ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bidayuh World View On Participation And Empowerment In Community Development

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ABSTRACT

Participation of native community in fulfilling their needs and resources has been known to enhance empowerment. The main focus of this research is to understand the world view of Bidayuh on participation and empowerment in community development. This study adopts the interpretative approach based on abductive logic from the perspective of an idealist ontology and constructionist epistemology. The findings show that the participation perceived by the Bidayuh community is limited not only at the implementation level, but also involves other levels such as planning, evaluation and monitoring. Meanwhile, their perception of empowerment refers to a process whereby individuals or groups are at the stage where they are capable of using their own ability, capability and self-capacity. The implication of this study is that greater engagement with the Bidayuh community on the part of the government agencies will go a long way in understanding the Bidayuh’s participation needs and their eventual individual empowerment.

Key words: Participation, Empowerment, Community, Native, Bidayuh, Sarawak, Malaysia

Introduction

This study focuses on understanding the concepts of participation and the Bidayuh community’s worldview of empowerment in community development, according to the world-view of the community itself based on their own construction of reality, and direction with regards to conceptualizing and giving meaning to their social world. Previous studies have clearly demonstrated that the ineffectiveness of a development programme aimed at improving the quality of life of a community – particularly in rural areas – is often linked to the attitude of the group of planners who fail to understand the life needs and aspirations of the target group, as well as the reality of their social world (Shamsul, 1977; Katzner, 1979; Fishers, 1998; Horowitz, 1998; Sen, 1999; Van Wicklin, 2001). In addition, the implementation of the purpose of a development programme typically highlights two things: Firstly, the planners are economists or those who have received training in the discipline of economy; and secondly they have a tendency to use the construct of development stage approach of Rostow theory, which is concerned with unilinear changes from traditional to modern, without taking into consideration the suitability of this approach with regards to the community in question, particularly from the socio-cultural aspects and acceptance towards modernism (Myrdal, 1970; Shamsul, 1977; Sanjaya et al., 2005). The main focus of these development programmes is on the economic development plans that prioritize economic growth and social change as measurements of success in development (Shamsul, 1977; Sen, 1993).

The main reason for this study is that, to date, there has been a lack of research on the Bidayuh community, particularly in the sense of giving greater focus to the concept of participation and empowerment from the perspective of the Bidayuh’s own world-view. To a certain extent, this situation has resulted in an understanding and knowledge of needs and wants of the community that is ambiguous and is often marginalized. In addition, needs and wants are two different concepts. Needs refer to the specific category of universal goal that is relevant to all humans in their effort to keep themselves from harm. Meanwhile, wants or desires are obtained from something that is preferred by individual and cultural environment (Lavers, 2008). This has resulted in development programmes planned by the government to improve the community’s quality of life of a community, often unsuccessful (Ngidang and Abdul, 1999; Ngidang, 2002). As a consequence the community has been portrayed by Western orientalists as a community that has cultural values such as laziness, resistance to change, low ambitions and a blasé attitude, as well as traditional characteristics, often considered as an obstacle
to development (Grijpstra, 1971; Abdul Rashid, 1990; Walker, 1998; Minos, 2000; Madeline, 2004). However, this portrayal can, in reality, be disputed.

Other contributory factors to this research are theoretical. Research conducted to date by economists, anthropologists, social psychologists and sociologists regarding the concept of participation and empowerment have often used different orientations and concepts. Sociological and anthropological studies focus on the development construct methodology based on conflict-oriented models and equilibrium in their efforts to consider the concepts of participation and empowerment, while economic studies emphasize economic growth and social changes based on Rostow’s construct methodology, *Stages of Economic Growth*. Social psychology research emphasize the cognitive and emotional aspect in order to discuss the concept of participation and empowerment by using the environment of free will – in other words, an environment where the social actors are determined to be free from poverty. This research seeks to understand the concept of participation and empowerment based on interpretivist ontology, whereby the actors define their reality in the context of the social environment and practical barriers faced by them in their daily lives.

