

People's Participation in Community Development: A Case Study in a Planned Village Settlement in Malaysia

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Abstract: In this study, the people's participation in community development activities is viewed as a process by which individuals are involved in initiating, deciding, planning, implementing and managing the group and its activities. It is also a process of social development in which people, as subjects in their own environment, seek out ways to meet their collective needs and expectations and to overcome their common problems. In pursuing this 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 dynamic aspect of the group process within which participation took place.

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1. Introduction

Participation is a dynamic process. Hence, it is difficult to predict or even to quantify using a standard 'measurement'. Participation is rather molded by, and originates from, individuals' experiences in participating. As such, the qualitative-ethnographic approach employed in this study was able to assist in understanding the process of people's participation in community development activities. This approach has also helped to deepen the knowledge about participation itself. This was not achieved merely by putting 'participation' into a measurable variable that can be operationalized into four quantifiable aspects, i.e. decision making, implementing, benefit sharing and evaluation (Cohen and Uphoff, 1977;1980), but more importantly it involves understanding of how people organize themselves to meet their needs. It was through in-depth interviews, follow-up interviews and group discussions with community members that the participation process was grasped. It was through intermingling the inductive and deductive processes, incorporated within and between these three main techniques of data collection on different groups of respondents that people's participation process in community activities was scrutinized and better understood.

2. Literature Review

The term 'empowerment' is a contested concept which connotes different meanings depending on different perspectives of looking at it. The main reason

for this is that the noun 'empowerment' is underpinned by the word 'power', which in itself is a contested concept. As elaborated in chapter 3, 'power' can be viewed in three ways. From one perspective, power is conceptualized as a 'fixed entity' possessed by individuals or groups (Weber, 1978; Dahl, 1957). In contrast, the second perspective views power as a non reducible 'thing', such as 'human ability', 'creative energy', 'potential' and 'resources' possessed by individuals (Parsons, 1963; Arendt, 1970; Browne, 1995). The third view conceptualizes power as something that is exercised rather than possessed (Hoy, 1986). Based on these ideas of defining power, it could then be suggested that 'empowerment' could mean the taking of power by one party who has the ability and capacity to do so from another.

Although there are different ways of interpreting the term 'power' its main element centers on the people - individual or community members. They are the agents who have the opportunity either to possess or exercise the 'power', or to utilize their ability to make something happen with or without changing the power relationship in order to meet their needs. With regard to this, the word 'power' or 'empowerment' implies an applied term, and this can be seen when the term is used in conjunction with the word 'participation' to become a twin strategy to promote sustainable development and people-centered development, as suggested by Mayo and Craig (1995). It is through understanding the participation process by which individuals engaged in mobilizing and organizing themselves collectively to achieve their shared

objectives or group goals that the concept and elements of empowerment can be grasped.

Nevertheless, reconsidering the complexity of its conceptualization, empowerment cannot simply be conceptualized by looking at the end product of people's action in achieving their own goals, with which it can later be said that people have mastered their life affairs. This is because the whole notion of empowerment is embedded within a complex process whereby people engage themselves to achieve their intended goals, which indicates that they are able to exercise their capabilities to make, affect and bring about changes in community life. In this regard, this study defines empowerment as a process whereby individuals or groups are able to exercise their ability and capacity to understand and interpret problems and define needs, which are then translated into an action process by organizing themselves in such a way so as to enable them to decide, influence, demand, negotiate and engage in carrying out activities.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-ethnographic approach that uses a flexibility and open-ended framework of research design. In this kind of interactive research, the basic aim of the whole process of the research activity is not only to gain information and to understand the meaning and process of participation. This study, which can be classified as the 'knowledge-development research' in Thomas's community work research typology (Thomas, 1980), emphasizes the process approach: describing and analyzing the people's participation experience, rather than examining participation through a snapshot approach as in a quantitative study. From the philosophical and the principled stance of the ethnographic approach, researching and understanding participation together with people of the same status and relationship itself embodies the value of empowerment. From the beginning of the research process, before actually becoming engaged in the process of gathering data, the 'welcoming tone' from the people signified the credibility that the approach has to offer. The trust that the people showed towards the researchers, facilitated by sensitive and interactive data collection tools, encouraged them to become involved in the research process. At the onset of the research process itself people were eager and confident to share their experience with the researcher.

