

## Participation and Quality of Life: A Study on the People's Empowerment in a Malay Village Community

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### ABSTRACT

Pendayaupayaan sering dikatakan berlaku apabila manusia secara kolektif menentang mereka yang kaya, berkuasa, pemilik gedung perniagaan dan semua bentuk penindasan. Walau bagaimanapun, ia tidak selalunya begitu. Pendayaupayaan komuniti juga tersirat dalam penyertaan komuniti semasa mereka mengendalikan hal ehwal kehidupan. Dalam proses individu mengawasi kehidupan mereka menerusi penyertaan itulah terpancarnya elemen pendayaupayaan komuniti. Artikel ini menerangkan pendayaupayaan manusia yang terbentuk melalui penyertaan di sebuah perkampungan komuniti Melayu. Ia mengesahkan kesedaran komuniti mengenai keperluan dan masalah bersama yang dihadapi. Kesedaran ini diterjemahkan pula kepada tindakan kolektif apabila mereka menyusun diri dan menyertai pelbagai organisasi berasaskan kumpulan. Kumpulan-kumpulan ini adalah wadah bagi ahli-ahli komuniti menawarkan bantuan atau pertolongan untuk mencapai matlamat kumpulan mereka. Dalam usaha yang digerakkan oleh komuniti inilah individu-individu membentuk keupayaan mereka untuk mempengaruhi perubahan dalam kehidupan komuniti, membolehkan mereka membentuk kecekapan, belajar menggunakan usaha secara kolektif bagi menghasilkan output yang memanfaatkan mereka, dan akhir sekali menguasai kehidupan mereka. Menerusi proses penyertaan inilah pendayaupayaan manusia terbentuk yang membolehkan mereka perlahan-lahan meningkatkan kualiti hidup dalam persekitaran komuniti.

### ABSTRACT

Empowerment is often said to take place when people collectively organise themselves to fight the rich, the powerful, the owner of large businesses and other forms of oppression. However, this has not always been the case. Community empowerment is also embedded in the people's participation when dealing with their everyday community life. It is within the process of how individuals take control over their life depicts the elements of community empowerment. This paper portrays the people empowerment through their participations in a Malay village community. It illustrates the people's awareness towards the emergent common needs and problems. People's consciousness is translated into a collective action when they organised themselves and participated in various group-based organisations. These self-propelling groups are avenues for members to offer assistance in order to meet the groups' goal. In this community-driven endeavour, individuals develop their capacity to affect change in their community life, enabling them to develop competence, learn to use collective effort to shape the outcomes that benefit them and ultimately, take control over their life. It is within this participation process that the people's empowerment is embraced and developed, enabling them to gradually improve their quality of life in the community environment.

### INTRODUCTION

Quality of life covers a wide spectrum of human life. It includes the social, economics, cultural as

well as natural living environment of the people or the community (hereafter the word community and people will be used

interchangeably). Each of these areas can be further divided into sub-areas, for example within the social dimension it could cover education, health, demographic profile, safety, social integration and so forth. Schalock (1996, 2004) proposed eight dimensions relating to quality of life, and these include emotional well-being, interpersonal relationship, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, social inclusion and rights. Based on the dimensions mentioned, there are basically two main aspects concerning quality of life, the subjective well-being and objective well-being. The objective well-being has more to do with the tangible things that one benefits from a quality condition of life. Increase in income, wealth, and ability to possess a decent living environment are examples of this objective well-being. This tangible thing is not easy to obtain. Individuals have to work for it at the same time they have to participate in the process of achieving the quality of life. In relation to this, Borthwick-Duffy (1992) and Schalock (2004) considered community participation as one of the indicators under the dimension of social inclusion. It is through participation, community members are able to discuss, think, plan, manage and take action to meet their mutual felt-needs. The process of how they organise themselves collectively enables them to learn experience and exercise their skills and abilities to meet their common needs. Meeting the common needs will help to upgrade their quality of life. Thus, through participation, community members gain and develop skills, knowledge, experience and confidence. It is the participatory process engaged in by individuals as they work collectively to improve the quality of life in their communities is the important component of empowerment (Peterson and Speer 2000; Gutierrez 1995; Kieffer 1984). In general, many researchers perceive empowerment as the process through which people gain control over their life and participate in the life of their community (Israel *et al.* 1994; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Kieffer 1984). In short, it is through participation that individuals or the community members help to increase their quality of life. This is about the subjective well-being. This paper focuses on how the individuals as community members see things and able to put themselves together to achieve their common needs so as to upgrade their

quality of life in their living space, i.e., their living environment.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVE OF STUDY**

Traditionally, quantitative approach is heavily used in studying quality of life. Economic indexes and social indicators are the two main yardsticks to measure people's quality of life. Hedley, Dubin and Taveggia (1980), Hankiss (1978), Rosen (1979) and Roback (1982) focused on economic account in examining quality of life. Both, Rosen (1979) and Roback's (1982) studies focused on economic indicators referring to wage and price amenities to rank the quality of life in cities. Headey (1993) made an attempt to integrate psychological variables into economic framework to account the household well-being and proposed three interrelated elements. According to the writer, the well-being is a function of stocks (comprised of family support, friendship network, leisure skills, work skills health and wealth), background (gender, knowledge, social status and age) and daily activities, including the psychic income and satisfaction.

