

## **Igal Theatre's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Well-being of Persons With Disabilities (PWDs)**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores *igal* theatre as a mental and physical therapy for People with Disabilities (PWDs). Observational, participatory workshop performance approaches are applied to enable PWDs to convey personal narratives and engage in meaningful dialogue. *Igal* theatre-based communication techniques (ITBCT) are applied to manipulate participants' mental and physical well-being and help them create content, tell their life stories, and strengthen their identity. The results contribute to the mental and physical well-being of PWDs and preserve *igal* theatre as a valuable cultural heritage where achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is significant.

**Keywords:** *Igal* Theatre; Sustainable Development Goals; People with Disabilities; *Igal* theatre-based communication techniques (ITBCT)

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### **1.0 Introduction**

*Igal* Theatre is traditionally practised by the Bajau Laut ethnic group in Semporna, Sabah, as a healing method. The Bajau ethnic group is the second largest indigenous group in Sabah and is a maritime group of 'Proto-Malays', which means they have skills and knowledge about the sea. They are an ethnic group that likes to travel at sea and live a nomadic life, with their economic resources largely dependent on marine products. They began to move to land when economic activities occurred and sought forest products for survival. In terms of customs and culture, the Bajau ethnic group still adheres to the rules of their ancestors. This includes eating customs, bathing, marriage, feasts, and even beliefs in the environment inhabited by other creatures. The purpose is to maintain the goodness of their lives continuously because they believe every action must be done carefully and according to hereditary customs to avoid accidents or plagues. Starting from the belief in plagues, evil spirits and good spirits, these give rise to societal crises, which are manifested through the *igal* theatre ceremony (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024).

According to the World Health Organization in the 'World Report on Disability', almost 15 per cent of the world's population consists of People with Disabilities (PWDs). This means that approximately 200 million people in the world's population experience disabilities that interfere with their daily functioning. The 'World Health Survey results reported that 785 million people worldwide are PWDs aged

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15 and above. Malaysian statistics show that PWDs registered with the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) until 31 March 2017 are 420,201 people. In line with this survey, disability is reported to be an issue of concern to the world due to its increasing prevalence. This increasing prevalence is due to the growing population and the high risk of people experiencing disability due to chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and mental disorders (WHO, 2011).

### 1.1 Problem statement

The importance of *igal* theatre for improving society, especially for people with disabilities, is not given due attention. So, this study tries to synthesize the concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of *igal* theatre through observational, participatory workshop performance with the application of *Igal* Theater-Based Communication techniques for the well-being of the disabled community for heritage sustainability.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Malaysia is a country with a diverse cultural heritage resulting from various races and ethnicities. Our cultural heritage needs to be defended and cared for because it reflects the identity and symbol of a country.

### 2.1 Heritage

Heritage is passed down from previous generations; in other words, it is a remnant of ancestors or nature that needs to be preserved. Heritage also means a remnant that is a source of national pride and identification. In general, heritage can be divided into two parts, namely, tangible heritage and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage can be seen and held permanently, static or mobile, as an appearance or artefact that a clear and precise touch can feel. Meanwhile, Intangible Heritage is a priority area of Heritage that includes a heritage that is 'not a thing' to be enjoyed by the human senses. Strictly speaking, Intangible Heritage means a human act or gesture that can be seen, touched, felt, smelled or heard when done or exists but can no longer be enjoyed when it is gone or ends (Official Website, National Heritage Department, Malaysia, 2023).

### 2.2 *Igal* Theatre and the Bajau Ethnic Group

*Igal* Theatre is an intangible heritage in the form of traditional performing arts. The performance combines elements of dance, singing, music and acting. This performance originates from ritual ceremonies practised by the Bajau ethnic group, especially in Semporna, Sabah, for healing that involves the power of spirits. The primary function of *igal* ritual theatre is to cure diseases and find the cause and way to solve the problem of the disease experienced by the patient for the community's well-being (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023).

From that, *igal* theatre originates from ceremonies related to procedures in religious ceremonies practised by the community of practitioners since the time of animism. Rituals are born from the desire of humans to seek contact with the metaphysical world because humans naturally have religious emotions. Metaphysics is a spiritual science that studies the unseen, namely the spiritual world. So, a ritual performance is a ceremony resulting from the action or desire to seek contact with the spiritual world (metaphysics) for the well-being of its practitioners' minds and social life. In this regard, the healing aspect in *igal* theatre is categorized as faith healing, which refers to ritual practices related to spiritual and religious beliefs. Healing occurs due to the belief in spiritual powers intervening in the healing process (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024).

