

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM AT ABAI VILLAGE, LOWER KINABATANGAN AREA OF SABAH, EAST MALAYSIA

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Abstract: This research firstly, discusses the concept of stakeholder's participation in developing sustainable community based tourism (SCBT) with respect to types of community participation, strengths, motivations and barriers to participation in sustainable SCBT. Furthermore, a discussion on the survey of local stakeholders via questionnaires, which will, carried out Abai Village, lower Kinabatangan area of Sabah. This survey will conducted to identify the main reasons for local participation in SCBT, followed by an analysis of likelihood of local stakeholders to be included in sustainable SCBT's decision-making process.

INTRODUCTION

Gearing a sustainable community based tourism (SCBT) programme into practice is essentially dependent on strong participation from host communities and their stakeholders. As United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2005 in Graci and Dodds, 2010: 185) mentioned: "Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, in addition to strong political leadership to guarantee extensive participation and consensus building."

The above statement recommended that sustainable tourism (and SCBT in this context) may not be successfully implemented without continuous support and participation of all relevant stakeholders. Consequently, determining the host communities and their stakeholders' perception and support towards sustainable SCBT development is the first vital step in planning for sustained the tourism activities. To further address this matter, this research will, at the outset, discusses the concept of stakeholders participation in sustainable SCBT with respect to types of community participation, strengths, motivations and barriers to participation. Then, a discussion on the survey of local

stakeholders, will, carried out in Abai is a rural village located 40 kilometers from Sandakan Harbor in the estuary of the Kinabatangan River, a highly productive area containing biologically diverse habitat types and wildlife species. The village has a population of 350 people that are predominantly of the ethnic indigenous group Orang Sungai, as well as Tausug and Suluk. The Orang Sungai (River People) are native to the state of Sabah and have traditionally lived in small groups along the Kinabatangan River. They have their own language and traditional practices and beliefs, but the predominant religion in the area is Islam. Historically, the Orang Sungai have relied on fishing and the surrounding forest habitat for food, shelter and survival.

However, to assess the likelihood of local stakeholders to be included in sustainable SCBT's decision-making process. This research concludes by commenting on the proposed process to enhance participation of local stakeholders in developing and sustaining sustainable SCBT. Local Stakeholders Participation in Sustainable SCBT Increased interest by a number of groups within local communities towards sustainable SCBT programmes has led to some conflicting issues; for instance, who should be involved

and who should make the decisions with regards to planning and future development of sustainable SCBT? many scholars such as Graci and Dodds (2010); Sebele (2009) and Hassan et al. (2006) approved that the CBRT development process should include local communities as principal stakeholders and decision-makers. This is because local communities play important roles in shaping the rural environment, utilising most of the rural resources for economic gain and are responsible for creating the local culture which becomes the main product in selling and marketing the SCBT programmes. So, any attempt to exclude the “owners of their culture” could to some extent, result in serious negative impacts not only on the viability of SCBT programmes, but also on community life as a whole. Cornell (1997:250) outlines participation as “not only about achieving the more efficient and more equitable distribution of material resources: it is also about the sharing of knowledge and the transformation of the process of learning itself in the service of people’s self-development”. Others, for example Ashley and Roe (1998 in Aref and Redzuan, 2008:937) have defined community participation as “a spectrum from passive to active involvement to full participation where there is active community participation and venture ownership”. From the perspective of tourism planning, community participation can be well-defined as “a process of involving all [stakeholders] (local government officials, local citizens, architects, developers, business people and planners) in such way that decision-making is shared” (Haywood, 1988 in Okazaki, 2008:511). The process in gathering people from several disciplines together with each of them participating by sharing ideas and knowledge, according to Arnstein (1969 in Okazaki 2008:511) could “expand the power redistribution, thereby enabling society to fairly redistribute benefits and costs”. From the tourism viewpoint, Brohman (1996 in Aref and Redzuan, 2008:937) advocated community participation as “a tool to solve major problems of tourism through local participation and functional stakeholders involvement in tourism activities – which will achieve more equal distribution of the benefits, discourage undemocratic decision-making and will meet the community needs of local communities in different ways”.



