Community Approaches in Tourism Planning at Grass Root Level

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A community-based approach to tourism development is a prerequisite to sustainability as the concept of community involvement moves nearer to the centre of sustainability debate. Several advocates of participatory planning in tourism development have argued for an issue-oriented involvement of residents in decisions at an early stage in the decision process, before commitments are made. Thus, community participation in many ways has become an umbrella term for a supposedly new genre of development intervention and an ideology in tourism planning, akin to the participatory planning ideologies in urban and regional planning. By utilizing emic-study method, this paper attempts to appraise the prevailing planning practice and community mechanism at grass root levels in rural areas, particularly in tourism context in this country. In general, it can be contended the level of public participation in Malaysia sits in the first lower quarter of Arnstein's ladder, and it is more in the form of informing rather than sharing powers to decide on policies and strategies.

Key words: community, tourism, planning, approaches

Introduction

In theory, the primary objective of public participation is to ensure that the diverse interests of the society are incorporated in the plan, and it accords with the people's right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This democratic credibility is part of the trend towards democratisation of all aspects of society (Wates, 2000). Wates (2000) further argues that there are several reasons why communities are actively involved in the planning process, as defined below:

- Additional resources
  Government rarely have sufficient means to solve all the problems in an area. Local people can bring additional resources, which are often essential, if their needs are to be met and dreams fulfilled.
- Better decisions and more appropriate results
  Local people are invariably the best source of knowledge and wisdom about their surroundings, and design solutions are more likely to be in tune with the local needs.
- Empowerment and community building
  Community involvement builds local people's confidence, capabilities and skills to cooperate, and this process of working together creates a sense of community belonging.

- Professional education
    Working closely with local people helps professionals gain a better insight into the communities they seek to serve.

Many authors agree that local benefits can be derived from active community participation (Murphy, 1985; Drake, 1991; Chalker, 1994; Cater, 1996). The benefits from such participation include joining in the process of self-governance, responding to authoritative decisions that impact on one's life, and working cooperatively with others on issues of mutual concern. Til (1984) refers to community participation as a form of voluntary action within which individuals confront opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship. This concept of community participation could also be seen as a powerful tool to educate the community in rights, laws and political good sense (Low, 1991) and could involve a shift of power, from those who have had major decision-making roles to those who traditionally have not had such a role (Willis, 1995).

Guijt and Kaul Shah (1998) argue that the broad aim of the participatory approach is to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalised people in decision-making. The assumption is this approach empowers local people with the skills and confidence to analyse their situation, reach consensus, make decisions and take action, so as to improve their circumstances. This may also imply that community participation, as a development strategy, is based on community resources, needs, decisions and capacities. Hence, the community is the main actor in the development process, and the community members are allowed to control activities that affect their lives. This is in contrast to the beneficiary approach, in which people receive benefits but are not empowered (Brandon, 1993).

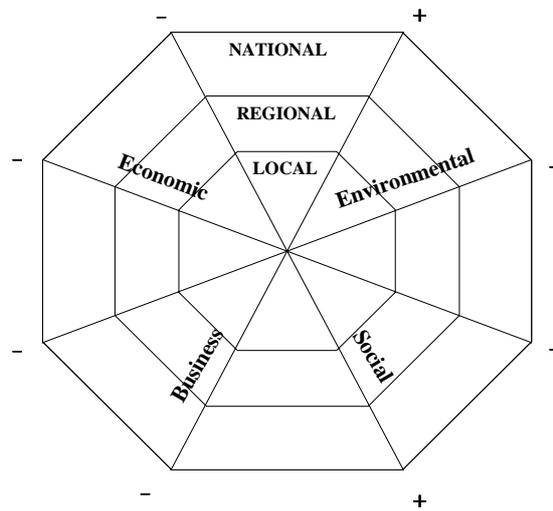## Community Approaches in Tourism Planning

Community involvement in planning is a fairly recent development and has been more of a feature of environmental planning than tourism planning, especially through the environmental assessment process (Page and Dowling, 2002). Proponents of community participation have contended that community participation, as an element of development, has been considered, promoted and woven into the development process in different ways since the 1950s and early 1960s under different terms and names (de Kadt, 1982; Gow and Vansant, 1983). That is to say, the concept of community participation has been a component of political dynamics of the post-industrial era, which mirrored, in part, a longer term movement towards a new public administration.

