

# **INOVATIVE APPROACH IN DEVELOPING SUCCESS INDICATORS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ECOTOURISM VENTURES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper outlines the process of developing success indicators for local community participation in ecotourism ventures by using qualitative approach. Success indicators are also known as performance indicators, traditionally developed through the process of translating the mission, vision and goals all the way through the strategies, process, actions and targets. Mission, vision and goals that are philosophical such as ecotourism need to be translated into success indicators by using qualitative approach, as there are several stakeholders involved in this sector with different views of success for local community participation. The stakeholders that also made up as respondents to provide the holistic view of success where their perceptions of what constitute success were explored and the results were analysed using thematic clustering and triangulated with reviews to the same respondents to ensure the validity and reliability of the result. The paper also reviews the challenges in developing qualitative-based indicators where this research innovates a method of ranking the indicator based on selected variables i.e. stakeholders and site.

Keywords: Success indicators, local community participation, perception, ranking of importance

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This research is largely influenced by considerable personal and professional experience in research works and by a number of consultations in the field of rural tourism development. Frequent visits to the rural communities on a professional and personal capacity over the years in Sabah have left a large impression that there are varieties of participation in ecotourism ranging from handicraft making to eco-lodge ownership. Many locals were eager to be included in any ecotourism activities at varying levels of participation. Most of them have the notion that ecotourism will improve their current economic conditions thus should improve their living conditions.

There are many levels of participation ranging from decision-making to manipulative participation. The existence of participation in an ecotourism project sometimes does not reflect the true meaning of local community participation especially if it is a manipulative participation and the locals do not benefit or are bearing the costs of ecotourism development. The primary intent is to explore the issues and context of the success of local community participation. This will relate to the success of the ecotourism site, where local community participation is an integral part of the success in ecotourism.

## **2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

The focus of this research is on the success of local community participation and ecotourism sites. Based on the research questions that expresses the need to develop and interpret indicators for success, it is essential to understand stakeholders' perceptions of success in local community participation and ecotourism sites, which includes a variety of factors such as financial sustainability, profitability, physical appearance and general satisfaction. The investigation focuses on what is meaningful to individuals and compares it to the industry. This has placed the research in an interpretive paradigm where the emphasis is on the richness of meaning. The research issues need to be addressed by posing two key questions, asking about the success of both local community participation and ecotourism sites.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Methodological Approach**

Since the essence of this research is to understand the stakeholders' perception of success in local community participation and ecotourism sites, and also looking into what is meaningful to individuals and then comparing it to the industry, the nature of this research is purely qualitative. This type of research is able to build a strong and reliable foundation to uncover motivations, reasons, impressions, perceptions and ideas of individuals. According to Peterson (1994), the characteristics of qualitative research include extensive information from each respondent and a search for meaning, ideas and relevant issues. Qualitative research is focused on natural settings as it is concerned with life as it is lived, things as they happen, situations as they are construed in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment course of events. It seeks lived experiences in real situations, as this research is intended to. The research requires the researcher to spend time at these ecotourism sites, and interact with the stakeholders in order to understand the situation and gain familiarity on the issues that are in discussion.

Since perceptions are sought after, an interest in meanings, perspectives and understanding is essential in order to get the full view of the issue. The researcher has to interpret situations and discover the meanings of the perceptions and perspective on the success issue. Research methods have to be sensitive to the perspectives of all participants, and must sample across place and over time, as perspectives may vary accordingly. These features in qualitative research also require the researcher to be in close contact with the stakeholders, live with them and explore the nature of their interests and understand their relationships within and without.

According to Wood (2006), the validity of interactionists qualitative research commonly rests upon three main features, which are 1) unobtrusive, sustained methods; 2) respondents validation; and 3) triangulation. According to Tesch (1995) the analysis to qualitative data is not in dealing with a monolithic concept like 'statistics'. Qualitative researchers are quite adamant in their rejection of standardization. It is applied to a wide variety of principles and procedures. Qualitative researchers normally agree that the analysis is the process of making sense of narrative data.

### 3.1 Respondents and Research Sites

After the initial investigation, four groups of stakeholders have been determined as the main respondents for the research. These are the local community, government and NGOs, businesses and tourists. The government and NGOs are grouped together as they are the advocates of ecotourism and local community participation and in several occasions, work together. Tourists are determined as an important stakeholder as they are also directly involved in ecotourism and indirectly involved in local community participation advocacy, and the most effective data collection method for this group is using a survey with open-ended questions. They were selected as the key respondents in this research due to their ability to give extensive information on the research issues based on their motivations, reasons, impressions, perceptions and ideas.