Picture 1: Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge, Kinabatangan River

Source: <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/kinabatangan-river-sandakan.html>



Picture 2: Abai Jungle Lodge, Kinabatangan River

Source: <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/kinabatangan-river-sandakan.html>



Picture 3: Borneo - Boys In Small Brightly Decorated Boats - Abai Village, Kinabatangan River, Borneo. (1.5 Hours Boat Ride From Sandakan)

Source: <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/kinabatangan-river-sandakan.html>

Types of Participation Leksakundilok (2006 in Aref and Redzuan, 2008:937) has recognized a typology of community participation in tourism development with a modification on Arnstein's model for ladder of citizen participation, and each type of participation is described in Table 1.

Table 1
Types of stakeholders participation in tourism development

<i>Item</i>	<i>Types</i>
Self-mobilization	Local people may directly contact explorer tourists and develop tourism service by themselves. Some programs may be supported by NGOs that are not involved in the decision-making of the local community.
Empowerment	Empowerment is the highest rung of community participation, in which local people have control over all development without any external force or influence. The benefits are fully distributed in the community.
Partnership	Conciliation between developers and local people is developed in the participatory process. Local organizations elect the leaders to convey their opinion and negotiate with external developers. There are some degrees of local influence in the development process. The benefits may be distributed to the community in the form of collective benefits and jobs and income to the people.
Interaction	People have greater involvement in this level. The rights of local people are recognized and accepted in practice at local level. Tourism is organized by community organization, however, receives limited support from government agencies.
Consultation	People are consulted in several ways, e.g. involved in community's meeting or even public hearing. Developers may accept some contribution from the locals that benefit their projects, e.g. surveying, local transportation and goods.
Informing	People are told about tourism development program, which have been decided already, in the community. The developers run the projects without any listening to local people's opinions.

contd. table 1

<i>Item</i>	<i>Types</i>
Manipulation	Tourism development projects are generally developed by some powerful individuals, or government, without any discussion with the people or community leaders. The benefits go to some elite persons; the lower classes may not get any benefits. This level applies to most conventional community tourism areas. Source: Leksakundilok (2006 in Aref and Redzuan, 2008: 937).

From Table 1, the uppermost level of participation is when communities achieve self-mobilization, which allows community members to establish their own tourism operations without assistance from other ventures, especially from government or foreign business bodies. In certain cases, nevertheless, especially when communities and their stakeholders feel that they are not capable or not ready to manage the potential risks from SCBT development, maintaining a certain level of partnership and empowerment, without pushing themselves to the top of the participation ladder has gained more favour.

As the tourism activities develop in their areas, communities come to realise the importance of the tourism network and its influences on the development of local tourism products. Furthermore, tourism is a vulnerable sector and very sensitive to any global or national changes (Hamzah, 2004). Global economic downturn or the effects of diseases such as the Influenza A (Swine flu) pandemic recently, has significantly influenced global and national travel patterns. If such events continue, they will not only decrease the number of in-coming international and local tourists, which will result in lower revenue and income to local operators; in the long term, they could jeopardise the survival of sustainable CBT itself.

Due to the vulnerability of local tourism to external changes, some CBT operators in Malaysia have found it is safer to maintain their partnership with other investors or agencies, whereby communities could enjoy tourism's benefits, although they have to bear potential costs or risks from global changes that could occur in the future (TPRG, 2009). While some authors agree that community participation can be a positive force towards achieving

sustainable CBT development (Okazaki, 2008; Aref and Redzuan, 2008; Hassan *et al.*, 2006), others seemed to differ (Sebele, 2009; Liu, 2006; Taylor, 1995 in Okazaki, 2008:511; Rattanasuwongchai, 2001).

