

## **Shortcomings of public participation to the decision making process in tourism planning: the case of the Langkawi Islands, Malaysia**

**Azizan Marzuki**

School of Housing Building and Planning

Universiti Sains Malaysia

11800 USM, PENANG.

### ***Abstract***

Public participation in the decision making process is regarded as an important tool for successful tourism planning. However, in reality, public participation merely at an early stage due to several structural and operational limitations in planning process. A study in Langkawi Islands was conducted to explore and examine approaches used during the preparation of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 and the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015. 40 interviews had been conducted with stakeholders in the tourism industry and analysed using 'framework technique'. Finally, this study found that the limitation of public participation in tourism planning was caused by the weaknesses of the participation approach and the regulation of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in the Malaysian Planning System. Therefore, it is suggest that an improvement in public participation process in the Langkawi Islands needs to emphasise more towards participation approach and its relationships with the Malaysian Planning System, to ensure that all related issues will be taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** tourism planning, public participation, decision-making, Langkawi Islands.

### **Introduction**

Western scholars (Addison, 1996; Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Cuthill, 2002; France, 1998; Pretty, 1995) generally agree that active public participation in decision-making will benefit local communities. They presented evidences in tourism literature to support the postulation that public participation is an important tool for successful tourism planning. However, in developing countries, such participation is difficult to put into practice because of structural and operational shortcomings, and cultural limitations in the tourism development process.

For instance, a study by Timothy (1999) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia found that public participation processes were not implemented due to weaknesses in local government administration. Even then, the residents felt that there seemed to be no reason to participate due to the ignorance of the local government to consider their views and participation. This is almost similar to the case of Pamukkale in Turkey where the local residents' needs for tourism development had been ignored because of the failure of the centralised administration to include their requirements in the decision being made (Tosun, 1998).

Thus, this article was based on a study on public participation in the decision making process of the tourism planning in the Langkawi Islands, Malaysia. It aims to identify the weaknesses in participation approaches used in the preparation of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 and the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015.

### **The significance of public participation in tourism planning and the decision making process**

Since the development of the tourism industry provides both positive and negative impacts, *'residents should have an opportunity to become involved in the industry in a way which will maximise local benefits and minimise costs'* (Woodley, 1999: 298). Inskip (1991) explains that maximum community participation can maximise the benefits from tourism to the community and similarly, Burns (1999: 330) notes:

*"...with better informed tourism planning, there is no reason why the positive effects should not be maximised and the negative ones minimised."*

Based on her studies on the Baffin Region in Canada, Addison (1996: 96) voices the reason why participation in tourism decision-making is important. She states that:

*"Public participation program(s) would make clear to local residents the benefits and potential hazards of the tourism industry thereby enabling them to reach an educated decision as to whether they wanted tourism development and under what condition."*

Schaardenburg (1996) also stresses the significance of public participation in tourism planning. He views the public participation issue in a broad context of tourism development, as changes in tourism progress not only limit economic factors, but also influence the residents in the destination area. Schaardenburg (1996: 10 & 11) stresses that public participation is important since:

*"Local residents are influenced by tourism development...they have to participate in plan making and implementation in order to control changes that affect their lives."*

Timothy (1999) meanwhile suggests that public participation in tourism planning should be viewed from two perspectives: participation in the decision-making and the participation of local residents in the benefits of tourism. A study done by Kamsma and Bras (2000) in Gili Trawangan, Indonesia demonstrates that residents' participation in the decision-making process has helped tourism businesses progress and grow significantly. Wall (1996) also found that the villagers in Bali are more positive when they have benefited from tourism development.

Furthermore, the Report of Public Participation in Protected Area Management: Best Practice in the Northern Territory, Australia (Park and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, 2002:3) states that public participation will improve community understanding of their role and contribution in the development process. Public participation will increase local communities' skills and knowledge, and indirectly improves the quality of the decision-making process. It is also suggests that participation process has the ability to build support for a proposed project and improve stakeholder relationships, and increase the agency credibility within the community. Through that improvement, the public will understand more about the agency responsibilities and it will create a good relationship, which could guide participation in tourism benefits.