The overall result is that, since the 1970s, community participation in many ways has become an umbrella term for a supposedly new genre of development intervention (Tosun, 2000) and an ideology in tourism planning, akin to the participatory planning ideologies of 1970s in urban and regional planning (Fagence, 1977). However, Tosun (2000) claims that the practicality of a participatory tourism development approach in developing countries has not been considered in detail because the concept has emerged and been refined in the context of developed countries. Also, it has been popularised by advocates writing on developed countries such as Murphy (1985), Gunn (1988), Haywood (1988), Blank (1989), Keogh (1990), Simmons (1994), and Reed (1997).

It is argued by Woodley (1993) that a community-based approach to tourism development is a prerequisite to sustainability. Hence, Getz and Jamal (1994) refer to the 'environment-community symbiosis' as the concept of community involvement moves nearer to the centre of sustainability debate. Notable among advocates of participatory planning in tourism development has been Murphy, who has argued for an issue-oriented involvement of

residents in decisions at an early stage in the decision process, before commitments are made. He has termed this process as a *community approach* (1985) and a *community driven approach* (1988). Murphy's stance has been developed in reaction to externally derived tourism development, and as such is similar in derivation to the urban and regional planning debates of the 1970s, which flowed from the reactions of academics (Davies 1972; Dennis 1972) and residents threatened with unwanted developments (Gregory 1971; Perman 1973).

Murphy's (1985) model of an ecological approach to tourism planning is a simplification of complex processes and no proportionality or relativity should be implied. The spatial perspective, with its associated hierarchy, is represented by the community scale boxes in Figure 1. These are discrete jurisdictional systems, each with their own priorities and goals, and their scale is indicative of their size of operations. The physical, economic, socio-cultural and exchange components of the community's ecology are portrayed as continuums to illustrate their continuous nature and have been joined to show they are interrelated. The negative and positive signs represent situations where a component is undeveloped or over-developed with regard to the community's tourism carrying capacity. An ecological model would be achieved at some mid-point where all the components can function without being threatened.

Source: Murphy (1985)

Figure 1: The Tourism Community

Getz also identifies a community-oriented approach as one of the four broad traditions of tourism planning. Getz claims that the four traditions (boosterism, economic-industry, physical-spatial and community oriented approaches) are neither mutually exclusive, nor they are necessarily sequential. Nevertheless, this categorisation is a convenient way to examine the different and sometimes overlapping ways in which tourism is planned, and the research and planning methods, problems and models associated with each (Getz, 1987, cited in Hall, 2000). Table 1 outlines the characteristics of a community-oriented approach.

Table 1: Community-oriented Approach

Underlying assumptions and related attitudes	Definition of tourism planning problem	Examples of related methods	Examples of related models	Examples of related literature
Need for local control	How to foster community control?	Community development	Ecological view of community	Murphy 1985 Blank 1989 Macbeth 1997
Search for balanced development	Understanding community attitudes towards tourism	Awareness and education	Social/perceptual carrying capacity	
Search for alternatives to mass tourism	Understanding the impacts of tourism on a community	Attitudinal surveys	Attitudinal change	
Planner as facilitator rather than expert	Social impact	Social impact assessment	Social multiplier	
Development defined in socio-cultural terms				

Source: Hall (2000)

In relation to the above, Getz (1983) has recommended more attention be given to planning and initiatives from the bottom up, while Rosenow and Pulsipher (1979) have suggested a personality planning approach that attempts to identify those elements which make a community unique and brings this tourism appeal into a meaningful package for both residents and the industry. Tosun and Jenkins (1996) argue that a central planning approach has its limitations and cannot guide community participation in tourism development. Therefore, a regional or a destination specific planning approach is the only appropriate scale, which may encourage community participation in tourism development.

According to Pizam and Marien (1997), there are many techniques available for community participation in the tourism planning process. Since many participation programmes have failed because the wrong techniques were implemented, it is important that the techniques chosen be based primarily on the participation objectives, which can be broadly divided into two categories: administrative objectives or citizens' objectives. Techniques of administrative objectives are those which best satisfy the local government's needs for public participation in tourism planning, while the citizens' objectives techniques are those that satisfy the citizens' needs for taking an active part in the tourism development process. The best participation programmes strike a balance between administrative and citizen expectations for participation.

