

Developing Community Capacity Through Experiential Learning:

A Case Study of Kg Sg. Melayu Ecotourism Village

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is a major contributor to the economic development of a country. Most developing countries use tourism as a development strategy, especially in rural areas. As well as generating employment opportunities, the tourism industry facilitates infrastructure development in rural communities. The development of tourism also reduces the issue of youth migration to cities. Past studies have shown that few community-based tourism (CBT) projects are actually successful, and most of them rely on outside assistance. This failure results from the community's inability to plan and

manage CBT projects. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore community capacity building for the purpose of CBT development. In order to achieve this goal, a qualitative research approach was used with Kg. Sg. Melayu Ecotourism Village in Johor as a case study. A total of 16 key informants were selected as participants in this study based on the purposive sampling technique. The researcher used a semi-structured interview method in the process of data collection. The collected data were analyzed and the findings of this study show the process of community capacity development involving aspects of knowledge and skills is based on an informal learning approach i.e. through research activities, involvement in planning, study tours, seminars, and courses as well as group discussions.

Keywords: *Rural tourism, community-based tourism, community capacity building, experiential learning approach.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism are significant industries in Malaysia, with direct and indirect links to all aspects of the economy (Abbas, 2021). Malaysia's tourist industry is the country's third-largest contributor to its GDP. Prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the National Tourism Development Plan, which aimed to increase tourist arrivals in Malaysia, had met its goals, resulting in a rise in tourist numbers (Hamid *et al.*, 2021). Rural areas in Malaysia are rich in natural resources and can be used as assets that can generate economic activity for the local community. Community-based tourism (CBT) is seen as a tool to improve rural people's livelihood and at the same time help in conserving nature. CBT is a form of tourism that is developed, operated, managed, and ultimately beneficial to the local community (Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010). The Malaysian government through National Cooperative Policy 2011-2020 encourages rural communities to be directly involved in the tourism industry by establishing cooperatives, especially those offering ecotourism products.

Development of tourism in local people cannot be successful unless local leaders and residents participate. This is shown in the research area, where Kg. Sg. Melayu has a great deal of potential for tourism development. The tourism business in Kg. Sg Melayu, on the other hand, is unlikely to improve without community participation. Community capacity building (CCB) is essential for the growth of community-based tourism. Understanding how CCB could develop tourism in local communities is critical for continued successful tourist development. CCB empowers communities to have an active role in the planning, development, and implementation of tourism at the local level (Ahmeti, 2013). As a result, determining the degree of CCB is a critical step in formulating community development initiatives (Marre & Weber, 2007).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism has been described as a catalyst for regional and local development, especially in developing countries where rural and peripheral regions are ignored in economic and social terms (Clancy, 1999; Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 1998; Kiper & Özdemir, 2012). The development of tourism has been recognized by many communities as being beneficial not only economically, but also socially, culturally, and environmentally.

Community-based tourism has gradually evolved and been researched by a number of scholars from various contexts, as Murphy (1985) found in his study of the effects of tourism in developing nations (Ashley & Garland, 1994). Community-based tourism arose as a result of community development and participation in the process of generating and planning tourism products (Menbere & Menbere, 2017), as well as a community development strategy to counteract the negative effects of mass tourism. To put it another way, CBT helps to preserve natural resources, traditional and cultural values, and promote socioeconomic development by allowing the local people to play a larger part in managing and operating local tourism (Asker et al., 2010; Salazar, 2012). This has significant implications for poverty alleviation, community strengthening, and livelihood diversification (Salazar, 2012).

Many have suggested that community development is a fundamental process of providing the local community with all the power and tools needed for development (Kwan et al. 2003). The recognition of the CCB is seen as the ability of individuals and their communities to implement knowledge within the community of the determinants and indicators of the environment for sector development in the tourism sector development in this context. According to (Frank & Smith, 1999), special attention is paid to community development, taking into account not only the current assets owned by the community, but all potential assets owned or accessible by the community. The CCB is also described as collectively facilitating the skills needed to develop community assets that can address community commitments, resource deployment, and community-related tourism development issues (Homan, 2010).

Human resource development requires the provision of learning opportunities. Learning is the act of acquiring and converting skills, knowledge, and traits into habitual patterns of behaviour and performance, whether intentionally or by the natural passage of time. C.Rogers differentiated between two types of learning: cognitive (meaningless) and experiential (meaningful) (significant). The main difference is that experiential learning focuses on the learner's needs and desires. The Kolb learning cycle was created by David A. Kolb in 1975 as an experiential learning approach. Concrete experience (CE), reflecting observation (RO), abstract concept (AC), and active experimentation are the four important components of the learning process in this approach. This indicates that when someone learns something new through their own experiences, they will build a new concept. Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning theory as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience".