One must not forget that there is also a subjective account or element in examining quality of life. Community involvement is one of it. As mentioned above, by participating in community life, individuals would be able to organise themselves to meet their need, thus help to enhance their quality of life. Participation is a process; hence it is difficult to study using a quantitative approach. It demands a qualitative methodology to explain the dynamic of the process. Hence, this paper will describe how people are able to improve their quality of life and illuminate the element of empowerment within that dynamic involvement process, through participation.

Many local studies on participation focused on the benefit gained by the participants in development programmes or project initiated by the government such as Felda (Rokiah 1987) and the conflict between modern bureaucratic and the local people's working style (Zahid 1992; King 1992) in promoting change. Zahid noted the 'tension' between the cultivators in the RISDA (Rubber Industry Small Holders' Development Authority) mini-estate programme and authority due to differences in working schedule introduced by the authority. Introducing a modern way of cultivation to the

local people also created a conflict between estate and the villagers as reported by King in his study on SALCRA (Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority) in Sarawak. In development process, the participants have to make adjustment and adaptation as described indirectly by Rokiah (1987) and Shamsul *et al.* (1979). Peasants, fishermen, smallholders etc. do not reject development. The crucial point is whether this development meets the people's needs and how the responsible authority takes the initiative discussing related matters with the people (Nazaruddin *et al.* 2000). Writings on women's participation in development process within the perspective of gender have been developed by Makol (2004), Maimunah (1995, 1997) and Jariah and Laily (1997). They insisted that women have the capability to make change through their active participation and in some cases under certain circumstances such as when they are left by their husbands, they are able to earn their living. According to them, this portrays the people's (women's) empowerment. In short, various studies have shown that the participation is pertinent to make and affect changes in community life, and thus subsequently, quality of life.

Though many studies on people participation have been carried out, the focus has always been on the government-sponsored programme or project. There is still a need to study on the people's participations so as to explain community empowerment in relation to the quality of life. Studies on people's self-initiated projects that exemplified local people's involvement in promoting their quality of life have not been given high priority by local researchers. This investigation is crucial because local initiated projects could portray the elements of self-determination and self-development (another dimension in quality of life) of the community members. It is about their ability to care for themselves, which denotes their empowerment. In other words, by understanding the dynamic processes of how individuals or community members organise themselves, participating to achieve the felt needs help to explain community empowerment. This article focuses on the women's empowerment through participating in the local group-based organisations organised by them to meet their common needs or to overcome their perceived

problems. It is important to note that the initiative taken to affect change may not involve the whole people in a community. Nevertheless, the women participation in this study is treated as an exemplar of people's empowerment as the women in the study area is part of the community as a whole.

In relation to empowerment, subjective aspect of the quality of life in terms of people's capabilities to affect changes in their life has not been explored qualitatively. Though there have been studies on empowerment, they are purely discussed in respect to learned behaviour (Zimmerman 1990; Abramson Seligman and Teasdale 1978), psychological empowerment (Zimmerman 1995; Chavis and Wandersman 1995), developmental perspective (Kieffer 1984) and skills development (Rappaport 1987) using quantitative approach. The whole notion about the subjective element of how people on their own initiative upgrade their living quality is yet to be explored further by social scientist. It is about understanding how the individuals as community members learn to organise themselves, identify common needs, work with each other towards achieving a common goal and taking decision to bring about change in their community life. These people's capabilities are the subjective element to quality of life in Sen's terminology (Sen 1993) that is closely related to the element of empowerment which will be explored further in this study.

Having said that, this study has three main aims; (i) to understand the individual's ability; (ii) to explain how such ability encourages individuals to affect change in their community life so as to upgrade their quality of life; and (iii) to discuss the relationship between the individual's ability and empowerment.

#### *Quality of Life, Community Development and Community Empowerment: A Theoretical Underpinning*

Quality of life and community development are not separate entities. Literally, community development is about a process of working towards achieving the betterment of the people (Batten 1957) by the people. In the phrase "achieving the betterment of the people", lies the notion of the quality of life. In fact, it is very much related in that the aim of community development is to upgrade the well-being of the community, which covers the economic, social and cultural aspects of the people through

their own initiative or through a joint effort with the authority (United Nation 1960). To achieve this, the emphasis is on the participation of community members that can be seen through 'their effort to mobilise the people...into groups and organisations to enable them to take action on the social problems and issues which affect them' (Kramer and Specht 1969:10). Thus, community development is a process to develop a community with the goal of improving the quality of life of its members (Rahim and Asnarulkhadi 2003) by the community themselves or with the assistance from development agencies. In relation to this, Labonte (1993) suggests that community development is more about supporting community groups to identify and meet their needs and community-based projects are concerned with involving the community members, while Hawe (1994) used the term community development to describe several different project types such as community-based initiatives that have varying degree of people's participations.

There are two main themes embedded in the community development effort to improve quality of life. First, the 'product' of community development that is to provide betterment for the people by the people, which enhancing the quality of life of the community. Second, 'processes' towards achieving the product, which involves community participation. It is through participation that individuals or community members exercise their ability and portray their self-determination to achieve their need and overcome problems to affect change. It is within this dynamic process embedded the characteristics of empowerment. Hence, empowerment implies more participatory, social inclusion, bottom-up approaches and freedom to make decision. It is about achieving quality of life and human dignity (World Bank 2002) and helps in promoting wellness and human competence (Friedmann 1996; Parsons 1991).