The key research question that will provide focus and direction for this article is:

What are the concepts of participation and empowerment according to the world-view of the rural Bidayuh community in Serian District, Sarawak? The main objective of this study is to obtain a basic description and a clear understanding of the concept of participation and empowerment of the Bidayuh community through data obtained from the original source – namely, from the world-view of the Bidayuh community itself. A clear understanding of the concept of participation and empowerment constructed from the world-view of the Bidayuh community will lead to the formulation of a very important and deeper understanding of the needs and wants of this community in their daily lives. The other objectives of this study include the contribution to the theoretical understanding of the concept of local participation and empowerment, and the meaning of participation and empowerment as conceptualized by the administrative agents at the macro level.

**Methodology:**

**Study Area:**

The Serian District is located under the administration of the Samarahan Region and is administered by a resident after Samarahan was officially made into a Region on 1 January 1987 (Sarawak, 2004). Each district is administered by a district officer. Meanwhile, sub-districts are administered by administrative officers (Sarawak, 2008). The Serian District is actually one of four districts in the Samarahan Region (Sarawak, 2007) (see Figure 1.1). The Serian District covers an area of approximately 2,106 square kilometres and is located about 64 kilometres, or an hour’s journey, to the south of Kuching City. It has one small sub-district, namely the Tebedu Sub-District, which is the main entry point (international border crossing) for Malaysia/Indonesia (in Sarawak) (Sarawak, 2004). The Tebedu Sub-District is located 43 kilometres from Serian Town. The Serian District borders the Kuching Region in the north, the Simunjan District in the east, and West Kalimantan, Indonesia in the south. The Serian District consists of a main city and seven small towns, which are the transaction centres of the district (Sarawak, 2007).

**Research Design:**

An interpretive approach and abductive research strategy were selected for this research. The interpretive approach and abductive research strategy analyses social reality as constructed by social actors. Accordingly, in this type of research, the researcher needs to understand the social world that has been interpreted, in order to understand the concept of participation and empowerment with regards to the social actors. Originating from this, scientific knowledge should be obtained from the knowledge, experience, interpretation, action and reaction of the social actors in the world of the social actors themselves. According to the abductive research strategy, when the researcher enters the world of the social actors to get an insight into their knowledge, the social reality is constructed jointly by the researcher and the social actors via a series of dialogues or narration. Therefore, by using this methodology, the themes and categories of participation and empowerment of the Bidayuh community in accordance with their own world-view have been explored and understood by the researcher in the present study. However, the logic utilized by the researcher to create the categories of quality of life of the Bidayuh community should be in line with the logic that has been used by the social actors.

The study consists of two population groups: i) participants of the SPKR programme in rural areas; and ii) non-participants of the SPKR programme in the rural areas. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to obtain a complete list of names of the SPKR programme recipients among the Bidayuh community in the Serian District; thus, the random method was adopted for the selection of respondents. Therefore, non-probability sampling method, consisting of quota sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling were used in this study. Purposive sampling was used at the initial stage of the study to select two types of SPKR
(Welfare Development Scheme) programme participants with various backgrounds or different demographic profiles. Ultimately, the researcher was in fact able to identify participants and non-participants of the SPKR programme as a result of the information that was obtained orally from friends and relatives, as well as through the network of leaders of the communities in the Serian District. The researcher was subsequently successful in contacting and identifying the Bidayuh people who are participants of the SPKR programme. This means that, in actual fact, the snowball sampling technique was used in the process of selecting the respondents of this study.

However, the use of snowball sampling technique has, to a certain extent, limited the diversity of the respondents in this study. To overcome this problem, the researcher attended an SPKR seminar and workshop conducted by the Serian District Office, in order to obtain further information on the types of SPKR programmes and the list of Bidayuh people involved in them, as well as the areas addressed. A total of 25 participants were selected from the SPKR programme whilst 25 non-SPKR participants were selected for this study. The total number of respondents in this study is 50. The targeted sample size was achieved through repetition of the sampling process until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation occurs when there are no new themes or categories emerging and no relevant data can be discussed or can act on the existing categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Results

Meaning of "participation":

The respondents’ world-view in this study on the concept of participation refers to the question of the extent to which they are involved in the decision-making process, particularly at the level of planning, implementation, involvement in discussions or meetings, having the opportunity to present their views and ideas, or having their views or ideas heard and fully appreciated by the government. At the same time, it refers to their having control or influence over the decisions taken (see Figure 1.2). For example, one of the respondents, namely R1, 31 (participant of the SPKR programme), stated that:

