



A COMMUNITY MODEL AND ROLE OF ZAKAT IN REDUCING STUNTING IN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article looks at a community model implemented at a residential flat in Ipoh, Perak. Methodology: Case study, qualitative approach research design. A group of women acted upon the UNICEF Malaysia report of the presence of children with stunted growth in Pangsapuri (PPRT). These women started by bringing food to feed children. Findings: They observed that many of the children were malnourished, stunted and had skin conditions such as scabies, impetigo and lice. Many of the children were unable to read and write. There was a need for a proper place for the children to study and read. Practical implications: This model can be easily replicated in other PPRT. Social implications: A community effort is successful just by doing one aspect of religion, that is, by giving out food. Women in the locality were empowered to help improve their children wellbeing. Suggestion: This model can be replicated using zakat to help end stunting in children, create better environment for learning and empower women to be involved in making changes.

Keywords: Children, Zakat, Stunting

INTRODUCTION

The first 5 years of life is the most important phase in children. Problem with nutrition may lead to permanent problems such as stunting. Stunting is diagnosed when the child's height falls 2SD below the mean height for age. It could be caused by genetic factor, hormonal, psychosocial factors, however the most important factor is nutritional. Stunting is usually more prevalent in developing countries.

WHO characterized stunting as “growth and development disorders experienced by children due to malnutrition, recurrent infections and inadequate psychosocial stimulation (Scheffler, 2019).

Malaysia, while aiming to be a developed country, has a surprisingly high number of children who were stunted. It does not stop there, believe it or not, the number is increasing day by day. Nevertheless, this alarming issue might not be spoken enough or discussed enough; hence causing the issue to be proliferatively blooming with or without us realizing.

The proportion of children under 5 years old in Malaysia who were underweight and stunted increased from 11.6 and 16.6%, respectively in 2011 to 14.1 and 21.8%, respectively in 2019 while the proportion of children who were overweight/obesity was 6.4% in 2016 and 5.6 % in 2019, respectively (2, 3).

Poverty as well as lack of knowledge on nutrition may be the main reason for why this is happening. However, neglect by parents must also be looked at as a factor. The Zakat institution can help the Government in making sure our children get enough nutritional food to eat to ensure their growth potential is achieved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, a land of abundance, choices and diversities where food is concerned, it is heart-breaking to know that 20.7% of children under 5 suffers from stunting and 11.5% from wasting, whereas 12.7% of children (5 years to 19 years) were obese (UNICEF Malaysia-Children, Food and Nutrition. State of the world's children 2019).

In fact, even after this finding was made in 2016, Malaysia has still failed to correct this problem, with 21.8% of children under 5 years old affected, which is equal to the average for the Asia region of 21.8% (Global nutrition report, 2020).

It has been shown that stunting lead to poor cognition, school readiness and school performance. Children will have impaired behavioural development in early life. These factors will then lead to poor earning potential and hence the vicious cycle will continue (Alam & Richard, 2020).

The SDG has 17 goals and the no 1-4 goals which are to end poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being and quality education are all closely related. We have to find out why are the children not growing? Is it because of poverty that led to food insecurity and hence the children did not get enough to eat? If they are always hungry or did not get enough to eat, they will not have good health and this could lead to absenteeism from school, and when this happens, they will not get a quality education. Is it because of poor choice of food rather than a lack of food? Is there also an element of neglect from parents? According to some scientist, stunting is a sign of social disadvantage and poor parental education (Scheffler & Rogol, 2020).

Food insecurity is one of the main reasons why growth is affected in the early years of child growth (Siddiqui, 2020).

There is abundance of food in Malaysia but somehow it did not reach the most vulnerable component of the society i.e. the children. What can be done? How can the zakat institution be mobilized to help correct this problem affecting our most important asset-the children. An education wakaf where focus will be on education and what factors could help improve the education, such as preventing malnourishment, not only among school-going children but also of higher-level education should be in place (Education wakaf, AZJAF).

What can be done at organisations and at individual level? A few concerned women decided to do something about it and it has led to a community driven solution for betterment of the children.

