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Environmental Conservation in Malaysian Local Government: Issues and Recommendation

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Abstract

The government of Malaysia is committed and receptive to environment conservation efforts. The study's explicit goals will now be as follows: a) Determine community participation techniques in environmental conservation programmes; b) Detect concerns and hindrances to community participation in environmental conservation programmes; and c) Suggest the most effectual community participation approaches in environmental conservation programmes. We spoke to eight main informants from three tiers of local governments. The observations were organised using NVivo. Community participation is hampered by a lack of enthusiasm and understanding, as well as a lack of workforce and finance.

Keywords: Community participation, environmental conservation, local government, SDGs

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1.0 Introduction

Safeguarding of environment pertains to any action intended to preserve or reinstate the environment's quality by evading discharge of contaminants or decreasing the existence of contaminating chemicals in the environs (United Nations, 1997). Any activity taken to cure or avert harm to the physical environs of natural resources driven by a beneficiary's actions, to lessen the risk of such harm or trigger more effective utilisation of natural resources, is considered environmental protection (Law Insider Dictionary, 2022). Governments have started banning activities which contribute towards environmental degradation (Bernama, 2022).

The importance of community participation in balancing the necessity to protect biodiversity and natural legacy while sustaining communal livelihood is growing. Residents can partake in decision-making, solve issues they believe are significant and pertinent, and help regulate the solution through community engagement (He, Yang & Min, 2020). Moreover, an extensive gamut of stakeholders, especially the community, must be engaged and involved if the SDGs are to be met (Bardal et al., 2021). Thus, effective community participation aids in the consistency and legitimacy of information used to make environment preservation decisions. The goal of this research is to identify community participation approaches in environmental conservation programmes, determine issues and hindrances to community

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participation in environmental conservation programmes, and suggest the most effective community participation approaches in such programmes.

1.1 Problem Statement

Sustainable development has gained a lot of traction in recent years, particularly as pollution, climate change, and habitat degradation threaten the planet's biodiversity. This support, notably, should be founded on the people's comprehension of sustainable development and how the government and media communicate essential scientific facts (Mohd Jasmany & Hoe, 2022). As a result of a dearth of public understanding and knowledge of sustainable development, it will be more difficult to make meaningful improvements in sustainability in the absence of public support.

Furthermore, with the rise of environmental issues which may imperil the demands of prospective generations, the nation needs young individuals to be the change-makers, eager to collaborate beyond borders, and able drivers of socio-ecological knowledge (Shaleh, 2017). The youth of today should participate in environmental education initiatives to grow into caring communities that have a beneficial impact on the environment.

Sarawakians, according to a poll, want the next administration and all future leaders to prioritise environmental conservation after they take office following the 12th Sarawak election on December 18. More than 90% of the respondents, according to the poll, said they would like to understand more about Sarawak's environmental objectives, and most believed MPs fail to pay sufficient attention to the environment. In the survey, the people also called for greater cooperation between lawmakers, local governments, non-governmental organisations, and communities to deal with environmental concerns (Goh, 2021). Therefore, the government should play a role in dealing with environmental challenges. A proper strategy for managing the environment, as well as how residents can contribute to environment's preservation in their community, should be established.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Participation Theory

Participation is not a new idea; it has a long and eminent history. The informally disseminated power structure of villages and small cities started displacing in 8th and 7th-century Ancient Greece, with collectives of Oligarchs obtaining power when towns and villages amalgamated into city-states. This led to extensive suffering and discontent among the general community, with several compelled to sell their property due to debts and even exposed to debt slavery (Osborne, 2006).

Around 600 BCE, Athenian political leader Solon introduced changes to limit the authority of oligarchs and re-launch a limited kind of participatory democracy, with few of the decisions made by a popular assembly constituting all free male citizens. Cleisthenes upgraded Solon's reforms a century later, enabling even more direct involvement of ordinary people. In 322 BC, Athens' democracy ended. Representatives, instead of the people themselves, made decisions when democracy was restored as a political setup about 2000 years later (Osborne, 2006).

Kelly (2001) has offered a fair analysis of the evolution of participation patterns (see: table 1) since the 1960s.