The interactive and responsive techniques of data collection of in-depth and follow-up interviews, and group discussions advocated by this approach allowed the people to be directly involved in the research process and helped to facilitate an understanding of their participation in the activities of the community.

The conversational style and interactive dialogue between researcher and researched also played a key part in the research process in that it encouraged respondents to express their experiences and views, and, as such, involved reflection during the dialogue. It was during this reflection that respondents became more aware about what was happening, while narrating their experiences, and in this way, a self-realization, consciousness raising and self-evaluation process took place. Certainly, in this process, the individual respondents became more aware of their abilities, which in turn empowered them to take action in the future. This was noticed towards the end of the research when the people became more aware about the problems and mistakes that hampered the process of integrating and channeling their creative energies into a more collective effort in developing their community and preparing to take action to restore the spirit of co-operation among group and community members. In short, bringing the subjects closer into the research process is an attempt to understand their existence and action within their world, and the sharing of information to reflect and feed the knowledge back to the people is the debunking process of education (Freire, 1972). The knowledge shared throughout the research process, and the feeding back of information about their capabilities through follow-up interviews and group discussions, is part of a consciousness raising process. Simultaneously, this developed and encouraged group members' ability and confidence to comment and make suggestions grounded in their own concrete experiences, and, as such, demonstrated an empowering capacity in the approach. The evaluation of the group and its activities was a 'critical comparison-reflection', based on members' past experiences of participating in various groups. Suggestions which emerged during the research discourse represented members own ideas for collective solutions, based upon an enhanced understanding of the problems and issues to be faced. Thus, this informal learning process facilitated by the research approach could motivate them to continue participating in developing their community by having more information about the situation and capabilities they possessed.

The mutual benefit in this reciprocal method of doing research embedded in the principle and techniques of the qualitative-ethnographic approach distinguishes it from other conventional methods of studying participation, and has covered some points made by Graham and Jones (Graham & Jones, 1992:235-241) in researching community development, in that it equalizes the power relationship between researcher and the people studied in a more participative and open-ended approach. In this way the

position taken by the researcher, according to Graham and Jones, is opposed to the traditional approach of not disturbing the setting studied. Instead, participatory research in community development requires: "... an understanding that research problems are defined through dialectic and this means a more ambiguous and shifting relationship between the research questions and the communities in which they are studied" (Graham & Jones, 1992:237-238). Methodologically, the principles which underlie this empowering research, i.e. the techniques of working, such as through dialogue, sharing ideas, raising consciousness, and enabling and facilitating the local people to be involved in discussing their local affairs, can be utilized by other paid community workers, to assist and to boost the existing capacity of community members to develop themselves as shown in this study.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Empowerment indicators

There were six indicators identified in this study, namely: i) awareness, ability to reflect and taking action (ii) capacity to exercise own abilities (iii) gaining control over their lives (iv) developing and enhancing confidence, skills and knowledge (v) gaining and exercising power over another party and (iv) self-evaluation. These indicators emerged and developed along the people's participation process.

4.1.1. Awareness, ability to reflect and taking action

Participation does not occur by chance. In a planned village settlement such as Kg. Barem, there are some significant incidents or issues that stimulated people to action. At the initial stage, "awareness" arose on the need to solve the common problems faced, to overcome the feelings of exploitation and alienation, and to meet the felt common needs. This awareness provided the impetus towards participating. It also facilitates the formation of groups and conducting of group activities. The rise of the people's awareness is assisted by their ability to think and reflect on the problems and environment in which they lived. By reflecting, people were able to comprehend and explain the problems that affected their social and economic lives. This later encouraged them to act effectively to overcome it. As empowerment involves a reflexive activity (Simon, 1990), the quality exhibited by the people to think and resolve their problems indicates that they possess elements of empowerment. Indeed, it was the people's awareness to think about their living condition and take their own initiative to achieve shared goals within the existing structure so as to

improve community life that is the basic indicator of empowerment.

4.1.2. Capacity to exercise own abilities

Another important indicator of empowerment is a person's capacity to exercise his/her ability. This can be observed at two different situations; firstly at the initiation of a group or an activity, and secondly during the process to achieve the group goals. Normally, at the beginning of establishing a group or initiating an activity only one or two individuals were involved. They were the local activists and group or project leaders who have demonstrated their leadership capabilities to mobilize, organize, facilitate and influence their friends to participate in a group to achieve group goals.

