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Decision making and community participation: A case study of the tourism industry in Langkawi

Abstract

Community participation is regarded as an important tool for successful tourism planning. Western scholars generally agree that active community participation in the decision making process will benefit local communities. However, in developing countries, such participation is difficult to put into practice because of shortcomings in structural and operational limitations in the tourism development process. A study in Langkawi Islands, Malaysia was conducted from March to July 2004 to explore and identify weaknesses in, and constraints upon current community participation in tourism planning. The study adopts a mixed method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies involving local residents in Langkawi and stakeholders in the tourism industry. This study found three main problems in the existing participation approaches of tourism planning in Langkawi: (1) inadequate information about the participation process; (2) limitations in participation procedures; and, (3) local residents' negative attitudes towards the process. Finally based on the study's findings, several suggestions are put forward for a future approach of community participation in tourism planning in the study area. This study recommends that a future participation framework should provide an alternative for optimum involvement with a potential for a higher participation level.

Keywords:

tourism planning; community participation; decision-making; Langkawi; Malaysia

Introduction

Tourism is an important mechanism for economic development and the creation of employment opportunities in many countries (De Kadt, 1979; Wahab, 2000). This has attracted attention from the governments of developing countries looking to maximize economic benefits from tourism development in their own countries. Many developing countries have tried to exploit the tourism industry for economic stimulation by getting foreign investment, capital, and surplus from currency exchange.

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However, even though the economic achievements from tourism are recognised by the government, their response to public participation during the stages of tourism planning is questionable. Local community participation in the decision-making process is always limited or sometimes marginalized, particularly in developing countries (Edelmann, 1975; Lea, 1988). Local communities not only fail to participate in the decision making process, but also fall short in maximising the benefits of tourism development (France, 1998; Scheyvens, 2003).

The involvement of many stakeholders, such as government agencies, private companies, and non-government organizations (NGOs) in tourism planning justify the importance of public contribution in the decision making process. In fact, public participation in tourism planning does not only relate to the decision making process and the benefits of tourism development, but is also regarded as an integral part to sustainable tourism (Green, 1995; Leslie, 1993; Murphy, 1988).

Thus, this article was extracted from a study of public participation in the decision-making process of tourism planning in the Langkawi Islands. It aims to identify the weaknesses of the existing participation process and suggest ways of improving future public involvement in tourism planning for Langkawi.

The Langkawi Islands in Malaysia was chosen as a case study for two reasons. First, based on studies done by Din in 1993 and Mohd Saad in 1998, it was found that during the public participation process, local residents only participated in the early stage, not in the decision-making process. Consequently, most of the issues related to tourism planning failed to address the needs of local residents which need further investigation to identify the causes of the limitation in the existing participation approach. Secondly, the researcher's familiarity with Langkawi was thought to be very helpful during the data collection process.

The community

Hillery (1955, p. 65) after reviewing 94 community definitions concluded that '*no agreement had been achieved but every definition deal with people*'. However, he found that the term of community covered three importance components: area, common ties and social interaction, in which Butcher, Glen, Henderson and Smith. (1993) have identified three distinct features with a strong relationship with, in the term of community:

- Descriptive community,
- Community as value,
- Active community.

They identify two further distinctions within descriptive community. The first is territorial community, which refers to people who might be a part of geographical location such as a town or village. The second is interest community, which does not refer to a place but is the influence of other characteristics such as occupation, ethnicity, religion etc.

The distinction by Butcher *et al.* (1993) clearly shows that the term, community, has a strong relationship with physical and social elements such as location and ethnicity. However, to identify the community as a value and active community are quite difficult and required a longer period of study. Therefore, based on the descriptive community definition, the identification of local community of this study was referred to geographical location of the Langkawi Islands.

Public participation in tourism planning

According to Brager and Specht (1973, p. 47) public participation referred to *'the means by which people who are not elected or appointed officials of agencies and of government influence decisions about programs and policies which affect their lives'*. While the Skeffington Report (1969, p. 72) defined public participation as *'a sharing action to formulate policies and proposal'*, a complete participation only happens when the public are allowed to participate actively in the planning process.