The community needs vary from one community to the other. Even within the same community, the needs may differ from time to time or between groups. The needs may not be only the tangible ones such as the economic-related needs, but also the instrumental or supportive needs which are of equal importance to the community. The importance of the certain

needs to certain community which can be translated as the felt needs that the members perceived and expected to achieve, embodies the element of the well-being of the community, epitomising the people's quality of life.

The ability of community members to realise and think about themselves, initiate an actions, plan and further decide for themselves in fulfilling their needs is the functioning characteristic of being a human. Thus, the ability is the functioning power of individual(s) to improve their condition individually or collectively, from one state to the other in which one can see the improvement or progress towards their quality of life. This ability is the actual empowerment which refers to the on going capacity of individuals or groups to act on their own behalf in achieving a greater measure of control over their lives and destiny (Staples 1990:30). In Sen's words, "functioning" represents parts of the state of a person that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functioning the person can achieve (Sen 1993: 31), and these alternative combinations portray the person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being (p. 32). In the process to achieve an improved condition of living so as to enhance their quality of life, they (community members) are definitely involved in the process of making choices. The process of making a choice or in Sen's words, 'the evaluative space' by the community members requires some decision-making skills. Thus, the people's ability to identify and prioritise their needs, plan their actions and strategise to meet the common needs portrays the empowerment of the community members to take control of their life. In short, how the people i.e. community members organise themselves and to take actions to upgrade their living conditions is about understanding the subjective aspects of how people improve their quality of life, in which also embeds the notion of people's or community's empowerment via community development endeavour. It is therefore, through community development "people strengthen the bonds within their neighbourhoods, build social networks, and form their own organisations to provide a long-term capacity for problem solving" (Rubin and Rubin 2001: 3) towards achieving better quality of life.



## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach. A total of 11 women were involved in this study. All of them are members of the local community group-based organisation such as Death Fund Association, Crockery/Eggs and Rice Association, and the Women's Self-help Group. This study was carried out in a small homogenous Malay village settlement situated in the Sepang District, Selangor. It is a land development scheme officiated in 1962 by the state government.

The snowball sampling technique was used in this study. Despite the small number of respondents, it reached its saturation point. For a start, the few names suggested by the leaders of the group or association during the preliminary informal conversation, a week before the actual data collection period, were considered as a set of a sample. In order to avoid sampling bias from leaders, each name was carefully cross-checked against the names suggested by the previous respondents. Using the snowball technique of sampling procedure, the few suggested names were checked three times by their friends who were recruited as samples. By utilising this procedure, the validity of the data gathered is assured. The rationale was that the respondents' experience is the authentic form of information. This type of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967) directed the researcher to select appropriate sample by which the data (information) collected could be validated through the induction and deduction processes, as the number of samples accumulated. This interactive sampling strategy minimised the selection bias before going into the field. Indeed, the method of data collection and the sampling technique used also ensure a sufficient phenomenological intensity with regard to understanding community empowerment in this study.

Having identified the respondents, the researcher visited their homes to conduct the interviews. A four-week fieldwork using an in-depth interview technique was carried out. Prior to the interview session, a guideline was prepared. This guideline consists of questions pertaining to the respondents' experiences in initiating the local-based activities. It was a loosely and flexible kind of in-depth interview guideline which could easily be adapted to the real setting and was applicable to the respondents'

experiences. The duration of each interview session ranged from a minimum of one hour and forty five minutes to three and a half hours. The assurance of confidentiality was also emphasised. The names used in the article are not their real names.

All interview sessions were carried out in the afternoon, after the completion of their daily chores. Occasionally, if more than one respondent were willing to be interviewed on the same day, adjustments and negotiations were made. All interview sessions were tape-recorded with the respondents' consent. Probing, paraphrasing or recapitulating technique was used during the interviewing. It allowed respondents to make some reflections on their experiences and reasoned out certain actions taken. This eventually delineated and explained the element of empowerment among respondents during their participation in community activities.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

After each interview session, the recorded dialogue was reviewed by listening to the tape and making notes. This induction process of making notes on respondents' factual descriptions was then cross-checked and validated by comparing it with the deductive idea/notes noted during the previous interview sessions. Therefore, in an interview process, the three elements of induction, deduction and verification took place simultaneously. The validity and reliability of the information gathered were checked during and between interviews. Ideas or loose thoughts on empowerment that emerged from the first interview then underwent the same process in the successive in-depth interview sessions.

After all interview sessions with the respondents were completed, the transcribing process took place. The verbatim transcribing process was done directly from the tape without editing, to maintain its originality. This process took triple the time taken in each interview session. Then, the data analysis continued. The analysing process was carried out in a cyclical manner that could be summarised as follows: (1) indexing or listing tentative categories (and sub categories) based on the transcripts; (2) refining and revising the categories by looking back at the information (transcript); (3) grouping the data under the tentative categories

while revising, reassembling, and regrouping the overlapping and redundant categories for a 'permanent' categories; (4) choosing the theme statements that best described "the meaning" from the respondents' viewpoint by linking in and across the categories; (5) repeating steps 1-4 for the next respondents' interview tapes and comparing the findings by making analytical comparisons and deductions to produce central tentative themes at the end of the analysis process; (6) these central tentative themes or propositions were then again checked against step 4.

