

Entrepreneurial Skills through Engagement Activities with a Disabled Community

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Abstract

Universities are no longer ivory towers where a research is done for research sake alone. University researchers are often accused of being disconnected from the practical concerns of everyday life and sometimes overspecialised or even worthless. However, this negative perception of universities has changed. Today, universities are engaging with the communities and industries through various programmes for a win-win situation for the benefit of all stakeholders. The transfer of practical knowledge from universities helps improve the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political developments of the community. When such knowledge and skill are shared with the disabled or the unfortunate population, the potential positive impact is even more fulfilling. This paper reports on the success of a community engagement activity with a disabled community in reviving an abandoned cat fish rearing project. It describes the three challenging but exciting phases of this engagement process until the cat fish rearing project is fully revived and sustainable with support from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). While instilling the population with the needed entrepreneurial skill to ensure sustainability of the project, USM social work students gain invaluable experience of engaging the community through clear phases of the process without sacrificing the general values and cultures of the community. Instead, the students engaged these values to win the confidence and trust of the community.

Keywords: *community engagement, disabled community, entrepreneurial skills, phases of engagement, social work student*

Introduction

Critics and advocates have long urged universities to become more directly and deeply engaged with their communities. Often public perceptions are that many university researchers are often disconnected from the practical concerns of everyday life. Universities can no longer exist as ivory towers detached from the communities. Regardless of the negative perceptions, fundamental research is still an essential part and a core function of universities, but this has to

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be built on an intellectual base that the research will eventually benefit the society. Many universities today have the needed critical mass of good research for potentially making a difference in the community. Community engagement is a practical method of implementing the change for community growth and eventually for community development.

Community engagement is a part of community work which is a productive process where the cost is non-monetary, but the output has immense economic and social value. The broad objective of community work is empowering the community for sustainable growth and development based on the felt and unfelt needs of the community. In social work, community work facilitates the community to develop, which is one of the main approaches to community development. In economics, community work is a voluntary labour input with some opportunity costs but with no financial costs to the community, but which results in some tangible or intangible useful output for the community. Community work is about sharing of knowledge, skills or ideas which eventually will empower the community to achieve its most needed objective of development.

Community work involves planning, managing, organising and mobilising of all resources together towards achieving a common community objective (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001; Brueggemann, 2002). Community involvement is a key to community development in social work as it is only through community participation that the needs of the community will be correctly identified. Eventually, it is the community that will take the initiative to achieve their objective or their desire for a change.

In a wider economics and business paradigm, this is part of entrepreneurship skill. Identifying opportunities, allocation or relocation of resources for the creation of value is also entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs change problems into opportunities and then take the necessary actions to produce economic goods that have value.

Social workers have several approaches or models in their effort to develop and expand the potentials of a community. This is similar to agricultural economists or personnel who do extension works in the community. Although the approaches or models may not be similar but the intended outcome, ultimately is still development. Regardless, all models engage the community, and in the process, create awareness and interests and finally determine their needs, including their unfelt needs, plans and actions to be taken. The ultimate aim of the process is to instil that sense of belonging of the project by the community to ensure project sustainability.

While community engagement for community development is one of the domains of several government or public agencies, such as the Department of Social Welfare and the Department of Agriculture in Malaysia, some leading public universities have established dedicated units to plan and design programmes of community engagement as a form of corporate social responsibility activity. In the four research universities in Malaysia, the unit is called the Division of Industry and Community Network (DICN) and is headed by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor. These efforts are in line with the *Strategic Enhancement Plan for Industry/Community Collaboration* of the Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia (MOHE) and which is equally emphasised by the social work profession as a means of instilling and improving the community by working with the community.

The Community Cat Fish Project

An economic project requires the owner or operator to have good entrepreneurial skills. Lacking in this essential skill may result in failure of the project. Often it is the owner or the operator who lacks the technical skill; but when the project requires only simple skill, it is the marketing aspects that led to the failure of the project. However, all projects require good technical and marketing skills to be successful. The following discussion illustrates how a potential income

generating cat fish project failed within a year of establishment due to several reasons and how the project is revived through community engagement. This is a demonstration of inculcating the entrepreneurial skills whereby problems are changed into opportunities.

The community cat fish project is conducted with a group of disabled population in a small town called Chuping in Perlis, a small northern state in Peninsular Malaysia. The participants are members of the '*Batu Bertangkup Workshop*' - a carpentry and welding workshop for the disabled, organised by the Association of the Disabled Population of Perlis (*Persatuan Orang Kurang Upaya Negeri Perlis [POKUNPS]*) with the cooperation of the Perlis State Welfare Department (its Malay acronym – JKMNP). The project involved several stakeholders.