These tasks which were carried out voluntarily showed that they were self-motivated, self-reliant and had the capacity to act, all of which are indicators of individual empowerment. The involvement of each individual group member within the traditional spirit of self-help shows that individual empowerment helps contribute towards collective empowerment. This characteristic of collective empowerment is a form of self-help effort towards bringing about community change (Kahn and Bender, 1985). In short, the degree of engagement in which individual members have the direct influence to shape and determine their own goals through exercising individuals' capabilities is the essential indicator of empowerment.

4.1.3. Gaining control over their lives

The people's capabilities to think about their problems and needs and to act upon them by establishing various types of community groups, conducting and sustaining group activities, pressuring and negotiating with the relevant authorities in order to solve their problems and meet their needs is part of the process by which people come to gain control over their lives. In this self-activating and self-determining process individuals are exercising their 'power'. The process of gaining control over their life affairs is also reflected in their working strategy. Campaigning and mild confrontation were used by the people to replace the collaborative and joint-action working strategy in order to counteract the slow action taken by the relevant authority to meet their needs and demands. The development of the capacity to act effectively in the process of gaining control over their lives is another fundamental indicator of empowerment. This process resembles the notion of empowerment as discussed by Adams (1996 & 1990), Wallerstein (1993), Parsons (1991), Simon (1990), Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) and Rappaport (1987). The tangible product of

the process is manifested in the formation of community groups and group activities. The success in changing and diverting the original plan proposed by the state's representative in order to pursue their own scheme is another tangible product of people gaining control over their life affairs. Hence, as has been argued, empowerment is a product as well as a process (Staples, 1990).

4.1.4. Developing and enhancing confidence, skills and knowledge

As shown in this study, in the process of participation individuals learn. This leads to increase in confidence, skills and knowledge, which in turn further enhances existing abilities to organize, solve problems, initiate action, and manage group activities. These accumulated personal resources are the main source of capacities that lead, encourage and facilitate them to participate further in pursuing or taking action. This can be seen when the members of one group took the initiative to mobilize and organize their friends to establish new groups, or initiate a new activity. Similarly, the diversification of group activities initiated and later led by one of the group members shows how an individual developed, sharpened and enhanced his/her confidence and skills through a cyclical and cumulative process. It could be argued that the individual's ability "to learn by doing", and later utilize that knowledge to explore other opportunities so as to improve other situations by creating or establishing new forms of services or projects is a further indication of empowerment. Therefore, participation as a process enables individuals to gain experiences and later utilize them for their own benefit and for the benefit of the community at large. Hence, it is part of the process which develops and stimulates empowerment.

4.1.5. Gaining and exercising power over another party

An examination of people's empowerment should not be viewed only as individuals' abilities to put forward their effort by working together in a self-help fashion to meet their goals within the sphere where they live. People living in one community, at the micro level, also interact with the outside system, at the macro level, in the development process. The linkage between the two levels lies in the context of their living environment itself, the planned village settlement, a state-sponsored community development scheme, which directly brought the community into the state patronizing structure. Furthermore, like the case with other villages in the country, this relationship is much more entangled when public services such as

educational facilities, infrastructure, and other forms of development grants are provided by the state through its representatives, agencies and personnel. It is within this patronizing structure that people's participation process takes place. Motivated people who had experience using their abilities or qualities individually, later developed a sense of self-confidence, which in turn strengthened their belief that they have the capacity to influence events and exercising power over another party. The process through which a group of settlers taking control over the contractors by monitoring their work is an example of people exercising power over another party. Taking control by exercising power over another means that the people have the "capability to influence the forces which affect *their* life space for *their* own benefit" (Pinderhughes, 1983:332) is an indicator of empowerment. Similarly, the changing of strategy from collaborative to mild confrontation employed by a group of parents against the school authority (i.e. the state representative) can also be argued as a process of people gaining power in pursuing their desired goals. In the process, there is an element of changing and adjusting of power relations between the people and the relevant authority. As a result of gaining power, people were more encouraged to take the lead and define their own agenda for the betterment of their future.