### 2.3 Sustainability

According to the 'World Commission on Environment and Development for the United Nations General Assembly in 1987', sustainability is the ability or capacity of something to maintain or sustain itself. In other words, sustainability is about what we need to live in the present without compromising the potential of humans in the future to meet their needs (Vermont Folklife Center, 2023). The Brundtland Commission, an organization that was established in 1983 to promote global sustainability, also has a similar view, adding that in addition to emphasizing the capabilities of future generations, the sustainability paradigm also encompasses the interaction between humans and aspects of economic, social and environmental life (Scammon, 2022). So, studying *igal* theatre is important because it also involves social and cultural matters that should be preserved as an important heritage for developing a national civilization.

### 2.4 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a central focus of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) agenda. As a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) with a global mandate on culture, UNESCO is engaged in unleashing the power of culture to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By driving sustainable impact, UNESCO advances the 17 SDGs through its six cultural conventions. Culture provides the necessary transformative dimension that ensures the sustainability of the development process. The integration of culture into development processes, strategies and policies at the national level is well underway across a broad spectrum of public policies, from reducing poverty through jobs, skills and employment in the cultural sector to strengthening quality education for all and social justice, to providing context-specific responses to foster environmental sustainability. Culture should not be considered a policy domain in isolation but rather as a cross-cutting dimension that can foster a paradigm shift to reform policymaking towards an inclusive, people-centred, context-relevant approach (UNESCO, 2023).

In conjunction with the 'World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2019, the Trusteeship Council, United Nations Headquarters, New York, has affirmed that the transformative power of culture for social inclusion, resilience and sustainable development is increasingly recognized as a key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030

Agenda for 'Sustainable Development' marks a significant turning point in global efforts to address development challenges and opportunities. Local authorities and communities are increasingly important in this global momentum, alongside international and national players and other relevant stakeholders. Culture is also a vital component of human development, representing a source of identity, innovation and creativity for all and providing sustainable solutions to local and global challenges (Culture and Sustainable Development. <https://www.un.org/pga/73/event/culture-and-sustainable-development/>. 2022)

### 2.5 Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are generally defined as physical, mental, and other impairments. According to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, PWDs include those who have long-term mental, physical, intellectual, or sensory impairments that prevent them from interacting through full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (BPKK, 2015). Individuals with physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments are used when interacting with various barriers that can restrict a person's involvement and full functioning in society (Undang-Undang Malaysia, 2014). Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are individuals who do not have the same rights as normal people in education, employment, and health. The Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Act 2008 (Act 685) was established under Malaysian law, recognizing the PWDs to be entitled to protection and opportunities in equal conditions subject to limitations and protections for PWDs. The Act also recognizes the collaboration of government bodies with non-governmental organizations to ensure the full participation of relevant parties (Nur Dayana Mohd Khalil, et al., 2022).

PWDs have various talents and skills that can be manipulated in the world of work. However, they may need additional support in the form of physical or technological assistance in order to function optimally in the workplace. A sensitive and inclusive approach is important to ensure they are given appropriate support and equal opportunities to develop in their careers (KPWKM, 2020). Therefore, the government and the private sector need to work together to provide facilities and amenities for PWDs and pay attention so that these facilities can facilitate the daily affairs of PWDs without prejudice towards normal people.

## 3.0 Methodology

This study method takes an innovative observational and participatory approach by exposing the PWD community to *Igal* theatre in the form of a workshop. The workshop, known as the 'workshop performance', will be used as a platform to involve the PWD community. This workshop not only introduces them to the art of traditional theatre but also aims to provide them with opportunities to convey personal narratives and engage in meaningful dialogue. The workshop was conducted for one day at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam campus, Malaysia. The rationale for selecting this area as the study location was because of the ease of access for the participants with disabilities and the conducive space for implementing the workshop to answer the study objectives. The study participants comprised 17 registered disabled people from the OKU Sentral Association, Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, the workshop facilitators consisted of a drama lecturer from the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur and two theatre lecturers from KPSK, UiTM, Shah Alam, one of whom was also a registered disabled person. All 17 respondents were given pseudonyms to protect the rights and privacy of the respondents.

