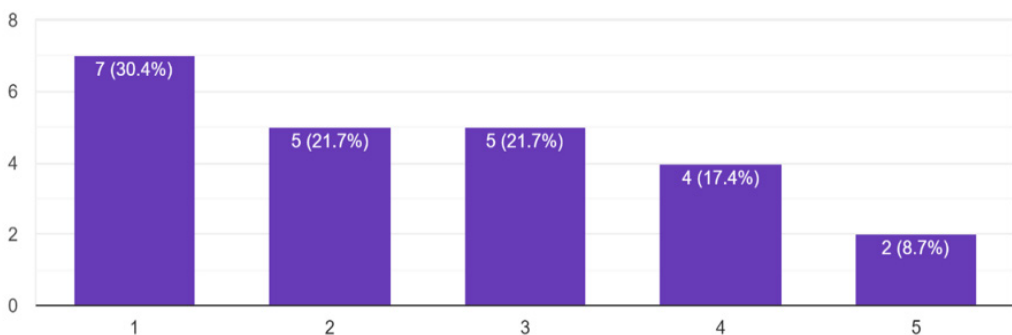
23 responses



While 12 respondents (52.1%) strongly disagree or disagree with this statement, 5 (21.7%) respondents are ambivalent, while 6 (26.1%) respondents are willing to compromise ethics and integrity if deemed necessary. This finding reflects the concerns expressed by behavioural ethics whereby ethical misconducts occur because people do not always act ethically or with integrity despite professing to do so. Indeed, success can be a powerful motivation for compromising one's ethics and integrity as shown above. The percentage of those who are ambivalent is also a cause for concern as they can be swayed either way.

Chart 6: It is not wrong for people to get government assistance (e.g., living allowance assistance, petrol subsidy, assistance for children's education, et cetera), even if they are not qualified, as the money for these programs belongs to the people

23 responses

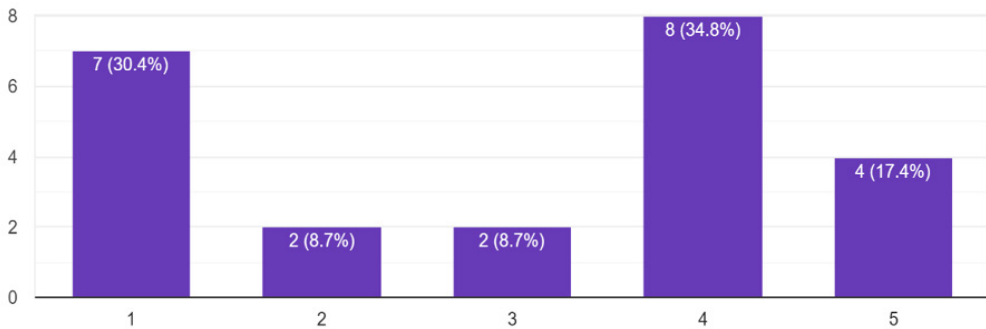


It is important to note that whilst the number (12 respondents) and percentage (52.1%) of those strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the above statement are the same as the finding in Chart 5, one notices that the number of those strongly disagreeing is only 7 respondents (30.4%) and those disagreeing are 5 respondents (21.7%); which is the same as those who are ambivalent (5 respondents or 21.7%). 6 (26.1%)

respondents are in agreement or strongly in agreement of unqualified people getting various types of government assistance despite this being an inappropriate action from both ethics and integrity perspectives. This is a cause for concern as this can lead to only some of the allocated funds reaching the targeted recipients, and some of the intended beneficiaries are denied of the assistance that they deserve.