## RESULTS

The study revealed that the respondents in the study possessed some abilities which can be labelled under three main themes; which are (i) understanding the common problem; (ii) organising and planning; and (iii) implementing and managing. Within each theme, there are also other sub-themes or categories as elaborated below. Examining these themes and sub-themes critically and closely will epitomise the people's abilities. These abilities as portrayed by the themes are the 'building blocks' of the people's empowerment, and they are interrelated. It is within the building blocks, other elements or traits of individual as well as group empowerment are embedded.

### *Understanding Common Problem*

The process of making a community in a new settlement scheme (the study area) is not an easy task. The respondents realised that in the process of developing the community, they faced big problems or challenges. The common problem that they encountered was the real experiences of living in this land development scheme, as there was no assistance or allocation from the authority to help them at the beginning of their settlement. The common problems that they faced during those times can be categorised into three categories: (i) Difficulties in organising and preparing for communal activities; (ii) Difficulties during moment of crisis; and (iii) Expected problems and the need for mutual help.

#### (i) Difficulties in Organising and Preparing for Communal Activities

The respondents were really concerned about this problem. As settlers' wives, they shared the

responsibilities with their husbands. Though initially together the problem was not a common problem at the beginning, they anticipated such difficulties to be attended quickly as they might jeopardise the process of making a community in the new settlement scheme. Reflecting on and consciously reasoning the problems that they faced, Mrs. Eton, who is the leader of the Crockery Association (*Persatuan Pinggan Mangkok*) elaborated:

Hah! At times it was difficult to hold a 'kenduri' (feast). I still remember Ali (not his real name)...wanted to marry off his son. His wife just passed away a few months before the ceremony. He, like all of us here are from poor families...we owned only a few bits of crockery, pots and pans, not many....Therefore we, the settlers' wives, agreed together to help him out... From that incident, we, Mrs. Yati, two other friends and I then discussed and decided to set up the Crockery Association. (Mrs. Eton)

Mrs. Yati, who was also involved in establishing and mobilising their friends, recalled the incident as a turning point for organising the group, as she expressed her deep concern about the problem:

It was difficult building up a new life over here, in this settlement. It was a problem when you wanted to hold any functions or feasts. Who is going to help us over here if we do not help each other? Even though we wanted to compliant to the land scheme supervisor, there was no point...he could not do anything. There was no allocation for that sort of thing. That's where we started to think and decided to set up the Crockery Association, to help out any families and friends that needed our services. (Mrs. Yati)

The descriptions above clearly showed that they were sensitive to their community life. They have the ability to understand the difficulties that they face when organising communal activities, and based on that, they organise and mobilise themselves to form the respective group.

#### (ii) Difficulties during Moment of Crisis

As the group developed the members learned and became more matured, becoming more sensitive and attuned to their problems and needs. They did not restrict themselves only to initiating a group for solving problems faced during seasonal occasions (such as wedding ceremonies and communal feasts), but also during time of crisis such as when a death

occurs in the community. The establishment of the Community Death Fund Association (*Khairat Kematian*) and the participation of the local people in this group exemplified the common concern felt by them. This was clearly expressed by Mrs. Anum, the leader of this group:

We initiated this Community Death Fund Association in 1979...about ten years after the success of the Crockery Association. The fund we established was meant to help our members during moment of crisis - death of any family member...we provided money. For the last few years RM80 was given to the families of the deceased, and recently it was increased to RM100. We, the women, felt that this sort of help is a kind of support, a moral support to our friends who are depressed. (Mrs. Anum)

Mrs. Eton, who was among the initiators of this group together with Mrs. Anum, recalled the situation before its establishment:

I can still remember one incident that happened....Our neighbour's wife passed away, his house was just down the hill. At that time there was no fund like this available. So we, the women, decided to collect money from house to house ...for the funeral services...to buy white cloth (for the deceased) and planks for making the coffin.... (Mrs. Eton)

Based on the reasons above, it can be deduced that people had some understandings about their problems in community life, and as a result of thinking about these problems they began to seek solutions. It was in this process of self-reflection that the action of initiating the group and participating in the activity followed.

### (iii) Expected Problems and the Need for Mutual Help

The problems faced were not personalised, and, as such, specific critical events (problems) associated with social life were not treated as individual problems. In fact, the reason people voluntarily became members in such associations was to help their friends. It is common in this village, among the community – especially the nearby neighbourhood – to practice mutual help activities as a way to lighten their burden or work load, regardless of whether this is when celebrating a significant day in family life, or in sorrow. Giving and receiving help to and from another person is a mutual practice among them, as well as being sensitive to their real life situations and past experiences in a self-contained village where mutual help is an

essential practice, this is also in anticipation of the realisation that they might face similar problems in the future. This was clearly described by an ordinary member, Mrs. Maria:

We live together...as neighbours...our friends' problems are also our problems. We share in times of difficulty and also in times of leisure. Helping each other, that's our lifestyle in this settlement scheme. Today, if one of our friends has a problem, we help her. Next, in future, if it is our turn to face a problem, our friend will help us out. That's why we set up this association...it helps us here. Five years ago I used the services provided by the Crockery Association...when my daughter got married....though I was a member of this association more than ten years ago. (Mrs. Maria)

The same response was also illustrated by Mrs. Fira, who is also a member in the Crockery Association/The Rice and Egg Cooperative, during a personal interview:

Over in this scheme, we help each other. Today we help them; maybe tomorrow they will in turn help us. All of us here are facing the same hardship and problems...not much different. That's why I joined this Crockery Association/Rice and Egg Cooperation. We can help each other in times of need. (Mrs. Fira)

The above quotations describe the real situations faced by them. They were not only aware about the existing problems but also foresee the future problem as well. This showed that they were able to forecast certain future incidences in their life, and for them to take immediate actions is a necessity during those days. In other words, they were proactive, while at the same time possessed elements of self-initiation.