Community Participation in the Planning Process in Malaysia

The practice of allowing the general public to contribute to the formulation of town plans is believed to be as old as the introduction of urban planning in the country. The Town Planning Enactment of the Federated Malay States of 1927 provided for the general town plans to be displayed for the public to make objections and to propose recommendations about the plans. Similar arrangements for public participation also existed under the provisions of *Cap 137 Part IX* (Goh, 1991). However, the public in the past was allowed to

participate only after the draft plan had been completed, and the participation was limited to making objections to what the planners had already proposed.

Under the provisions of *TCPA (Town and Country Planning Act) of 1976*, public participation is mandatory during the formulation stage of a plan and after the draft plan is approved. In drawing up a structure or a local plan, the legal provisions for public participation as contained in the Act state that the local authority must:

- give adequate publicity to both the report of survey on which the plan is based and the policy which the planners propose to be included in the plan;
- provide publicity for its proposals and provide adequate opportunity to enable representations to be made by the public;
- take into account the representations in drawing up the plans;
- place the plan on deposit for public inspection, together with a statement of the time within which objections may be made to the proper authority; and
- submit the plan to the State Planning Committee together with a statement of the steps which have been taken to comply with the requirements (GOM, 1976).

The minimum necessary approach takes the forms of publicity in the newspaper, exhibition, briefing, public representative meeting and public objection meeting. However, Shamsudin (2000) argues that, since the early 1980s, this standardised approach to holding public participation has been based predominantly on consultation, mostly typified by a one-way communication process. Over the years, suggestions were made to improve this situation, but these were merely concerned with managerial and procedural aspect than with substantive aspect of participation itself (Shamsudin, 2000). These relate to placement of exhibits in various locations, reducing the scale of participation exercises and wording of its notification in the newspaper.

According to Goh (1991), there are four major assumptions underpinning effective public participation in Malaysia. These are knowledge of the planning process, availability of information, representativeness of participants and a high degree of political sophistication. The following discussion argues whether the socio-economic and political conditions in Malaysia fulfil these requirements.

i) Knowledge of the Planning Process

It is basically true to say that there is lack of knowledge of the planning process in the country because Malaysians generally do not know the current planning practices, let alone the numerous substantive areas upon which planning decisions are based (Goh, 1991). The two main reasons are the participatory approach is rather new and the planning practice is rapidly changing. It is very difficult for non-practitioners to keep abreast with the latest practice and its theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, the general public have traditionally been denied the opportunity to participate in the formulation of five-year national development plans and other sectoral plans, such as the Industrial Master Plan and National Agricultural Policy, although the plans were made public after the Cabinet had given its approval. In the case of regional and master plans and master plans of major infrastructure projects, the plans are prepared in complete secrecy and remain as official documents, even after they are approved by the relevant authorities. From the planners' perspective, it is also important they are not engaged in excessive data manipulation, planning jargons and complicated modelling techniques, which tend to overwhelm the lay citizens into agreeing with what they propose (Goh, 1991).

ii)   Availability of Information

Goh (1991) argues that there is still a serious lack of access to government data and information in Malaysia, which is partly compounded by the mass media failure to disseminate information to the public. In addition, the government, which is the biggest data source, is stringent in disseminating the information. The amendment to the *Official Secrets Act* in 1986 leads to even stricter control of information from the government to the public. However, there are some favourable trends, in which some government departments have been producing good annual reports, containing useful information. Special interest groups, known as non-governmental organisations, have also played an important role in raising the consciousness of the general public on planning issues through their seminars and publications. Not surprisingly, active non-governmental organisations have always been sceptical about public participation exercises, and they view it as window dressing, tokenism and a public relation ploy played on the public (Raman, 1994), and a common complaint is nothing comes out from such exercises.

iii)   Representativeness of Participants

In Malaysia, the need for effective public participation is particularly important because local councillors are appointed by the State government, and not elected by the people. It is most likely that these appointed councillors are members of the political parties which form the State government, and they may not truly represent the interests of the electorates in the local authority area. In addition, public participation, in practice, is also limited to very few people, mainly the articulate and concerned individuals and leaders of organisations and community groups. As Maurice Broady pointed out in 1963, it is neither possible nor desirable to involve everyone in the formulation of development plans:

> 'The activity of responsible social criticisms is not congenial to more than a minority. Most of us for most of the time are content to remain complacently acquiescent in our social niche… The activist, the social critic, the reformer, will always be a small section of any society. Their activities require not only an extra effort which few are willing to expand, but also the ability to criticise and organise which comparatively few possess' (quoted in Cullingworth, 1985, p. 378).

