



MANAGING PUBLIC PERCEPTION TOWARDS LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Nursyahida Zulkifli¹⁺
Shamsinar Rahman²
Suzei Mat Nurudin³
Saidatul Akma Hamik⁴
Ahmad Shah Pakeer
Mohamed⁵
Rugayah Hashim⁶

^{1,2}Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Pahang, Malaysia
^{3,4,5,6}Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 15 December 2016

Revised: 23 January 2017

Accepted: 15 February 2017

Published: 6 March 2017

Keywords

Good governance
Local community
Local agenda 21
Public hearing
Public participation
Perception
Local government
Malaysia.

This paper highlights the efforts by the Seremban Municipal Council in encouraging participation among local community at their administrative area. Public participation is the most vital component in a good governance model for local governments in achieving effective and efficient administration. It is very important for the local government to ensure the local community participates in the activities carried out by the council. Through interviews with public administrators of local authorities and secondary data gathered from the Seremban Municipal Council as well as the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the findings showed that there are challenges in public participation at the local government level. This is due to the public's perceptions towards the local authority's activities. In managing this challenge, awareness campaigns on local government activities should be conducted regularly. The findings from this study are significant in ensuring two-way communication and rapport between the communities and the local authority. This way, value added benefits can be shared between the stakeholders on a win-win situation.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes in the public participation literature by revealing that the public has an idea and perception that they should not interfere in the administration of the council. The wrong understanding should be managed by the council to ensure that public participation can successfully be implemented.

1. INTRODUCTION

Good governance is an ethical principle, which obliges the government to perform its functions in a manner that stimulates the values of being efficient, non-corrupt, and responsive to the civil society. Good governance is also identified as a strong concept which is structurally necessary for market reform. Public participation is one of the seven principles of good governance and is considered as the most important principle and it is the main requirement in achieving sustainable development. According to Nyalunga (2006) public participation is seen as a vehicle to promote and instill a culture of good governance at the local government level. It is also considered as the cornerstone in implementing good governance (Cuppen et al., 2012).

According to [Creighton \(2005\)](#) public participation highlights two way communication and interaction to achieve better decision supported by the public. It is a process by which the public's needs and values are incorporated into governmental decision. Participation can be in the form of direct communication by the public or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. In addition, [Marzuki \(2009\)](#) defined participation as 'the means by which people, who are not elected or appointed officials of agencies and of government, influence decisions about programs and policies which affect their lives'. This argument is supported by where they stated that the citizens at the local level will be directly affected by the political decisions made by the government. This is because they form the community which is really close with the local government and every action and decision by the local government will affect them.

The citizens within the local government's jurisdiction are given the chance to contribute to the management of certain local authorities' policy-making agenda. In engaging the citizens, the local government would receive immediate feedback on the residents' desires resulting in better planning and implementation of citizen-centered projects. This is a win-win situation for both parties. Besides, public participation evidences the element of transparency in implementing good governance at public organizations. According to [Irvin and Stansbury \(2004\)](#) citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions and thus will contribute to more efficiency benefits to the rest of the society.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The notion the government knows best is no longer relevant as in this 21st century, the citizens' judgement is important in every action and decision made by the government. Some might argue that the governance weaknesses at the local level still exist, which result in the citizens of developing counties often having limited chances to participate in planning the public policies that impact their daily lives. As Malaysia implements Local Agenda 21, the local government faces several challenges to inspire community involvement and other stakeholders in the program. It is not easy to attract the local community to participate in the project. The commitment of the organization is the basic principle in ensuring the success of a program ([Makmor et al., 2012](#)).

Basically, the aim of participatory activities is to let people to be involved in the decision making process. However, the numbers of participants are still low in Malaysia. According to [Lee \(2012\)](#) as stated in [Nurudin et al. \(2016\)](#) the level of public participation in Malaysia is quite disappointing as the assumption that most Malaysians have the knowledge pertaining to the planning process, its issues, and the rules governing the planning process is doubtful. The scenario on the low percentage of the public participation in most of the government's program has become the trend in most districts for the other states in Malaysia. As a result, the degree of public involvement is considered very low. This reflects the ineffectiveness of public participation in the planning process.

According to [Van Brabant \(2015\)](#) among the reasons of public participatory resistance is that the ordinary people do not have interest as they are focused on their daily needs. One other reason is timing for the public consultation is not convenient for many people, whereby most are at work or it coincides with a time of the day which is typically very busy in the household. In addition, according to [Creighton \(2005\)](#) only interested parties will get themselves involved in the decision.