The study participants were between 30 and 40 years old, covering three main ethnic groups in Malaysia: 14 Malays, two Sabah ethnicities, and one Indian, consisting of 9 females and eight males. The study's participants were selected through the researcher's network of contacts with the OKU Sentral Organization. This study is entirely qualitative, using the case study research method that explores the challenges of the study participants. The specific technique of this study is the *Igal* Theatre-Based Communication Technique, which involves observation, workshop participation, performance implementation and forum reflection.

### 3.1. *Igal* Theatre-Based Communication Technique (ITBC Technique)

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a reflection approach, namely the triangulation of the researcher's reflection, experts, specialists and the PWDs community involved in the workshop performance. Data triangulation and information were obtained through observation, participation, and forum reflection. The 'workshop performance' method involved the PWD community with *Igal* theatre activities while conveying personal narratives and engaging in meaningful dialogue. One way to make qualitative data highly trustworthy is by implementing triangulation between data. The validity and reliability used by the researcher in this qualitative study involved validation from the expert and specialist, namely the counsellor, drama therapist and art therapist, and data triangulation to ensure the existence of the 'trustworthiness' aspect. The *Igal* theatre-based communication technique was applied through interaction with the facilitator to manipulate the participants' mental and physical well-being.

The data obtained were analyzed using theme analysis and organized using thematic analysis focused on the Art Therapy framework (Kramer, 2001). The data analysis process began by transcribing all reflections conducted with the study participants to obtain an overview of the structure and content of the research. After that, the coding process was carried out to develop a thematic analysis, which eventually emerged several main themes, namely *Igal* Theater-Base Communication Technique (ITBCT), Arts therapy, SDGs and Community well-being.

## 4.0 Findings

This study identified the central theme, Adrian Hill's Art Therapy (Hill, 1945). The breakdown of the theme is the result of interventions on respondents through practical *Igal* theatre activities known as the *Igal* Theatre-Based Communication Technique (ITBCT). Art therapy

is a therapeutic approach that uses the creative process in art to help individuals express feelings, overcome stress, and improve emotional and mental well-being (Gussak, 2015). Art therapy involves the creation of artwork and the process of reflection and self-exploration through art (Kramer, 2001), namely *Igal* theatre, as shown in Fig. 1.

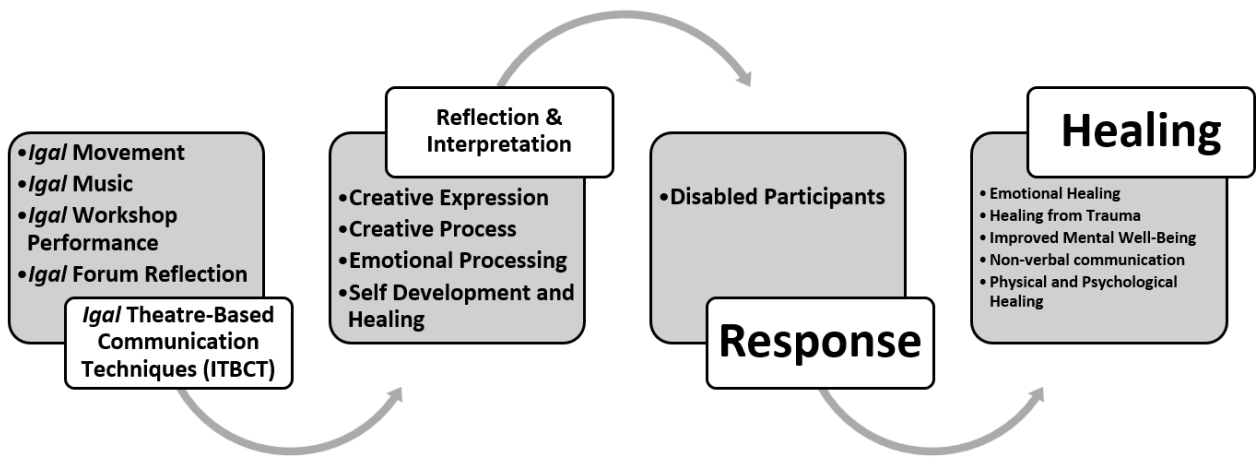


Fig. 1: Application of art therapy modified from Hill (1945) & Kramer (2001) through *Igal* Theater-Based Communication Techniques (ITCBT)

4.1 *Igal Theatre-Based Communication Techniques (ITBCT)*

Based on Table 1, the ITBCT approach provides space for disabled participants to reflect mentally and physically in expressing their ideas and views freely.