A majority of the public do not seem to be interested in attending public meetings or exhibitions because they may be acquiescent to the decision-making policy of the few. It is felt that participation is a phenomenon conducive to an elitist environment, and attendance at meetings are usually from political groups, NGOs, business associations and other pressure groups (Sheikh Long, 1988).

iv)   High Degree of Political Sophistication

The government in Malaysia is highly centralised and power is concentrated in the hands of a few people. In developing countries, it is common for a limited number of people or one individual from the privileged class to have the voice in social decision-making. The conventional power structures in systems governed by patriarchal rulers commonly exclude most population groups from decision-making and preclude them from participation in the benefits of tourism (Singh *et al*., 2003). With the exception of the short-lived election of local councillors and its subsequent abrogation, the decision-making structure of local

authorities in Malaysia is largely a closed one, with considerable State influence at the local authority level. Decision-making is largely based on centralisation of command and hierarchy of authority, there being limited devolution of state power to local authorities (Shamsudin, 2000). It is, therefore, difficult to envisage a situation where the public can participate effectively in the development plan-making process.

It is not only the case where politicians and planners are not willing to share power, but it is also the citizens themselves who are not able to make effective representations. In fact, researchers and practitioners have often argued that much of the confusion regarding the function and desired output of public participation in planning is due to its lack appreciation of the political process, in which it operates (Styles, 1971; Damer and Hague, 1971; Whitehead, 1976; Boaden *et al.*, 1980; Bruton, 1980; Healey, 1983). Sociologists and academicians, in particular, have gone to the extent of suggesting that radical institutional changes have to be made prior to any participatory programmes for public participation to be meaningful and beneficial to the public (Styles, 1971; Damer and Hague, 1971; Whitehead, 1976; Boaden *et al.*, 1980; Tewdwr-Jones, 1999).

These two aspects of political process and institutional decision-making process have a great bearing on whether meaningful participation can be fully realised, given the value systems of technocracy among planners and a legacy of non-participatory bureaucratic administrative culture in Malaysia (Shamsudin, 2000). Shamsudin (2000) further argues that the introduction of participatory democracy appears at odds with varying levels of tension within the existing decision-making structures and plan-making process. According to Goh (1991), the present power-holders, namely the politicians and government planners, must realise that they do not have absolute power in deciding what is good for the people. The politicians must realise that in being elected into the State Assembly or appointed as local councillors, they are only entrusted to lead and not to make all decisions for those who elect them. Similarly for the planners, their planning qualifications do not give them absolute right to say that they are the only experts and they know what is best for the people.

From the technocratic and elite's perspective, the success of participation is seen as 'an end in itself' rather than as 'a means to an end' (Rosener, 1978, 1981). The latter entails greater participation in nature and public benefit. The minimum publicity requirements as specified by the Act are examples conforming to the former, whereas dialogue sessions and greater involvement in strategy formulation akin to a decision-forming partnership are examples of participation as 'a means to an end'. Shamsudin (2000) argues that the level of public participation in Malaysia sits in the first lower quarter of the Arnstein ladder, ranging from no participation to tokenism, and the involvement of NGOs in special committee on certain issues were merely seen as co-optation. Likewise, Goh (1991) agrees that participation in Malaysia is more in the form of informing rather than sharing powers to decide on policies and strategies.

On a positive note, many young planners have social science background and are willing to incorporate a rich source of public views (Shamsudin, 2000). The trend is towards participation and the public has responded to the opportunities provided by the planners, although the progress is painfully slow (Goh, 1991). The Malaysian Institute of Planners helps to educate the public about the planning process by publishing booklets and distributing them freely to non-governmental organisations and schools. Meanwhile, many local authorities are currently promoting the non-statutory Agenda 21 strategies that cover a wide range of issues including public participation, sustainable development, conservation and pollution. The concept of public participation is, therefore, increasingly seen as a basis for legitimation. There is a likelihood that public participation in Malaysia will move up the rungs on Arnstein's ladder in the future.