At the workshop, the disabled participants are given the opportunity to acquire useful skills in carpentry and iron welding while at the same time learn and do additional income generating activities such as cat fish rearing and growing bamboo for bamboo shoots. All these activities have helped to contribute additional income to the participants. Actual successes of the activities are difficult to be determined as no proper record keeping was done by the participants. While the carpentry and iron welding activities could be observed at the workshop, their activities appeared slow. Bamboo shoots are always available for sale to those who seek them. Unfortunately, the cat fish rearing activities have stopped. The fish ponds were dry and appeared abandoned.

The cat fish project at the *Batu Bertangkup Workshop* started in 2007 with a grant from the JKMNP. All the needed infrastructures, including the six fish ponds were built for the project with the grant. The project could have been sustainable, but abandoned after a year due to mainly marketing problems and several other technical difficulties.

In early 2011, five Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) social work students, while undergoing their practical training at the JKMNP, came to know about the workshop and the abandoned cat fish project. They saw an opportunity and felt challenged to revive the project as part of their community work. After an initial assessment of the abandoned project it was agreed that the project has potential and was worth reviving. They needed some funding to revive the project and after reporting their plans to their Social Work Programme Chair, who was also their practicum supervisor, it was agreed that they apply for the funding from DICN of USM. Based on a working paper submitted by the Social Work Programme Chair, the request for funding was approved by DICN.

Several meetings and discussions by the students were held with the disabled community, POKUNPS and JKMNP about the project. This was engaging the community and the stakeholders in the process of getting the cat fish project revived. In the context of social work, this process goes through several phases. In the agricultural extension services, extension workers engage farmers to adopt new technologies through creating awareness, interest, then trial and finally adoption of the new technology (Mosher, 1966). The similarities are many, but community work in the context of social work generally goes through the following phases which will be discussed further.

Methodology

This qualitative approach study is based on data observed from the various phases of community work; and to identify and determine the form of community engagement carried out by the concerned stakeholders, particularly the disabled community and the students. Five undergraduate students were initially involved in the project, who stayed for two months in the community. This experience gave the students an opportunity to build a strong rapport with the disabled community. It was based on this initial contact and rapport building that an additional seven students was then roped into the project. The 12 undergraduate students were then divided into three groups of four and took turn to visit the community every week. The weekly

visit was rotated between the groups and this ensured that there was always a group of students working with the community. For each visit, the group will spend at least two to three days living in the community. The whole project lasted almost seven months starting in October 2011. All expenses involved in the student visits were funded by a grant received from the University.

For every visit, it was made compulsory for the students to record on the activities carried out, all observations made and the problems faced, project development phases as well as the students' learning experiences in the group log book. The same log book will be passed to the next group for follow-up recordings. The recording of the activities in the log book is data for the research. The observation made was based on the different known phases of the community work. These phases of community work are based on the theoretical framework in the field of social work when working directly with any community (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001; Brueggemann, 2002; Compton, Gallaway, & Cournoyer, 2005). Several focus group discussions were also held with the disabled community to learn more about their ideas, feelings, aspirations and progress of the project. The students in turn had their focus group discussions on campus from time to time, to share and jointly monitor the development of the project.

It is these series of data collection methodology that allows the researcher to analyse the stages of engagement between the community and the students and with other stakeholders. The detailed recording of the students' engagement activities were analysed and presented according to the phases of community work as the following.

Phases of Community Work

The Initial (Beginning) Phase

The initial phase is rapport building with the disabled community. A series of four discussions was held with the community to gather and understand the needs of the community and at the same time, their view on the proposal to revive the project. All decisions were made together with the community to ensure the sense of belonging of the project. Considerations to revive the project took into account the available infrastructures, resources and leadership within the disabled community to be the motivator and driver of the project. Some estimates were made on how much fund will be needed to revive the project, the potential markets and most of all knowledge of cat fish rearing to ensure success and sustainability of the project.

The rapport building phase is crucial to ensure the sense of belonging of the project by the disabled community. This sense of belonging will emerge when all decisions are made jointly with all the stakeholders. The project was not forced upon them, but it was the community that had chosen to revive the project with their commitments and for their own benefits. It is hoped that the project will be sustainable with the greater sense of belonging instilled in the community.

The process also involves doing the needs assessments based on available information; available resources and available capacity of the community for development (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001; Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2008). There is a strong community engagement activity involving all interested parties or stakeholders in the process. The main players were the disabled community, the relevant agencies, the social work students and indirectly USM as the enabler and source of funds for the project. The elements of community engagement are the cooperation of these parties for the mutual benefit of all.

The Mid-Phase

The next phase of the engagement process, or the mid-phase, includes identifying the needed resources, the costing and the planning on the approach of how best to revive the project collectively by the disabled community, the social work students and other stakeholders. The major costs items include repair of the existing ponds, purchase of juvenile cat fish or cat fish fry and cat fish food for the different stages of cat fish development. Total cost of reviving the project was finally estimated at RM5,000. A formal request was made to the DICN of USM which was subsequently approved. Similarly, this stage of community engagement also involved all stakeholders with the disabled community. The social work students, at this stage, were resourceful for getting funding for this community project.