### *Organising and Planning Stage*

The ability to understand common problem is crucial at the outset of the group formation. Without understanding what the real problem is, it is difficult to identify a common need. This is important because common needs could encourage concerted effort among community members to focus on their undertakings so that the targeted goal could be achieved. Based on the verbatim statements expressed above the data shows that they have the capability to think for themselves. This capability encouraged them to affect change in their community life. The people's capabilities to affect changes in their community life can be clearly seen in the

organising and planning stage. In fact, these are the emerging themes deduced from the interviews. Within these themes there are several categories which denote the level of actions that they performed. Again, the action exemplified their ability to affect change gradually in their social life as explained below.

i. Pre Group Process – Inviting Friends

Before deciding on any activity, it was a common practice among the groups to invite members to attend a group meeting or discussion. Most of the group leaders interviewed mentioned that they had invited their group members to plan and organise the activities such as the Women Self-Help Group, Death Fund Association, and Crockery Association/Rice and Egg Cooperative as narrated by Mrs. Yati (Women self-help group leader) and Mrs. Anum (Community Death Fund Association).

When we wanted to help our friends, for example, our neighbour who planned to hold a wedding ceremony, we would first meet. Normally, I will call all our friends and neighbours, either by phoning them or going personally to their houses. As for those friends who lived on the other side of the hill, I asked our representative to inform them....My close friend, Mrs. Eton, usually assisted me....We have been practising this since we started this group twenty five years ago. (Mrs. Yati)

I always invited my friends, our group members, before deciding on any activity. I told them, "please come over this Sunday, we are going to have a meeting"....for our Community Death Fund Association or Crockery Association meeting this is what I normally do. I also informed and invited them to come along. (Mrs. Anum)

This practice was confirmed by the group members who had experienced the planning process, as shown from the statements below:

I have been a member of this Women's Study Circle group for almost twenty years. When we want to carry out certain activities, the leader will inform us. It's the same when we are going to conduct a self-help group for a communal feast...the leader will inform us. She will say, "please come...we will discuss together". When I know about this, I will then inform my next door neighbours. (Mrs. Maria)

In our association, we don't send letters inviting members to the meeting.... Normally Mrs. Anum, our leader, will invite them verbally. That's what we normally do for the Crockery Association, Community Death Fund Association Study Circle. (Mrs. Yati)

From the above statements, it can be inferred that, as a group, the members have the skills and ability to organise themselves for the planning activity. They are also aware of the importance of inviting and informing other members of the group. This can be seen by their self-initiated actions in informing or calling their friends to attend the meetings; either by writing invitation letters, sending them out or taking the initiatives to go to their friends' houses, showing that they have the ability to perform the task. This exemplifies that they are self-motivated, and prepared to take part in conducting the group activities. This situation is possibly related to the importance of having as many members as possible attending the group meeting or discussion (as a group process). The reason for this is that they can easily plan the action and divide the workload among the members. Hence, it is clear that they value the group process in organising, planning and deciding on an activity.

ii. Group Process

The actual group process normally takes place in a meeting. As informal groups, informal meetings are usually practised by the three neighbourhood groups. Group meetings are a focal point for most group members to sit together in discussing, planning and deciding on their group activities. In general, from the information gathered, it can be deduced that there are two functions of having a group meeting that can be categorised or labelled as (a) a medium for making decisions about the activity, and (b) as a medium for giving ideas. These two distinctive functions of group meetings employed by the community groups eventually influenced the group members' participation in the decision making process, as explained below. In other words, it is within group meetings that the process and level of peoples' participations in planning emerge simultaneously.

(a) Making decision *about* the activity

After the group members have agreed and decided on an activity or project, they then discuss and share ideas about it. Most of the members interviewed said that they had some experience in discussing different issues related to organising an activity. These experiences varied from one person to another, depending



on the group they were engaged with. The issues discussed also vary according to the activities, from a very simple matter such as deciding on the date of the activity, to a more complex one such as determining the tactics and strategies in pursuing the agreed matters.

### Deciding the date

Through in-depth interviews in an effort to understand people's participation process in the planning stage, the researcher noticed a significant element occurring at this preliminary stage - it was found that all the community groups emphasise the importance of deciding the date for activities. This is usually the first issue being raised and decided upon in the discussion, as can be seen from the statements given by Mrs. Wani, Mrs. Maria and Mrs. Hasif, consecutively. "Whatever it is, the date must be confirmed first.", "In the discussion, we would agree on the date first." and "Long before the launching of an activity, a suitable date is chosen and must be agreed by the members. This we decide during the group meeting."