As Darier *et al.* (1999) postulates, public participation will make the implementation

of policies more effective, since local communities are able to generate ideas for tourism planning and development. This will enhance opportunities for the government to find tools for better tourism planning and development. However, it is too ambitious to claim that public participation in tourism planning will bring harmony to the development process. For example, Wells (1982) claims that sometimes, active participation in tourism planning will increase conflict among local communities and other stakeholders, including the government. Based on their research in Ontario, Canada, Reid *et al.* (2004) outlines the list of community tensions induced by tourism planning as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: List of community tensions induced by tourism**

Nature of tourism effect	Community reactions
Tourism development organised by a dominant few	Appear to be elitist
Deep conflict and splinter groups in community life appear	Those who want high end tourism and those who want mass tourism, are openly divided
Trade off between more development and community lifestyle no longer tolerated by citizens not involved in tourism business	Protests both active and passive, appear
Tourism development and planning are very centrally organised and controlled, thought to be too complicated for average citizen	People openly muse about whose agenda is important
Strong emotional resistance to further development	Vandalism and confrontation
Apathy, disempowerment and extreme frustration with decision-making process	People do not feel they are being heard
Tourism is considered to be destructive to both community life and to itself	The in-fighting spills over to the tourists' experience

Source: Reid *et al.* (2004: 627).

Findings from the Reid *et al.* (2004) study show that when meaningful participation is not achieved, it creates tension within the local community. However, this situation can be minimised if members of the community are allowed to voice their views or raise objections through formal channels. In fact, public participation in tourism is not only for decision-making, but also '*has the potential for providing new "social bargaining tables" of the wider implication of debated issues by orientating tourism planning*' (Haywood, 1988: 108). Participation process could become a centre for local community to share their vision for future development.

Despite the potentials and benefits of public participation process, Jenkins (1993) also identifies several constraints to public participation in the process of tourism planning, including the difficulty in comprehending complex and technical planning issues. Occasionally, the public is not aware of, or fails to understand the decision-making process. Moreover, it is difficult to attain and maintain representation in the decision-making process, in fact; the process can be very costly if decisions cannot be made according to schedules. In relation to this, Bramwell and Sharman (1999) highlight three sets of community participation issues in tourism planning, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Issues affecting community participation in tourism planning**

Sets of issues	Specific issues
Scope of community	The extent to which the range of participation by the community is

participation	representative of all relevant stakeholders The number of people who participate from among the relevant stakeholders
Intensity of community participation	The extent to which all community participants are involved in direct, respectful and open dialogue How often community stakeholders are involved The extent to which all participants learn from each other
Degree to which consensus emerges among community members	The extent to which community participants reach a consensus about issues and politics The extent to which consensus emerges across the community members

Source: Bramwell & Sharman (1999: 28).

According to Bramwell and Sharman (1999), effective public participation is difficult to achieve if the residents are not equally represented. This requires representatives that represent the whole group of stakeholders. Furthermore, it is important to have public participation from the early planning process, not in the middle or after the proposal has been made. However, sometimes the frequency of participation is not important, but rather the quality of participation which is also related with the stakeholder capabilities and responsibilities. Therefore, the priority of public participation in tourism planning should be in fulfilling the stakeholders' needs and aspiration for the benefits of the society and the tourism industry.

### **The Physical Planning System in Malaysia**

The physical plan hierarchy in Malaysia is a 'top-down' administration strategy and development policy, and is divided into three levels of implementation hierarchy. The Federal Government is responsible for formulating uniform national policies and standards, providing planning services and advice, drafting and monitoring the Town Planning Act and preparing the National Physical Plan. The 2005 National Physical Plan functions to:

- strengthen national planning by providing a spatial dimension to national economic policies.
- coordinate sectoral agencies by providing the spatial expression to sectoral policies.
- provide the framework for regional, state and local planning.
- provide physical planning policies.