About six months after the first initiative by the social work students, cat fish fry were released into the now operational fish ponds in a simple symbolic ceremony involving all stakeholders. Technical advice was provided by an owner-operator of a successful cat fish farm, also in Perlis. His support has been very useful and encouraging.

The final item deliberated during this phase is marketing of the cat fish. All stakeholders, including JKMNP, POKUNPS, the disabled community and the students managed to solicit help of the same successful cat fish farm owner-operator to assist them with the marketing. Engaging him to help market was indeed a blessing given that the first attempt by the disabled community failed because of marketing problems.

The Final Phase

Once the project took off, the final phase is managing and sustaining the project by the community. USM's social work students would have then finished their practicum assignment in Perlis. There will be no more funding from USM or other sources as the project was supposed to be self-sustaining. To prepare the community for this final phase of community work, USM social work students took it as their responsibility to familiarise and train the community about simple financial planning and book keeping, cat fish food preparation without depending on the commercially available food to minimise cost, maintaining the fish ponds, encouraging the community to acquire more knowledge on fish rearing to enhance their skills and exploring new cat fish markets.

The JKMNP will continue to monitor the progress and development of this project. The community needed encouragement and support and it was expected that JKMNP would have played this role.

This final phase is even more crucial. The cat fish rearing project was once abandoned for several reasons; but with initiative of the students, the project was revived. It was the social work students using their social work skill in community work and engaging the community to ensure sustainability of the project.

Elements of Community Engagement in Community Work

It was obvious at the outset that the cat fish project approach of community work involved several elements of community engagements. Needs or wants of individuals or communities very often differ from one another. Efforts to introduce projects for community development therefore need to instil the sense of belonging of the project to ensure acceptance and in the long run its sustainability. Engaging the community in the decision making process is therefore essential and crucial to ensure success of the project. Some community engagement elements involved in the revival of the cat fish project are discussed below:

i. Multi-Party Participation

A successful community work will need to involve many relevant parties, who are not only resourceful but can contribute to the development of the community. The social work profession regard this multi-party engagement as important and is considered crucial in capacity building and finally, for the development of the community.

The MOHE has often emphasised and encourages university students and lecturers to contribute by sharing of practical knowledge, expertise and skills for community development. The setting up of the DICN in the four public research universities is testimony of this commitment.

In the community cat fish project discussed earlier, the main players were the disabled community, USM social work students, POKUNPS and JKMNP. Their active participation and contributions made the revival of the cat fish project possible after previously abandoned for several reasons. The engagement process helps reinforce the values such as cooperation, mutual respect and lending support when needed. Social work students need to be aware that sharing of resources has mutual benefits and is useful in community work.

ii. Sharing of Knowledge

Community work in the context of social work is also about sharing of knowledge and skill useful for the community. One of the ultimate aims of community engagement with respect to sharing of useful knowledge and skill is to ensure that this new knowledge and skill is not only accepted but implemented for the benefits of the community. A useful knowledge and skill in the case of the cat fish project is on the correct practice of cat fish rearing and knowing what type of fish food to use and when. It was also about financial planning and simple book keeping skills to ensure better management of the activity and also about ensuring a market for the fish produced. All of the above activities reflect the needed entrepreneurial skills. This transfer of useful knowledge and skills is about leaving a legacy to the disabled community with the hope that this legacy will be continued when outside support and assistance are no longer available.

iii. Transfer of Skill

Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) introduced the concept of “*asset-based community development*”, which suggested the need to identify all wealth and assets of the community, including their strengths, skills and the available resources useful in mobilising the community for development and sustainability. In community engagement, it is imperative for social work students to acquire this ability to identify the available resources and to transfer this skill to the community, which can then be used for community activity.

The community will need this skill and in community engagement. This skill need to be transferred effectively to enable the community to work together and mobilise all resources in their effort to improve their social and economic wellbeing (Majee & Hoyt, 2011). This approach was earlier proposed by Hoyt (2004) and, Majee and Hoyt (2009) who argued that cooperation and working together with the community while utilising the existing resources is also a means of improving the economic, social and political well-being of the community.

The cat fish project used existing fish ponds and available infrastructure. A proposal to solicit funding to revive the project was developed together by the students and the community. Besides the community and the students, expert advice on cat fish rearing and marketing involved a willing owner-operator in Perlis. This is the transfer of skill between all parties with the main beneficiary being the disabled community.

