A Tale of Two Neighbourhoods: Some Evidence of Leadership, Learning, and Liveability

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Research on community-based organisations’ potentials and capacities to mobilise community at grassroots levels are emerging rapidly. Yet, inadequacy in terms of understanding how these grassroots institutions participate within Local Agenda 21 processes persists. Despite the establishment of Local Agenda 21 for sixteen years in Malaysia, research on the development of community leadership and learning in mobilising community remains scarce. This paper thus attempts to assess community leadership and learning through participation in Local Agenda 21 programs. Triangulated data collection methods comprising document analysis, experts’ interviews, and case study approach were undertaken to evaluate the development of local sustainable initiatives implemented by two community-based organisations within the platform of community participation facilitated by the City Council of Petaling Jaya. Building on Purdue’s leadership and trust framework as well as instrumental and communicative learning concepts, this qualitative study finds that continuous participation resulting from a continuous charismatic leadership has caused the local neighbourhoods to keep learning. This finding suggests that neighbourhoods participating actively in sustainability platform may substantially contribute to social dimensions of neighbourhood liveability, depending on the extent of community leadership and learning.

Keywords: community leadership and learning, community-based organizations, neighbourhood liveability, Local Agenda 21, community participation, and sustainable initiatives

1. INTRODUCTION

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) traces its origin back to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or more popularly known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The conference produced an action plan called Agenda 21 to denote the strategies for the 21st century. It aims at achieving the goals of Sustainable Development. While the central and the state governments play significant roles in broader policy-making processes, the level of local government under LA21 has been given a role in mobilising grassroots communities apart from performing their major role in service delivery. Community-based organisations (CBOs) are regarded as one of the stakeholders, along with state and the federal government agencies, NGOs, and private sectors within a ‘space’ created under LA21 (Pereira et al., 2005). In 2015, a set of renewed goals originated from the Agenda 21 known as Sustainable Development Goals outlined sustainable cities and communities as one of its main goals. This stems from the awareness that critical issues and challenges in sustainability are mostly found in urban areas. Statistics provided by the United Nations (UN) show that the percentage of Malaysian urban population in 2015 is at 73 per cent. This figure is growing at the rate of 2.7 per cent annually. By the year 2020, it is expected that local authorities in urban areas will face more complex challenges. In the age of governance, the local authorities are not the only parties responsible as the community performs complementary functions and holds partial responsibility in the environment where they live in.

Although a great deal of literature on LA21 in Malaysia has focused on approaches to its implementation by local authorities, little work has addressed the roles played by CBOs in partnership arrangements and community participation approaches within the platform of LA21. Existing research on CBOs in the country is limited within the context of community development programs, although their roles as stakeholders in local governance partnership are well-recognised. Nonetheless, studies on CBOs’ potentials and capacities to mobilise community at grassroots levels (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015; Hoe et al., 2015; Middlemiss, 2011; Krishna, 2003) are emerging rapidly. Yet, the inadequacy in the