Chart 7: Sometimes organizations and/or community leaders must “embellish” the skills, qualifications and potentials of their subordinates/members in order to enhance their quality of life (e.g., so as to get scholarship, employment, housing, et cetera)

23 responses

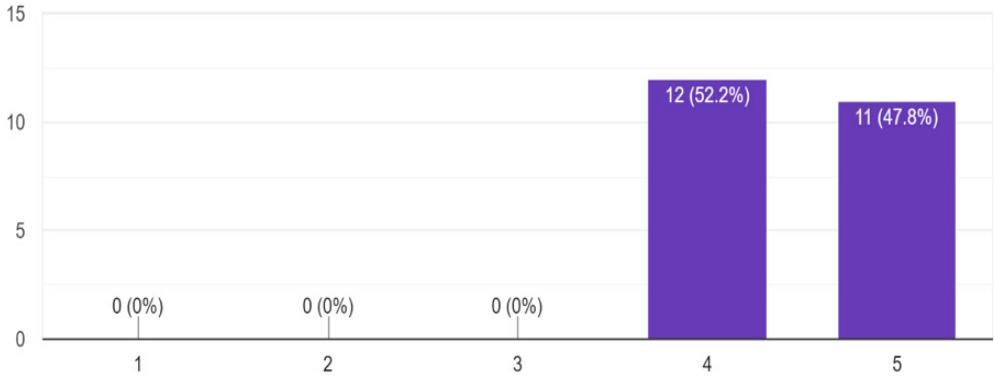


This finding shows that 12 respondents (52.2%) agree or strongly agree that leaders of organizations/community groups should compromise ethics and integrity if doing so means that the quality of life of their members/subordinates can be improved. Indeed only 9 respondents (39.1%) strongly disagree or disagree with this statement. Even if those who are ambivalent (2 respondents or 8.7%) can be swayed to change their stances to “strongly disagree or disagree”, the total

percentage of those choosing ethics and integrity as fundamental requirements of their leaders’ actions and decisions are only 47.8%. This is a cause for concern as it indicates that a majority of the respondents accept and expect actions that are unethical and/or without integrity by their leaders when it comes to getting assistance that are considered beneficial to the enhancement of their quality of life.

Chart 8: I understand what is meant by law

23 responses



All 23 respondents (100%) agree or strongly agree that they know the differences between ethics, integrity and law.

Chart 9: I know the differences between ethics, integrity and law

23 responses

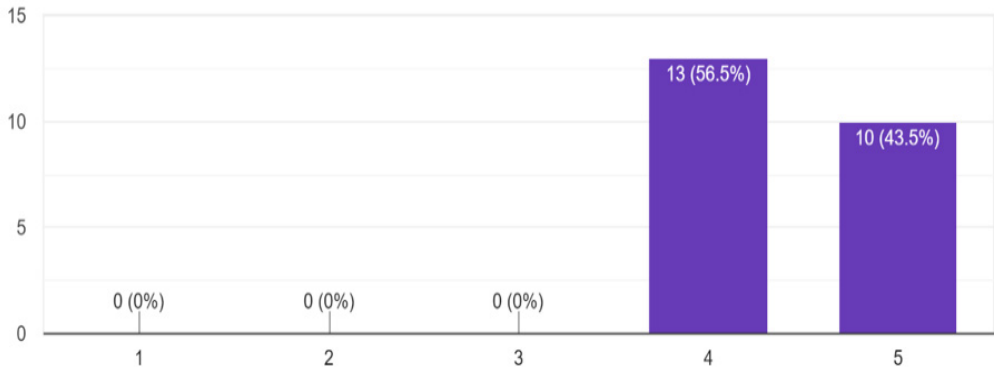
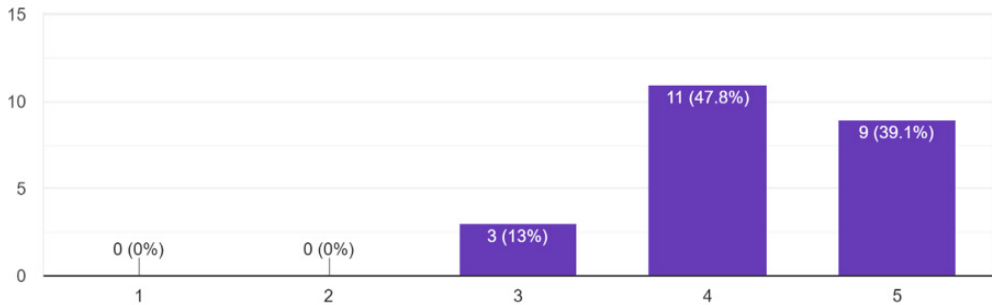