Instilling and improving the entrepreneurship skill is, from the economic perspective, an essential element for a successful business venture. The revival of the cat fish project not only encouraged the disabled community to assimilate the needed entrepreneurship skill during the engagement process, but along the way, the social work students also gained valuable

knowledge in entrepreneurship and the potential for generating economic activities. The students also gained other relevant soft skills beneficial for their future career development. Communication, negotiation and engaging in meaningful discussion do provide students with real advantage when applying for jobs upon graduation. These skills are important for the students' future careers as has always been advocated by the MOHE.

iv. Socialisation

There is always the element of socialisation in community engagement and work. There was interaction between USM social work students and the disabled community during the whole community engagement process. This intended outcome is both useful and beneficial to the two parties, which not only made them more understanding to each other but also enabled them to work together towards a common objective.

Along the way, both parties came to appreciate the different organisational structures of the government agencies that can offer assistance to the project. The students acquired some effective negotiation skills in dealing with the 'authorities'. The essentials of effective interaction, rapport development and communication skills were some of the other positive outcomes of this community engagement process. Students need to acquire the soft skills and this is in line with MOHE's aspirations that university students need to have these skills to prepare them for the job market.

v. Awareness of the Respective Roles

Since the initiative to revive the cat fish project was started by the USM social work students, it became the students' responsibilities to play their role rightly to ensure success of the community work assignment. Engaging the community is not an easy task or skill to learn in a classroom setting. The practical experience and the students' abilities to engage the community in this project has, however given them the confidence to complete the project successfully. Their first step was to gain the confidence of the disabled community and engage them in the process. The students then became the catalyst and the change-agent in the empowering the disabled community to revive the cat fish project.

The students were also the educator. With help from the successful cat fish farm owner-operator they were able to engage the community to plan for the revival of the project. Others, including staffs of agencies and associations, who were involved in the engagement process, carried out their responsibilities or duties well. All these contribute to the better understanding and appreciation of community engagement in community work for the benefit of all parties.

vi. Exposure to Real Life Settings of Social Work Activities

Practicum training provides students the exposure to real life work environment. It was for this reason that new academic programmes that require approval of the MOHE must include compulsory industrial training for the students in the curriculum. Students need to be prepared to become responsible citizens, and share their knowledge and skills with the community (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005).

Community engagement, according to Soska, Sullivan-Cosetti, and Pasupuleti (2010) provides valuable experiences to the students with real life settings while contributing to the development of the community. It encouraged students to be creative in developing the needed social networking with the relevant parties for a more effective community work (Hill, Ferguson, & Erickson, 2010).

In this respect, USM social work students benefitted from many useful experiences while doing their required practical training at the Perlis State Welfare Department. Reviving the cat

fish farm of the disabled community has taught them all the skills needed in community work and while engaging the community and the related agencies to work together for the benefit of the disabled community.

Conclusion

Recent development in higher education insists that universities can no longer be ivory towers. It is not an institution that churns out degrees for students needing higher education or where a research is done for research sake alone. Not surprisingly, university researchers have often been accused of being disconnected from the practical concerns of everyday life. However, this negative perception of universities has now changed. Universities are now engaging with the communities and industries through various programmes for a win-win situation and for the benefit of all stakeholders. All these are in line with the *Strategic Enhancement Plan for Industry/Community Collaboration* of the Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia (MOHE). For this purpose and to achieve the above objectives, the four research universities in Malaysia were asked to establish the Division of Industry and Community Network (DICN) in 2007. *BJIM*, the better known Malay acronym of the division is headed by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

Engaging the community as a means of transferring new knowledge and skills is an effective approach for community development. Agricultural extension workers impart new agricultural technologies to farmers through the process of creating awareness and interest of the new technology. This is also a form of community engagement. In social work, community engagement has long been part and parcel of community work to ensure a more sustainable development of the community. This paper describes how community engagement with a disabled community was implemented through the various phases of community work. As was in the case of the revival of the cat fish abandoned project, in Chuping Perlis, the emphasis on the community work was sharing and transferring of knowledge and skill involving various stakeholders, including USM social work students and the disabled community.

Several elements of community engagement emerged in the project and the more significant ones were probably the successful involvement of the stakeholders, sharing of knowledge; transfer of skills and for the students, a successful community work experience in real life setting. In the final analysis, the disabled community has been empowered to be more independent and hopefully are able to sustain the project as a means of additional income for them. It is evident that finally the community has not only successfully revived the cat fish project; but have also acquired the needed entrepreneurial skill to sustain the project into the foreseeable future. The project is still on-going but with fewer and unscheduled visits by the students. The disabled community are now able to sustain the project through their own initiatives and with the experience they gained and learned from the students' involvement. They seem to be more empowered to take up the project themselves with less support from the students, JKMNP or POKUNPS.

In conclusion, the engagement process via the community work phases has somewhat helped empower the disabled community to establish the spirit or sense of belonging of the cat fish project. This has also further ensured the sustainability of the project, which has now become one of the community's main revenue generating economic activity.

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