

Organizational, Operational and Interactional Processes of People's Participation in Community Activities in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study focuses particularly on how people living as one community organize themselves to fulfill their needs and expectations through various groups, as revealed and directed by respondents in the research process. Therefore, the analysis and interpretation of the data is based on the people's expressed experiences of participating in such processes by treating those experiences as one entity, regardless of the type of groups they represented.

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Introduction

This study focuses on the people's participation process in conducting their community activities. It describes the interaction and operational processes by which community members mobilized themselves to organize and plan their activities, and subsequently participated to implement and manage them based on mutual agreement. While describing these processes, important elements in discussing people's participation, the decision making process and the way they solved their internal group problems, are also examined. It is important to note here that the decision making process not only took place at the planning stage but in some community groups this process also took place at the implementing and managing stages. Hence, the central issue in discussing people's participation will be examined in both stages; organizing and planning, and implementing and managing. The type of people's participation will be examined at these stages. This study also discusses the development of leadership and the role played by the leaders in initiating, mobilizing, enabling, facilitating, campaigning, leading, and directing the community work and community development activities. In short, this study examines the process whereby people are exercising their capabilities, individually and collectively, in participating towards achieving their common needs or expectations, and solving the shared problems faced, in their respective groups. The information gathered is mainly based on interviews and observations, supplemented by secondary recorded materials provided by them.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-ethnographic approach that uses a flexibility and open-ended framework of research design. In this kind of interactive research, the basic aim of the whole process of the research activity is not only to gain information and to understand the meaning and process of participation. This study, which can be classified as the 'knowledge-development research' in Thomas's community work research typology (Thomas, 1980), emphasizes the process approach: describing and analyzing the people's participation experience, rather than examining participation through a snapshot approach as in a quantitative study. The interactive and responsive techniques of data collection of in-depth and follow-up interviews, and group discussions advocated by this approach allowed the people to be directly involved in the research process and helped to facilitate an understanding of their participation in the activities of the community (Asnarulkhadi & Aref, 2009).

Literature Review

Participation is a dynamic process. Participation is considered as an important factor for successful and prosperity of local development (Aref et al., 2010). Hence, it is difficult to predict or even to quantify using a standard 'measurement'. Participation is rather molded by, and originates from, individuals' experiences in participating. As such, the qualitative-ethnographic approach employed in this study was able to assist in understanding the process of people's

participation in community development activities. This approach has also helped to deepen the knowledge about participation itself (Asnarulkhadi & Aref, 2009). Community participation processes can support and uphold local culture, tradition, knowledge and skill, and create pride in community heritage (Lacy et al., 2002). Ashley & Roe, (1998) describe community participation as a spectrum from passive to active involvement to full local participation, where there is active community participation and venture ownership. Community participation also is the mechanism for active community involvement in partnership working, decision making and representation in community structures (Chapman & Kirk, 2001). It should be noted that community participation often means the involvement of people or community with the government. Numerous studies about community participation have been published (Aref et al., 2010; Bozlul, 1994). However, this study emphasized the participation of the community as an involvement of local people in community activities processes.

Findings & Discussion

Organizing and Planning

It is obvious that the outcome of people's empowerment is objectified and manifested in the activities implemented by the various types of groups. However, prior to that the process of how the community or group members engaged themselves in organizing, planning, implementing, and sustaining the group activities resulted from their awareness to take their own initiative to achieve the shared goals within the existing structure to improve the community living situation is an important aspect of understanding people's empowerment. In order to understand this it is necessary to explore the people's participation and their interaction process in organizing and planning the activity. This can be examined in three ways: first, in the pre-group process; second, in the group process; and lastly, in the decision making process. In practice, the second and third stages took place simultaneously and will therefore be examined together.

