

Public Involvement on Environmental Issues in Malaysia with Reference to Alor Star, Kedah

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Abstract. Public involvement is very important aspect due to every citizen has the right to live in a healthy environment and the obligation to protect the environment. Generally, the concept of public involvement is dealt with according to the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention: access to information, participation in planning and decision making and access to justice. Therefore, good information is vital for effective public participation. Thus, it is necessary for all authorities and political actors know their responsibility in making planning and decision making processes participatory. The objective of this paper is to highlight participation of Malaysian public in the environmental issues in order to achieve sustainable development. The study was to identify the public involvement in environmental issues in Alor Star, Kedah, Malaysia. The research was based on a set of questionnaire. A total of 200 respondents were interviewed and filled in questionnaire. From the study, Malaysian public are concerned about environment, but their concerns do not naturally translate into action. Therefore, challenges have to be overcome to allow creativity and synthesis in public participation. For Malaysian public participation to be successful, it is essential to maintain public involvement over time. Furthermore, public participation programs should provide opportunities that encourage the citizenry to both develop greater awareness and become more actively involved in environmental issues. Overall, major progress is still needed at the level of practical implementation of Malaysian public involvement at national and local levels.

Keywords: public involvement, environmental issues, Malaysia, sustainable development

1. INTRODUCTION

Public involvement is the themes of environmental protection and sustainable development that were highlighted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro 1992 and again during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002. Public involvement is the active involvement and full engagement of the public in planning and decision-making processes and activities towards to environmental conservation and preservation. Public involvement is where stakeholders collaboratively engage, as appropriate, in the identification of project concepts and objectives, selection of sites, design and implementation of activities, and monitoring and evaluation of projects. The main objective of public involvement are to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions in any environmental issues which effecting their quality of live. Developing strategies for incorporating public involvement throughout the project cycle is particularly necessary in projects which impact the incomes and livelihoods of local groups, especially disadvantaged populations in and around project sites (for example, indigenous communities, women, and poor households) (http://www.thegef.org/gef/public_involvement). Furthermore, public involvement in environmental issues is closely linked with democracy and the development of civil society.

However, differences in requirements for public involvement exist across focal areas and types of projects, and, therefore, all public involvement activities should be based on local needs and conditions. For example, biodiversity projects affecting indigenous communities may require more extensive stakeholder participation than global projects which focus on technical assistance and capacity building at the national and regional levels. There will also be varying approaches to design of public involvement activities that

respond to country conditions, such as cultural, political, and project-specific factors influencing project development and implementation (http://www.thegef.org/gef/public_involvement). Among this techniques are public meetings, public hearing, focus groups, survey, questionnaires, deliberative polling, workshops, discussion forum, citizen advisory committees and demonstration.

In Malaysia, public participation and involvement in environmental planning and discussion is provided under the Environmental Quality Act 1974 and Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Haliza 2009). In order to mitigate the adverse impacts of development on the environment, the Environmental Quality Act 1974 was amended to include EIA (Environment Impact Assessment) in 1985 and the order came into force in 1987. The law provides for adhering to the widely accepted procedure, including people's participation, especially of those who might be affected by the proposed development project or any other activity to which an EIA is a necessary requirement. Town and Country Planning Act 1976 as well introduced the concept of the Structure Plan and Local Plan. The idea of the Act was to ensure much more co-ordinated planning of development projects in each State with participation of local population (Haliza 2011). The public also can seek redress from a public body-the local councils (with the representation of NGOs, Resident's Associations, etc.) by lodging a complaint. The Public Complaint Bureau accepts complaints against action and decisions of government (Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Centre 2002).