The State Government is needed to prepare and adopt the Structure Plan. During the process, the State Planning Committee will hear public objections and consider the public appeals. All policies in the National Physical Plan are translated into the Structure Plan based on the needs and suitability of each state. In the Kedah Structure Plan 2002-2020 (JPBD, 2004), the policies and strategies for development and land use planning for urban and rural area are explained through:

- improvement in physical environment.
- transport management.
- upgrading socio-economic conditions and encouraging economic growth.
- encouraging sustainable development

Finally, the policies and strategies stated in the National Physical Plan and the State Structure Plan will be translated in the Local Plan. For example, the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 (Langkawi Municipal Council, 2005: 13), had set a goal to 'create

*Langkawi as an international tourism destination based on nature and local identity and also to improve local resident's quality of life'. To implement the federal and state policies, the plan has aimed to:*

- structure a land use framework based on economic development to support current and future tourism development
- conserve the nature and preserve historical elements
- improve public facilities and infrastructures
- identify and plan an important project for development
- prepare development guidelines for the local authority, government agencies and the private sector

The three levels of administration make it easy to delegate power from the federal level to the local level. However, the implementation has not been as smooth as it should be. For example, even though the federal government formulates tourism policies and strategies; the state government does the development work because 'land matters' are under state control. Then the local authority has full power and control of the development in their area. Therefore, the implementation process sometimes creates a question of effectiveness in tourism planning in the country.

The national planning system however, has not explicitly explained how the public's suggestions are included in tourism decision-making processes, since all development processes in the country are heavily controlled by the state and local governments. The effectiveness of public participation in the Structure Plan and Local Plan studies have also been criticised by Goh (1991; 1998) because of a limited opportunity for the public to participate and influence the decision-making process.

### **Research Approach**

This article focuses on the Langkawi Islands as a case study due to a tremendous development in public infrastructure and tourism facilities since 1986, after declaration of the islands as a duty-free zone. Many construction projects on the islands have been undertaken purposely to accommodate tourism development.

The investigation focuses on the master plan prepared by the government; the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990 – 2005 and the Langkawi Local Plan, 2001-2015. Stakeholder interviews were used to identify perceptions and opinions on the effectiveness of the public participation process in the study area.

Based on a review of other tourism studies (Din, 1993; Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 1998; and Yuksel *et al.*, 1999), 40 stakeholders were selected and classified into four different groups: (1) government officials; (2) private company officials or entrepreneurs; (3) local community; and (4) interested groups such as non-government organisations (NGOs). The interviews were recorded by tapes and notes, and lasted between 45 minutes to 75 minutes and analysed using a framework technique, developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994).

### **Research Findings**

The discussion on research findings is based on the public participation in the Langkawi Structure Plan, 1990-2005 and the Langkawi Local Plan, 2001-2015.

### **The Langkawi Structure Plan, 1990-2005**

The aim of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 was to develop the Langkawi Islands as a tourism destination centre. The objective of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 was:

*“to encourage, develop and guide physical development in Langkawi to achieve an aim to become a tourism destination centre and also to increase local residents’ socio-economic level and maintain the quality of the environment”* (Langkawi District Office, 1992: 18).

The 1990-2005 Langkawi Structure Plan provided two stages of participation for the public as follows:

- Firstly, after the survey report<sup>1</sup> of the Structure Plan was completed, it was put on display and was open for comments throughout the month of February 1990.
- Secondly, after the draft report<sup>2</sup> of the Structure Plan was completed, another month of public exhibition and invitation to comment was held in January 1991.

During the second public exhibition in January 1991, the public was provided with an opportunity to submit their comments about the Langkawi Structure Plan to the Public Hearing Sub-Committee. The Public Hearing Sub-Committee comprised state politicians and administrators who were required to respond to comments submitted by public, before amending and submitting the final report of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 to the State Executive Council for approval.

### **Issues on Public Participation in the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005**

Although two exhibitions and a public hearing session were held for public participation, the outcomes of the process were not encouraging since only 34 comments were submitted from almost 5,000 visitors who attended the public exhibition (Din, 1993). Limited budget and resources were the constraint for the Langkawi District Office and the Department of Town and Regional Planning in conducting the participation process. As a result, their failure in providing sufficient information to local residents had left the participants with no ideas on what to do during the participation process.

