

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

At the international level, local governments are playing a significant role in community development by means of better cooperation with the people at local level. Policy makers are encouraging a high level of community participation in local development to provide a good reason for the continued existence of local government and to retain strong state power (Jessop 2004; Newman et al. 2004). Of late, there is pressure that challenges the functional role of local government in encouraging community development and social welfare redistribution. Stoker (2011) finds that local government systems in most of the countries sustain close relationship with its citizens in giving better services. This relationship would remain in the future development by engaging good cooperation between local government and the citizens. The theoretical framework of this paper argues that the factors involved in supporting the process of community development and the roles of local government influence the outcomes in community development. Community development is the domain that would influence delivery of services. Community development is difficult to measure as the ability of local government in providing and delivering services influences the demand of community development. Thus this study identifies the barriers between perceived demand and delivery of community development services. Besides that, this study also examines the problems between stakeholder expectations and delivery.

Keywords: Local government, Community development, Delivery and Demand for Services

INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread agreement among development practitioners, government officials and foreign donors that local government plays an increasingly proactive role in participatory community development. The World Development Report (2003) strongly supports devolution for making service delivery work for the poor. Recently a number of scholarly books, articles and panels at conferences have dealt with the growing importance of local government as providers of local services, valuable partners in community development arena and a successful laboratory for local democracy (Sisk et al., 2001; Forbrig 2011; Rondinelli 2006).

At the international level, local governments are improving their performance by playing a very significant role in providing better cooperation together with the people at local level concerning community development. It shows that policy makers are committed to a high level of community participation for the community development. By doing so, this would work towards allowing local governments to retain strong state power (Jessop 2004; Newman et al. 2004). Local communities should involve and help each other to acquire new approaches in terms of community development. In other words, community development offers a practice that is a part of a process of social change based on the sharing of integrity, skills, knowledge and experience. Green and Haines (2012) state community development as a planned effort to build assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life. The authors added that these assets may include several forms of community capital such as physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political and cultural. In their study, they identified community development that is controlled by local government provides a better match between the assets and the needs of the communities, such as housing, financial capital, job skills and productivity. Community development fundamentally involves a series of actions and decisions that improves the situation of a community, not just economically, but as a strong functioning community (Cavaye, 2003). Cavaye argues that through action, participation and contact a community becomes more vital and this relies on strong networks, organisational ability, skills, leadership and motivation of the local government. It shows that local government plays a significant role in bringing the best out of the community it serves in order to achieve productivity and sustainability.

Community development's prior objective is to assist the communities in need of revitalization (Rebohlz, 2003). As Rubin (2000) explains that '*the organic theory of community development begins by premising the moral obligations to bring back the communities that the government and the private sector have abandoned*'. However, community development is different in its holistic approach to development, adopting strategies that go beyond economic growth.

ISSUES ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Local government is expected to provide more services, be innovative, and keep up with the increasingly sophisticated demands of an articulate populace who knows their rights (Bowman & Kearney, 1996). Local governments' effort to achieve better

performance in community development in Malaysia is hindered by the country's growing population which may cause a set of problems. Growing population would demands higher expenditure for education, housing, food and health. As a nearest government to the people, local government has to identify strategies and possibilities to fulfill people demands in order to help the government to attain sustainable economic growth. But it is notable that if the local government could not afford to fulfill all the demands, it would cause difficulties in getting people involved in community development.

In the context of contemporary global economic restructuring, local governments in Malaysia could not escape from having problems in its objectives and strategies. Although local governments tend to promote community development for its citizens, clear and concrete strategies are still required for better community development planning. With the shifting emphasis in development objectives and strategies towards promoting more inclusive and socially equitable economic growth and meeting the basic needs in developing countries, widespread involvement in community development is considered important to the development growth (Shadiullah Khan & Morton 1999).

The recognition and importance of local government in the development process is prompted by the need to tackle local socio-economic problems and to manage participative development (Bowman & Kearney, 1996). In most developing countries, including Malaysia, decentralization and participation could not solve the various rural problems faced by the rural populace as local governments are facing a series of challenges in implementing community development plans and programs (Bowman & Kearney, 1996).