Table 1. Development of Participatory Processes

Era	Trends in Participatory Processes
1950s and 60s	Swift industrialisation and increasing influence of technological knowledge; supremacy of scientific knowledge. This age was characterised by the diffusion model of adoption in agriculture. Extension agents were involved mainly in teaching farmers, and in technological transfer.
1970s Need for alternatives	Concern expressed about "giving a voice to the voiceless" particularly the poor in emerging nations. Growing emphasis on learning, adult learning principles and group extension.
1980s, the participation boom	Shift from top-down to bottom-up; acknowledgment of the value of local indigenous knowledge The 1980s saw flourishing of activity, especially among non-government organisations (NGOs) in seeking options to top-down outsider-driven development. The focus was on participatory appraisal and analysis in rural communities.
1990s, the participation imperative	The zeal about participation continued in the early 1990s. Participation became synonymous with "good" or "sustainable" in the development field. The popularisation of participation is risky, as the issues are often glossed over. Funding bodies started asking for participatory processes as a condition for funding. The push for participation stimulated a proliferation of guidebooks and courses on "how to". A rising interest in natural resource monitoring and assessment has led to community involvement in these activities.

Participation today signifies a shift from a top-down to a bottom-up strategy. Thus, there is a transition from conventional hierarchical structures to more networking, flexible, and participatory leadership, which entails group and individual involvement in planning and decision-making.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research study utilises a qualitative method, wherein an examination of the issues, methods, and barriers to community participation is conducted; it also explores the most effective community participation strategies. The respondents comprise eight (8) local government

officials from the city and municipal councils of Seberang Perai (4), Tapah District (2), and Alor Gajah (2). The total number of the respondents' data saturation was different at the three (3) local governments; this was due to the different saturation levels in the information they provided. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the data was collected by means of online interviews using Microsoft Teams. We employed open-ended questions to draw more complex answers from the interviewees. Purposive sampling was utilised in executing the research.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

Generally, qualitative research scrutinises experiences, attitudes, and behaviours through interviews or focus groups to surface in-depth opinions from participants. The qualitative research design particularly employed semi-structured and face-to-face interviews with the selected local government officer.

To prevent deviations from the theme of the study, individual semi-structured and face-to-face interviews were used. Informants were able to express their opinions on the subject matter liberally because semi-structured interviews were employed. Moreover, the interview sessions were carried out using Malay language. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. Altogether, it took one month to finish the data collection process.

A face-to-face interview could establish connections with respondents and provide rich data as well as explore and understand a complicated subject. After online interviews using Microsoft Teams, the data was analysed according to themes. The interview sessions' audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and then coded manually for analysis. In addition, the questions used during the research were also categorised by themes and sub-themes.

This research employed a multiple embedded case study design involving respondents from three (3) different units of the local government: Tapah District Council, Alor Gajah Municipal Council, and Seberang Perai City Council. Within a month after the interview sessions, the data were transcribed and then subjected to verification by the experts.

3.2 Development of Interview Questions

Prior to the conduct of the interview sessions, experts from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) validated the recommended interview questions. Because the interviews were conducted bilingually in English and Malay, language experts also evaluated the translations' clarity and consistency.

3.3 Research Themes

The central theme is thematically categorised into two: community participation issues and methods, and barriers to community participation). Table 2 indicates the responses collected from Theme 1, the first research question, were divided into the following three sub-themes: (1) the role of intermediaries/mediators, (2) survey method, and; (3) discussion method. As for the second question (Theme 2), it was also grouped into these four sub-themes: (1) lack of interest, (2) lack of understanding, (3) lack of resources and autonomy, and; (4) lack of funding and workforce.

No.	Code	Themes	Sub-Themes
1	RQ1	Community participation methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of intermediaries/mediators • Survey method • Discussion method
2.	RQ2	Issues and barriers to community participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest • Lack of understanding • Lack of resources and autonomy • Lack of funding and workforce

3.4 NVivo and Thematic Analysis

Face-to-face interviews involving the local government officers (interviewees) and the researcher (interviewer) generated the data, which were then collected. The question is asked to the interviewees according to the semi-structured interview questions formulated earlier. The interviewer utilised Microsoft Teams for recording of the interview sessions. After being transcribed into written form, the collected data were analysed with the use of thematic analysis and NVivo. During the thematic analysis, the research questions were systematised into themes and sub-themes.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Community participation methods in environmental conservation initiatives

Based on the outcomes of this research (see: table 3 and figure 1), 8 of the candidates agree that Department of Environment, local council members, presidents of citizens' associations, village chiefs, regional associations, and environmental NGOs play a crucial role as arbitrators or mediators between the local government and the community. The role of an intermediary may satisfactorily include citizens

in policy making and execution as regards sustainability (Elelman & Feldman, 2018). Consequently, mediators or arbitrators play a crucial role in making sure that the democratic practice is smoothly implemented. This is to ensure that environmental protection measures abide by the established objectives regarding sustainability.