4.1.6. Self-evaluation

Empowerment does not end when people achieve their group goals. Motivated individuals who possessed the characteristics of empowerment began to evaluate their activities. This self-evaluation process, facilitated by an empowering research approach, enabled individuals to reconsider changing the dynamics of their group process in order to maximize benefits. They were able to see possibilities to improve the activity, the group and the whole working process that can promote members' involvement. Beside that they also began to share and seek solution to overcome the 'in-group' nature of group activity, based on the political grouping. These attractive 'promises' voiced out and shared together with community members in group discussions have the potential to restore the community and cooperation spirit between the two disputing groups. In short, it can be suggested that these self-evaluation elements which emerged from the people themselves with the aim of improving their internal affairs within and between the groups as well as future activities is an additional indicator of people's empowerment.

4.2. The "empowering" and "non-empowering" groups

Participation leads towards people's empowerment. It is part of a process which develops and gives rise to empowerment. However, the level of engagement among members in organizing and conducting the activities differed from one group to another. Consequently, this affected the degree of empowerment. The study showed that the group or group activities could be empowering and were able to facilitate empowerment when members were given the chance to be directly involved in the activities. This direct involvement meant that they had the right to determine or to influence decisions which benefited them or the community at large. Regardless of the type of group, its composition or specialized activities, each had developed and practiced group meetings and discussions as the nucleus of their group process. Nevertheless, not all groups established utilized group meetings or discussions as a medium for deciding how to initiate and conduct their activities. Some had used them as a medium for informing, requesting or even directing group members to implement the pre-determined projects. Basically, groups that utilized group meetings or discussions as an instrument to facilitate the organizing and decision-making process, encouraged wider members' participation, and this led to more opportunities for individual empowerment to take place.

In the community-initiated activities, local people participated actively and were directly involved in the development process of initiating an activity such as in mobilizing, attending meetings, exchanging ideas, deciding, and lastly organizing themselves. The self-directed participation in this type of activities has a relatively higher degree of participation compared to the other three types of participation i.e. the leader-directed participation, joint-participation and externally directed participation which correspond respectively to three other types of activities, namely the leader-induced activity, partnership and externally-directed activity. The higher degree of people's control in this self-directed participation resembles the authentic participation, i.e. the third level of Oakley's classification, where participation becomes the integral component of the activity (Oakley, 1989). This also parallels the grass-roots policy-making or community control model of Hollnsteiner (1977), the 'self-planning' concept of Wandersman (1979 & 1981) and the 'citizen control' of Arnstein (1969). The people's ability to determine and embark on a particular project or activity suited to their needs shows that they had gained greater control over their life affairs. Unlike the self-directed participation in community-initiated activities, the level of participation in leader-induced activities is relatively low. It is a 'piece meal' approach to the development process, a process of determining

and deciding the activity formulated by the leader, who only then in the latter stage 'requested' members' involvement in organizing themselves to carry out the activity. This is an intermittent process of participation. Even though the activities identified by the local leader would benefit the local people, there was no continuity in the members' participation process. It is therefore, difficult to say whether individual members are directly involved in the activities. However, since the group leader and the members utilized group meetings as a platform for organizing themselves to pursue the project, members do have some opportunities to influence the outcome of the activity, if not the activity itself. Furthermore, as was observed in this study, the cultural-tradition and mutual-help spirit was still prevailing as exhibited in the people's compliance to the leader's request for help to implement the activity. This can be seen as a form of participation in which members share the responsibility to improve their neighborhood. To improve neighborhood conditions is part of an attempt to promote a better quality of life, such as to revitalize human relationships, and to encourage human resource development. Therefore, the process of mobilizing group members to accomplish the objectives is partially an empowering endeavor. However, the group could be more empowering if members were collectively involved in identifying and prioritizing the activities as practiced in the community-initiated activities.

Participating in the rubber planting industry, as a partnership effort, integrated the people into a state macro economic development policy. Inevitably, the villagers of this planned village settlement scheme, directly or indirectly, are encapsulated within the state administrative bureaucracy. As a state community development programme, the programme was literally pre-planned and pre-determined for the people. This joint-ventured participation or substantive or induced participation in Oakley's term (Oakley, 1989) is a means for the state to achieve its development programme objectives. Although the people were given opportunities to manage themselves and participate actively at the local level, structurally the programme was externally controlled by the state at the macro level. As long as the people continued participating in the rubber plantation industry, the state maintained its interest in them, even though they rejected the mini-estate scheme. It was at the local level that the people actively became involved in self-management. Through their Group Replanting Committee they decide, negotiate, influence and pressure the contractors to safeguard the settlers' collective interest. In-built in this partnership programme is the cooperation between the people and the state. It is within this relationship that people established their right, which is the right to be

informed or consulted, to reject, to choose and to decide for them. Thus, the opportunities provided by this relationship encourage the people to have more say or control in determining their own affairs.