Deciding the date is much more important than the time and venue for several logistic reasons, as perceived by the respondents, when they said, "When the date is confirmed we would then plan among ourselves...to do the preparation early... (Mrs. Mona)" and "All of us have our own work to attend to. This activity is a voluntary work. Once the date is fixed, then it would be easy for us to prepare. (Mrs. Lina)"

The reasons given by the respondents above on the importance of deciding on the date showed their willingness to contribute. It was also revealed through the interviews that the value and quality of group members' participations depend very much on the suitability of the date of the projects, as mentioned by Mrs Eton, "Our group activity stressed participation. If we are late in deciding the date, then the turn out will be poor". On the same tone, Mrs. Yati said, "We perform the work in a group. So, it is better to inform members early. When they know well in advance, they then can plan to come and help...". Mrs. Wan, who was also involved in the group activity, also said:

Since we have decided on the date and time, that would mean we have already committed ourselves to

participate from the beginning to the end...arranging back the tables and chairs after the activity has ended. (Mrs. Wan)

The reasons given above show that these members have the knowledge to make use of local resources that they possess, and the group meeting is used to enable them to organise these resources. Their concern about the date to conduct the activity is practically important to the group because most community members are working to earn their living, especially the younger generations, who work in the nearby industrial estate. Consequently, only a few community members and group members are able to participate. In this regard, it is clear that some group members have the ability to think and project their ideas to affect other people's behaviour, i.e. their friends to participate in helping to conduct the activity.

### 'Content' of the activity

The group members' involvement in determining and identifying the 'content' of the activity of each group is also crucial. In this context, content refers to any sort of programmes and type of events. In order to achieve the targeted goal, group members try their best to ensure that the content of the activities is related to and geared towards those goals. This can be clearly seen from the comments made by Mrs. Fizi, when she said "Like I said earlier, we must be clear about our needs. Likewise in our meeting, we want to hear from the women, the members, what they want...later we can decide the activities they like".

#### (b) Giving ideas

In the community-initiated activity characterised by self-directed participation, the members' involvement is more active especially in expressing and sharing ideas in the group meetings. This can be seen by examining the statements of members' experiences. The dynamics of the group process in giving ideas to decide an activity was confirmed by Mrs. Fizi during the interview, a few days after their group meeting, when she said, "...It wasn't me who suggested the activity. The members wanted them. They suggested it in the meeting and requested me to handle it together with them...".

Regardless of their age, whether a senior member or a new member (young member) they were actively involved in discussion and giving suggestions based on their previous experience of handling the same task. In fact, this phenomenon was clearly observed in their group meeting when the researcher was invited to meet and attend their group meeting to discuss the preparation for the Hari Raya communal gathering. The practice of giving, sharing and discussing ideas before embarking on the activity is also reflected in Mrs. Maria's words:

I always give my opinion on the type of dishes that we can cook for the feasts, whether for the religious or the communal feasts...because that's the type of work, we, the women can help with, isn't it? (Mrs. Maria)

I told Mrs. Eton not to use the Crockery fund for our feast [but] I suggested that we collect money from the members. No matter how much, they are willing to pay... [Because] maybe there are some friends who are not members in the Crockery Association who will come to the feast... That way, we can save money to buy some more crockery. ( Mrs. Anum)

Giving and sharing ideas in the community initiated activities, as shown above, allows members to be directly involved in the decision making process democratically. During this process, they learn to make suggestions and work together as a group to achieve their goals. Learning to give and accept suggestions are motivating factors for the members to continue contributing ideas, which later benefit the group. Moreover, it is a personal reward if an idea is well received and used by the group. This personal satisfaction encourages people to further contribute ideas and suggestions, which simultaneously develops and improves their competency and confidence in helping to organise a group activity. One important aspect in the whole process of contributing ideas is the development and formation of self-judgement, which is the ability of members to put forward ideas which are relevant and suitable for their group. All in all, the collective actions by the people in the organising and planning stage portray that they have the abilities and exercise those capabilities so as to create a better living environment according to their needs. Such endeavour is about people taking action through participation to upgrade their quality of life.

## IMPLEMENTING AND MANAGING

The self-directed endeavour can be further examined in the implementing and managing stages. This is the third main theme emerged from the analysis. In comparison to the planning stage, people's participation in carrying out the activity is more active in both the implementing and managing stages. If at the planning stage some members only attend the meeting "to hear or listen" to the discussion, at this stage all members interviewed consciously described how they participate: helping in contributing their energy and materials to carry out the activity. From the respondents' statements, participating in implementing an activity is the 'heart' or the centre of their involvement. It is important to note here that in understanding the way they are involved in implementing and managing the group activities, the fundamental issue is to appreciate the capability of the members to carry out certain tasks or responsibilities voluntarily in their attempt to achieve group goals.