Slocum and Thomas-Slayter (1995) explain that the public need to participate during the decision-making process for their personal interests as well as for that of the society more broadly since planning activities affect public lives. In addition, several arguments on the importance of participation process developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2002) are viewed for further explanation (Table 1).

Table 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

Why the participation process is important?	
Citizens' arguments	<p>We have a right to say about decisions that affect our lives.</p> <p>We know more about where we live and what we want and what is best for us than people working for big organisations.</p> <p>We are fed up with politicians and civil servants asking us what we think and then not taking our views into account. We want to be actively involved and to have an influence.</p> <p>We all have something to contribute and our ideas and views are as valid as anyone else's.</p>
Professionals' arguments	<p>Community participation can help us target resources more effectively and efficiently.</p> <p>Involving people in planning and delivering services allows them to become more responsive to needs and therefore increase uptake.</p> <p>Community participation methods can help develop skills and build competency and capacities within communities.</p> <p>Involving communities in decision making will lead to better decisions being made, which in turn are more sustainable because they are owned by the people themselves.</p> <p>Community participation is a way of extending the democratic process, of opening up governance, and of redressing inequality in power.</p> <p>Community participation offers new opportunities for creative thinking and innovative planning and development.</p>

Source: World Health Organisation (2002, p. 11).

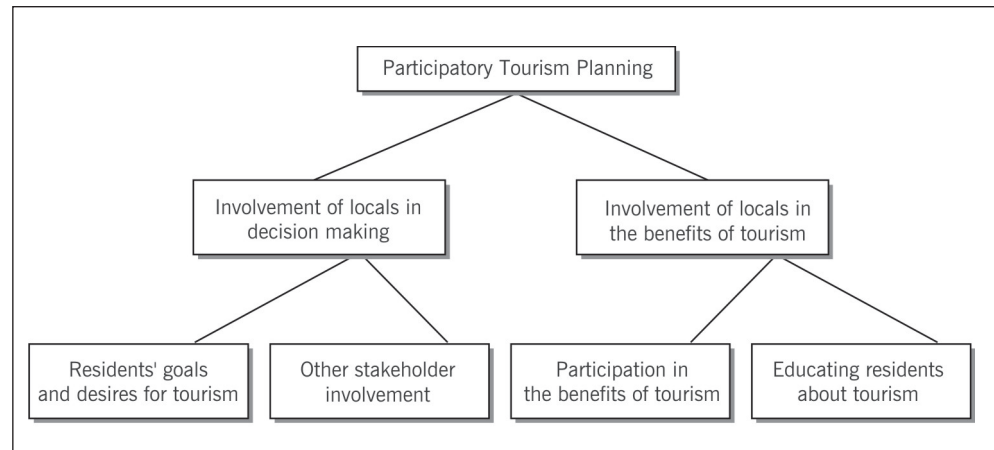
In the WHO summary (2002), participation process was considered as a channel for citizens to voice opinions and get involved in the decision-making process. The professionals agreed that involving citizens could contribute towards better decision-making and target resources more efficiently. Public participation also should be used to educate citizens and increase their awareness by being more responsive. Then, it could become as a way to minimise political and administration interference that could probably extend the democratic process and balance inequality of power.

It shows that public participation is not only important in the planning system, but also has a big role to bring the executive decision from the top to the bottom level of the planning process.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 1, public participation in tourism planning is also vital for the decision-making process and the benefits of tourism development (Timothy, 1999).

Figure 1

A NORMATIVE MODEL OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN TOURISM PLANNING



Source: Timothy (1999, p. 372).

Timothy's model shows that for full participation, the residents should be allowed to be involved in the decision-making process and receive the benefits from tourism development. However, involvement from other stakeholders is also important for long term development as well as providing education to local people about tourism. Looking at this model in a broader picture, participation in the decision-making process can be a catalyst to influence residents' perceptions about tourism development and involvement by other stakeholders.