Research Methodology

The objective of this paper is to appraise the prevailing planning practice and community mechanism at grass root levels in rural areas, particularly in tourism context. The study adopted the *emic*-study method by conducting in-depth interviews among planners, government officers, chieftain (penghulu) and village heads in Perlis State Park (PSP) and Ulu Muda areas, where the main fieldwork had been conducted. In principle, informant samples for qualitative research tend to be relatively smaller and non-random, and the selection of interview informants is also driven by objectives other than generalisability.

The initial steps in data analysis involve methodical procedures to classify and organise data, and thematic analysis approach is used to organise this raw information. There are a number of competencies to use thematic analysis effectively: 1) *pattern recognition* is the ability to see patterns in seemingly random information, 2) *openness and flexibility* of the researcher to perceive the patterns, 3) *planning and systems thinking* that enable a person to organise his or her observations into a usable system, that others can use or the person can use consistently at other times, and 4) *relevant knowledge* to the area being studied (Boyatzis, 1998). In the first stage of thematic analysis, the researcher must be able to 'sense themes' or to recognise the codable moment. The next stage is to develop a coding scheme inductively and manually, which involves giving names to codes only when the notes and analysis start suggesting possible labels, in order to capture the essence of the observations and to organise concepts from the transcripts. The themes are then clustered into main headings, which are juxtaposed against one another to ensure they are conceptually distinct. These are further discussed in the section that follows.

Findings of Research

The findings indicate that the level of community participation in tourism planning process is very minimal; one main reason is lack of planning awareness among the general public in Malaysia. In a similar discussion, Goh (1991) agrees that the public have been denied the opportunity to participate because there is lack of knowledge of the planning process and lack of access to government data and information. As a result, a majority of the public generally do not understand the current planning theory and practice.

To substantiate this claim, Goh (1991) revealed that the number of people, in terms of percentage of the population, who visited exhibition was very small, ranging from one to four per cent. Interestingly, the findings disclose that public attendance is usually good at the beginning of public meetings and exhibitions, which are normally held for a certain fixed period. Some other determinants that affect participation level are location of meetings and types of communities. The findings further indicate that urban communities are more aware of their rights to participate, and the Chinese community, as compared to the Malays, even engage consultants to speak on their behalf during public meetings and dialogue sessions. In one particular case, public participation in rural areas is claimed to be better due to demographic homogeneity, social cohesiveness and collective responsibility of rural society. One respondent argues that individualism is more prevalent in urban areas.

The above discussion raises the question of effective representation of a cross section of the population in the planning process. Both the literature (Singh *et al*., 2003) and findings agree that there is lack of representation from the poorer sections of the population. In addition, there is no progressive planner to advocate for the poor because advocacy planning is not well established in Malaysia. This situation is characterised by select involvement rather than broad participation of all community members, which is an important prerequisite for effective public participation (Smith, 1984).

The literature (Shamsudin, 2000) claims that it is difficult to envisage a situation where the public can participate effectively in tourism planning process in Malaysia. Local councilors are appointed by the State government, and the decision-making structure of local authorities is largely a closed one. Shamsudin (2000) argues that participatory democracy is at odds with the technocracy value system among planners and non-participatory bureaucratic administrative culture in the decision-making and political process in Malaysia. In fact, the findings reveal that few planners go beyond the normal practice to reach out to these non-joiners.

As a result, the participatory approach, as indicated in the findings, takes the form of consultation only. It is often regarded as a one-way communication process because planners seldom give feedback to the community due to a strong culture of paternalism. Planners perceive that not much can be received from extensive local involvement. Similarly, some local people are in the opinion that planning is a governmental activity that rarely involves them. In addition, local communities, particularly in rural areas, are not anti-development and tend to agree on government plan especially if it benefits them.

The above situation is a classic example of tokenism (Arnstein, 1969) or pseudo participation (Painter, 1992), which is restricted to processes such as informing and endorsement rather than sharing powers to decide on policies and strategies (Goh, 1991). Raman (1994) depicts community participation as public relation ploys played on the public, and nothing comes out from such exercises. From an elite's perspective, participation is seen as 'an end in itself' (Rosener, 1981), and the final power to make decisions is reserved with the authority holder.