There are many efforts conducted by the council in encouraging participation yet not many responses are given by the public. This is due to the problem of public perception and mindset that they should not be involved in the activities carried out by the local government. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify numerous efforts carried out by the Seremban Municipal Council. This study will also identify the issues related to public perception towards local government activities.

3. GOOD GOVERNANCE

Good governance is not a new concept used in government administration. Governance can be defined as the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented (<http://www.unescap.org>). Governance emerges in diverse substances such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. Thus, to implement good governance that involves different contexts, there are eight principles of good governance that can assure the needs of the society are heard. The principles are participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and abiding to the rule of the law (<http://www.unescap.org>). The execution of good governance at local government is vital because this level of government is the closest to the public and it plays a significant role to the people (Nooi, 2008). In Malaysia, the practice of good governance is being conducted at the local level. Some of the local authorities lead the implementation of local governance through public hearings, consultations and meetings to identify the problems of the community at the grassroots level and encourage them to get involved to solve the problems respectively. Participation among locals in local council meetings showed that good governance has been practiced in the local governance. It shows that the transparency of government is enough to be responsive to the present and future needs of society.

Moreover, in year 1998 the Ministry of Housing and Local Government supported a national program in conjunction with the Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) which highlighted the need to expand community participation and involvement in the work of the local government (Makmor *et al.*, 2012). It shows that the government is serious about good governance practices to make sure that the services of the local government are more transparent, accountable and efficient. According to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government websites as cited in Nurudin *et al.* (2015) there are latest good governance programs and activities in 2015 where the Seberang Perai Municipal Council had invited participation from the stakeholders for the provision of recreational parks and bicycle tracks, process acceleration of the development plans and license approval by business communities and the establishment of intelligent monitoring system for project monitoring and urban sanitation. Other than that, Kampar District Council came out with an innovation of disposal the residual waste in their local areas. The innovation is related with the disposal of residual waste into fertilizer. These are some examples of effective good governance practiced among the local government in Malaysia especially towards the sustainable development.

3.1. Local Governance

Similar to the World Bank's definition, the Economic and Council (2006) defined governance as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels, comprising of mechanisms, processes and institutions through which the citizens and groups get to articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences". One of the essential elements in governance is public participation. Participation means all men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their interests. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively.

In the local government administration, participation is merely important as it becomes the main indicator to show that the public are supporting the governance administered by the local government. Public participation in the development program and improvement of service delivery has been suggested as an effective way to achieve sustainable development and it brings a lot of positive impact on the society. According to Bello *et al.* (2014) local governance is important in ensuring the availability and access to options which lead to better implementation of adaptation and strategies. Governance and government are two different things. Government refers to the body of administration while governance is the actions taken by the body itself. Usually, governance is interrelated with wise decision making and the best action taken by the government after considering all the important elements.

In Malaysia, the existing decision making structure and plan preparation process are still within the discretionary powers of planning authorities, making them to be at odds with participatory democracy (Maidin, 2011). The local government in Malaysia does not fully practice the democracy system in choosing the councilor whereby the councilors are chosen by the state government among coalition parties that win at the state level. Still, the decision taken by the councilor in making any decisions does not represent the public, but more of a state's favor.

3.2. Efforts by Seremban Municipal Council

3.2.1. Local Agenda (LA 21), Encourage Public Participant towards Local Government in Decision Making

Local Agenda 21 describes the action plan created by the people working towards a sustainable development. Preferably, it is established through the communication and cooperation between all sectors of society, including minority groups, building consensus on a common vision for the future of their community, and deciding on the most effective and suitable method for the realization of this vision. There are many degrees in which public participation and communication can occur. Local authorities therefore have a lot of choices to make in deciding on how to improve public participation in their communities. At this time, there is no 'best practice' or any single method likely to succeed in all societies.

According to Nielsen (2010) Local Agenda 21 (LA21) was addressed in Chapter 28 of the AGENDA 21 document (United Nation's Program of Action for Sustainable Development). It appealed to all governments and local sustainable development action plans for the twenty-first century. The document claims a call for greater public participation at the local level as the level of governance is the closest to the people, thus playing a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote a sustainable development. A spirit of deliberative commitment dominated where all actors are supposed to have a common interest in co-operating for sustainable development. A dialogue process with citizens, local organizations and private enterprises forms the basis for an LA21 as a shared community image that takes place-and effort taken towards good governance.

3.2.2. Program and Activities Held by Majlis Perbandaran Seremban (SMC)

Seremban Municipal Council (SMC) has been organizing various activities and programs in recent years to build their public image, improve staff morale and teamwork between local authorities and the public. According to the website of the SMC in the Local Agenda 21 Program, SMC has developed a public involvement program at which the participants are divided into three communities. The first community deals with public social issues, the second- environmental conservation, and the final community deals with the infrastructure and public facilities. All three communities are very effective in giving space and opportunity for the public to participate in the SMC program. This situation also benefits the SMC as it allows them to improve their public engagement.