Table 1. <i>Igal</i> Theatre-Base Communication Technique (ITBCT) and Art Therapy Reflections		
<i>Igal</i> Theatre-Based Communication Techniques (ITBCT)	Art Therapy Reflection & Interpretation	Response
1) <i>Igal Movement</i> 2) <i>Igal Music</i> 3) <i>Igal Workshop Performance</i> 4) <i>Igal Forum Reflection</i>	Creative Expression	Rosman
	Creative Process	Ali
	Emotional Processing	Azmi
	Self-Development and Healing	Kamal
		Ahmad
		Zahir
		Zainal
		Hassan
		Kumari
		Salasiah
		Ala
		Azlina
		Esterlina
		Magdalena
		Zaharah
		Samsiah
		Kamariah

Creative Expression – ITBC allows disabled participants use *igal* movement, music, and performance to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, which are difficult to express in words. This process provides space for self-reflection and deeper understanding.

Creative Process – ITBCT focuses on the experience of creating a performance workshop. This allows individuals to fully engage in the creative moment without pressure or expectation, allowing them to experiment and express themselves.

Emotional Processing - ITBCT art therapy allows PWD participants to face and manage deep emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or trauma.

Self-Development and Healing - ITBCT encourages personal development, self-understanding, and healing. Helping clients to strengthen their sense of identity, increase self-esteem, and provide a sense of control. ITBCT helps individuals overcome psychological and emotional problems, as well as relieve stress and anxiety.

#### 4.2 Reflection and Interpretation

After going through the ITBCT workshop, PWD participants are asked to reflect and talk. Participants are given space to explore the meaning behind their artwork, both verbally and non-verbally. This reflection process helps clients understand their feelings, navigate trauma, or gain insight into themselves. Improve social skills and interaction with peers.

#### 4.3 Responses of Disabled Participants and Healing

Emotional Healing – Through Creative Expression, PWDs can channel their feelings, such as anxiety, sadness, or trauma.

"When I do the *igal* movement activities, *igal* music and performances in this workshop, I feel satisfied because I can express my feelings without having to express them in words. I do not remember feeling anxious, sad, or traumatized anymore... it has gone." (Rosman, Esterlina, Zainal & Salasiah)

Healing from Trauma – Increases concentration and distracts from daily problems to reduce stress and anxiety.

"When allowed to create an *igal* performance workshop, I feel very relaxed and focused, so I do not feel anxious like I always do... when asked to do an assignment. I can also concentrate a lot on my performance. I do not even remember those daily problems anymore..." (Kamal, Kamariah, Samsiah & Esterlina)

Increased Mental Well-being – Increases confidence and self-esteem.

"I feel more confident in myself and feel more valued. The reason is that during ITBCT activities, I am free to express difficult or stressful feelings because I can process those feelings without judgment and prejudice." (Kumari, Magdalina, Zaharah & Rosman)

Non-verbal communication – Making ITBCT allows participants with disabilities to process their feelings in a safe and non-verbal way and becomes an alternative communication method.

"When I can express my feelings without using words, I feel relieved, and the traumatic feelings about other people's criticism and loss of ability slowly begin to disappear." (Salasiah, Azmi, Ali & Zaharah)

Physical and Psychological Healing – ITBCT can support physical recovery by reducing pain or improving motor coordination, especially in patients undergoing physical recovery.

"I enjoyed working with my friends to make an *igal* performance at the end of the workshop. I feel more confident about expressing my views to create a performance with my friends. Although I move a lot to make this performance, it does not interfere with my physical abilities. I feel more energetic" (Ala, Ahmad, Kamal & Zahir)

"I feel like I enjoy doing the *igal* movements while accompanied by the sound of *igal* music. It is like just playing with friends while laughing happily. My friends also give me fun reactions." (Azlina, Hassan, Salasiah & Kumari)

## 5.0 Discussion

Fig. 2 shows that the ITBCT application, which focuses on the reflection of three aspects, namely *igal* movement, *igal* music and *igal* performance workshop, shows seven therapeutic effects on PWD participants, namely emotional healing, stress and anxiety reduction, improved mental well-being, healing from trauma, non-verbal communication, improve social and interaction skills and physical and psychological healing.