4.3. Group action as an empowering process

Although membership in groups' overlaps, in general, it was found that in the community-initiated activities and partnership activities people's involvement is very active and the action process is dynamic, compared to involvement in the leader-induced and externally directed activities. The action and dynamics of the participation process can be observed both in terms of the group member's direct involvement in decisions about the activity during their group meetings at the organizing and planning stage, and also in terms of the action taken during the implementing and managing stage. The high level of people's participation, especially in the activities generated by the members and the leader in the neighborhood and community action groups, shows that given the chance, people are able to exercise the ability to carry out activities suited to their needs. They are able to become empowered to develop themselves in a collective effort. The community development process calls for more than bringing social change to improve living conditions in the community. The groups process in determining 'what' they want and 'how' to implement them requires a concrete and clear purpose. The ability of the people to formulate some plans of action and then to work on it is a process of grassroots empowerment. Group action, as portrayed in the people's ability to organize them to establish and initiate community activities, illustrates that they have the capacity 'to speak up for themselves'. In self-directed participation, both group members and their leaders are involved in deciding and prioritizing the activity. The direct involvement among group members in organizing and planning marks their differences from other groups. Collective decision-making through group meetings is apparent. Open discussions during the meetings, facilitated by the group leader or project leader, enable them to raise their awareness about their needs and problems that require attention.

Giving and sharing ideas between members and their leaders on how to pursue an activity or an action is the main characteristic of community-initiated activities which distinguishes them from the leader-induced or externally-directed activities. The group action in pursuing a collective effort to meet needs and solve shared problems, all started from the people's realization, stirred up by the leaders of the respective groups during their discussion. In deciding what action to take to tackle identified problems, decisions are made in the group meeting. The decision is then

undertaken by members by sharing the responsibilities. This makes them fully involved in organizing, planning, decision making, implementing and managing the activity. In short, they identify the problems, commonly-shared needs and constraints that hamper their satisfaction with community life. By pursuing collective action, community members gain control over the process of achieving their identified group goals.

The end result of this collective effort is manifested in the establishment of groups and activities implemented that benefit the participants. These benefits vary, depending on the type of activity conducted. Villagers who attended the Women's Study Circle and religious talks/classes enhanced their religious knowledge. Those who participated in adult-educational projects such as parenting-related courses or motivational seminars refreshed their knowledge on parenting. Sending their children to the community-initiated school or the improved Religious Primary School gives parents the opportunity to enroll them later in the religious boarding school in town. In addition to providing socio-emotional support, participation in community care and welfare groups also helps members with financial matters, both during the feasts and in emergency situations, as they can avoid borrowing money to purchase necessities that may drag them into debt. By studying and examining the people's participation in a real context of the social setting and structure in which they reside, this study explains how empowerment actually took place and was experienced by the community members. Unlike other studies which look at empowerment as a matter of perception, i.e. the perceived control felt by the respondents (Chavis and Wandersman, 1990; Florin and Wandersman, 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988), this study exemplifies the actual empowerment through the people's action in taking and gaining more control over their lives. As a process, participation gives experience to individuals. Experience in turn provides and equips individuals with more insight about participation from which they can learn, adapt or adjust themselves by adopting or changing certain approaches in order to achieve group-defined goals. Indeed, besides the success in their self-governing and self-regulating activities, which showed that they had the ability to handle their community life, experiencing participation in those activities and action also developed other personal resources such as confidence, skills and knowledge as the product of the participation process, i.e. the 'process product'. Personal resources are the 'process product' from and within the participation process. As observed in this study, the personal resources generated from participation