Pre-group process

Before deciding on any activity, it is common practice among all community groups to invite members to attend a group meeting or discussion. Most of the group leaders interviewed mentioned that they had invited their group members to plan and organize the activities. The practice of

informing members about group meetings was not only restricted to the younger leaders, who mostly led the formal or 'modern' type community groups as portrayed above, but was also used by the 'traditional' type of community groups that were led by middle aged women, such as the self-help Group. From the descriptions above it can be seen that inviting group members to organize or plan an activity in a meeting is a normal practice of the leaders. Although the date for the meeting is decided by the leaders themselves, their efforts to inform the members about the meeting shows that they realize the importance of a meeting and are able to organize themselves. At this point, it can be deduced that the leaders' participation in encouraging their members to attend the meeting, through his or her personal invitation shows that, from the point view of the leaders and the local activists, the group process in organizing and planning an activity is an important aspect of organizing the activity.

Group Process

The actual group process normally takes place in a meeting. There are two types of group meeting; formal and informal. Formal group meetings are practiced by the Youth Club, Mosque Committee, and the Anti-Drugs Campaign Committee. From their files and by personal attendance, it was found that these groups have formalized their meetings. Prior to the meeting, each group produces an agenda and keeps updated minutes of meetings. The informal meetings are practiced by four neighborhood groups; the self-help groups, the Crockery Association/ Rice and Egg Cooperative, the Community Death Fund Association, and the Women's Study Circle group. In comparison with the other groups, these informal groups do not have proper agendas for their meetings. Decisions made during the meetings are recorded in a small book or diary, which is kept by the leaders. The exception is the self-help group, which does not possess any sort of documentation.

In practice, both types of group meetings (informal and formal) eventually end up as group discussions. Group meetings are a focal point for most community group members to sit together in discussing, planning and deciding on their group activities. Since different groups have different ways of planning their activities, and because within the same group different activities demand different ways of organizing, the experiences gained by the members in these meetings (at the planning stage) are different. In general, from the information gathered it could be deduced that

there are two functions of having a group meeting; first as a medium for sharing and communicating ideas and problems and making decisions, and second as a medium for requesting, directing and informing. These two distinctive functions of group meetings employed by the community groups eventually influence the group members' participation in the decision making process, as explained below. In other words, it is within group meetings that the process and level of peoples' participation in planning emerges simultaneously.

Type of participation

In general, from the experiences described by the respondents at the planning stage, there are four types of participation in community work practice:

- Self-directed participation
- Joint-participation
- Leader directed/induced participation
- Externally directed participation

This division is not a rigid classification, but is based on one fundamental dimension, that is the process within which the activity is decided: how and who determines the activity for the people and to what extent a group has 'a say' in the decision making process. The degree, type of participation and community activity is as shown in Table 1.

In self-directed participation, the group members themselves decide the type of activity, then design and plan it - they decide the time, identify content, budget, strategies and tactics, and finally organize members to carry out the activity. In this type of participation, members have direct control over their own project or activities, which indicates that they have the opportunity and capacity to control their own affairs to fulfill their needs and expectations. They have the chance to utilize and develop their abilities, skills, confidence and competency to shape the activity that they pursue to achieve their targeted goals and every member has the opportunity and power to decide for themselves.

Table 1: Degree of Participation, Type of Participation and Activities

Degree	Type of Participation	Activities
High ↑ ----- ↓ Low	Self-directed participation	Community-Initiated Self-help and community care activity. Islamic Family Course My Home My Heaven project . Meat Market project. Community sport. Religious talks/communal feasts/ religious classes Cooking, craft work & sewing classes (WSA). Religious School, Religious Camp .Campaigning for better school project .Motivational Training project .Bill Paying Service project Neighborhood watch project (for drugs abuser)
	Joint-participation	Partnership Group Replanting Scheme
	Leader-directed participation	Leader-Induced Greening the village project Book Corner project
	External-directed participation	External-directed All competition activities Social gathering; and .Exhibitions organized by WI District level

Thus, the activity that offers the greatest opportunities for members to identify, choose and decide for themselves in the decision making process, possesses a high degree of people's participation. It can be said that community members are in control of their lives and possess the ability to affect the development process

through participating in self-initiated activities or projects.