Chart 10: The law guarantees that everyone will be given similar treatment if they commit the same offence regardless of their positions or social status

23 responses



While a majority of the respondents (20 respondents or 87%) agree or strongly agree that everyone will be given similar treatment if they commit the same offence regardless of their positions or social status by the law, 3 respondents (13%) are ambivalent about this. This finding indicates that not everyone is convinced of the impartiality of the law.

Chart 11: It is not wrong to transgress against ethics and integrity as long as no law is broken

23 responses

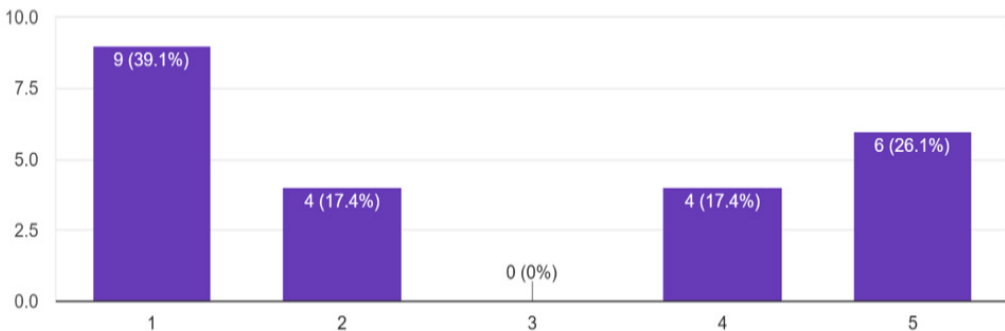
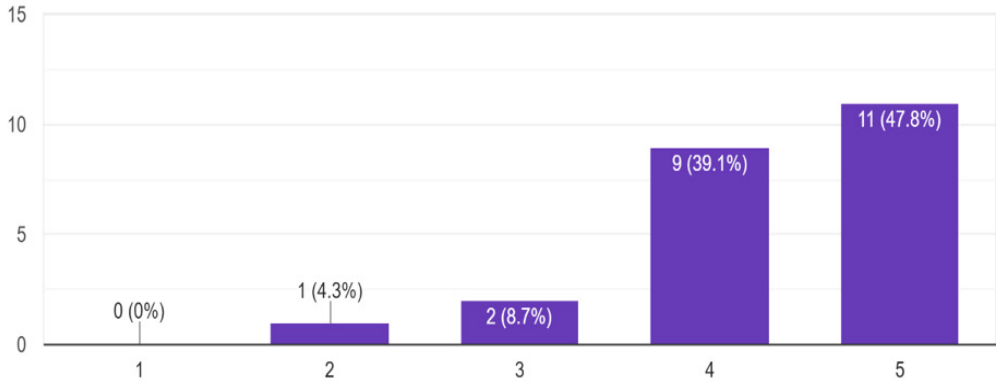


Chart 11 shows that 13 (56.5%) respondents disagree or strongly disagree with transgressing ethics and integrity, even if no law is broken. However it is interesting to note that 10 (43.5%) respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement, and no respondent is ambivalent about this. This finding shows a clear split in views between the respondents on this issue.

Chart 12: The law guarantees that no citizen will be oppressed

23 responses



While the majority of the respondents (20 respondents people or 90%) agree or strongly agree that the law guarantees that citizens will not be oppressed, 2 respondents (8.7%) are ambivalent about this, while 1 respondent (4.3%) disagrees with the statement. This finding shows the scepticism among a few respondents over the law’s ability to protect them from oppression.

