

Barriers to community participation in rural tourism: A case study of the communities of Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia.

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Abstract: Semporna district is situated within the Tawau division, located on the southeastern coast of Sabah. The district is 1,145 square kilometers and is one of the main tourist attractions for both locals and foreign tourist. Most of Semporna's potential for tourism lies within the natural resources of the district. In order to safeguard the sustainability of the industry, it is of unprecedented importance that there is proper use of rural tourism policies. In this argument, this paper highlights gaps and challenges in the actual scenario of the study site versus the policy texts. A full qualitative study was conducted on the heterogeneous society of Semporna and the results indicated that the local communities were not fully involved in tourism activities despite policies indicating the support of their participation. From the study several factors were identified that caused the participatory gap. This includes (i) knowledge gap, (ii) economic factors, (iii) religious factors and (iv) traditional factors. This gap indicates that the policies are under utilized and therefore there is a need for a change in management practices within the district.

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1. Introduction

Semporna is the principle town of the district, situated within the Tawau division. Located on the southeastern coast of Sabah, Semporna is a fishing town encompassing both formal and informal markets, shops, supermarkets, travel agents, shops and restaurants (Kleinen & Osseweijer, 2010). Semporna's tourism lies within the natural resources of the district. The crown jewel of Semporna's tourism lies in Pulau Sipadan. It is regarded as a world-class dive site and is most frequented by the high-end, professional foreign market segment (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2012). Pulau Sipadan is an island approximately 30 kilometres south of Semporna, host to a cornucopia of marine life such as turtles, moray eels, tropical fish and a diversity of hard and soft corals (Ledema, Lewis & Savage, 2003). Often compared to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, from January to October 2011, Pulau Sipadan received an estimated 30,959 foreign tourists and 4,523 local visitors (Borneo Post, 2012).

Findings with key stakeholders indicate that there are gaps in the successful implementation and governance of rural tourism policies in Semporna. The United Nations Environmental Programme and World Tourism Organisation (2006) highlight this as a crucial aspect to be addressed. Programme indicates that the proper use of rural tourism policies is of unprecedented importance for safeguarding the sustainability of the industry. In order to ensure the holistic approach of the policies, policy gaps

pertaining to environment, economics (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2012) and communities (Kleinen & Osseweijer, 2010) must be addressed. In the rural tourism arena, three main policy-texts are identified for the use of rural tourism. This are: (i) the Malaysian Tourism Policy Study Policy Document; (ii) the Rural Tourism Master Plan; and (iii) the National Ecotourism Plan.

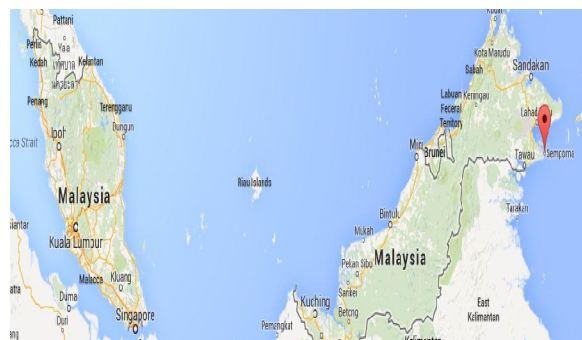


Figure 1. Location of Semporna

The gaps found in Semporna pertaining local communities' participation in tourism related activities are apparent and requires investigation. In-depth interviews with village leaders have indicated that there is a discrepancy in tourism related participation amongst the local communities. The objective of this paper is to investigate this

discrepancy between community participation in tourism related activities based on on-site scenarios for policy improvement purposes.

2. Local Communities And Tourism

Local communities, their culture and tourism are important components (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003) in socioeconomic development as the concepts of culture, rural and tourism are seen as multidimensional and interrelated. It can be seen as an opportunity for specific skill development as the locals are then given the roles in the tourism experience (Kastenholz et al., 2012), enabling culture to be an attraction to tourists and create economic benefit (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). The fact that the rural communities become 'living spectacle' to be observed, photographed and interacted with results in the 'pollution' of previously authentic cultures (Yang & Wall, 2009).

Social equality advocates fairness and equal rights to resources by all actors as it should reflect a situation in which all individuals have equal opportunity to participate, benefit, make decisions and manage resources for tourism development (Mbaiwa, 2005). Tourism can be a major influence in a nation's economy or a particular region, thus eliciting strong ties with the rest of the domestic economy (Mbaiwa, 2003). Through this understanding, tourism may be considered a catalyst for national and regional development (Mbaiwa, 2003; Sharpley, 2002), promoting employment (Liu, 2006), exchange earnings, balance of payment advantages and important infrastructure developments (Mbaiwa, 2003). That is why sustainable development aim towards economic efficiency is important (Mbaiwa, 2003, 2005) for the future inheritance of generations to come. This is achieved by producing maximum output in order to reach a high standard of living within the constraints of existing capital (Mbaiwa, 2005). An important policy implication is the decentralisation of natural management, redistributing power and transferring of responsibilities from central government to rural communities. Through asset decentralisation, communities have the power to promote conservation and rural development (Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2011).