For example, a study by Wall (1996) in Bali found that participation in the benefits of tourism development is important to gain positive perceptions from local residents. However, it should be started with educating the residents about tourism as Tosun (2000) and Din (1993) suggested that lack of knowledge in tourism not only could contribute to lack of awareness in participation, but will create a negative perception of tourism development.

Moreover, participation process also has the ability to build support for a proposed project, improve stakeholder relationships, and increase the agency credibility within the community. Through that improvement, the public will understand more about the agency responsibilities and it will create a good relationship which could guide involvement in tourism benefits. In a broad view, public participation will make the implementation of tourism policies become more effective. Local residents' participation in tourism is able to generate ideas and enhance opportunities for the governing agency to find tools for better tourism development.

Tourism planning in Malaysia

In Malaysia, government involvement in tourism development began in the 1970s; this followed an economic downturn and the decline in popularity and demand of commodity products, which caused the government to explore new resources, with the aim to improve Malaysia's economy (Government of Malaysia (GOM), 1976). This resulted in the establishment of the Tourism Development Corporation (TDC) in 1972 following the Pacific Association of Travel Agencies (PATA) conference in Kuala Lumpur.

Following the establishment of the TDC, the first Tourism Master Plan was completed in 1975 with help from international consultants. The plan provided a detailed explanation of the policies for tourism planning and development in Malaysia. However, the implementation of the 1975 Tourism Master Plan met with resistance from local residents, because of perceived negative social and cultural impacts that tourism could have on the local society. However, continuous efforts by the government and economic benefits resulting from tourism development have changed the residents' perception of the industry from a negative to a positive stance (Wells, 1982; Sharif, 2000).

Apart from the 1975 Tourism Master Plan, the national Five Years Plan, which is produced by the federal government every five years is also important in formulating the strategy for tourism planning and forecasting the progress of tourism development in Malaysia. The plan is used for statistics and budget allocation for tourism development in every state in Malaysia. It also outlines government policies and strategies for tourism development. The government also promotes Malaysia as a tourist destination for international visitors, by reference to Malaysia's political stability. All these policies are regarded as important to create a favourable image of Malaysia internationally. Additionally, the policies in the Third Five Year Plan (1976-1980) reveal that whilst community participation in tourism development is important (GOM, 1976); the focus is more on sharing the economic benefits rather than involvement in the decision-making process. The policies fail to explain how the public can be involved in the decision-making process.

In fact, there is no specific mechanism for the public to participate in tourism planning since the development process in the country is heavily controlled by state and local governments. The only opportunity for the public to voice their right in the decision-making is through the physical planning process (Structure Plan and Local Plan studies) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) studies. Therefore, both physical planning processes and EIA are reviewed here to investigate how they could provide opportunities for the public to participate in tourism planning.

Before the first National Physical Plan was completed in 2005, all the guidelines and strategies on physical development were based on the Structure Plan and the Malaysian Five Years Plan. However, the Five Years Plan only represents socio-economic matters, and the Structure Plan focuses on local perspectives, without any reference to the national level. After the amendment of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in 2001, Section 6B revealed the need for a National Physical Plan, which would be prepared by the Department of Town and Country Planning, and subjected to review in every five years, in parallel with the national Five Years Plan. Table 2 shows the hierarchy of development planning in Malaysia.

Table 2

THE HIERARCHY OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS IN MALAYSIA

Government level	Socio-economic plan hierarchy	Physical plan hierarchy (from July 2005)
Federal government	Five year plan	National physical plan
State government	Five year plan	Structure plan
Local government	Yearly budget	Local plan

Source: Goh (1988), Ibrahim (1999) and Federal Department of Town and Country Planning (2005).

The physical planning hierarchy in Malaysia provides opportunities for the public to participate in the Structure Plan and Local Plan. Compared to the socio-economic plan hierarchy (Five Years Plan), which focuses on socio-economic planning through policies formulations and budget allocation, the physical plan hierarchy (National Physical Plan, Structure Plan and Local Plan) reflects how the policies and strategies created in the Five Year Plan will be implemented at the state and local levels.