Participation is a process where village people like myself have the opportunity to participate and communicate their views or ideas in any decision-making process without there being any restrictions or feeling of fear appearing. I do not want my name to be suddenly listed as the recipient of the Rubber Plantation Scheme (Skim Tanaman Getah), but I myself am not sure whether the land I have with me at the moment is suitable or not for the crop. Let the development programme that is to be given to us be in line with the needs and resources we have with us (R1, 31).
The same idea was also given by R2, 29 (participant of the SPKR programme), R3, 31 (non-participant of the SPKR programme), and R4, 45 (participant of the SPKR programme). They are of the opinion that anyone who wishes to be involved in the development programmes organized by the government has the right to do so – i.e. that they should be able “to sit together at one table and on one chair (R4, 45, participant of the SPKR programme)” in the process of making decisions, especially at the planning stage. Meanwhile R5, 50 (participant of the SPKR programme), is of the opinion that the community should:

Not surrender outright the process of making decisions to the government agency that organizes the development programme. This is because not all information and needs of the village people are understood or realised by them. They only sit at the office. Only we are aware of our own limitations and strengths. Let the decisions made be beneficial for both parties (R5, 50).

R6, 38 (non-participant of the SPKR programme) suggested that:

Our participation in the decision-making process is more important than the advice and technical assistance provided by the organisers or programme planners. This is because village people like myself do not get any profit or benefit if I myself am not involved in the decision-making process personally. Try and tell me, how am I to know if this project or development programme gives benefit to me if I do not participate? Village people nowadays are not like those in the old days who are easily deceived [and] persuaded ... We have our own knowledge and we know the intricacies of pimaanbinua [land village] such as damun [individual traditional land] in this village that is good for agricultural activities (R6, 38).

The respondents then ranked their participation in the decision-making process in terms of effectiveness. On an overall basis, they suggested that their participation is ineffective. This is because almost all of the decision-making that encompasses discussion, dialogue sessions and meetings are carried out by the authorities without their knowledge or presence. For example, R8, 44, (non-participant of SPKR programme) said that “the people who are invited to attend the meetings and dialogue sessions usually consist of relatives and friends as well as people known to them only. People like us are not invited” (R8, 44).

There is also a small number of respondents in this study who consider their participation in the decision-making process on planning or implementation of a programme to be irrelevant and unnecessary. This is because they assume the government agencies that organize the programme or projects are more discerning and knowledgeable as compared to them. In fact, they also put very high hopes and trust on the officers. As an example, R13, 57, (participant of the SPKR programme) in his statement said that:

I think the villagers’ participation in the decision-making process on the implementation of a project is not so important. This is because the government officers involved in the process are more discerning and more knowledgeable than us. They are all highly educated and have extensive experience. For me, it is better for us to leave all the decision-making process to those officers. The important matter to me is that we should give solid

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**Fig. 1.2:** Categories and themes of the concept of participation and empowerment of the rural Bidayuh community
and strong support to ensure the development programmes are successful and give great benefits to us. It is unlikely that the government would act cruelly and deceive us (R13, 57).

Meaning of empowerment:

Empowerment, according to the majority of the respondents in this study, refers to a situation where individuals or a group are in a position to use their own ability and capacity. It also involves their capability with regards to understanding and interpreting the problems, and later defining their needs as well as translating the meaning of their needs into action via their participation in the organization itself (see Figure 1). The majority of the respondents in this study acknowledged that the main component of empowerment comprises the individuals’ capability to have even more control over their lives and their capability to generate ideas or constructs that can be shared with practitioners in social work, community work and group work. This was highlighted by participant R1, 29, Participant of SPKR Programme as follows:

I have been involved in the SPKR programme – namely the income enhancement programme – for two years. What I want to raise here is not because I am angry with the government. Just that I feel what the government should do through the Department of Agriculture or other agencies is to bring us [in] to discuss … with them … developing programmes or development projects that are suitable for us. I have a lot of ideas and opinions. But the government does not give us the opportunity to discuss. We do not merely want to be involved as participants only, [with] no power to express our ideas or constructs … We, if possible want the government to [provide] many courses and training for us, so that we can be independent and dare to make our own decisions in determining our lives as farmers (R1, 29).