### *Contributing Energy*

'Contributing energy' is the most frequent phrase used by the respondents in describing their involvement at this implementing stage. Literally, it means giving a helping hand, and has a close relationship to the mutual-help and self-help principle of conducting the activity. It concerns the work, tasks and responsibilities which each individual member have been decided upon and assigned at the earlier planning stage. This sharing of the workload between members is clearly expressed by the respondents below:

Oh yes, helping Mrs. Yati cook 'mee goreng' and cookies for the feast is my favourite job. I like to do this.... This is the only way I can contribute my energy to the group. I can't do other than that because I'm getting older and weaker. Normally, we join with the WI (Women Institution) members to do this work. (Mrs. Maria)

Collecting money from house to house is my responsibility when there is a death in this village. The money collected will be added to the money from our Community Death Fund collection, [because] each time our members or their close relatives pass away, our group contributes RM100 to the deceased family. If I didn't take this responsibility, didn't want to collect from members in our area, later the fund would decrease. (Mrs. Fira)

For the preparation of the competition, I went to Bangi to get materials for the members. I went on my motorbike but I did not claim the money for petrol from my group. To me, this is small matter...what's important to me is that I can contribute to my group. (Mrs. Nor)

This people empowerment, i.e. the capability to carry out the task or responsibility towards achieving the goals as described above by the group members were also confirmed by the leaders. The role or task performed by the members which involves giving energy to support group activities shows their commitment to handle and manage the activity. The ability to share and perform the task together with, and for their friend reveals that they have to learn to work together as a group. This experience is an important element in the group work process, in which by possessing such abilities one can help to maintain the existence of the group, and such experience can be used when performing future group activities. In short, they are empowered in taking action to fulfil their needs and achieve their objectives.

#### *Contributing Money and Materials*

The member's commitment to support their groups (and group activities) to ensure the achievement of their common goal can also be examined through their collective action in contributing money to the project or activity. Again, their action is primarily based on the principle of sharing the burden. In some cases, the contributions made have a direct impact or benefits to the contributors, such as in the Death Fund Association and Crockery Association/Rice and Egg Cooperative. In order to ensure continuity, and to maintain group activity, there is some sort of mutual agreement among members to give 'donations' to their group. The statements below are some examples which illustrate their contribution and concerns maintain the group activity:

Since I joined the Community Death Fund Association, I have had to contribute RM1 for every death that occurs, besides the RM4 annual fees. This is the regulation of the Association...[and] that's our promise last time. If we didn't pay the money, how could the Association survive or be maintained? (Mrs. Rosi)

If we just expect donations from our friends who attend the class, of course it's not enough. Therefore, as their leader, I have to contribute at least RM10 per month. The money collected is used to pay the

'ustazah', water and electricity bills for this women's *surau*. I don't force them to pay...if we force them and they don't have the money, next time they are ashamed to attend. If the attendance is low, most probably the class will close. That's a loss to us...just because of few cents or ringgit, we would have to close this class. (Mrs. Anum)

...five eggs and three 'kati' of rice is not much, is it? That's the amount I normally contribute to friends who are going to marry off their son or daughter. We decided this a long time ago...so, the next time I want to have the same occasion, they will also help me. (Mrs. Yati)

The money contributed by the members is mainly to support the financing of the project or activity which also means that it maintains the group itself. It was also noticed that for a small project or activity, group members tried their best to solve the financial problems at group level. This commitment and the self-reliance spirit can be seen among the member of the self-help group in organising the communal activities. Below are some examples which depict their attempts to maintain and sustain the activity at this stage:

... to contribute RM10-15 for running the communal feast and self-help activity to clear the grave yards or school compound, is normal for me... We can't expect so much assistance from the District Office...how much they can give? (Mrs. Sidi)

Yes, we contribute some amount of money, normally about RM10 to buy materials for the women to cook for our 'gotong-royong' activity.... For the orphanage project, each of us in the VDSC (Village Development and Security Committee- *Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung*) contributes about RM15 to the fund....I know the District Officer can give us some allocation, but we can't depend on them very much. (Mrs. Wan)

The above descriptions are not exaggerations. Indeed, from close observation by attending the activity, for example in the Women Self-help group, the practice of giving donation is the norm. Since giving a donation is normal practice not only among leaders but also group members, it is not surprising that groups such as the Death Fund Association and Crockery Association have a stable flow of accounts.

Hence, from the above illustrations, and supported by evident obtained from group's leader during the study period, it is obvious

that contributing money or other materials to the group for community feast or its members who are in need (such as for preparing a wedding feast) is voluntarily practised in community-initiated group activities, and is the way they keep the activity going. Their willingness to sacrifice their money to run the activity without depending on external assistance shows members' commitment to the group. In addition, it also shows that they have the capability and skills to manage other group activities themselves. They are self-reliant and through this participation process (by contributing the money and materials) they actually enable the group to survive. The skills and capabilities that are developed together, in their attempt to sustain the group (and group activities), are another product of people's empowerment, important element in the participation process.

### DISCUSSION

Participation is a dynamic process. Hence, it is difficult to predict or even to quantify using a standard measurement. Participation is rather moulded by, and originates from, individuals' experiences in participating. In this research, the people's participation is viewed as a process by which individuals are involved in initiating, deciding, planning, implementing and managing the group and its activities. Participation is also a process in which people, as subjects in their own environment, seek out ways to meet their collective needs and to overcome their common problems so as to upgrade their quality of life and well-being. In pursuing the collective action, the self-help and mutual-help spirit that underlies the Asian traditional community spirit of working, helped to hasten the achievement of these shared interests through group-based-activities. Thus, by understanding this collective action in which members participate, it is possible to comprehend the aspect of people's empowerment.