However, according to Langley (2002), the 'top down' administration system has caused some problems during implementation of projects. The three-tier administration system makes it easy to delegate power from the federal level to the local level, but the implementation has not been as smooth as it should be. For example, even though the federal government formulates tourism policies and strategies; the state government does the development work because 'land matters' are under state control. The local authority on the other hand has full power and control of the development in their area. Therefore, the implementation process sometimes creates a question of effectiveness in tourism planning in the country.

The national planning framework has also not explicitly explained how the public's suggestions are included in tourism decision-making processes, since all development processes in the country are heavily controlled by the state and local governments. Therefore, the effectiveness of participation processes in tourism planning have invited criticism from scholars (Mohd Saad, 1998; Briffett, Obbard & Mackee, 2004) because of a limited opportunity for the public to participate and influence the decision making process.

The case of the Langkawi Islands

This research focuses on the Langkawi Islands as a case study (Figure 2). The Langkawi Islands consist of 104 islands covering a land area of 466.51 square kilometres, of which the main island, Langkawi, is the largest and the population centre of the group. The Islands are situated 143 km north of Penang and approximately 27 km west of Peninsular Malaysia. Kuah, the main town in Langkawi, is the commercial and administrative centre. The Langkawi Islands are sparsely populated, with almost all of the inhabitants living on the main island (Langkawi Island). The population is predominantly ethnic Malay (97%) and the remainder ethnic Chinese and Indians. In 1991, there were about 42,093 residents living in the Langkawi Islands. That number increased to 73,091 in 2002 with a 6.09% growth rate per year (LADA, 2002). The 2005 Langkawi Local Plan showed a very small difference in gender with 50.8% of the total population consisting of males compared to 49.2% females.

The Langkawi Islands have experienced tremendous development in public infrastructure and tourism facilities since 1986 when the island was declared as a duty free area. Many construction projects on the islands had only one purpose: to accommodate tourism development. To guide the progress of tourism development in the Langkawi Islands, the government prepared the Langkawi Structure Plan, which was gazetted in 1991. The 1990 Langkawi Structure Plan outlined the government policies and strategy for socio-economic and physical planning and development for Langkawi Islands from 1990 until 2005. During the preparation of the Langkawi Structure Plan, local residents have been provided with an opportunity to give their comment and suggestion. Nevertheless, based on his study, Din (1993) questioned the effectiveness of the public participation process, since local residents could not effectively participate in the decision making-process. Hashim (1986) also argued the transparency of the decision making process since the government administrator made most of the decisions without public

consultation. Due to that, most of the issues related to tourism planning and development failed to address the needs of local residents.

Figure 2
LANGKAWI ISLANDS, MALAYSIA



Source: Langkawi Municipal Council (2005)

For example, during preparation of the 1990 Langkawi Structure Plan, the public had two chances to participate. First, when the survey report for the Structure Plan was completed, it was displayed to the public for one month from February to March 1990. Second, the Structure Plan was exhibited in Kuah Town, Langkawi for one month from January to February 1991. It resulted with 39 protest letters pertaining to tourism development, impacts on the environment and the local community received by the governing body. In addition, 32 individuals and organisations who sent protest letters indicated their willingness to attend public hearings, but only 14 persons turned up in the three separate sessions. However, because of the limited chance for public to make suggestions or protests against the Structure Plan, the outcome was not very productive. In fact, the Public Hearing Sub-Committee, composed of state politicians and administrators, suggested that many of the complaints concerning tourism issues were outside of the study's scope, and no further action was taken regarding the objections (Din, 1993).

The Public Hearing Sub-Committee's decision was questioned considering that most of the issues raised in the meeting were relevant and could probably affect local resident in the future. Indeed, local residents should be given greater chances to voice their opinions or ideas, despite shortcomings in implementation approach and the lack of their understanding. Moreover, the lack of knowledge of tourism might result in low level awareness in the participation process and could contribute to negative perceptions. Therefore, this limitation of participation in the decision making process is used as an objective for this study to identify the problem and issues related to the participation process in the Langkawi Islands.