Residents’ attitudes were also questioned since only 14 people of the 34 individuals and groups who made submissions to the Sub-Committee attended the public hearing process. The large number of people (20) who failed to attend the hearing process had relinquished their opportunity to put their issues forward. Out of 34 comments received by the Sub-Committee, only nine issues related to tourism planning and development were raised in the public hearing session, as follows:

1. Land reclamation for tourism related projects.
2. Acquisition of land from local residents for development.
3. The development of golf ranges.
4. Soil erosion problems at hill sites earmarked for tourism development.

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<sup>1</sup> The Survey Report of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 presented findings and analyses from the data collection process.

<sup>2</sup> The Draft Report of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 is documented with policies and guidelines for future land use and socio-economic planning in the Langkawi Islands.

5. The extent of local residents' participation in new development projects.
6. Relocation of fishing communities.
7. Increase in ferry fares.
8. Problems relating to improper conduct of tourists.
9. Social issues from tourism development.

However, the Public Hearing Sub-Committee commented that all tourism issues were beyond the scope of the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 study. The decision suggests that no consideration was given by the Public Hearing Sub-Committee to all complaints received, even though the issues raised by participants were related with the impact of tourism development to the local residents. Din (1993) argues the Sub-Committee decision not to discuss the issues brought by public for their consideration. He also questioned the purpose of the public hearing session as all decisions made by the Sub-Committee are considered final. In view of that, Din (1993) suggests that the structure of the Public Hearing Sub-Committee needs to be reviewed. The committee members should represent all groups of the stakeholders to provide a fairer hearing process for public comments.

The objectives of the review process during the public hearings were also unclear. The Town Planning Act (Act 172) explained that the Public Hearing Sub-Committee should respond to comments or complaints received, but there was no explanation about how the comments would be considered in the final decision. Perhaps that was a reason why a community leader (Respondent 34) argued that, *'...the purpose of the existing participation process is just to inform the residents about the development process, but not to hear what they want.'*

Another issue is that, although after the Public Hearing Sub-Committee has made its recommendation, the State Executive Council which, as stated in the Town Planning Act, is chaired by the Chief Minister is free to make a decision without any reference to the recommendations from the Public Hearing Sub-Committee. This raises the question of the value of any public participation process, if the decision makers could over-rule any comments, recommendations or decisions and are free to make their own decisions.

### **The Langkawi Local Plan, 2001-2015**

The Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 aimed to review and continue the development policies suggested in the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005. The objective of the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 was:

*"to create Langkawi Islands as an international tourism destination based on local identity and environment friendly features and to improve the quality of life of residents"* (Langkawi Municipal Council, 2005: 17).

Compared to the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005, the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 was done according to the amendment made in the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in 2001. One of the key features in the amendment is that a local plan study needs to be prepared for every district in the country. The amendment of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in 2001 also provided some changes in the public participation approach. This (Act 172) required public participation involving the local community prior to the start of any Structure Plan or Local Plan studies.

Various comments were made by respondents to this study's investigation about the implementation of the public participation process. According to a State Department's Town Planner (Respondent 2):

*"We have two stages of public participation. Firstly, after we have completed the Terms of Reference of the local plan, we will have an early participation process. We will invite the local community to a public briefing...we will elaborate the purpose of the plan and how they can benefit from the development and participate in the planning process. Secondly, we will have further public participation after the draft report is completed. An exhibition will be held for a month and everybody is welcomed and encouraged to give comments or ideas about the plan."*

A town planner from a municipal council (Respondent 5) explained that during the development of the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 study, several explanation sessions were conducted for local residents, local business persons, and representatives from the non-government organisations (NGO). Another town planner from a state department (Respondent 2) claimed the participation process was successful since many community leaders, Ngo's representatives and local residents were present during the briefing session. An open dialogue was held at the Langkawi Development Authority office in June 2000 between the Langkawi Municipal Council, the Town and Country Planning Department and local residents.