Meanwhile, R3, 55 (non-participant of the SPKR programme) also viewed empowerment as not only focusing on the potential of natural resources such as equipment, fertilizers, financial resources, and production resources such as land and machines, but also involves empowerment in the form of attitude and interaction skills, since these are the most important elements involved in starting a business, finding business partners and buyers – especially wholesalers – and expanding the business. According to R4, 45, Participant of the SPKR Programme, although the Federal Marketing Authority (FAMA) provides some help, it is very limited. In fact, in some situations the wholesale price offered by FAMA is lower than the price offered by the middlemen – namely the wholesalers themselves.

Some respondents also raised the role of social capital in empowering the participants of the SPKR programme. According to them, social capital refers to the norm, institution and social relationships that form the quality of the social interaction in society, and which subsequently allows the members of the community to work together amongst themselves. For example, R5, 55, Non-Participant of SPKR Programme is of the opinion that social capital should encompass social support, social relationships, skills and information. These are important assets for instilling sustained confidence in an individual when dealing with problems. Thus, R6, 54, Participant of SPKR Programme suggested that these aspects should be empowered and close attention should be paid within the context of the participants of the SPKR programme so as to ensure the participants who have completed the programme can at least be independent, and potentially capable of increasing their income level.

R7, 55, Participant of SPKR Programme agrees with this opinion, and pointed out that the empowerment of the participants should be multi-dimensional in nature and not focused on one form only. This is because the concept of empowerment refers to the capability of the Bidayuh to obtain more control and increase their ability to develop collective strategies to improve their standard of living. Thus, R8, 42 (non-participant of the SPKR programme) suggested that the concept of empowerment should be elucidated in detail and not limited to the level of presence in meetings only. The concept of participation should be seen as a whole, that comprises various levels, including planning, implementation and evaluation, as well as sharing of benefits. This is an important distinction even if the Bidayuh are involved in the organization of programmes, it does not necessarily mean that they have a high level of empowerment. The same opinion was also voiced by R9, 58 (participant of the SPKR programme), while emphasizing how important changes in the individual are in terms of aspects such as a more positive attitude toward life, and having high levels of confidence in solving problems and high levels of emotional control. Such changes will in turn help the individual to be braver in facing risks, particularly in the business field and the planting of commercial crops such as palm oil. Based on this foundation, R10, 56 (participant of the SPKR programme) suggested that the frequency of participation of the Bidayuh people at the level of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation should be improved and increased from time to time. This is because the higher the degree of participation at these levels, the higher the level of the participants’ empowerment will be.

However, the opinion of R10 is not shared by R11, 42 (participant of the SPKR programme), who is of the opinion that participation at the planning and evaluation level is actually impossible. This is because most of the activities in the SPKR programme have already been designed and determined by the government. For that reason, R11 suggested that the participants’ empowerment could be more effectively enhanced by augmenting the leadership system in the community – namely the leadership of the village heads. The weakness in the
leadership system has resulted in the community members not having any ability to voice their needs and concerns to superiors in terms of getting specific attention within the development process. This weakness in the leadership system at the village and community level has made it difficult for them to find and identify the proper channels to voice their problems and requirements regarding the developments. Therefore, the only way for them to voice their problems is through visits from the state assemblyman (Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri or ADUN) and Member of Parliament, whether during the election or periodic, government-accompanied visits. However, the use of this channel as the most effective mechanism is still doubtful. Meanwhile, R12, 44, Participant of SPKR Programme suggested that the length of time for the participants to be involved in the SPKR programme should be extended from one year, as it stands currently, to three years. This is because the longer the participants are in the SPKR programme, the higher their level of empowerment will be.