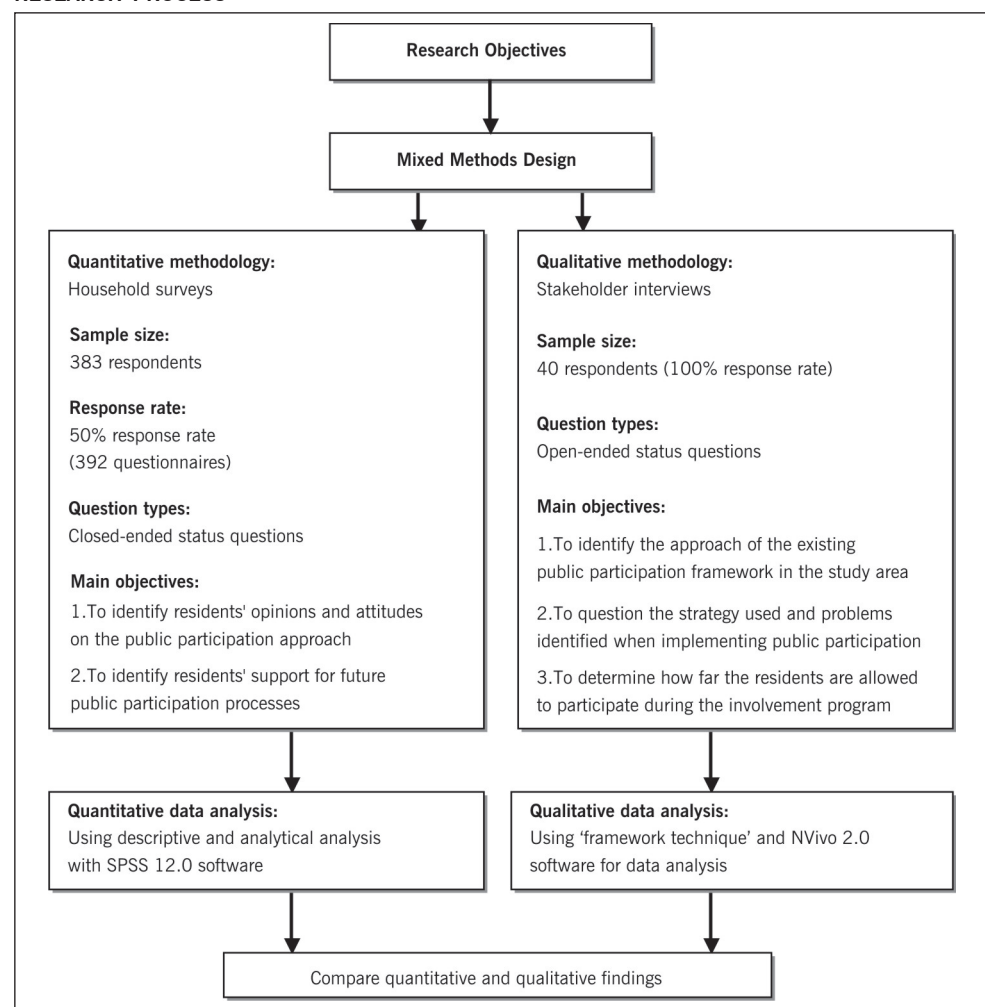
Research methodology

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 17) defined mixed methods research as '*the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, or language into a single study*'. Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann and Hanson (2003) stressed that the mixed method researcher can give equal

priority to both quantitative and qualitative methods or choose to emphasise either one or the other, but a researcher should select the designs 'that effectively answer their research question' (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20). Therefore, from the six designs suggested by Creswell *et al.* (2003), the concurrent triangulation design was selected and employed in this study after considering the study objective and question under investigation. Figure 2 defines the steps involved in concurrent triangulation design in this study.