2.1 Heterogeneous Communities

The communities in Semporna, Sabah are complex. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), Semporna has a population of 178,061. The figures underline that at least 22.5% are non-citizens of Malaysia. The livelihood in Semporna varies, with some residing in large well-equipped houses complete with modern furnishings and a proper sewage system. A large number, however still live on houses with stilts, built along the seashore

where they rely on the sea to clear away raw sewage and rubbish (Kleinen & Osseweijer, 2010). The lack of basic facilities in these areas is conducive for the spread of cholera, malaria, tuberculosis and typhoid (Kleinen & Osseweijer, 2010).

As with other parts of Sabah, Semporna faces a problem with illegal human migration and complex socio-economic factors. The census conducted in 2010 shows that 24,000 people are immigrants living in squatter homes where there are 18 major squatter colonies within the district rating zone and more than 100 smaller colonies scattered outside the area ("Semporna a dangerous district – DO, 2013). In most cases, these illegal immigrants are of Pilipino descent and are called Bajau Laut, Sea Bajau or Pala'u. They reside in Semporna due to the political unrest in the Philippines. The Bajau Laut are categorized as 'stateless people' rather than illegal immigrants or political refugees, without official citizenship and status (Ali, 2010).

A popular tourist destination in Semporna, called Mabul Island for example is home to three distinct groups of people. The Bajau Laut, the Bajau Darat or Bajau Semporna and Sulu. While most of these individuals embrace Islam as their religion, some of these individuals have included customary and cultural components into their faith. Also, these communities speak in different languages and have different customary ceremonies and customs. In the context of community participation in Mabul island, investigations have indicated that some groups have either abstained themselves from tourism related activities or were not given opportunities to participate in tourism related activities.

3. Rural Tourism Policies in Malaysia

There are many policies in Malaysia that have both direct and non-direct impacts on rural tourism. However, The National Tourism Policy, The Rural Tourism Master plan and The National Ecotourism Plan are 3 policies identified to have the most impact on rural tourism in Malaysia.

The National Tourism Policy issued by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (2011) has the agenda to drive tourism as a primary sector, a sustainable and viable form of economic generation for the nation. For rural tourism, the policy highlights the importance of community empowerment through rural tourism activities (Zainal et al., 2012).

The Rural Tourism Master plan is commissioned in 2000. The government's effort to ensure the growth of rural tourism is witnessed in the agenda of this plan. This marketing plan creates a strategic vision of the Master Plan to create a new brand of tourism experience for visitors, particularly long stay and high spending visitors.

The National Ecotourism Plan that is drafted by MOCAT and WWF in 1996 acts as a backbone for rural tourism policies in Malaysia (Marzuki et al., 2011). Of the estimated 20 sites in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak are taken into consideration for the high patronage of both local and foreign tourists (Marzuki et al., 2011). The aim of this plan is to assist both the Federal and State level Governments in the development of Malaysia's ecotourism potential, with effective tools for conserving the natural and cultural heritage of the country while providing socio-economic benefits to the local (Marzuki et al., 2011).

4. Methodology

This research is conducted using a full qualitative approach, and uses in-depth interview as a way to elicit data. Data analysis is completed simultaneously with data collection. Researchers must begin analysing data with the first point of data collection and first observation (Merriam, 2002). All interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim as soon as the interview process has ended.

4.1 Selection of community participants.

The respondents were selected based on individuals who were able to contribute to this study include the head of village or any member of the community that is influential and can provide accurate information to this study. The selection of community began by identifying several communities located around Semporna. The researcher uses theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to discover concepts that are relevant to the problem and population. The use of theoretical sampling leads to the discovery of the importance of acquiring representations from different communities. These include the communities from Tun Sakaran Marine Park (TSMP), Malaysian citizens outside TSMP, and non-Malaysian citizens.

5. On-Site Findings

The in-depth interview ran from the 14 May 2013 to 30 September 2013. During this period of time, the researcher interviews 6 respondents. Each interview lasts between 45 minutes to an hour. To safeguard the identity of these respondents, pseudonyms are adopted. The summary of respondents with respect to their representation is shown in Table 1.

The findings from the in-depth through thematic analysis showed 3 main findings. These include (i) knowledge gap, (ii) economic factors, (iii) religious factors and (iv) traditional factor. These findings have been summarized based on the key points voiced by the respondents.

5.1 Knowledge Gap

The respondent addresses the shift in trend towards the involvement of the local community in tourism; this means that they are aware of the benefits of tourism. As the leader of Mabul's community, he is in a very difficult position because his community is not given high-level management positions. The operators take in outsiders to fill the positions instead. The leader does not fully comprehend why they are not employed. However, he believes it is because of their English proficiency. Everyone has equal opportunity, but since locals have the opportunity but they might not have the expertise. He seems to be very dissatisfied with this situation as witnessed by the way he airs his concerns and from his tone of voice.