Out of all the candidates, five candidates demanded that a discussion of a group of specific people with the community must be arranged before making of any decision regarding environmental protection initiatives. Such discussions of the focus group with the community are crucial for gaining awareness of various perspectives of the different stakeholders taking part in the process of conservation of environment, ensuring that the process of decision-making is streamlined. Local governments are expected to bring out a balance among the preferences of the local community and the objectives of the central government and allow higher influence of the local communities in the decision-making process, although it does not happen in majority of the cases (Franco et al., 2018). Outcomes of decentralisation may often seem satisfactory when perceived from a top-down view in government, but it is not so at local levels (Franco et al., 2018). As per research by Gibson et al. (2016), collaborative processes can promote and facilitate the active contribution of members of the community in environmental evaluation to improve its quality and credibility while also ensuring related learning capacity-building advantages.

Among all, 3 candidates mentioned that a survey is performed before launching any environmental conservation initiatives so that more information can be collected and successful community participation can be ensured. When properly executed, surveys provide actual statistics pertaining to a community's views and actions, which may be employed to develop and take crucial decisions regarding sustainability. In reference to the analysis of the purposes behind environmental protection initiatives, taking a survey is most reliable process. In research by Han, Yang, Shi, Liu, and Wall (2016), there was an undertaking of a survey among the residents of Bogda World Natural Heritage in Xinjiang, China. Furthermore, research by Moore et al. (2017) indicates that the survey techniques are viable data collection means that the regional government can employ to measure public support for healthy food consumption and active living.

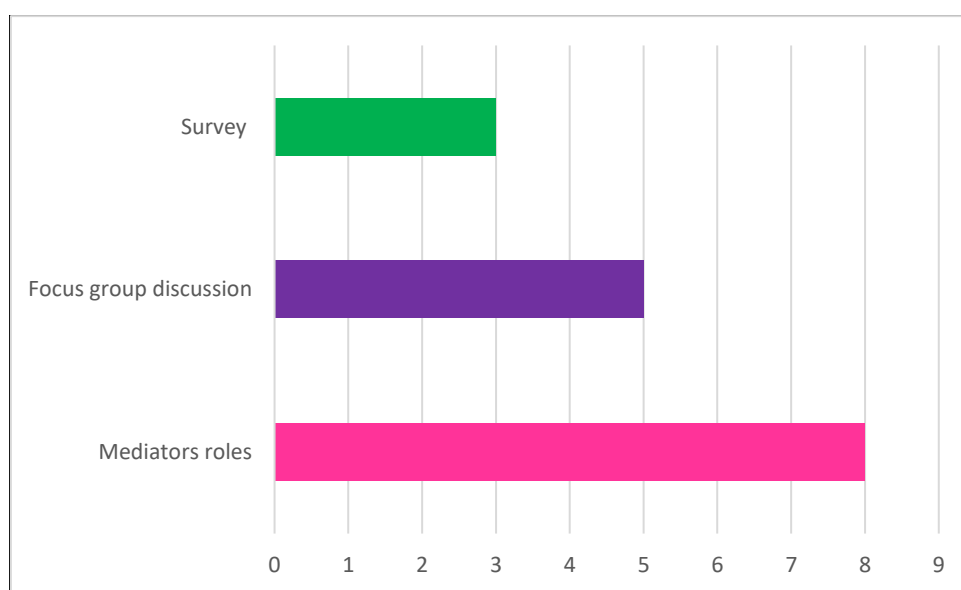


Figure 1. Effective Community Participation Methods in Environmental Conservation Initiatives