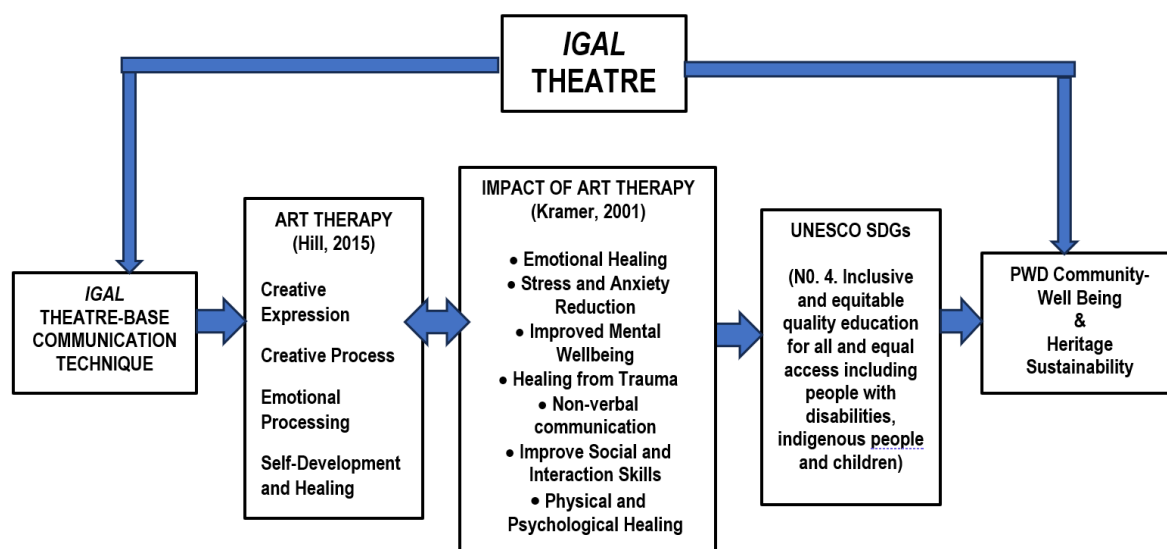


Fig. 2: *Igal* theatre-base communication technique (ITBCT) and SDGs reflections

The healing effect is in line with UNESCO's aspiration with SDG number 4, which is to provide inclusive and equitable quality education, promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, eliminate gender gaps in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous people and children. The aspiration also aims to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development.

Achieving the SDGs goals can finally provide well-being to PWD participants, especially regarding mental and physical aspects. Not only that, but well-being is also achieved in terms of culture and heritage, passed down to the PWD community so they can be appreciated, valued, and practised daily.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

*Igal* Theatre-Based Communication Techniques (ITBCT) will be effectively applied through interaction with the facilitator to manipulate participants' mental and physical well-being, helping them achieve well-being. In this context, *igal* theatre is a form of performing arts and a 'therapeutic' method that can improve the mental and physical well-being of people with disabilities. The workshop, known as the 'performance workshop', will be used as a platform to engage the disabled community. This study is not just about introducing them to heritage art but also aims to provide them with opportunities to convey personal narratives and engage in meaningful dialogue. Through interaction between facilitator and respondent (PWDs), ITBCT will be effectively applied to manipulate participants' mental and physical well-being, thus helping them achieve better well-being. Introducing *Igal* theatre in this new context can open up space for the community to see the potential of traditional theatre as a cultural element and a powerful tool for healing and community development, especially for groups in need, such as the PWDs.

### 6.2 Recommendations

Although this study has revealed the role of ITCBT in the healing purposes for the PWD community, some limitations remain, such as the research sample, which is only limited to people with physical disabilities. Therefore, this study also suggests that the ITBCT application needs to be disseminated and modified to empower other types of people with disabilities by providing them with space to create content, tell their life stories, and strengthen their identity through cultural arts. In the long term, the results of this study support the achievement of the SDGs, especially in the aspect of inclusive and sustainable social and cultural development.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper presents the relationship between *Igal* ritual theatre as a cultural heritage with the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that can provide well-being to the People with Disabilities community and enhance the field of performing arts as a body of knowledge.

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