A community and stakeholders' participation approach may, according to George (2004) and Njoh (2002), sometimes fail to identify the influences of elites within the communities in the participation process. For many areas such as in Africa (Sebele, 2009), in Thailand (Rattanasuwongchai, 2001) and in Malaysia (Liu, 2006), tourism projects in rural areas are driven by foreign ownership or the private sector or even by powerful and wealthy individuals within the community and do not contribute much to the community itself. Community and stakeholders' participation are only discussed in superficial terms but the primary goal is to make a profit for such commercial entities, and for a few powerful individuals and families within the community (Sebele, 2009; Yaman and Muhd, 2004). Indeed, it causes displacement, increased costs, economic leakages, loss of access to resources and socio-cultural disruption among the locals. Strengths of Participation Despite all the criticisms that have been described above, there is still a growing interest and awareness among social scientists to implement a community participation approach in planning and development of sustainable CBT. Okazaki (2008:512), in summary, has listed four strengths of a community participation approach

To encourage a greater level of participation among local communities and their stakeholders in sustainable CBT planning and decision-making process, Smith (1984 in George, 2004:58) presents four prerequisites: 1) the legal right and opportunity to participate; 2) access to information; 3) provision of enough resources for people or groups to get involved; and 4) genuinely public – broad rather than selected (sometimes elite) involvement. Besides factors which directly related with locals, Yaman and Muhd (2004) have suggested that sustainable CBT planning and development must be strengthened through education for local host populations, industry and visitors as well as respect for the quality of natural environment, resources and sustainable use of energy and investment in alternative modes of transport (Yaman and Muhd, 2004).

Table 2
Strengths of community participation.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Issues</i>
Local issues	have a direct influence on the tourist experience: a backlash by the local's results in hostile behaviour towards tourists (Pearce, 1994). Thus, tourist's environments should be created in harmony with the social climate, where residents will benefit from tourism and not become the victims (Wahab and Pigram, 1997).
Local assets	the image of tourism is based on the assets of the local community, including not only the local people but also the natural environment, infrastructure, facilities and special events or festivals; therefore, the cooperation of the host community is essential to access and develop these assets appropriately (Murphy, 1995)
Local driving force	Public involvement functions as a driving force to protect the community's natural environment and culture as tourism products, while simultaneously encouraging greater tourism-related income (Felstead, 2000).
Tourism vulnerability	Because the tourism industry is sensitive both to internal and external forces, many tourism development plans are often only partially implemented or not at all (Bovy, 1982). Moreover, even those that are fully implemented are not always sustainable. Thus, to increase the feasibility and longevity of projects, all plans should be linked with the overall socioeconomic development of the community. Source: adapted from Okazaki (2008: 512).

Motivation for Taking Part in Sustainable CBT Dunn (2007) in community-based tourism (CBT) research in Thailand and Sebele (2009) in CBT research in Botswana have identified that one of the many motivations to get involved in tourism is because the members of a community wanted to help with conservation of the environment and improve their management skills. They were also interested in meeting new people both in their community and outside their community. Some members of the community, especially women, stated their motivations were driven by interest to learn English and improve their skills mainly in language for communication

(Dunn, 2007). Another motivating factor is earning supplementary income from local tourism activities, especially when their current jobs offer flexible time which enables them to participate in SCBT activities (Dunn, 2007) and it is applicable for tourism projects in seasonal areas (Logar, 2009) (refer to Figure 1).

Barriers to Participation This section discusses barriers to sustainable CBT participation under two different points of view; that is from those of the host communities and the government. The identification and organisation of these barriers are based on review of the

literature and by examine previous research works by Dukeshire and Thurlow (2002), Krank et al. (2010) and Stone and Stone (2011). However, such barriers are unique to particular CBT sites including those in Malaysia and most of the barriers have been eliminated through well-planned, well-developed and good management of CBT programmes accompanied by experienced and motivated host communities. Nevertheless, these list of barriers may be useful in understand common issues surrounding the communities participation in sustainable CBT programmes in general.