The main reasons which motivate people to participate are the common problems that they faced and the common needs felt in their community lives. The responses given by them showed that they are capable to reflect past experiences and difficulties and further comprehend the problems, shared them together, and later organise themselves in their

own way in the respective groups to establish, initiate and conduct various community-based activities. These reflections, which highlight the reasons for participation, include both their reaction towards overcoming past negative experiences, and intentions for fulfilling their future needs. The reflections are about people's real consciousness in understanding problems that they encountered, and their needs in the context of their everyday lives. These are the people capabilities which further developed into an action. This quality is an element of people's empowerment. In this case, the experiences undergone by the community members is not merely about psychological empowerment (Zimmerman 1995; Chavis and Wandersman 1995), rather it is the actual people empowerment when they are able to exercise their ability to take control over their lives (Staples 1990; Adam 1990).

The people's awareness was manifested through their actions in mobilising members, establishing groups, and participating in group activities. Their initial impetus to participate may not have materialised had the problems they encountered been personalised rather than shared. It was in the process of sharing the problems that previous negative experiences became a new knowledge that stimulated them into finding solutions. This complex interaction between them and their world involves the people's awareness and consciousness about problems, which eventually translated into group conscientisation (Freire 1972) in the form of establishing the group and initiating group activities. It can be suggested, therefore, that it is the people's ability, first, to perceive and understand their needs, and secondly to act upon it within their means which showed that, collectively, they have the potential to take charge of their lives. The effort to change their lives is the whole notion about how through participation, the people could improve their quality of life. Therefore, all the reasons given reflect the conscious intention of the people to liberate themselves from various kinds of problems and situations, and to achieve certain targeted social goals to fulfil their expected needs. This impetus towards organising and participating in community groups (and activities) is the first step in the grassroots mobilising process towards people's participation.



In summary, at this stage it can be said that the learning ability of the people to identify and to reason out their problems, needs and expectations which was later translated into an active process by to integrating and organising their efforts to decide, to influence and to engage in various community groups and activities, demonstrates that they were consciously aware of the internal community affairs, demonstrate the people's empowerment. Their energies fostered and engendered their participation in conducting, planning, managing and sustaining the various groups and their activities. People's empowerment therefore, constitutes the complex and continuous process of interaction between people themselves and their community life, and through understanding the situation (needs and problems) or by reflecting on their past experience based on those interactions, they collectively mobilised and organised themselves into various types of community-based groups to seek ways to overcome the problems and to achieve their shared needs and expectations (as revealed in the reasons given for participating). Hence, empowerment developed when individuals are able to comprehend their situation and their interaction with the living environment reciprocally influence their emotions, cognitive as well as behaviour which is translated in participation (see also Speer 2000).

The product of empowerment is manifested in their success in establishing the groups and conducting the activities, which resulted from their awareness of the situations and the capability to participate, manoeuvre, and negotiate and to take further action with the aim of improving general living standards, thus, the quality of life. It is the ability of the members to organise themselves in planning and decision making shows that they, as individual members and as a group, have the skills and capabilities to integrate their efforts and take personal responsibility to achieve their social or group goals. It also depicts that the knowledge they have for using the group meetings as the focal point to mobilise their members' participation to decide about the activity and subsequently contributing energy and money to ensure meeting their targeted needs. The whole process is about the interactional competence of empowerment in Speer's term (2000). The

interactional characteristic is the individual's (or people's) ability that is the functioning of individual members as manifested in their participation to effect change. Here, people's empowerment is their 'power to' or ability to think, rationalise and then act according to the situation and structure where they live. The end product of this empowering endeavour exercised by the people is the launching of the activities or actions to achieve their needs and expectations. Hence, the experiences gained by individuals in this village go beyond the perceived control (Chavis and Wandersman 1995). In the village, the people's empowerment through participation is resulted in a more tangible thing.

The self-directed groups and its activity or programme could not have materialised and been sustained to the present day if community members were not empowered to initiate and participate to support them. The creation and existence of these community self-directed activities emerged from their awareness about the needs and problems faced by community members as a whole. Various efforts have been made to alleviate problems and also to achieve group members' expectations by participating together. This resembles the idea of locality development model of Rothman's (1973). Since this empowering endeavour is generated from community members for the sake of developing themselves and other the community members as a whole, it demonstrates the principle of self-reliance. As such, this is in line with the consensus approach to community development as propagated by the state. Culturally and socially it has helped to develop themselves through the community self-help spirit and principle, and economically, at the same time has assisted the government in providing much needed services. In this regard, it can be suggested that an empowered community is taking the chances available within the structure in which they live and is confidently making use of their inherent ability to bring changes to their community life, and in those processes, by and large they are also contributing to national progress.

## CONCLUSION

Human beings are creative creatures. Given them a chance and opportunities, they were able to do something to change their life conditions. This can be achieved through participation.

This denotes that participation can act as a means towards uplifting their standard of living, thus their quality of life. Also through participating in community life, community members exercised their abilities. However, first and foremost they should be aware about themselves, their problems and needs. In fact the people's awareness is the simplest form of people's ability. Afterward this ability grows into an action process via participation when community members progressively and collectively gaining more control over their lives, which underpin the notion of people's empowerment. In this respect, participation thus strengthened and intensified people's ability to master their lives. It was within the continuous learning process of participation that the people's empowerment was embraced and developed which enable them to improve their quality of life gradually at their own pace.

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