The quantitative and qualitative methods are used as separate, but complementary means to cover the weakness of one method with the strength of another method. Two strategies were applied in delivering the questionnaires to local residents. Firstly, the questionnaires with a pre-paid return envelope were hand delivered by the researcher to randomly selected local residents chosen from the stratified random sampling in each division. To avoid a homogeneous group of representatives (Brunt & Courtney, 1999), 40 stakeholders were selected for interview based on four groups: (1) government departments, (2) private companies, (3) community leaders, and (4) interested groups such as non-government organisations (NGOs). The result from both analyses were compared and integrated in the interpretation process.

Figure 3
RESEARCH PROCESS



Research findings

Based on the mixed method approach used, the discussion on research findings is divided into two sections of quantitative data and qualitative data.

FINDINGS FROM QUANTATIVE DATA

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis was carried out to identify the respondents' perceptions of the problems of the public participation process. The Barlett's Test of Sphericity shows statistical significance with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.7, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1995). This means the items can be subjected to further exploration to identify the underlying factors that may exist. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated to test the reliability and internal consistency of each factor and a cut-off point of 0.45 was used to include items in interpretation of a factor (Table 3).

Table 3

FACTOR ANALYSIS ON THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS (N=392)

Factor of participation problems	Factor Loading				Commonality
	1	2	3	4	
Factor 1: Implementation weaknesses					
The involvement was limited to early stages	0.816				0.678
Was excluded from participation process	0.787				0.707
Only selected individuals were invited	0.713				0.573
The process was difficult and too complex	0.629				0.703
Factor 2: Inadequate information					
Did not know how to participate		0.807			0.671
Did not have enough information		0.804			0.673
Was not aware of the participation program		0.730			0.572
Factor 3: Resident attitudes					
Did not ready to participate			0.865		0.782
No interest in participating			0.827		0.703
The process was not important			0.589		0.515
Factor 4 ^a					
Was not invited to participate				0.848	0.824
Eigenvalues	2.93	1.87	1.58	1.00	
Variance (%)	26.69	17.03	14.40	9.15	
Cumulative variance (%)	26.69	43.73	58.13	67.28	
Cronbach's alpha	0.67	0.75	0.68	-	

^a Factor 4 has only one item and was excluded for further analysis.

From the Varimax-rotated factor matrix, four factors representing 67.28 % of the explained variance were extracted from 11 variables. However, factor number four was excluded from further analysis because it consists of one item, leaving another three factors with at least three or more items. The results showed the alpha coefficient for all three factors ranged from 0.67 to 0.75. The value is acceptable as it is above the minimum value of 0.50 indicated for reliability for basic research (Nunnally, 1967).

Three factors related to the problem of participation processes in Langkawi identified from quantitative data analyses are discussed further as follows:

Implementation weaknesses

The first factor of government control of participation process suggested that only selected individuals were invited (mean = 1.64), participation process was difficult (mean = 1.24), public involvement was limited to the early stage (mean = 1.12) and they (public) were excluded from participation process (mean = 1.10) (Table 4).

Table 4

SUMMARY RESULTS OF HOUSEHOLD SURVEY OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ISSUES

	Items description	Mean ^a	Std. Deviation
Factor 1 Implementation weaknesses	Only selected individuals were invited	1.64	0.726
	The participation process was difficult	1.24	0.900
	The involvement was limited to the early stages	1.12	0.831
	Was excluded from participation process	1.10	0.767

^a Scale: 2 = agree, 1 = disagree, 0 = unsure

Inadequate information

As shown in Table 5, factor of inadequate information suggested that the residents were not aware of participation process (mean = 1.72), did not know how to participate (mean = 1.72) and they did not have enough information (mean = 1.68).