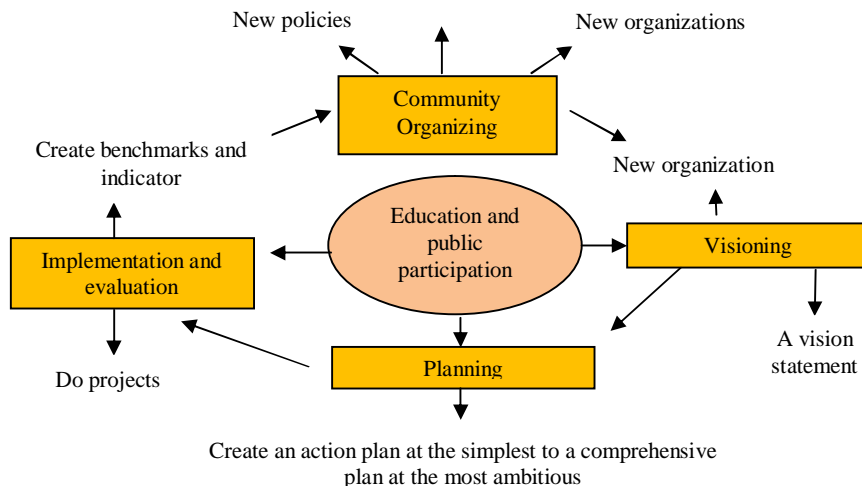
Apart from that, local authorities have to overcome many barriers, such as lack of legal powers, expertise and adequate financial resources. Their financial resources are limited and local taxation is under serious strain. Financial constraints also cause limitations to ability of local government to perform better (Kuppusamy, 2008). Therefore citizens become increasingly dissatisfied due to unmet needs. Overall, local governments face limitations in community development. Stokker (2011) finds that local government systems in most countries sustain a close relationship with its citizens in giving better service and performance. This relationship would be retained in the future development by engaging good cooperation between local government and the citizens.

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Community development process can be difficult, time consuming and costly. Community residents are often concerned with daily tasks than thinking about, and coming up with, a vision of their community's future (Green & Haines, 2012). For example, residents want access to good schools for their children, decent jobs, and a safe and a clean environment to live. Community development has the potential to effect changes against poverty and social exclusion (Lee, 2006). The author explains that its role is to advocate for radical change against the structures that keep people poor. According to Lee, the analysis so far has pointed to the fact that community development has not realised its full potential. The question remains then whether alternative approaches and processes can be put in place to build the effectiveness of community development as a powerful force for social change (Lee, 2006). The model in Figure 1 shows a process that begins with community organizing, visioning, planning and the final process is implementation and evaluation. There is a consistent debate over the importance of process versus outcomes in community development (Green & Haines, 2012).

Green and Haines also stress that there are many who argue that the outcome of public participation is unimportant as long as there is an avenue for the community to participate. They state that *"others contend that the ultimate goal of community development is to improve the quality life of the community, with public participation being simply a means to an end"*. They further iterate that it is difficult to maintain interest and commitment to community development processes if participants cannot point to successes. In the long run, both process and outcomes are essential pieces of community development.

Figure 1: Community Development Process



Source: Green & Haines (2012, p.64)

PATTERNS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SOME FOREIGN COUNTRIES

The United Kingdom's government focus strongly on developing and strengthening local community as mechanisms for both increased efficiency and effectiveness (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). In Ireland, deliberative democracy structure has been designed to promote a significant level of participation among people in community development for a better local democracy (Teague, 2007). Countries such as Australia and United Kingdom (UK) have hierarchical institutions and strong bureaucratic government that struggles to attract participation among people for community development (Gaventa, 2004). Both Australia and United Kingdom have policy and practice to achieve greater community participation. Local governments control people participation in community development through the imposition and internalisation of performance culture that require a good partnership (Taylor, 2007).

On the other hand, Eversole (2011) explains in foreign countries working with communities is a significant policy for their growth. This can be seen for instance in the UK government's strong focus on developing and strengthening local partnerships as mechanisms for both increased managerial efficiency and local democratic renewal (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004), and the OECD's recent work on public participation. There is a growing interest in moving from shared service provision to include service co-design, and from consultation to deliberative processes that allow for a greater depth of community involvement in decision-making (Eversole, 2011).