Giving Food in Islam

The act of giving out food to the needy is an act which is very much encouraged and highly demanded in Islam. In many verses in the Quran, giving food to the hungry and the poor are considered the measure of one's trueness in religion.

“Have you seen the one who denies the Recompense? For that is the one who drives away orphans. And does not encourage the feeding of the poor”

Surah Al Maun (107: 1-3)

In this verse, the one who does not encourage feeding the poor is equated as the one who denies the day of Recompense (akhirah). As well as the one who drives away orphans—meaning someone who does not take care of the orphans, who neglected them and not taking care of their wellbeing and turns away the orphans who came to ask for food.

Again, in another surah, Surah Al Fajr (89:17-20) delivers a powerful admonition regarding the responsibilities towards the vulnerable members of society. The verses highlight the neglect of orphans and the failure to support the impoverished, emphasizing the moral imperative to extend care and assistance to those in need. Furthermore, the passage critiques the excessive pursuit of wealth at the expense of justice and compassion.

Encouraging one another to feed the poor. In this verse, Allah reminded us to encourage each other to feed the poor. Not only we should be aware of poor people among us and to feed them, but we also must encourage our family, our friends and our community to feed the ones in need.

In Surah Al Balad, it is not considered that someone has done a good deed if he has not done these acts, which are considered the ‘gold standard’.

In Surah Al Balad (90:11-17), a profound perspective on compassion and solidarity is presented. The verses illuminate the notion of breaking through the difficult pass, emphasizing acts of kindness and support for those in need. Here, the passage defines the essence of overcoming challenges not merely as personal achievements, but as collective efforts to alleviate the suffering of others.

This passage serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of humanity and the moral imperative to extend compassion and assistance to those facing adversity. It challenges us to broaden our understanding of success and fulfillment, recognizing that true prosperity lies in our ability to uplift and empower others.

The teachings of Surah Al Balad offer timeless wisdom on the importance of empathy, solidarity, and collective responsibility. By embodying these principles in our lives and communities, we can work towards creating a more just, equitable, and compassionate world, where the burdens of hardship are shared, and the bonds of humanity are strengthened.

Something of value, a deed which is considered as “difficult pass”, a deed which is worthy in the eyes of Allah—these include the freeing of slaves, this is probably not relevant anymore in present times; feeding on a day of severe hunger, an orphan, or a needy person in misery.

Deeds can vary in many ways and forms, and all are commendable, however among the good deeds, there are deeds, which are likened to climbing up a difficult mountain. Feeding on a day of severe hunger is one such deed in Islam. During the time of calamities such as in earthquakes, floods and other natural disaster or man-made disaster, a situation in which even a wealthy man may not have access to food, act of giving out food during these times are very much encouraged.

The ones giving out food to the needy must be sincere in doing so, often, the ones who are in need of food, do not have anything to offer the donor in return. The one who gives must not give because of hoping for future favours from the needy. Favours should only be from Allah.

In the sacred text of the Quran, in Surah Al Insaan (76:9-10), there's a profound reflection on the nature of giving. It speaks to the essence of charity, emphasizing the importance of selflessness and sincerity in our acts of kindness. The verses convey the idea that true generosity stems from a place of compassion, where the giver seeks no reward or recognition but simply aims to serve others for the sake of Allah.

Similarly, in Surah Al Layl (92:18-21), the Quran offers guidance on the purification of the self through charitable deeds. It highlights the purity of intention behind giving, emphasizing that the true essence of generosity lies not in seeking recognition or repayment but in seeking the pleasure and approval of the Most High.

These verses serve as a timeless reminder of the spiritual significance of charity and selflessness. They encourage us to reflect on our intentions behind our acts of giving, reminding us that true fulfillment comes not from worldly rewards but from seeking the pleasure of our Creator.

As I ponder upon these verses, I am reminded of the importance of cultivating a sincere and selfless attitude in my charitable endeavors. I aspire to emulate the spirit of giving depicted in the Quran, striving to serve others with humility and compassion, seeking no reward other than the approval of Allah.