Table 5

SUMMARY RESULTS OF HOUSEHOLD SURVEY OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ISSUES

	Items description	Mean ^a	Std. Deviation
Factor 2 Inadequate information	Was not aware of the participation process	1.72	0.557
	Did not know how to participate	1.71	0.615
	Did not have enough information	1.68	0.619

^a Scale: 2 = agree, 1 = disagree, 0 = unsure

Residents attitudes

It is undeniable that residents' attitudes towards the government program could influence the participation process. Survey results showed that they were not ready to participate (mean = 1.07), not interested to participate (mean = 1.05) and felt that participation process is not important (mean = 1.01) were another important factor contributing to the problem of participation process in the study area (Table 6).

Table 6

SUMMARY RESULTS OF HOUSEHOLD SURVEY OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ISSUES

	Items description	Mean ^a	Std. Deviation
Factor 3 Residents attitudes	Was not ready to participate	1.07	0.607
	Not interested in participating	1.05	0.590
	Felt that the process was not important	1.01	0.638

^a Scale: 2 = agree, 1 = disagree, 0 = unsure

FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data analyses identified three problems in the public participation processes in the Langkawi Islands which are discussed as follows:

Government control in the decision-making processes

This situation existed in all decision making during the Structure Plan and Local Plan studies. Excessive control by the government limited the public's involvement in the decision making process. One of the government officers (Respondent 5) explained:

"...if the public disagree with the plan they can make an enquiry to the State Planning Committee. That was the highest level of participation in any physical plan development in this country...even though, the state planning committee considered the enquiry, the committee was still free to make a decision which they held to be relevant."

Interestingly, the residents understood how the decisions were made. Although they were encouraged to attend the draft plan exhibition, they did not have an opportunity to raise any questions or suggestions. Community leaders viewed the exhibition technique as not effective since the residents could not participate actively. One of the community leaders (Respondent 32) stated his regrets:

"Usually, the decision was made at the top level of administration without in-depth involvement from the local level. Even when they (government officials) went to the local level, the approach used was not effective because we were not able to be actively involved."

The weaknesses of the existing participation approach

The weaknesses of the existing participation approach were another major concern for most of the interviewees. They claimed that flaws in the current practice had limited residents' opportunity to be properly involved in the decision-making process. A community leader (Respondent 32) explained his views on that situation:

"I think the priorities in the participation process was just to inform the residents but not to look at their reaction...actually, some of the residents had objections but the problem was that they didn't have proper means for voicing their objections...the government approach was very simple...we were only involved in the early stages of participation"

An officer from the government department also did not deny the failure of the existing participation process. The officer (Respondent 5) remarked how the limitation exists:

"One of the failures was when we did the Structure Plan or Local Plan, the consultant carried out the household survey among the community and they claimed that that was public participation. That was right, but it was only a one-way communication approach. I mean the residents just filled the questionnaire without having a discussion with the consultant to draft the plan together"

The attitude of residents

The attitude of residents also contributed to the ineffectiveness and low response to the public participation process. The government officials blamed the residents' negative attitudes for not participating in the involvement process. One of the government officers (Respondent 11) explained:

"They (the residents) did not participate because of their attitude...normally; people will not react unless something happens...they just wait to see what will happen to the development before giving their feedback."

However, the community leaders claimed that the residents were not involved because of insufficient information. They stressed that the government needs to inform and educate the residents prior to any participation process. One of the community leaders (Respondent 34) explained further:

"I think they (residents) were not involved because they knew nothing...it is so often for us to find out about any project only after they (project proponents) had started their work..."

The NGO representative in a contrary statement blamed the government for not educating the residents. Based on his experience in the 1990 Langkawi Structure Plan, he (respondent 37) stated that:

"...most of them (the residents) are not involved because they do not understand about the Structure Plan. That's why since 1991, we have urged the state and local governments to educate local community about tourism development, the benefits to get involved and the consequences from the development. We suggest them to organise a seminar or forum for local community but nothing was done until now."