There are several other obstacles to the bottom-up tourism planning approach. Lack of capital is one major hurdle because local people do not have the financial capability to plan independently without government assistance. Likewise, the literature (Singh *et al.*, 2003) suggests that inadequate funding is one major limitation to community tourism planning. There also appears to be redundancy among bottom-up planning applications, which can cause delay. However, planners do not look at it negatively because the extra costs, due to delays, will be borne by the government. The reports, plans and exhibit materials are also too technical and incomprehensible. Goh (1991) argues that excessive planning jargon and data manipulation tend to overwhelm the ordinary citizens into agreeing what the planners propose. The findings further claim that local people are perceived to be unable to make intelligent decisions. Ironically, in many cases, government views overrule community ideas because local people are seen not to be used to coming up with their own ideas. This exemplifies a beneficiary approach (Brandon, 1993), in which local people receive benefits but are not empowered and purposely excluded from the decision-making process.

Public participation in rural areas is limited to infrastructure planning because the provision of basic infrastructures is still inadequate in many rural areas. Most planning applications are for basic amenities and not for economic activities. Despite the prevailing top-down planning practice, some top-down development projects are unsuccessful because government authorities have failed to fulfill community needs. If communities are involved in the planning process, Wates (2000) claims that better decisions are expected because they are the best source of knowledge about their surroundings.

In a related development, the findings indicate that the Village Development and Security Committee or the JKKK, is seen by many respondents as a proper channel to voice or represent local opinions to government authorities. JKKK is an organisation of leadership at the grass roots level, and it acts as a government mechanism to facilitate development in rural areas. However, there are various factors that hinder this community mechanism from functioning effectively.

The most commonly highlighted issue is political intervention from the government as JKKK is seen as a government instrument at the village level. This is true because the Chief Minister has a vested power to appoint committee members based on recommendations of the respective local representatives, and individual loyalty is judged as the main selection criterion above individual capability and academic qualification. As a result, elements of favouritism are evident in Ulu Muda especially in dispensing government subsidies because the constituency is under the political control of an opposition party. There are also cases of subsidies being distributed among their cronies and next of kin because some committee members hold positions for personal interest.

While the literature (Ramlan, 2003) acknowledges that many committee members lack education, communication and leadership skills. The findings add that some of them are old and not proactive enough to initiate development ideas. Both literature and findings disclose that some of them are not fully committed and too preoccupied with their main economic activities, which have resulted in some of the committees being inactive. They also complain that the allowance received is too small, and it is not commensurate with the amount of voluntary responsibilities that even include personal matters of the villagers.

As a voluntary organisation, JKKK can only be managed part-time by its members. Therefore, in order to improve this mechanism, the literature (Ramlan, 2003) suggests that JKKK should be administered full-time by qualified staff and be appraised annually by the relevant development agency. Specific training courses on personal development, leadership and village administration should be emphasised since JKKK's effectiveness depends to a large extent upon its leaders and committee members. In a positive development, the findings reveal that recent trend has observed younger generation and white-collar workers joining this institution, and has injected new mindset and outlook into this community mechanism.

Conclusion

As evident from this study, in general, there is rarely a quick fix or blueprint because each community needs to carefully design its own community planning strategy to suit local conditions. Public participation is actually a notoriously difficult concept to be operationalised (Arnstein, 1969). Some basic conditions and prerequisites, as being discussed extensively in this paper, have to be satisfied before it can take place. Nevertheless, the recent amendment of *Town and Country Planning Act 1976* recognises the importance of greater public participation, which is part of the current trend towards democratisation of society (Wates, 2000). The trend is in the right direction although the progress is slow (Goh, 1991). Young planners are now willing to incorporate public views, and many local authorities are promoting Local Agenda 21. Public participation is seen as a basis for legitimation. Despite the favourable trend, the findings suggest that it will be politically contentious to fully adopt bottom-up approach in Malaysia because effective public participation requires radical institutional changes. Therefore, it is argued that the combination of top-down and bottom-up is the best approach because they complement and reinforce one another (Inskeep, 1994).

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