SMC is committed to help people in terms of training, motivating and counselling as well as giving hospitality. For example, Bahagia Youth Camp Program is a program organized by the SMC in June 2011 with the cooperation of the Department of Community Welfare, Youth and Sports Chairman. The Islamic Religion State Council of Negeri Sembilan mainly focuses on the youths who have problems in their lives. Nowadays, the youths are exposed to social life and free sex that in turn, lead to the cases of abandoned babies from pre-marital sex. The program aims to

provide guidance to young people to interact with each other, especially in choosing their life partner. In order to make the public aware about legal rights and the public, SMC has organized a program such as Insight Counselling Law and Individual Rights in March 2011 and they collaborated with the Bar Council. This program focuses on public awareness to understand law and also provide counselling to those who have trouble understanding the legal rights of individuals in the Act.

Environmental programs provide opportunities for people to be close to nature. These activities also help to promote the importance of nature, adventure, sports and healthy lifestyles to the public and to promote the Seremban area as an eco-friendly environment. It also promotes cooperation between the public and private sectors to promote a healthy environment in Seremban Valley. The *Gotong-royong* program is an on-going program conducted annually by the SMC each year. It is a good program since it helps build public awareness by fostering cooperation between the housing developer with the local population.

A public hearing is one of the important programs conducted by the SMC in Local Agenda 21 through the Committee on Social Issues of the Seremban Municipal Council. This is because this session provides some information on problems that involves the public and local community in Seremban Valley under the supervision of the SMC and the SMC will be the best way to solve all the problems and difficulties raised at the hearing. First of all, the SMC will hear all the issues faced by society so that they can be resolved quickly.

The Seremban Municipal Council has fully implemented the LA21 program to residents of Seremban area. The role of the SMC is indeed to create a community that can work to develop the local area to become greater in future. LA21 program is beneficial to all public that participated in this program. Therefore, the LA21 programs are widely promoted especially by the local council so that people know this program can be beneficial to them.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study provides the findings of the public towards activities carried out by the local authority. Questionnaires were distributed randomly using online survey which is Google Forms. 73 responses were recorded and used for the detailed analysis. This study only used descriptive analysis in order to gain an overview on the public perception towards local authority. The findings of this study are important for the researchers to determine the direction of future research.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the findings for this study that identifies the efforts carried out by the Seremban Municipal Council (SMC). This study also identifies the issues related to the public perception towards local government activities. From the secondary data, this study found that various activities and programmes were organized by SMC to encourage public participation among their local residents. Among the programs is the public involvement program where the participants were divided into three communities (Social, Environment Conservation, and Infrastructure and Public Facilities Community). Each community developed a lot of activities such as *Gotong Royong*, camping, talks, competitions and many more. However, the participation of the local residents is still low since 52.5 percent of the respondents have never involved themselves in any activity organized by the SMC.

Further analyses showed that the respondents are not interested to join in any activities organized by the council (28.8 percent) and most of them did not realize or did not know the about programs (40.3 percent). Besides,

some of the respondents said that the local council's activities do not give any benefits to the society. These findings are supported by Van Brabant (2015) where in his studies, it is stated that most of the reasons that lead to fewer public participation in the local council's programs is due to the local residents having no interest, time constraint and lack or have no information pertaining the programs.

This study showed that the perception of the local residents towards the local council plays an important role to improve public participation and to ensure that the local governance is a success. It is vital because the local council, to be specific, the SMC, is the closest institution to the public and is very significant to the local people. The negative perception of the local people towards local authority is a critical issue that needs to be managed by the authority. It seems that the local authority is not important for the local residents and this perception will affect the whole administration of the authority- for instance, assessment tax collection, rental and other related functions. This is one factor which led to the high proportion of tax arrears that affected the revenue of local authority when in actual fact, revenue is a vital element for this council since it is a self-finance institution. It can be concluded that the negative perception of the local residents towards the local authority will influence the level of public participation in the programs or activities organized by them.

The most important thing is, the SMC should properly manage these negative perceptions of the local people in order to ensure that the local council is seen as an important institution and thus public participation at the local level is a success. Therefore, it will be the biggest challenge for the local council to manage this type of perception since it deals with humans. Moreover, the public participation is one of the important features in the local governance principles.