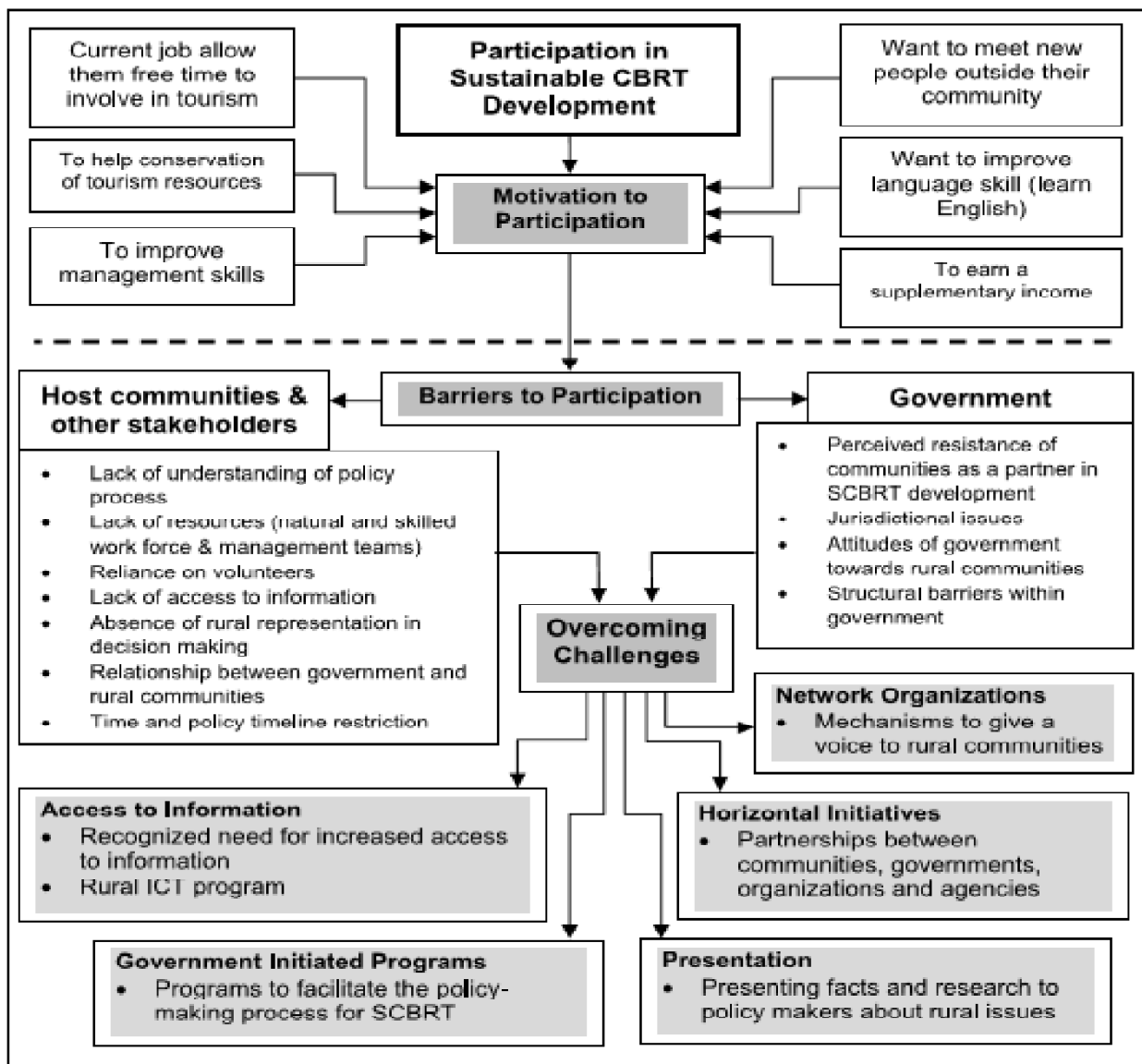


Figure 1: Motivation, barriers and overcoming challenges in local participation and stakeholder's involvement. Source: adapted from Aref and Redzuan (2008); Dunn (2007); Dukeshire and Thurlow (2002)