Finally, five ecotourism sites were identified which fits the characteristics that were selected for this research after a process of elimination. During the process of elimination, the geographical locations of the sites were also taken into consideration. The location of these five sites are spatially spread out in the State of Sabah, which makes it representative to the research in terms of geographical locations. Kampung Bavanggazo is located in the north, both Batu Puteh and Sukau are located in the East and the Rafflesia Information Centre and Kampung Rantai are in the interior.

The five sites were also selected based on their eligibility as set by operational definition where the definition encapsulates the elements of conservation, benefit to the local people and enjoyment of the touristic assets. All of them share the same characteristics i.e. type of attractions and activities where all these sites are involved in nature and culture, have local involvement, use eco-practices, and are protected. However, there are differences in the ownership. The local community runs Kampung Bavanggazo and Kampung Rantai ecotourism operations while Batu Puteh's operation involves both the local community and NGOs. Sukau's ecotourism operation is mainly run by the private sector and a government department runs the Rafflesia Information Centre. While these differences in the ownership are found in the pool of the case study sites, this will not affect the results of the case study analysis as these sites share common characteristics. The differences also will give insights on the success factor, whether the government, private sector or locally owned operation have differences in the degree of success. This will add more justification in terms of reliability of the results.

Since the research is focused on local community participation, it is essential to ensure that the sites have a certain level of local involvement in ecotourism operations. All of the sites have community involvement with different levels of participation. Since the levels of participation in all sites are different with different contexts, this issue will be addressed in the analysis, where rank of importance will be used. There is another issue that needs to be addressed, which is the ownership. The sites have different ranges of ownership. Each community operates their own ecotourism operations and community participation projects at Kampung Bavanggazo, Batu Puteh and Kampung Rantai, while the government department operates Rafflesia Information Centre. In Sukau, a pool of local tour operators is the main operator of the ecotourism industry.

In Malaysia, the government and its agencies together with the Non-Governmental Organisations are advocates of local community participation. They often work together in advocating this, by combining their resources and skills. In fact, one of the research sites that was selected for this research, Batu Puteh, is a good example where both government and NGOs work together to promote local community participation. In this site, WWF for Nature trained the local community in operating ecotourism activities with the assistance of the local Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture. Sukau is also a good example where both government and NGOs worked together in gazetted the Wildlife Sanctuary Area in order to conserve the area while promoting the ecotourism industry in the area to support conservation efforts (Bagul, 2009).

In a research context, both the Government and its agencies and Non-Governmental Agencies are strong advocates of ecotourism and local community participation. While in other countries, NGOs may be in direct opposition to the government and its agencies, in Malaysia, they often work together in a consultative approach not just on project basis, but also in policy formation. Therefore it is imperative to put them both in one group as they both belong to the group that both has authority, resources and objectives when it comes to advocating ecotourism and local community participation.

Direct observation was made during the field visit to each site. Assuming the phenomena of interest is not purely historical, some relevant behaviors and environmental conditions were observed. Observational evidence is often useful in providing additional information about the topic being studied. This is where first-hand information is verified. A large part of information gathered from the interviews and surveys are tested for its validity by field observation. It also adds some new dimension for understanding either the context of the phenomenon being studied.

#### **4. INDICATORS DEVELOPMENT**

The data from the survey was analyzed using a matrix of categories and placing the evidence within set categories. This analysis will be used for indicator development. Two of the objectives of this research are to develop indicators for ecotourism site success and its local community participation. These are derived from the research question, which focuses on the assessment of success for ecotourism sites and its local community participation and how the two are related. The indicators that were developed from this research help to determine the context of success for ecotourism sites and local community participation for the industry, while practical knowledge is derived from these research findings.

Indicators are mainly used to measure information, which decision-makers may use to reduce the chance of unknowingly making poor decisions. The indicators are also able to reduce the wide range of potential information to a set of usable and meaningful measures of those factors important to the decision-maker. Indicators are not an end in themselves, but rather a vehicle for better understanding of a phenomenon.

The indicators that were developed from this research were derived from the data collected across five research sites from four selected groups of stakeholders. Each of the indicators are based on the interviews and survey analysis and then clustered into groups based on the themes that emerged from the data. These sets of indicators form the basis for indicator analysis and success analysis. The indicators are analyzed based on its variations within and between the groups of stakeholders and site.

#### **4.1 Indicators Analysis Framework**

Each of the indicators that were derived from the interviews and survey analysis were then clustered into groups based on the themes that emerged from the data where the themes form the basis for indicators analysis and success analysis. Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information. This may be a list of themes; a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related; or something in between these two forms. A theme is a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon). The themes may be initially generated inductively from the raw information or generated deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1988).