6. CONCLUSION

Over the years, good governance has become an important aspect of local government to deliver its service. Good governance has added new dimensions to the management in local government administration. Good governance and public participation are interrelated to each other. It begins with the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 program which encourages the council to practice good governance and at the same time emphasizes more public participation from the local communities. As discussed above, whenever the council is involved in Local Agenda activities, it also needs to practice the good governance concept and also focus on inviting public participation in the program conducted by the council.

However, since the public has a negative perception towards the local government, this issue may lead to low involvement in their programs. Hence, some recommendations are proposed for the local government to manage the public perception. Firstly, the local government should become friendly with the public and explain their functions to the public. There should also be a dialogue session with the public regarding the local issues such as safety, solid waste management, traffic management and many more to show that the local government are concerned about the public's needs. Thirdly, the local government should organize programs to enhance a good relationship with the local residence such as '*sukan rakyat*' and '*gotong-royong*'.

Next, the local government can also take the initiative to spend some of their time and send representatives to conduct a special session such as an open day with the local residents so that they know that their voices are heard. Finally, to practice good governance, the local government should be transparent. This can be achieved by explaining the budget expanded through the revenue collected and informing the public how the collected money is being spent to benefit the local residents. By conducting such programs and methods, the local residents' belief and faith in the local government is restored hence proving that as the local governance is practiced, the public can live in harmony and peace.

Future researchers can study about the factors that can enhance public participation and also the problems pertaining to public participation in the local authorities' programs. Public participation is one of the good governance principles, and the most popular program related to public participation is the Local Agenda 21. Thus,

this study has shown the importance of public participation in the local authority in ensuring the successful implementation of Local Agenda 21, which in turn, may increase the effectiveness and efficiency of local authorities in Malaysia.

Funding: This research project is funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia through the Research Acculturation Grant Scheme (Ref: RAGS/1/2014/SS04/UITM//1).

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: The researchers would also like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia for the facilities in preparing the research and also to the staffs at the Seremban Municipal Council and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government for their cooperation in data collection.

REFERENCES

- Bello, A., K. Dola and S.A. Shaba, 2014. Towards a preferred housing environment: Examining satisfaction elements outside a dwelling unit among Ahmadu Bello University (Kongo Campus) staff, Nigeria. *ALAM CIPTA International Journal on Sustainable Tropical Design Research & Practice*, 7(1): 3-13. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Creighton, J.L., 2005. *The public participation handbook: Making better decisions through citizen involvement*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Cuppen, M., B. Broekmans and B. Enserink, 2012. Public participation in EIA and attitude formation. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 30(2): 63-74. [View at Google Scholar](#) | [View at Publisher](#)
- Economic, U.N. and S. Council, 2006. Definition of basic concepts and terminologies in governance and public administration. *E/C*, 16: 4.
- Irvin, R.A. and J. Stansbury, 2004. Citizen participation in decision making: Is it worth the effort? *Public Administration Review*, 64(1): 55-65. [View at Google Scholar](#) | [View at Publisher](#)
- Lee, G.B., 2012. Governance and accountability in Southeast Asian cities. *Urbanization in Southeast Asia: Issues & Impacts*, 341.
- Maidin, A., 2011. Access to public participation in the land planning and environmental decision making process in Malaysia. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1: 148 – 164. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Makmor, M., Z. Ismail, R. Hashim and N.M. Nasir, 2012. Malaysia under the purview of the United Nations and Agenda 21. *Agenda*, 21: 22. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Marzuki, A., 2009. A review on public participation in environmental impact assessment in Malaysia. *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management*, 4(3(12)): 126-136.
- Nielsen, K.A., 2010. *A new agenda for sustainability*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Nooi, P.S., 2008. Decentralisation or recentralisation? Trends in local government in Malaysia. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Government*, 1: 126-132. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Nurudin, S.M., R. Hashim, S.A. Hamik, S. Rahman, N. Zulkifli and A.S.P. Mohamed, 2016. Public participation in local agenda 21 programs Implemented by Seremban municipal council. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 219: 555-561. [View at Google Scholar](#) | [View at Publisher](#)
- Nurudin, S.M., R. Hashim, S. Rahman, N. Zulkifli, A.S.P. Mohamed and S.A. Hamik, 2015. Public participation process at local government administration: A case study of the seremban municipal council, Malaysia. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 211: 505-512. [View at Google Scholar](#) | [View at Publisher](#)
- Nyalunga, D., 2006. An enabling environment for public participation in local government. *International NGO Journal*, 1(1): 1-6. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Van Brabant, K., 2015. *Effective advising in statebuilding and peacebuilding contexts – how: Public participation and citizen engagement*. 2015. Geneva: Interpeace-IPAT.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), International Journal of Public Policy and Administration Research shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.