Table 3. Responses from The Respondents

Research Participant	Responses
Research participant 6	[...]Typically, we will collaborate with the Resident Association [...] The Resident Association serves as a bridge between the community and the local authority to disseminate any information and activities pertaining to environmental conservation [...]
Research participant 5	[...] We work with stakeholders like the Department of Environment, village leaders, councillors, and other agencies [...]
Research participant 1	[...] We will hold a Focus Group discussion with the locals [...] We will ask them what they want, what they want to do in this area, and what the outcome will be [...]
Research participant 3	[...] We conducted a survey [...] We would like to gather information from people from all occupations [...] Only then will we be able to ensure effective community participation [...]
Research participant 6	[...] Feedback from the community is used as input [...] We held a town hall meeting with the community [...] We also conducted Focus Group discussions for the district [...]

4.2 Issues and barriers to community participation in environmental conservation initiatives

According to all candidates, the main impediment to public participation is inadequate interest in the regional undertakings (see: figure 2 and table 4). This can cause low commitment, less enthusiasm, and an absence of learning experience in initiatives of environmental

conservation. Furthermore, this inadequate interest in participation is commonly connected to unclear obligations and a dependence on local authorities to resolve sustainability issues (Wamsler, Alkan-Olsson, Björn, et al., 2020). Similarly, in research by Haricharan et al. (2021), involvement in primary healthcare might be hindered by a lack of commitment to the community.

Also, 4 respondents considered that a lack of awareness of the obligation of environmental conservation was a problem. Education regarding the environment conservation is essential since it allows the residents to be aware about environmental concerns, resolve them, and participate actively in the improvement of the environment. Individuals have a better understanding of environmental issues and the capacity to take responsible actions. Deficiency of awareness of the wide-ranging council health schemes in Manyoni District of Tanzania was one of the factors that prevented public participation (Kilewo & Frumence, 2015). Additionally, in research carried out by Ward, Holmes, and Stringer (2018), ignorance about Protected Areas can hamper effective public participation. This can get in the way of the efforts to conserve and sustain and their unique natural features.

Moreover, three candidates felt that the factors of public participation were a lack of funding and workforce. One of the most noteworthy obstacles in developing and executing environmental conservation schemes was a lack of funds for community participation activities. The capital covers resources, training, grants, administration, and other costs. Therefore, the expense of ensuring successful community engagement is too high for the local authorities to bear. Also, a lack of devoted staff to connect with residents might make it more challenging to make sure that environmental conservation activities are practical. Similar to research carried out by Bello, Carr, and Lovelock (2017), community participation in protected area-based tourism development in Malawi is constrained because of labour and budget shortages experienced by the government.

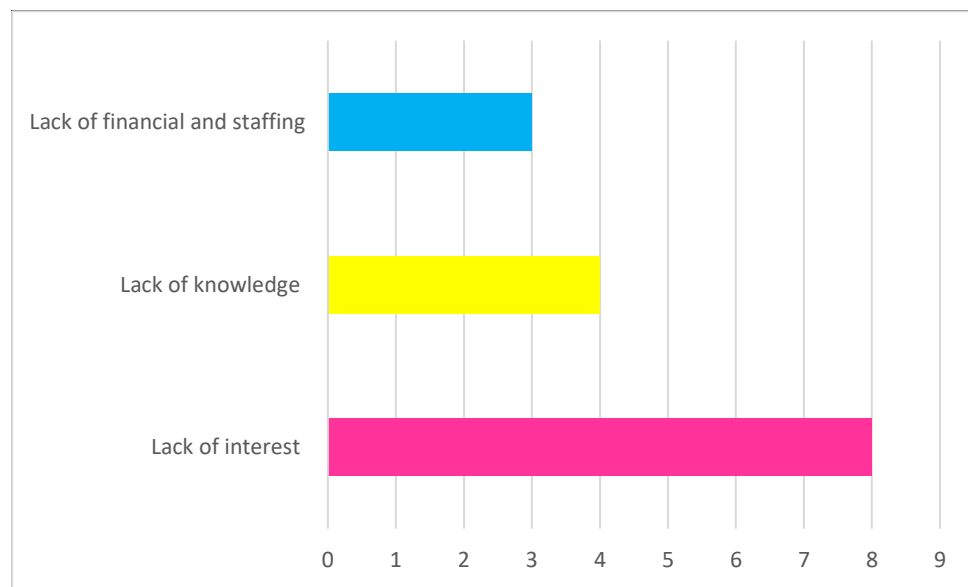


Figure 2. Issues and Barriers to Community Participation in Environmental Conservation Initiatives