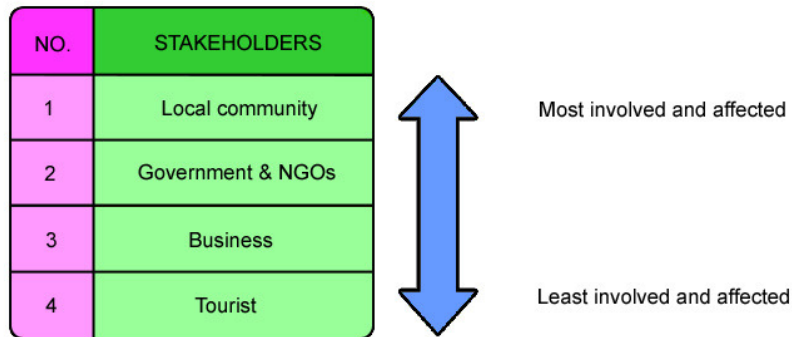
#### **4.2 Innovating the Framework**

However, indicator identification needs to address the issue of the weight of the importance of each indicator or determining which indicator is more important than the other. The indicators' importance can be based on the variables sequence, depending on the data collection process. This variable sequence is developed through the interpretation of qualitative data.

The variable sequence should address the issue of disparity of the data collection for all respondents. There are three groups of respondents where the data was collected through interviews while the other was obtained through surveys. The data should be sifted and put in a matrix based on themes. These themes will show some patterns where qualitative information is encoded for the researcher to draw his opinion. The next step would be to rank the importance established to the indicators. In order to do this, the variables sequence should be formed in a logical way, based on the observation of the data by the researcher. This logical sequencing can be used as the basis in analysing the success indicators.

In the logical sequence, there are two important variables involved, which are the stakeholders and the sites. The stakeholders' variables are sequenced based on each stakeholder's involvement and how much the local community participation process affects them. At the top of the sequence is the stakeholder that has the most involvement and is most affected by local community participation and ecotourism. At the bottom of the sequence is the group that has the least involvement and is least affected by local community participation and ecotourism. The sequence of stakeholders (Figure 1) is as follows:

Figure 1. Stakeholder's Sequence



Source: Pengiran Bagul (2009)

The second variable, the sites, are sequenced based on the initiative of ecotourism and local community participation. On the top of the sequence is where the local community owns and operates the sites, and the bottom is where the local community has the least involvement. The sequence for the sites (Figure 2) is as follows:

Figure 2. Site Sequence

| NO. | SITES                        | INITIATIVES   |
|-----|------------------------------|---|
| 1   | Kampung Bavanggazo           | Owned and managed by local community  |
| 2   | Batu Puteh                   | Managed by local community with an international NGO and government with high stake for local community |
| 3   | Rantai                       | Managed by local community with local NGO   |
| 4   | Sukau                        | Dominated by business with some local community involvement and initiatives                             |
| 5   | Rafflesia Information Centre | Run by the government with a handful of local community workers   |

Source: Pengiran Bagul (2009)

These sequences will address the issues relating to the indicators developed from this research such as establishing the importance of indicators, the variations between stakeholders and sites and variations between the groups of stakeholders.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research recognized that there are certain limitations to this model. This is because the model does not categorize the indicators as 'output' or 'input' indicators. The indicators that are based on 'output' show that the sense of success of the local community participation and ecotourism sites are as a result of the ventures. The indicators based on 'input', on the other hand, show the sense of what contributes, or something that enters to the process, which resulted in the success of local community participation and ecotourism site for any ventures. Indicators that are based on 'input' and 'output' are usually measured based on its own objective. Therefore, this is not inline with the research framework.

The models suggested in this methodology mixed the indicators indiscriminately as it focuses on the importance of the indicators' substance. It is based on perception and the categorization is done for analysis rather than producing the end-indicators. These models are based on the success perspective from the literature review done for this research. The potential indicators from the literature review identified and analysed against the indicators from the research.

The principal purpose of the indicators, which are developed from this research, is to help stakeholders learn how to view the outcome of local community participation efforts. The entire process is anchored in this research that determined the ways in which stakeholders define success in the local community participation efforts. Stakeholders may use these indicators to develop practical ways to measure progress. This is to ensure that their resources were justifiably spent and that appropriate activities were carried out.

These indicators will ultimately help planners and managers of tourism to anticipate ecotourism business strategies, which may lead to its success. The indicators that are developed from this research can also be the tools for managers today and an investment in the future, since it can reduce the risk in decision-making. Local communities may use these indicators to develop practical ways to measure progress for both themselves and locally established goals in term of outputs, activities and inputs. It helps them measure concrete results of ecotourism development efforts.

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