In a world often driven by materialistic pursuits, the teachings of the Quran offer a profound perspective on the true essence of generosity and self-purification. May we all strive to embody these virtues in our lives, seeking to uplift and serve others for the sake of Allah alone.

Giving of food is such a noble act in Islam and yet we still find our children malnourished and stunted. Have the act of giving food to the needy become alien in our society now?

On the other hand, food wastage in Malaysia is very high and peaked in Ramadan, the month of giving! The NST reported 16,720 tons of food wastage daily and increase 15-20% during festivities. (NST, March 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The ‘Zakiyyah-Dapur Santun Kanak-kanak’ Project

This project was started by three friends who were concerned with the issues affecting children’s growth especially stunting. They started the project by bringing food to one the PPRT in the midst of Ipoh town. They brought lunch and serve the children who were loitering at the ground floor. They served the lunch packs once a week, i.e. every Tuesday. The lunch pack included rice, chicken and vegetables. They also gave out nutritious drink which were Probiotics-enriched, fruits and candies.

The initial response to their effort were very good. Initially the project started off with about 15 kids, subsequently increased to 30 and later to about 45-50 kids at a single time. They focused on smaller children and primary school goers. The children enjoyed the attention given to them and enjoyed the food. Some children even requested to bring food back home for their parents.

While giving out food, the trio noticed that some of the children had skin conditions such as scabies, impetigo, eczema and lice. They also notice some of them were short for their age. They took the children’s weight and height for documentation and investigation purposes.

This group then started a reading session and noticed that some children was unable to read or write. Some was struggling even though they were already in the upper level of standard school. The reading session continued with one-to-one coaching. There were marked improvement in the children who were coached. Many programs were held including reading programs where volunteers were invited to coach children to read. The program was titled “Baca

dan bangkit'. Children were also taught to pray. Health screening for kids were also held at the Projek Perumahan Rakyat Tempatan (PPRT).

These programs continued from 2018 till 2020 until the pandemic happened and these programs were stopped due to given consequences.

Mini Library

Realizing that the children did not have materials to read at home, and they do not have a conducive area to study or just to read at home, these women approached the Lembaga Perumahan & Hartanah Perak (LPHP) who is responsible for the residential flat. They insisted on the need to have an area where the children can be comfortable to read, do their homework or play board games.

A meeting was held between Lembaga Perumahan & Hartanah Perak (LPHP), the residents committee, the Perak Library and the Pejabat Pembangunan Negeri Perak (PPNP). It was then agreed that a unit which was used as a store to be converted into a library. The Lembaga Perumahan & Hartanah Perak (LPHP) started the project to build the library and the cost was fully borne by the Government.

Now, the PPRT has a comfortable, air-conditioned library, a TV and a few computers. The children can now spend their valuable time reading in a more comfortable environment. Not to worry about the maintenance and the efficacy of the Library ; a few mothers with children decided to help in cleaning the library and teach the children to read and write.

Funding

The initial funding for food was from an ingenious idea. The Zakiyyah team approached different restaurants and asked whether they would be willing to sponsor food for needy children only once a month. This request was accepted willingly by the four restaurants and it was rotated weekly among them.

On week 1, food will be provided by Restaurant A; the next week will be by Restaurant B and the next restaurant C and finally restaurant D and then will be rotated back to Restaurant 1. Some personal donations were also coming in and sometimes these children were treated with KFC or Mc Donald's.

How Zakat Can Improve Children Health-suggestions

The Zakat and Waqf Institution has great potential in helping children, especially those below 5 years old to achieve their growth potential (Ahmad & Ghafoorzai, 2021). These children need to have adequate nutrition. The Zakat Institution may start and focus on the wellbeing of children living in PPRT.

In Malaysia zakat is either given using staple food like rice or using money. In Indonesia, who also faced problems with stunting in children, the Zakat bodies have developed what is known as 'nutrition-based zakat intervention'. This program includes educational programs for parents to prevent stunting, counselling, allocating a special nutritional budget for stunting, modifying nutritional packages among others (Ahmad, 2021; Raudhah, 2020).