Comparing the quantitative and qualitative findings

In a comparison of the findings, the quantitative and qualitative results show that the three main problems of the participation process are as follows:

- Government control in the decision making process. This issue was influenced by the administration system and bureaucracy constraints. The legislation limitation was also a major issue since many of the important regulations and procedures were designed to maintain government control.
- The implementation weaknesses resulted in the simplicity in the existing participation approach. Despite limitations in the existing approach of participation process, the level of knowledge among the government officials also contributed to these problems. Only limited numbers of the governing body staffs were well educated and experienced in conducting participation process.
- Residents' attitudes. It was undeniable that some of the residents had a negative attitude towards the government program and the participation process. However, the significant findings were that the limited information of the participation processes and the level of education caused those problems. Since the limitation of information decreased the number of participants, a low level of education resulted in the failure to increase the quality of comments or suggestions.

Despite the existing problems in the participation process, the majority of survey respondents supported a greater involvement for future public participation processes. Survey results show that most of the respondents want to have more information (87%) and take part in the consultation process (82%).

Although the current practice in Langkawi does not include the participants in the decision-making process, the respondents want to be involved in the decision-making process (78%). They want to share the responsibility in making the decision (76%) and more than half of the respondents (53%) want to have complete control in the decision-making process.

The stakeholders however reacted differently to the survey respondents, regarding the suggestion of greater public involvement. Most of them suggested that several aspects should be considered before the residents could be involved at higher levels of participation. One of the government officers (Respondent 2) remarked:

"Firstly, we must educate the public about the meaning of the participation process and what they should do when they come to participate. However, I think at this moment our citizens are not ready for a higher level of involvement yet, maybe in the next 10 or 15 years. The highest level they can make a contribution is at the consultation level."

Community leaders (Respondent 35) supported this position:

"I think our community is only ready to be involved in the second level (consult) because we have to consider their level of education also, since many of them still cannot understand the purpose of the participation itself. What we need to do is to educate them and after that we can think about the next level, if not we will struggle even at the first level."

However, another government officer (Respondent 4) explained that the problem not only existed among the residents but also within the government staff:

"We at the government level were also still in the learning process especially within local government, because we need to train and expose staff to the participation process. Therefore, for the local people for sure they were sure to be one-step behind us."

Even though there were differences between survey respondents' views and the stakeholders' views on the stages of future involvement processes, several suggestions, such as increasing the education level of residents and government officials, were important for further consideration. These factors significantly influenced the effectiveness of the existing public participation process in the study area. The range of stakeholders' opinions on improvements to the participation approach show how the system was run in the study area and Malaysia generally. The public seems to understand their right and need for greater participation in the decision-making process. However, by contrast, some government officials object to any suggestion to provide more opportunities for greater public involvement, even though they recognise its importance to improve the decision-making process.

Some differences existed in the case of participation problems. The interviewees from the government groups explicitly represented the government and viewed the problem from their working experience. They thought the residents' attitudes played a major role in their response to the participation processes. Community leaders, however, disagreed and explained that the implementation weaknesses and the limitations in the involvement process were the reasons for the weak responses from the residents, and affected their ability to participate effectively. However, this study found that the residents were not excluded in any of the public participation process, in fact, they were encouraged to participate, but some limitations in the practice had unintentionally excluded them from the process.

Conclusion

This paper argues that current participation processes in tourism planning in Langkawi fail to provide a majority of local residents and other relevant stakeholders with sufficient opportunities to participate in the final decision making. Limitations in government administration and procedures as well as community's constraints have been identified.

The weaknesses in current participation approach seem to be the reason for the exclusion process. The findings also indicated that exclusions from involvement processes were caused by implementation limitations and weaknesses in participation approach. Both survey and interview respondents suggested the existing approach of participation

process in the Langkawi Islands needs to be improved. The governing bodies are also required to provide more access for residents to be involved in the decision-making process by doing an improvement especially in public participation approach. Prior to that, the criteria and strategies for the public participation process need to be developed to support and guide the implementation of the participation process. This is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of participation process and to overcome the weaknesses identified from this study. It is hoped that this research shall become an impetus for wider research in similar field to add value to the existing knowledge.

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