According to another respondent, the local community is not fully benefiting from tourism related activities because they are not involved. Education and proficiency in English appear to be the main causes. Financially it is a constraint because outsiders are benefiting.

A Sea Gypsy's feedback on this matter highlights that they are a community that does not possess basic education. As a result, they depend solely on their survival skills. Their hand-to-mouth way of life enables skills such as fishing. They cannot be employed legally because they do not have an IMM13, which is a social visa for refugees. They are not able to obtain this visa because they are stateless and not refugees.

Table 1: Pseudonyms of Respondents

No.	Pseudonyms	Description
1.	Mr. Kamal	He is one the leaders of the community of Mabul island and represents the refugees in Mabul
2.	Mr. Bill	He is the leader of the community of Mabul island.
3.	Ms. Julie	She has been part of the community for the past 7 year. She is close to the community of Mabul and was formerly active with an NGO based in Semporna.
4.	Mr. Ali	He is one the leaders of the community of Mabul island and represents the Sea Gypsies in Mabul
5.	Ms. Mimi	A local from Semporna who was actively involved in non-formal environmental education especially within TSMP.
6.	Mr. Mike	A local from Semporna who is also a reef ecologist in a public university in Malaysia.

5.2 Religious Factor

The respondents are very concerned over his community being involved in tourism related activities as he is of the opinion that it goes against their religious views and norms. He remains very calm throughout this area when questioned and does not show any signs of hatred towards the industry. He is very clear that his family and community are living on Mabul Island and are of Sulu descent, which abstain from tourism. Another person has mentioned that a major reason is the issue of religion. One of the respondents from the local level mentions that the majority of communities in Semporna are Muslims.

5.3 Economic Factor

In this context, their interpretation highlights the fact that the locals do not see economic benefit of being involved in tourism related activities. This is because the locals are impatient in waiting for the yields of their investment, which can take a few years to materialize. Therefore, the locals rather are involved in fishing or seaweed farming where the returns of investment are quicker. However, they might be ignorant on the fact that this would yield a smaller return.

Also, their interpretation involves economic context from a different angle, which carries a similar weight to ignorance, the respondents note that the term economic in this case is the difficulty in the start-up assets. This would mean that the community has no monetary capability in starting up a business that requires a large amount of investment.

5.4 Traditional Factor

In this context, the respondents have mentioned that fishing is a way of life. One of the reasons why they do not venture into tourism related activities is because they do not possess basic or sufficient education and live a hand-to-mouth lifestyle. All their daily activities are about survival. For instance, the Sea Gypsies are a community that does not possess basic education. As a result, they depend solely on their survival skills. Their hand-to-mouth way of life enables skills such as fishing.

Others would include indicating that the skill required for tourism related activities are very demanding. They are not involved because they are used to their normal way of life such as fishing. So in their minds, tourism is non-existent. However the respondents have highlighted that their involvement has nothing to do with government initiatives, but rather their own decisions.

5.5 Identifying Gaps Between On-Site Findings And Policy Corpus

Table 2 analyses the findings based on the on-site interpretation of the researcher versus the policy corpus of the 3 main rural tourism policies in Malaysia.

Table 2: On-site Gaps versus Policy Corpus

Gap identified	Local Community	Policy text-corpus	Identified in policy
Knowledge Gap	Yes	Yes, the policy text highlights the importance of local community participation and grow with the expansion of the tourism sector	The National Tourism Policy and The National Ecotourism Plan
Religious factors	Yes	No, there is no text indicating the uses of faith in tourism per say. But there is text that highlights the importance of understanding local cultures, values and history of local cultures.	Not available
Economic Factors	Yes	Yes, mechanism such as profit-sharing arrangements between tourist industry and local-communities, and financial aid are highlighted.	The National Tourism Policy and The National Ecotourism Plan
Traditional Factors	Yes	Yes, homestay programs are highlighted to allow local communities run businesses while continuing with their everyday lives.	The Rural Tourism Master plan.

From table 2, it was found that (i) knowledge gap, (ii) economic factors and (iv) traditional factors were identified in the policies. However, religious factors were not directly highlighted but the policies identified sensitivity of local cultures and norms.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to identify the gaps and challenges in the actual on-site scenario of the study site versus the rural tourism policies in Malaysia. The challenge of this paper was due to the heterogeneous communities in Semporna that were

lacking in terms of participation in tourism related activities. From the in-depth interviews, 4 main findings were uncovered. This would include (i) knowledge gap, (ii) religious factors, (iii) economic factors and (iv) traditional factors. The author then used three main policy text to analyze the gap. This includes (i) The National Tourism Policy, (ii) The Rural Tourism Master plan and (iii) The National Ecotourism Plan. It was found that religious factors were not directly highlighted within the policy text. An implication of this finding would reflect accuracy while during policy formulation. This factor should be further examined for future policy implementation.

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