In Malaysia, people are having cohesive relationships that foster willing participation in community development within the mechanisms established by local government. Communities have a strong sense of commitment in all the initiatives carried out by local government in order to nurture better local democracy by building a strong community development. For the local government, working effectively with community can be a path to better policy formulations and greater acceptance

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because of the empirical nature and the objectives of this study, three main theories form the backbone to understanding community development, i.e. SERVQUAL, Systems theory and Expectancy theory.

The SERVQUAL instrument has been the predominant method used by many studies to measure consumers' perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). For years SERVQUAL is the best known service quality measurement instrument, and has been widely used to measure service quality in various service industries (Hsiu et al., 2010). According to Hsiu SERVQUAL measurements have been widely accepted and applied in the domain of service quality measurement.

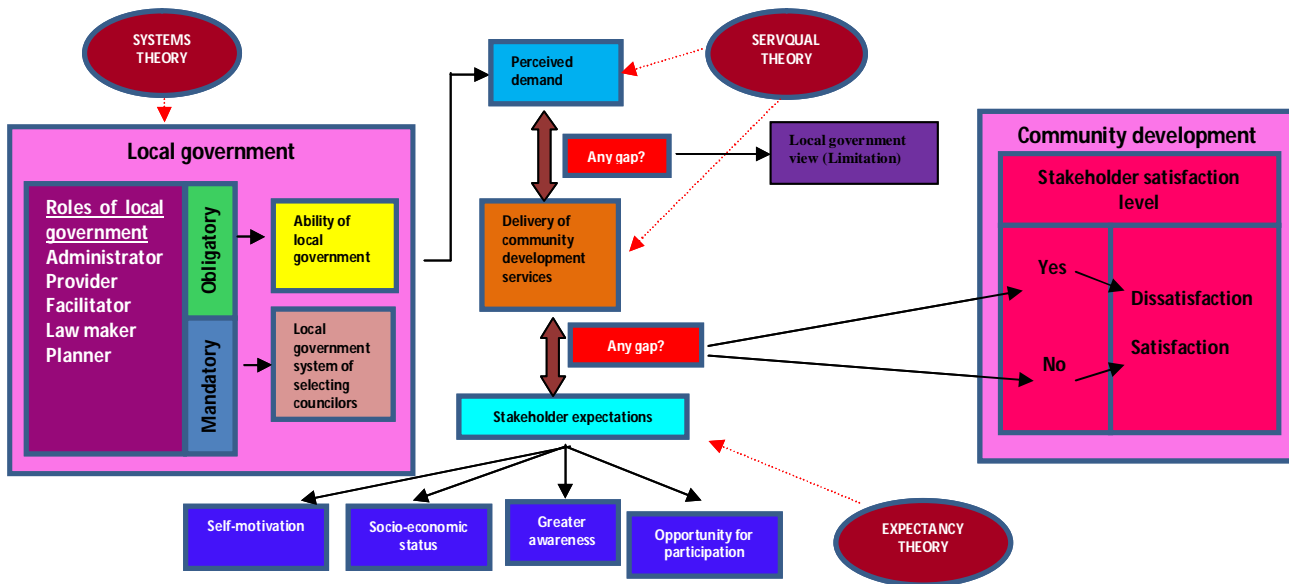
Fesler (1980) states system theory is necessary to explain community development at local level. According to Fesler, it asserts that every local government has a purpose, goal or objective in achieving better performance through excellent community development. Furthermore, the author elaborates citizen's performance needs to be measured against the stated objectives. Citizens' participation in community development must follow all the requirements and procedures by government at local level for effective involvement (Fesler, 1980).

While expectancy theory is an alternative approach that assumes citizens' have a variety of goals and strength of their preferences to achieve their target in community development (Rosenbloom & Kravchuk, 2005). Rosenbloom and Kravchuk propose that people's motivation in a community development will depend on the extent to which they expect a certain activity lead to some degree of satisfaction. For instance if they think that participating in community development will lead to a greater productivity, they will participate more in all the activities carried out by government. According to the authors, key to motivation is affording citizens some opportunity to achieve their desired goals and making clear what activities or efforts on the job they can reasonably expect to lead to attainment of these goals.