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to highlight involvement of Malaysian public in the environmental issues in order to improve their involvement on sustainable development process.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was to identify the public involvement in environmental issues in Alor Star, Kedah, one of the northern states in Malaysia. Alor Star is the capital of Kedah state. The study was carried from Mei till August 2010. This research involved with primary and secondary data. The SPSS was applied for data analysis. The research was based on a set of questionnaire. A total of 200 respondents were interviewed and filled in questionnaire. Secondary data collected from the related agencies, journal, proceedings and books.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis involved analyzing of feedback from the respondents who were involved in filled in the questionnaire. Feedbacks of respondents have been studied to identify the existing of public participation in environmental issues in order to improve the public involvement on sustainable matters of the development process. From the survey, it was found that, 50.5% respondents concern environment must be preserved and conserved because of their importance and contribution to human life. As evidence, 25.5% of respondents acknowledged the importance of environment in stabilizing the climatic factors especially weather and another 28.0% give an economic reason where natural environment could derive their income from environmental resources such as fisheries, non-timber forest products and wildlife. For that reason, 73.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that public participation and involvement are an essential part to achieve environmental sustainability. However, only 18.0% stated that public was the main stakeholders in protecting the environment. This is because only 1.0% respondent were have opportunity and invited by related agencies to involve in development process especially to discuss further about the effect of the project to the environment and local community.

The study was shown that, 84.0% respondents worried about environment deterioration phenomenon. Indeed, for 47.5% of respondents, industries and developers are the main actors in destructing the environment. For the question whether natural environment should be changed to other land use or development project which is unsustainable, 66.5% respondents disagreed. The study also found that, 88.0% of the respondents get the current information and related environmental issues from mass media especially television. For them (98.0%), television is the most important tools in educating and increasing awareness among public regarding the importance of environment. According to 45.0% respondents, to minimize current environmental problems and increasing environmental quality, government should educating public the importance of public participation in environmental issues through formal and informal education. Public

should be educate regarding the purpose, importance and scope of their participation as well as the right, obligation and the proper ways for them to participate. Another 28.0% of the respondents suggest that the government should seriously consider in strengthening the roles of their related agencies regarding enforcement and making laws more compliance-friendly in order to enhance the quality of environment.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Environmental issues are much more difficult to resolve, therefore, public awareness and involvement is an essential part to achieve environmental sustainability. Public involvement is a process that occurs on a continuum that ranges from providing information and building awareness, to partnering in decision-making. The recognition of public involvement in various international environment initiatives, such as conventions, agreements and declarations, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, for example, encourages each country to have informed citizens who can participate in environmental management. However, the task to implement public involvement is challenging and often difficult.

Public involvement in environmental issues must be stressed and highlighted because (Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Centre 2002):

1. Public involvement in planning will lead to efficient planning, better project preparation, easier proposal acceptance, better project management, and can lead to innovative solutions. It will also lead to better post-implementation management. This is all due to the sense of ownership among stakeholders built up through the participation process.
2. Through the involvement process, outstanding objections are identified. When they are heard at early stage, solutions can be sought and the problems settled by discussions, negotiations and informal exchange. Public involvement brings social and political solutions to the problem.
3. Local people can most benefit from a project when they can involve in the management of it.
4. Public involvement builds trust, faith and sense of ownership in the stakeholders and interest groups involved. This then leads to solutions faster than the access to justice option.
5. People's involvement in planning and prevent potential conflict. It can also lead to the identification of an entirely new set of objectives. It requires greater penetration by government machinery into stakeholder groups.
6. It can build local experience on different aspects into the overall project scheme thereby resulting in project activities that suit to local patterns.
7. Allowing people to involve from planning stage onward will help avoid the social and environmental degradation at later stages.

However, the successful practice for public involvement on environmental issues depends on a few factors (<http://www.iap2.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=4>):

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

In Malaysia, generally, public are concerned about environment, but their concerns do not naturally translate into action. For example, 73.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that public participation and involvement are an essential part to achieve environmental sustainability, however, only 18.0% stated that public was the main stakeholders in protecting the environment. Therefore, challenges have to be overcome to allow creativity and synthesis in public participation. For public participation to be successful, it is essential to maintain stakeholder involvement over time. Moreover, participation and involvement of the public is important and relevant as they are stakeholders in development process. Therefore, responsibility for assuring public involvement rests within the country, normally with the government, project executing

agency or agencies. Effective public involvement requires thoughtfully developed programs of participation and should be broad and sustainable as well. Furthermore, public participation programs should provide opportunities that encourage the citizenry to both develop greater awareness and become more actively involved in environmental issues (Haliza 2010). Moreover, to ensure the validity and accuracy of the status and progress of public participation in Malaysia, the numbers of respondents should be increases nationwide. Overall, major progress is still needed at the level of practical implementation of Malaysian public involvement at national and local levels.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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