Malaysia may also adopt these programs to help reduce stunting urgently. Zakat stakeholders should seriously meet and discuss how zakat can be used in other ways with focus on the problem of stunting. In this way, the zakat money can benefit the mustahiq directly.

Below are some suggestions on how Zakat can help improve the situation of these disadvantaged children:

1. Seminar and talk by doctors and nutritionist on dangers of malnutrition in children and how to prepare cheap and nutritious food for children for parents.
2. Providing basic provision to families with small children—rice, milk, meat, chicken
3. Providing meal coupon for lower primary school children so they can buy selected quality food in school canteen
4. Providing vitamins to help in growth for example iron tablets, calcium and Vitamin C
5. Milk provided to preschoolers in PPRT
6. Periodic checks on children below 5 years old to gauge their growth and identify possible children who are at risk of malnutrition and stunting and perform interventional measures.
7. Data on children.

Educating parents by having professionals, giving guidance on food for a growing child is the most important initial step. Parents sometime do not have

the knowledge of what constitute good or bad food to be given to their children. They usually end up buying non-nutritious food. They also should be given the skill to prepare cheap but nutritious food. They may have the wrong understanding that that good food is expensive. They could also be encouraged to plant vegetables in their kitchen although this may be difficult. Zakat institution can plan regular classes with the help of professionals.

Food basket should be given with children in mind. Often the food basket given out contain only food for the adults like tea, coffee and even maggi mee. We should actually include a one-week food ration which may include fresh milk, chicken or meat, vegetables, fruits, potatoes and such.

Meal coupon for primary schools' children can help correct children who are underweight or malnourished by ensuring they have enough to eat in school. Food provided must be of healthy choices like “nasi lemak”, “ayam goreng”, eggs etc. Alternatively, Zakat Institution may contract a caterer to make specially – prepared food for those with malnutrition.

Education also can be given to school canteen provider to prepare healthier food. Vitamins should also be given to boost their growth and prevent infection which could hamper their growth. Optional vaccines should also be provided for them because they are more prone for infection.

Periodic checks should be made in collaboration with nearby health clinics to ensure growth of the children.

Collecting of data is of utmost importance. We can start by identifying the children below 5 years, taking their biometrics and identifying those at risk of stunting or malnourish.

These efforts must be done continuously until the children is out of dangers of stunting and the focus should be on the first five years of life. This model provides an implementation plan to address current condition resulting in health disparities and inequities.

To replicate this model, some key condition should be looked at:

1. Time: It takes time to build trust and relationship in the community. However, being persistence and sincerity will win the community
2. Working through tensions: each PPRT has its own unique problems from mistrust, fighting among committee members, unable to sit

together etc. to ensure success, there is a need to be creative in trying to mitigate between groups.

3. Community involvement: very important to identify key person with influence in the community
4. Leveraging: identifying available assets-in this instance identifying a space for the library
5. Long term: need to ensure involvement of members of the residence to ensure continuing benefit. In this case, the residence got involved in using the library and teaching kids.

CONCLUSION

The Zakat institution is the best instrument to manage the issue of stunting of children in Malaysia, with focus on children in PPRT.

Children is the asset of a country. Healthy children will have better outcome as students in the future and as adults later on in life.

The Zakat institution has a responsibility to ensure money from the fund is used where it is most needed. In present situation, the children in the PPRT should be given utmost priority. They have no voice of their own, their fate lies in the hand of those given authority over the money of Muslims. Let us provide food, as instructed by the Quran to those who are in dire need.

Organizations, religious bodies, groups and individuals should pay more attention to children coming from a poor background such as those in PPRT. Sometimes, just by following the Sunnah of giving food, many doors will be opened such as shown in the example above.

This simple act of bringing food for children has resulted in community empowerment where the mothers of the students themselves had agreed to play a part in educating children in the residential PPRT. By bringing in the stakeholders the community now enjoy having a fully functioning library. The residential committee were also included in decision-making.

Let us end the stunting problem. The Zakat institution, has a unique and urgent role to play in helping the children of Malaysia stand tall with children from other parts of the world.

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