There are seven main barriers to host communities' participation of sustainable CBT identified: lack of understanding, lack of resources, reliance on volunteers, lack to access to information, absence of representation in decision-making process, the negative perceptions among government representatives towards local communities and finally, tourism policy timeline restrictions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Motivation, barriers and overcoming challenges in local participation and stakeholder's involvement. Source: adapted from Aref and Redzuan (2008); Dunn (2007); Dukeshire and Thurlow (2002) Survey of Local Stakeholders and Presentation of Result This section describes the background of the CBT sites

selected for this study, i.e.). Abai village is located in the eastern part of the Lower Kinabatangan. There are seven villages within the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, of which Abai is the most isolated (it can only be reached by boat). Abai village is located in the eastern part of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary and is in close proximity to the largest 'Ramsar' (wetlands of international importance) site in Malaysia (Map 3). The area surrounding the village is highly biodiverse in forest habitat types and in wildlife, such as orang-utans, proboscis monkeys, long-tailed macaques, pygmy elephants, wild boar, monitor lizards, and crocodiles. In addition, the riverine and mangrove ecosystems near Abai are critical spawning waters for freshwater prawns and fish.



Source: <http://www.moidowalohomestay.com/attractions-in-kampung-abai>

Principal Reasons for Participating in Tourism Activities The interviews (using open-ended questions) will carried out to identify, from the economic and entrepreneurship, socio-cultural and leadership, and environmental point of view, reasons why respondents participated in the local tourism activities (Table 3 as an example). As suggested by literature reviews in earlier section, the participation of local stakeholders is very

important since many tourism activities have various impacts (direct and indirect) on the local community wellbeing. The respondents' reasons for participating in tourism activities are very important in this research as this helps to identify if there were any specific needs and, maybe, levels of tolerance regarding certain aspects of local tourism activities, which might affect their lives when tourism activities are further developed in their village.

Table 3
Respondents principal reasons for participating in tourism activities

Number	Item
Economic and entrepreneurship reasons	
1	To earn extra income
2	To enjoy a better living condition (stable jobs)
3	To increase market opportunity for their products
4	As a part of requirement by aid agencies
5	To increase savings
6	To pay the business loans
7	To contribute more money to the family or parents
Social-cultural and leadership reasons	
8	To promote local and traditional cultures
9	To build self-esteem and co-operation between member of the community and with tourists
10	As a vital part of youth development – to become the future leaders
11	As a spare time activities
12	To increase the opportunities to be included in tourism continuous training and workshops
Environmental and natural reasons	
13	To help keeping the village clean and beautiful
14	To increase awareness of and to learn more about environmental and natural resources conservation
15	Increasing the practice of waste handling (recycle, reuse and reduce)

CONCLUSION

The scope of CBRT is very comprehensive, involving multi-dimensional inputs, and many stakeholders (with various interests) need to be involved. As a response to these variety of needs, the participation of relevant stakeholders in decision-making process, as suggested in the survey of respondents of abai villages could coordinate discussion on raising issues in local tourism, and to protect local interest and increase stakeholders voices/shares over certain issues of interest. Additionally, the community is the party, who often receives direct impacts from any policies or planning outcome, as imposed by other parties (especially government agencies and private investors). The study also will discovered the engagement with decision-

making process could expand the host communities and stakeholders' learning curve through: (1) Receiving direct exposure to organisational leadership and training programmes provided by government agencies (2) Enhancing the stakeholders' understanding on the sustainable CBRT concept by working closely with government agencies through training and educational programmes such as discussion forum and experience sharing, motivational talks, exhibitions and educational trip visits (Research fieldwork in February, 2018). This new knowledge could potentially enhance the stakeholders' understanding of sustainable tourism including in CBRT development and its implementation in the local context. As demonstrated by this study, participation is important to maintain stakeholders' continuous support towards cultural and local development tourism programmes. Moreover, with their likelihood for being included in decision-making, the local communities could share their skills and local knowledge –considered as inputs and provide direction needed to carry out planning for tourism. Engaging the host communities in the development process, in spite of this, is not without challenges. Information on communities' perception towards their participation in sustainable CBRT and identification of enabling and constraint factors for participation are essential as the starting point of CBRT programmes.

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