Table 4. Responses from The Respondents

Research Participant	Responses
Research participant 1	[...] It is not easy to explain environmental conservation to the community [...] They will not pay attention to the significance of the issues [...]
Research participant 5	[...] It is quite challenging to educate the public on environmental conservation [...]
Research participant 6	[...] The community is hesitant to partake as they believe that it is the duty of the local government [...]
Research participant 5	[...] How will we put a program in place if the community does not understand it? [...] [...] Another concern is the limited funding for specific programs [...]
Research participant 7	[...] Manpower is insufficient [...] We are overburdened with work, while the fundamental task must also be completed [...]

4.3 Effective strategies for community participation in environmental conservation initiatives

Several proposals are made to ensure effective community participation in conservation initiatives regarding sustainability based on outcomes of the study. The introduction of social media has improved the community's need to associate with communicators and acquire information quickly (Mitcham et al. (2021). Consequently, social media may be exploited by local governments to circulate valuable knowledge. Local authorities can grab this chance to increase citizen participation in activities of environmental conservation by using social media as an effective way of online interactive participation (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Any information related to environmental conservation awareness and activities can be shared via social media like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Thus, this approach can circulate information widely and, in turn, promote community awareness regarding environmental conservation undertakings.

Secondly, local governments must adequately disseminate and encourage environmental conservation schemes and implore the individuals of the local community to participate and stay involved for as long as possible. All this can only be accomplished if the individuals of the local community sufficiently trust the local authorities (Farah Adilla, Radduan & Mohd Idham, 2021). To cultivate community trust in the local government, it must work more responsibly. Moreover, a lack of trust might reduce the community's enthusiasm to participate in other environment conservation efforts and hamper effective democratic engagement.

Lastly, devising and implementation of any environmental protection strategies in the future must involve a dialogue and consultation with the local community. The commitment of the communities to remain aware of, understand, take care of, and participate in an environmental protection scheme can be enhanced through dialogue and discussion (Enshassi & Kullab, 2014). Moreover, the local authorities can carry out a survey to discover public stance and awareness of measures of environmental conservation.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Applying SDG models and objectives to local governments of Malaysia has provided it with a unique chance to examine different environmental models and approaches. Conversely, local governments would have to face challenges if there is not much participation of the community in environmental conservation initiatives. As per this study, conservation initiatives will be ineffective if the local government is unable to understand the issues, hindrances, and identify effective community participation schemes. The position of intermediary between the local government and the community is the most common way adopted by all the 3 local governments to guarantee that a program is properly designed and executed. It is important to consult with the community during the planning phases of various conservation events to promote and facilitate active involvement of the people. A survey is also being carried out to collect further information and guarantee successful community participation. Nonetheless, it has been found that there are several obstacles as regards community participation, such as a community's inadequate interest and awareness about environmental conservation. This can result in low involvement and low enthusiasm of the people in environmental conservation activities.

Moreover, a lack of finance and workforce might impact the efficiency of community engagement. Several recommendations have been provided to the local authorities to promote and improve community participation. Firstly, it has been recommended to make use of social media to circulate knowledge, thereby increasing community awareness regarding environmental protection initiatives. The low budget of using social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook can also be helpful to solve problems of deficiency of workforce and finance for launching initiatives related to environmental conservation. To increase the willingness of the community to take part in additional environmental schemes and sustain effective democratic practice, the local authorities must also enhance their trustworthiness among the residents. Lastly, the consultation and survey techniques are vital in ensuring communities' eagerness to know, understand and participate actively in a nature conservation scheme. Nevertheless, this study's outcomes cannot be generalised, a fact that can be regarded as a shortcoming of this study. The study's limitation is that it only puts focus on the responses provided by the local government officials. It is also necessary to get responses also from the individuals of the community. Thus, more comprehensive research involving the process of selection of local governments based on the region in Malaysia may produce more detailed and definite results for future studies. Furthermore, quantitative research in the future might employ a method which also considers the responses from the residents of the local communities.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper may contribute to environmental planning and management, sustainable development goals and social sciences fields.

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