### **Issues on Public Participation in the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015**

During the fieldwork interview, a town planner from a state department (Respondent 2) explained that the number of participants and participation issues in the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 had increased compared to the Langkawi Structure Plan 1991-2005. However, not much improvement resulted in terms of the quality of comments received by the Public Hearing Sub-Committee. The majority of participants failed to provide constructive comments or ideas regarding to the proposal in the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015, due to inexperience or limited understanding of the planning process. A community leader (Respondent 33) made a similar observation and suggested that the residents' lack of understanding had also prevented many of them from participating. He was also frustrated with the implementation of the public participation process as the residents were not adequately informed about the planning process and their role as citizens.

The effectiveness of the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 study team was also questioned by several stakeholders. A committee member from an NGO (Respondent 37) observed that the implementation of the public participation process during the Langkawi Local Plan study to be very simple. He claimed that the study team only informed the residents about the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 but failed to respond to comments or complaints received. A community leader (Respondent 32) added that:

*"They (the study team) just come and give some explanation about the local plan without having an active discussion...then they are gone and never give us feedback until the plan is completed."*

The NGO committee member (Respondent 37) also questions government's attitude



to public participation after he had not been invited for the consultation process after being too vocal in emphasising the weaknesses of the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015. He (Respondent 37) then detailed his participation experiences as follows:

*“We are invited in the early briefing session by the Town and Country Planning Department...we highlighted some of the problems and weakness of the physical planning during the session. Then, that is all, no more invitation after that. They view us as a troublemaker because we regularly complain about their proposal but...we only present our opinions and of course, some of the suggestions are against their proposal, but they should not feel that we are just there to oppose them. If everything is OK, we will not give any complain. However, in reality we find too many things are wrong.”*

### **Discussion: The flaws of the existing public participation approaches**

The flaws of the existing public participation approaches in the Langkawi Structure Plan, 1990-2005 and the Langkawi Local Plan, 2001-2015 are discussed as follows:

#### **The flaws of participation approach in the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005**

Two main flaws of the public participation process in the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005 are the weaknesses in the implementation approach and the governing bodies' dominance in the decision-making process.

The weaknesses in the implementation approach have contributed to the low level of awareness amongst the public about the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005. Community leaders who participated in the stakeholder interviews explained that most of the participants failed to contribute effectively since they did not understand the content of the Structure Plan and the purpose of the public participation process. Community leaders claimed that the participatory techniques used were ineffective and failed to increase participants' awareness of the Structure Plan, as well as participants' understanding of the planning process.

Furthermore, the governing bodies' dominance means that there is only a very limited opportunity for stakeholders to contribute to the decision being made. The public hearing session was far from satisfying. Too many procedures set by the governing bodies limit the process to certain individuals. For example, the public hearing session was done in a closed session involving only those who have submitted complaints about the proposal in the Structure Plan, but the attendees are not allowed to argue or appeal any of the decisions being made.

Another major issue is the selection of the Public Hearing Sub-Committee: all the members came from government agencies. The Public Hearing Sub-Committee should involve representatives from the private sector, NGOs and local communities to ensure public representation in the committee.

#### **The flaws of participation approach in the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015**

The public participation process in the Langkawi Local Plan 2001-2015 was conducted in 2002 after the amendment of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in 2001. The new amendment of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) suggested an inclusion of an early participation process prior to the beginning of the study to seek comments on

local issues from local residents and stakeholders in the study area. However, most of the approaches used are similar to the procedures applied in the Langkawi Structure Plan 1990-2005.

Although an anticipated improvement in public awareness did not materialise, various public briefing sessions provided more information to the stakeholders. However, the public hearing process still applied a similar approach, with all representatives coming from the government agencies. Moreover, the decision-making process was still controlled by the government.

### **Conclusion**

In general, the implementations of the public participation processes in the Langkawi Islands are based on the Malaysian Planning System. Even though the public is expected to participate in the process, the extent of their participation had been merely limited to an early stage. Very limited opportunities are provided for consultation, but none of the decisions made by the decision makers involve the public. This limitation is influenced by the weaknesses of the participation approach and the regulation of the Town Planning Act (Act 172) in the Malaysian Planning System. Therefore, any suggestion for improvement to the public participation process in the Langkawi Islands needs to emphasise more towards the participation approach and its relationships with the Malaysian Planning System, to ensure that all related issues will be taken into consideration.

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