became sources of potential capacities which led, facilitated and encouraged them to participate more. Unlike other studies which emphasize empowerment as individual qualities (Kieffer, 1984), this study has shown that empowerment can be a collective experience developed through participation with others. As individuals experience and develop their abilities (i.e. individual empowerment) it helps to encourage collective empowerment. This phenomenon can be seen where individual members from various groups used collective effort to undertake certain action in pursuing their targeted group goals. By being collectively involved in an action process, their organizational, leadership, problem solving, negotiating, communication and managing skills developed and intensified, and this eventually facilitated and encouraged them to participate more. From this study, it can be concluded that participation does not merely end at one particular point, for example, after accomplishing certain work, achieving the group targeted goals, or succeeding in establishing a group or demanding certain needs, but it progresses and becomes more stimulating. The process is cyclical and cumulative in its nature: the more skills gained the more it encourage people to participate, and in turn, further skills are acquired. Therefore, it can also be confirmed that experiences gained in participation are the locus of the empowering educational process, which is an informal social learning process for local people to sharpen and strengthen their abilities in preparing themselves to undertake more challenging action together. It is also important to note here that empowerment is not merely a perception, a concept generated from the people's feeling of perceived control or induced from the 'mental' judgment to exercise their ability. Rather, empowerment is a practical concept, and this study has shown that through participation, individuals learn and can become empowered when they truly exercised their ability, either individually or as a group, to act effectively to bring changes to their community life and to develop their own community activities.

4.4. Participation and Empowerment

In examining and reflecting on the process of participation that people underwent and the product they gained, it has been shown that by being given more opportunities they learned, and obtained as much control as possible over their lives, as well as developing an enduring capability to act for themselves. The people in this village are self-determined and self-activated. If this same self-stimulating participatory process phenomenon occurs on a wider scale, it has the capacity to provoke social unrest and generate mass collective action, which has

the potential to challenge the status quo and change the superstructure. One would expect such energetic forces, from the people or perhaps in other such self-contained villages nearby, to contain the potential to threaten the power structure. This raises two basic questions. First, why has an empowered community not erupted into a more radical people's movement to challenge the status quo? In other words, what mechanisms does the state have to control them and uphold the present social arrangement? Second, if the state succeeds in controlling mass action, does it mean that the people's participation in community action is not empowered? Therefore, in the light of discussing participation as a route to empowerment, it is worth addressing this issue in a wider context, at the macro level, within the Malaysian socio-political setting. While other governments in the Third World countries have their own way of controlling people's movements, either through manipulation or co-optation (Gilbert and Ward, 1984), Malaysia also has its own mechanism of that type. The controlling mechanism is in-built within the philosophy of community development itself, indoctrinated by the state through, and reinforced by, its governmental machinery down to the grassroots level, i.e. through the District Office personnel and the ruling political groups. These forces eventually create a patron-client relationship between the state and the masses. It is within this patron-client framework that all self-help activities and community action is based and monitored by the state. As far as the state-initiated community development programme is concerned, the introduction of the land development scheme itself is a ready-made 'patronizing' platform. Landless masses need land for their living and cultivation. After undergoing certain bureaucratic and 'political' procedures of selection, they indirectly became the 'state's clients'. To them, land is a 'gift' from the state, and expressions such as "the government gave me this land..." which were quite frequently heard during the interview process, show that there is a culturally obligatory sentiment that binds them in this patron-client relationship with the state. To proceed with more radical action would violate their personal moral obligation. At best, they act only as pressure groups at two levels; the group level or at the highest, village level. Internal conflict between groups in the village, as shown in this study, also helps to minimize the 'volume', extent and impact of community action on the state's authority. It can also be explained that the existence of factions in the community is an advantage for the state because people are then unable to focus their attention on one particular issue. The diversity of groups, interests and influences in this pluralistic community makes it difficult to integrate their groups collectively into mass people's action. When people

are divided the aggression of community action is reduced and it is possible for the state authority to take up group demand, rather than mass demand. This can result in delayed action, as experienced by the Primary Religious School.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is the interlocking between the state bureaucratic structure, politico-administration machinery, the village political culture, and personal relationships on one side, and internal conflict, fortified by socio-cultural values and sentiments on the other, that neutralizes and stabilizes the dynamism and vibrancy of community action. Hence, it is possible to sustain the present social arrangements in a harmonious 'patronizing' relationship under the state, and thus maintaining the paternalistic society. It is under this paternalistic environment that community development and community action have been interlocked into a wider pattern of state power, within which social control can be exercised. It has to be kept in mind that the state community development was 'an attempt to create plausible democratic institutions without serious dislocation to the vested interests of the status quo' (Mayo, 1975:131). Therefore, all the empowering group activities and community action take place within the boundary that has been created by the state through this patronizing sphere. This means, the state has successfully upheld its community development philosophy, which stressed self-help and joint effort between the people and state, so as to contribute to national progress. Malaysia has adopted the United Nations' definition of community development (Satar, 1979), which reads, "The process by which the effort of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and enable them to contribute fully to national progress" (United Nations, 1960:1). Thus, community development is a 'state tool'. In order to achieve national progress, community development as the 'state's tool' should be 'easy to handle' but 'sharp' enough to give some output. Operating within the conducive patronizing environment generated by the patron-client relationship, the state's community development philosophy has achieved its objectives.