Chart 13: The law guarantees that citizens’ rights and interests will be protected

23 responses

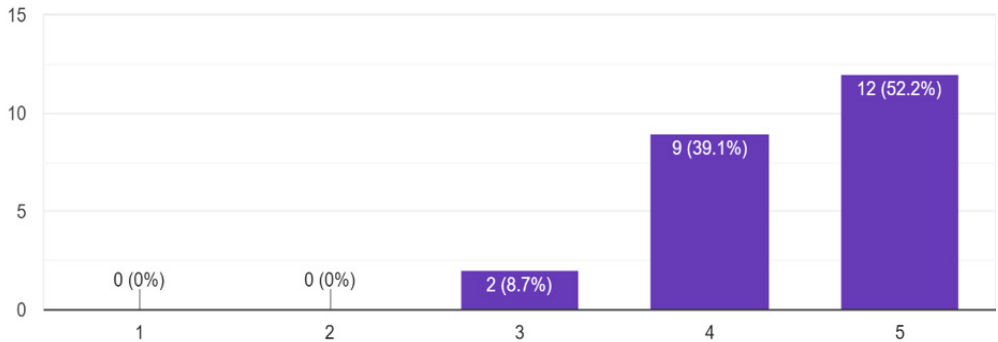
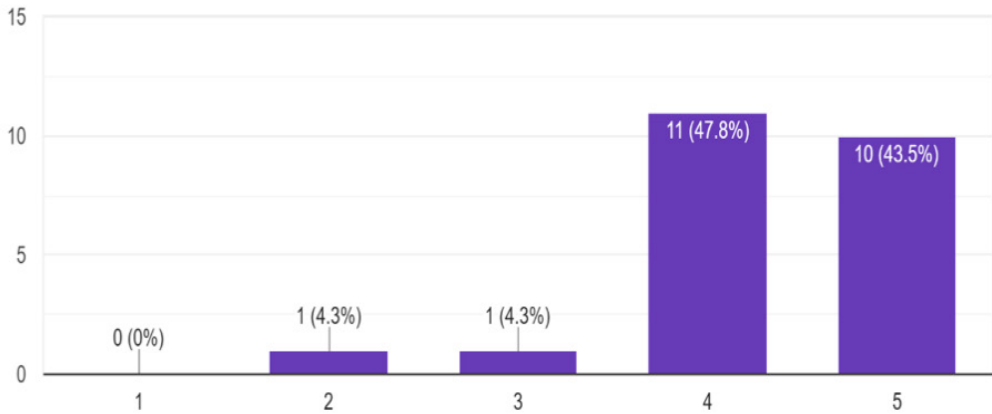


Chart 13 shows that a majority of the respondents (21 people or 91.35%) believe that citizens’ rights and interests will be protected by the law, while 2 respondents (8.7%) are ambivalent about this.

Chart 14: The laws in our country are not effective and must be amended.

23 responses



21 respondents (91.3%) agree or strongly agree that the law in Malaysia is still not effective and must be amended. Only 1 respondent (4.3%) is ambivalent about this, while 1 respondent disagrees with this statement. This finding is interesting because despite the majority's trust in the law's ability to treat citizens equitably regardless of position and social status, protect them from oppression, and protect their interests and rights, the majority of them still believe that the law is still not effective and must be amended.

Table 1: A comparison of ethics, integrity and law understanding amongst respondents before and after the knowledge transfer program

| Level of Understanding (%) | Before | After |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|
| 0 – 20                     | 26.1   | 0     |
| 21 – 40                    | 13     | 4.4   |
| 41 – 60                    | 21.7   | 21.7  |
| 61 – 80                    | 34.8   | 43.5  |
| 81 – 100                   | 4.4    | 30.4  |

It is disconcerting to note that before the knowledge transfer session, 26.1% of respondents have very little understanding on ethics, integrity and law. However, Table 1 shows that the knowledge transfer program conducted is effective as a means of communicating and sharing subject-matter experts' knowledge on ethics, integrity and law with the participants. Indeed, after the program, responses from all participants show that their levels of understanding have increased; most notable being the 0-20, 21-40 and 81-100 percentage ranges.