Self-directed participation is not limited to describing the features of people's participation in the community-initiated groups. People's participation in the WSA (and its activities - cooking, craft work and sewing classes), and in the Meat Market project organized by the Mosque

Committee can also be considered as self-directed participation, even though the group is under the auspices of, sponsored and patronized by, the state agency, RISDA and the State Islamic Department respectively. This is because the initiation of the group (WSA) and its activities was decided by the women members themselves, aimed at improving their situation in the village, while the Meat Market project aims to offer services for the whole community during the festival session. Therefore, the whole process of participation, in identifying and deciding the activities is similar to that of self-directed participation in the community-initiated activities of the community-based groups.

When a project is joint-ventured, the activity is conducted along the lines of a partnership. In the case of rubber replanting program, RISDA had to accept the decision of the people. Through a series of meetings between both parties (RISDA and the settlers) and followed-up by group discussions among the settlers, they chose the GRS, rejecting the mini-estate scheme. At this point, the people (the settlers) had the power to decide and choose the option that would be most beneficial to them, and subsequently to influence the decision of the authorities. However, since the activity involved bureaucratic procedures and the funding came from the state as the patron, the people's control over the project was restricted within certain regulations and by-laws outlined by the state agency. The GRC established by the settlers provided a platform for the members to decide certain issues pertain to the activity and act as the settlers' representative body in choosing the contractors and monitoring their work in the plantation. This was based on advice given by RISDA personnel, although the GRC had the right to select one of the few bidders. It is the responsibility of the GRC to monitor the contractors work and keep account of the money allocated for the scheme. Monitoring the quality of work performed by the contractor so that, allowing for the budget, the work schedule was met in accordance with the replanting guidelines encouraged members to decide their tactics and strategies in supervising the contractor's work. It is within this context that settlers have the power to control the contractor to ensure they are not being cheated.

An activity that is put forward by a leader for the members to carry out is the basic characteristic of leader-directed/induced participation. In this kind of participation, although members are requested to carry out a particular project, they have the opportunity to decide how to carry it out: the

launch date, organizing manpower and so forth. Since this type of activity is inspired by the leader, and thought to be beneficial for the community at large, it has the potential to be more empowering if members make full use of opportunities to influence the outcome of the project. As far as collective decision making is concerned, leader-induced participation to some extent has undermined the critical stage, the group process in deciding and prioritizing the type of activity needed, where the meeting can be used to redefine and reemphasize the reason for initiating the activity.

On the other hand, in externally directed participation, the arena for members to exercise their power to choose an activity is taken away from them, and instead, they are obliged to follow the directive of the higher-level organization, as experienced by the *WI Kg. Barem*. Being under the patronage of the District WI and strictly devoted to carry out the activity planned by higher management means that they are being co-opted. The only decision they have is in determining who should be sent to represent the local WI group in the district competition. This type of decision-making is not empowering enough to encourage and motivate group members to develop their abilities and skill to determine for them, compared with the community initiated activity. Therefore, it was a wise step taken by the WI members to be involved in helping to plan, implement and manage some of the joint-ventured activities with other local community groups as this action probably complements the 'vacuum' that they experience in participating in the directed-activities. In short, these four different types of participation set the pattern for the process of members' involvement in planning, implementing and managing the group activities. It is within this participation process that people showed their commitment and ability to utilize their inherent skills and knowledge to achieve group goals, as well as developing and constructing the features of community development they want, and at the same time increase and develop their own competencies.

Conclusion

The study showed organizational, operational and interactional processes of people's participation in community activities in Malaysia. The position between leaders and members is diffused between community groups. In one group a respondent is an ordinary member but in another group the same respondent may act as leader. Due to this,

one can see that the role of a respondent varies from being an initiator in one group or just an ordinary member in another. It is not unusual for some respondents to play different roles in different community groups. From the in-depth interviews and observations made in this study, it was found that all the respondents are involved in various forms of participation in conducting an activity in at least in one of the groups they were involved in. 'Form of participation' here is defined as an individual action in organizing the activity. There are three forms of people's participation, which emerged out of the induction and deduction process of analysis. First, giving ideas; second, task, work or role performed; and third, attending the group meetings. In general, all three forms of involvement are present in all group activities, but the degree of participation varies.

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