The second question raised is that, if community development and community action take place within the boundary set up by the state, does people or community empowerment exist? In this study, empowerment has been defined as the people's ability to define and to act on their problems and needs. Therefore, it is argued that they are in the state of empowerment. Nevertheless, the empowerment that

people have is within the boundaries or spheres created by the state. 'Gaining more control over their lives' in the process of empowering participation, however, does not mean gaining an absolute control by taking the power from the state, due to the limitations and boundaries discussed earlier. Gaining more control over their lives by influencing, demanding and pressuring the state's representative or authorities is the people's ability to secure and safeguard themselves and their interest from being totally engulfed by the state. The people's collective action can be interpreted as a countervailing action to confront the power holder. However, it was no more than an action to counter-check the imbalance relationship in terms of the state's responsibility over its citizens in the patron-clients relationship. Through fear of being neglected, discriminated against and alienated from state services, people participate together by mobilizing themselves collectively to plan and take action to meet their demands. The making of demands either through campaigning, or sending petitions or memorandums acts as a shield to protect themselves from being entirely manipulated and exploited, which could drag them into being engulfed and maneuvered by the state. Indeed, the product of participation which is the means of people making the demands, and the outcome of that process is for the people to become more empowered than they were previously. Researching, discussing and defining empowerment is less problematic when analyzing people's participation in community activities or action that is not directly involved with the state, such as in the self-help activities, community welfare/care activities, community/adult education and community service activities. The groups that managed such activities are able to be self-directed and operate autonomously within which community members can participate and develop their potentials by doing things that they wish. The outcome of this self-directed participation is that the people are able to solve problems in their social lives. It may be said that, as long as the activities implemented are generated from and organized by the people themselves to fulfill their common shared needs, then it can be suggested that they "have control over their lives affairs"; a common phrase used in defining the concept of empowerment see Rappaport (1987), Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988); Simon (1990); Parsons (1991); Wallerstein (1993); Adams (1990 & 1996)].

Defining and conceptualizing 'empowerment' is problematic, 'partly because of contextual factors in its use' (Adams, 1996:10). However, in the context of Malaysian culture, where the patronizing structure is practiced and maintained by both the state and citizens, empowerment to some extent constitutes these 'dual functions'. At the micro level, as shown in this study,

people can be empowered. This is exhibited by their ability or capacity to manage their own life by establishing groups and conducting activities to achieve their needs and objectives. Some of the groups and activities carried out are meant for giving and providing care and welfare for local people, while others offer help in terms of providing community services, such as adult education-related projects and 'money-saving' projects. By positively exploiting their talents and inherent skills, and by participating together in a group, community members have achieved their goals. The ability to attain this shows that they have control in themselves to work for what they need. This is the liberatory trait of empowerment in that collectively they had solved common problems, social negligence and other exploitative relations that they suffered. These self-activating activities can be achieved because at the same time there is an 'empowering strategy' employed by the government at the macro level, to encourage citizens to improve their standard of living with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative, through the self-help and mutual-help principle. Examples of these are the community-initiated activities which include the self-help activities, community welfare/care activities, community/adult education and community service activities or projects. People who manage to take care of themselves by participating together in the spirit of self-help as propagated by the state's community development philosophy can help contribute to the national progress. The reason is that if these kinds of activities occurred on a larger scale, at the macro level, this could save the government's expenditure. Remembering that all the empowering endeavors take place smoothly within the patronizing structure set up by the state through its community development policy and politico-bureaucratic framework/strategy, therefore, ironically it could be argued that in some way 'empowerment' has acted as a 'cement' to reinforce and strengthen the power structure: the self-help and self-reliance strategy promoted by the government has achieved its goal. In this sense, the end result of empowerment encouraged by the 'symbolic empowering environment' provided by the state has its regulatory function. Nevertheless, this 'bottom-top' people's participation process that comprised elements of people's empowerment, which takes place within the permissible structure is workable in the Malaysian culture. On the whole, people's empowerment in the Malaysian context is not empowerment by confrontation, but empowerment in partnership with the state.

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