### Conclusion and Implications

Ethics, integrity and law play important intertwining roles in ensuring social, economic and political order of a society by regulating and controlling the behaviour of its members. As some members of society need more assistance than others, community development programs are a means of ensuring that those in need receive the help they need to enhance their livelihoods, empower them, enabling them with knowledge, self-efficacy and skills, so that the wellbeing of the community as a whole can be uplifted. Decisions, actions, and use of valuable communal resources must be done with ethics, integrity and the law in mind so as to prevent abuse of power, bribery, conflict of interest, corruption and misappropriation.

The preliminary findings above show not only inadequate knowledge and awareness amongst respondents from Kg. Seberang Takir (26.1% before the knowledge transfer program), but also problems of behavioural ethics; whereby ethics and integrity principles are compromised in the pursuit of individual interests. Development programs' allocated funds and assistance will not reach some of the targeted recipients as these are given to unqualified people. Most alarming is the acceptance and expectation of a significant number of community members that their community and organizational

leaders would set integrity considerations aside, by engaging in actions that are unethical, just so that their quality of life can be enhanced. Indeed more than 40% of respondents would commit ethics and integrity transgressions, as long as they do not break the law. This explains why despite the high level of trust that they have in the law, more than 90% agree and strongly agree that the law in Malaysia is still not effective and must be amended.

The findings imply that more efforts must be made to educate and inculcate ethics and integrity principles and values amongst community members. First, some members of the Kg. Seberang Takir community who are entitled to government assistance would feel resentment towards other members of their community, their leaders, the government, and other community development stakeholders, if their opportunities to empower themselves, and enhance their quality of life are denied because of abuse of power, corruption and injustice, arising due to compromises of ethics and integrity. In the long run, community cohesion and unity will be adversely affected if the inequality gaps in Kg. Seberang Takir grow wider.

Second, program funding and communal resources diverted unethically to serve selfish individual interests, could be used for new commercial and entrepreneurial activities, thus providing more employment opportunities, especially to inshore fishermen, labourers and small traders at Kg. Seberang Takir, whose continuous downward mobility is prevalent. This will reduce poverty, especially amongst those who could not keep up with the rapid urbanization process that is taking place in the area.

Third, community and organizational leaders have a responsibility to put the interests of the community above theirs or their followers/supporters. Thus they can become good role models to the younger

generation at Kg. Seberang Takir, and inspire trust among all community members. Indeed, good leaders would not tolerate unreasonable and unethical demands of some community members to “embellish” their eligibility skills or qualifications by providing incorrect or misleading information in order to get development programs’ assistance.

Fourth, as the Kg. Seberang Takir’s coastal community is quite homogeneous in nature (predominantly Malay-Muslim), local cultural, political and religious entities should play more rigorous roles, in terms of educating members of the community on ethics, integrity and law, as well as inculcating these values in the daily lives of their members. More knowledge transfer programs between them, government agencies (e.g., Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission), NGOs (e.g., Transparency International Malaysia) and higher education institutions in Kuala Nerus (e.g., Universiti Malaysia Terengganu and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin) can be conducted for this purpose.

Finally, the findings of this study show the benefits of knowledge transfer programs in enhancing participants’ understanding of the concepts, practices and legal awareness of ethics, integrity and law. Continuous efforts must be made to ensure that the ethics and integrity of the coastal community of Kg. Seberang Takir are not eroded. By strengthening ethics and integrity, all members should have the moral resilience to face the area’s rapid rate of urbanization, whilst ensuring that those facing continuous downward mobility are getting assistance. All sources of ethics (e.g., religion, culture, social conventions) must be effectively utilised so as to compensate the ethics and integrity deficiencies of the law.

### Disclosure Statement

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