The recommendation suggested by R12 is also in line with the recommendation expressed by R13, 37, Participant of SPKR Programme, who also suggested that the one-year participation period should be extended to at least three years, in order to give them ample opportunities to enhance their level of community knowledge and empowerment, especially in matters pertaining to technical knowledge, suitability of land for certain crops, and the appropriate method of fertilization and harvesting. Currently, the level of understanding and acceptance of the participants after one year regarding the cultivation of commercial crops is still at a moderate level, with the majority of them still considering the crops as being of minor importance, and not as the main source of income. In addition, the locations of their farms are far from their houses and the roads. This situation makes it difficult for them to market their crop yield, and has obliged them to sell their crops to middlemen at a price which is far cheaper than the market prices. Thus, R14, 58 (non-participant of the SPKR programme) suggested that the farmers’ knowledge of commercial crops and livestock should be improved with the help from the relevant agencies. This relates to the fact that the absence of systematic monitoring and supervision has resulted in some of the activities of the SPKR programme being unsuccessful, particularly those involving the use of modern technologies. R15, 45 (participant of the SPKR programme) also suggested that social support programmes should be developed continuously to enhance the level of empowerment among the SPKR programme participants. These programmes should include cooking classes, sewing classes, vegetable-growing classes and crafts classes.

Based on the feedbacks given by the respondents, it is clear that the theme of empowerment is a very important aspect in the Bidayuh community’s life. The concept of empowerment according to them is more related to individual empowerment, since they place a strong focus on the aspects of individual potential, emotional control, knowledge about the society, efficiency in making decisions and solving problems, a positive attitude toward life, high confidence in solving problems, changes in attitudes and skills when interacting with others, appreciating help from others, and so on. Accordingly, the theme of individual empowerment expressed by the Bidayuh community as a whole can be divided into three main components: individual internal empowerment, individual external empowerment, and individual additional empowerment. The characteristics found within individual internal empowerment include a more positive attitude, having confidence, and so on. Meanwhile, the characteristics found in individual external empowerment focus more on social skills, such as having the potential to help others, learning how to accept help from others, having good relationships with others and being more considerate. The final aspect, additional empowerment, involves the leadership system in the community and the relationship of the community members with the wider society in terms of knowledge of their position and responsibilities in the society.

Discussion:

On an overall basis, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of local studies conducted by Abdul Rahman (2006) and Songan (1993), who suggested that participation and empowerment are the main yardsticks that need to be given attention by the government in designing new plans, in order to overcome various issues and problems faced by the rural society in terms of meeting the quality needs of their social life. Participation enhances the individual’s needs, personal development, self-awareness and, to a certain extent, self-satisfaction, while empowerment refers to a process whereby individuals or groups are at the stage where they are capable of using their own ability, capability and self-capacity in terms of understanding and interpreting the problems they face, and subsequently defining their needs as well as translating the meaning of these needs into an action process through participation in the organization itself (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988; Speer and Hughey, 1995; Somerville, 1998; Lyons et al., 2001; Moore, 2001; Moket et al., 2006). In this regard, Tanaka and Bhavsar (2008, p.36), in their research on the impact of the Southern Sustainable Agriculture and Education (Southern SARE) programme and its relationship with quality of life, suggests that the aspects of participation and empowerment need to be given attention in understanding the quality of life of the rural community, over utility indicators such as income, assets or properties and financial situation. This is to ensure that the concept of quality of life that is generated with reference to a community is more comprehensive and represents the community itself.
Some previous studies also found that the participation indicator is the direct determinant of the quality of life of a rural community (Lyons et al., 2001; Durlak and Isenberg, 2004), and that there is a significant relationship between the empowerment variable, and satisfaction regarding quality of material life in terms of aspects such as income and employment. This is because empowerment is linked to an individual’s desire to improve his power for his own self-benefit, without changing the social structure, through participation in the form of making choices, influencing, making demands, negotiating and being involved in the implementation of development activities (Ward and Mullender, 1991; Wallerstein, 1993; Barr, 1995; Speer and Hughey, 1995; Somerville, 1998).

Conclusion:

The meaning of participation of native in community development must not only be in congruence with the needs and resources of the community, but also entails wider participation beyond the implementation stage, such as planning, evaluation and monitoring phases. However, the lack of participation was attributed to the prevalence of familial ties and cronyism in decision making process. In fact some even suggest the irrelevance of their participation as the officials knows what is best for the community. It was also asserted that increase and longer participation will enhance knowledge which eventually improves the empowerment prospects. The role of social capital and leadership at the local level was a key feature of empowerment. The implication of this study is that greater engagement with the Bidayuh community on the part of the government agencies will go a long way in understanding the Bidayuh’s world view on participation that has ramifications to the individual empowerment.

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