The framework as in Figure 2 presents an integrated system representing factors, arising from a combination of the theories, which exist prior to the process of community development, the approaches supporting community development, the roles of local government and the outcomes. The model shows the roles of local government in influencing the delivery of services. Whether it would employ mandatory or obligatory set of functions would depends on the ability of local government and system of electing councilors. Selection of councilors can be divided into appointed and elected. Appointed councilors do not necessarily fulfill people demands, requirements and needs as best as elected councilors could.

There are four factors that influence community development that would give big impact in bringing an excellent local government. This paper has documented four factors such as self-motivation, socio-economic status, greater awareness and opportunity for participation.

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework Of Research



Self-motivation is one of the most critical factors that would influence community development in order to establish successful local government in Malaysia. This factor is important to help local governments to excel in community development. Self-motivation is essential to encourage the environment to support and participate in achieving the community development goals effectively. Those who are having a very high self-motivation would be able to influence their communities to involve actively in delivery of community development services. By having this factor, the tendency to nurture better local government is very high at local level.

Holmes (1999, p.27) states “*socio-economic status is characterized by the economic, social and physical environments in which individuals live and work, as well as demographic and genetic factors*”. Individuals with higher level of socio-economic status would show more excitement in participating activities organized by local government. They would also help the local government in achieving their targets in community development.

Opportunity for participation would be the third factor influencing community development in implementing successful local government (Lawler, Edward, Hackman & Richard, 1969). Local government is able to organize and implement various activities and programs for the local people to achieve the objectives in order to develop the community. Besides that, local government also encourages people to participate in decision making process by engaging in extensive partnership with local government officers with increasingly more sophisticated skills and experience. It is difficult to analyze the community development activities as the diversity of experiences among the stakeholder. Therefore, providing opportunity for participation to the people would be effective increasing the range of activities undertaken by local government.

Greater awareness is also an important factor in community development (Skeldon, 1995). Local government identifies specific program attributes that may directly influence community development outcome and impacts. For that, local governments attempt to identify defined mission, vision, adequate resources and community support to generate greater awareness among the public. This would help the local government actively plan for a critical successful community development in the future.

Community development is the domain that would influence delivery of community development services. Community development is difficult to measure. Thus it is important that the following are answered:

- (i) Determine the level of community development and its services by local government
- (ii) Whether there is a gap between perceived demand and delivery of community development services
- (iii) Whether there is a gap between stakeholders’ expectations and delivery. Any mismatch between the two would imply dissatisfaction among stakeholders towards community development activities

The literature review on local government and community development has highlighted certain gaps and points to possible areas for further research. The above reviewed studies and concepts of community development still need to look at the more systematic studies comprehensively.

It should also be mentioned that other aspects such as policy formulation and implementation, community development process and other development issues have so far not been adequately explored. Although there have been studies on community development, none has focused specifically on initiatives carried by local government in order to increase stakeholder participation in it. In addition, past studies have not investigated community development initiatives towards enhancing performance of local authorities.

CONCLUSION

Local governments are public agencies that provide urban services to communities in enhancing better operations (Kuppusamy, 2008). It is the prime source of services in the community development in most developing countries including Malaysia. Being close to the citizens and central to the participatory development, local government in Malaysia has been assigned an important role to play in community development.

Shaw (2008) states “community development’s potential as an entering wedge is still what matters most about it and what can make it most distinctive”. Community development is imperative as it confronts the challenges and looks for the opportunities to contribute to the renewal of political and democratic life. Community development plays a very crucial role for a better future for the citizen and renewal of democracy. Communities are encouraged to participate in community development programs and activities to enhance performance of local government.

Shaw (2011, p. 11) explains “different conceptions of citizenship have been inscribed in community development theory and practice over time”. In this sense, historically community development has occupied different practices among communities. Therefore, to perform better at local level all the initiatives for the community development require a very important action in order to avoid upcoming obstacles in terms of policy and politic (Fudge, 2009).

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