In accordance with Minkler and Wallerstein (2011), community capacity building involves three levels: individual, organizational, and community:

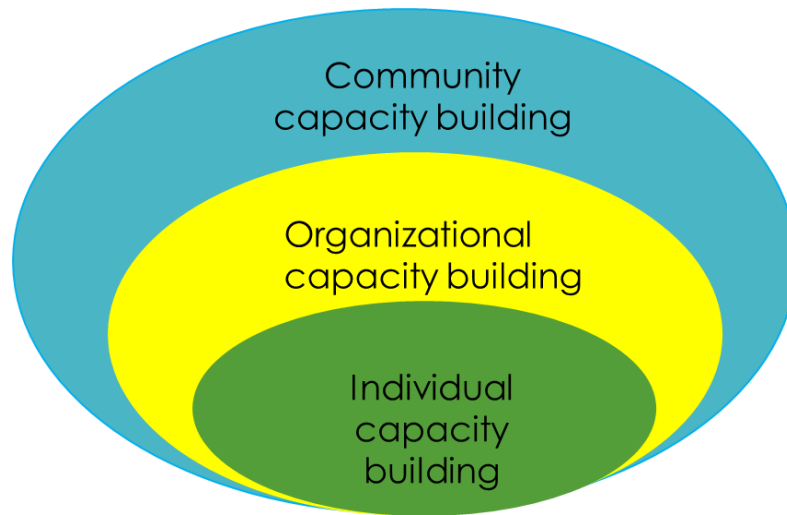


Figure1: Levels of community capacity building (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011)

The three levels can be better understood through the table below:

CCB Level	
Individual capacity building	Considered the most important level of capacity building and influences the individual skills and potential skills needed to achieve the desired changes and outcomes. At this level, strategies should be adopted to complement all the necessary knowledge and skills essential to personal growth, such as participation level, and various individual skills (VicHealth, 2006). This development strategy may include individuals who are part of an organization or community, and individuals who are, or are part of, or can contribute to community development in the future.
Organizational capacity building	An organization is the one that can determine how individual capabilities are used and strengthened. Organizations provide technical expertise and capabilities, allocate all necessary

	<p>resources (whether financial or physical in nature), engage in awareness management, provide innovative knowledge, and advance human resources. Have the ability to lead the community development process because they can contribute to and improve leadership, or by building partnerships with other organizations and communities (JICA, 2004).</p>
<p>Community capacity building</p>	<p>A community can be a place (geographical area) with clear physical boundaries made up of groups of people who live and work together in the area with a common goal or purpose. (Homan, 2010, p.214). Individuals and organizations are part of the community. Therefore, community-level capabilities are broader than individuals or specific organizations and include informal and formal links between individuals and organizations, and between different organizations within the community. Moreover, communities are not separate entities. In this regard, to benefit from the experience of the external community, the infrastructure needs to be connected to other network equipment. It is associated with the development of social wealth and various forms of networks involving individuals and community members (either alone or through the involvement of organizations), strengthening relationships between community members, which is the community (Woodhouse, 2006).</p>

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sg. Melayu Ecotourism Village is chosen as a case study because the community tourism development in that area is driven by the rapid development projects in the Iskandar

Malaysia region. Also, the location of the village is nearby to the Causeway Link which gives easy access for tourists from Singapore. These factors contribute to massive tourism opportunities if the community has the necessary knowledge and skills. As a result, this qualitative study employs a case study approach to investigate the growth of community members' awareness, knowledge, and skills in the development of community-based tourism in Sg. Melayu Ecotourism Village. A semi-structured interview was done with 16 key informants, all of whom are members of the Kg. Sg. Melayu Cooperative and have been active in the tourism development from the beginning. This is because in a qualitative study, the interview is a key source of information (Yin, 2003). By asking people about their experiences or thoughts, the method allows data to be collected (Yin, 2003, Lebar, 2007). Thematic analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts.

4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Involvement in tourism development planning

The principal organisation responsible for developing Kg. Sg Melayu as a tourism destination in 2010 was the Iskandar Region Development Authority (IRDA). The process of analysing and enhancing the community's awareness, knowledge, and experience was the key focus in the early phases of building community-based tourism in Kg. Sg Melayu. The local community was directly involved in tourism development planning, and it was a valuable learning experience for them. The lack of community understanding contributed to the early emergence of negative attitudes about the project. Consciousness, knowledge, and community skills were developed through informal learning employing an experiential learning approach as a result of their involvement in tourism development planning. As a result of this strategy, tourism activity in Kg. Sg. Melayu has increased.

4.2 Benchmark visit trips

IRDA also exposed the community of Kg. Sg Melayu to other community-based tourism projects in the country to give them a first-hand experience of how a tourism

product is managed and operated. A visit to Banghuris Homestay in Selangor gave the participants a learning opportunity on how homestay programmes are conducted. Also, a visit to Lenggong, Perak exposed them to how the relationship and participation of the local authority, stakeholders and community members play an important part in sustaining community-based tourism projects. These trips also gave them the feel of a tourist when visiting a community-based tourism destination, the likes and dislikes, and what makes the visit memorable. These experiential learning outcomes are invaluable and help them to understand better the core of a successful community-based tourism project.

4.3 Brainstorming and Focus Group Discussions

The Kg. Sg Melayu resident cooperative members' learning occurs as a result of their participation in brainstorming and focus group discussion activities for the goal of tourist development planning. Each action was discussed in the cooperative group so that each participant could have the knowledge they needed. The cooperative members will meet for a discussion and planning session before beginning any programme. Members are educated and instructed on how to participate in the discussion. Mutual decisions are made, and members of the session must present what they have learned from each activity after it is completed. Many things were learned by the participants as a result of these group activities, including communication skills, self-confidence, and respect for other members' opinions.

5.0 Conclusion

For rural communities such as Kg. Sg. Melayu, experiential learning approach is effective, considering the limitation of academic capabilities of the community. Through direct involvement in planning and development process, the knowledge and understanding of the community members about tourism are more effective. From the findings of the study done in Kg. Sg. Melayu, it is evident that the experiential learning approach provides a positive outcome for rural community involvement in tourism projects.

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