

COMMUNICATION ENHANCES COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION (CECP): A TESTIMONY OF A NGO IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

NGOs in Malaysia can be categorized in different groups based on their activities and purposes. The aim of NGOs is to develop communities through their social service initiatives. Good governance and effective communication within the NGOs are essential to run community development projects smoothly and make them successful. The main objective of this study is to determine the flow of communication between NGO officers and community members to ensure community participation in Malaysian NGOs. The NGOs need to determine what level of communication adaptation is important in their context and explore how best the systems of participation that can help them improve their communication works. Field research data collection method was used to collect data from 100 direct beneficiaries of one NGO. Graphical diagram presentation and multi-linear regression methods were used to describe the findings. This study adds value to the existing body of knowledge by extending clarity on the subject of the adapting and standardizing of the communication system in NGOs. The data shows that the nature of communication system of NGOs is an important factor to increase community participation.

Keywords: communication, community participation, NGO, social service, communication system, Malaysia.

Introduction

Communication is defined as “the process of sharing ideas, information and messages in a particular time and place” and it includes writing and speaking, visual communication and electronic communication (Yetude, 2009 p.378).

Communication is the process or activity of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving information to people (Yuka, 2007). Ellen (2001) highlights that organizations are mostly reliant on communication and the process of sharing information, idea exchange, sending and receiving messages is by speech, signals, or writing.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are known as agents of community and rural development. They are considered mediators for social transition and have been promoted with increasing frequency (Candland, 2000). NGOs mainly work for the provision of social services and as advocacy organizations they provide information to the public and put pressure on policy making. As humanitarian groups, they provide more aid and relief assistance than the whole UN system (David, 2010).

David and Wayne (2003) claim that Malaysian civil society includes not only advocacy-oriented, non-governmental organizations (NGOs); but also networks of trade unions, public intellectuals, unaffiliated activists, students and politically engaged religious associations. There are many NGOs working in rural and urban areas in Malaysia for the rehabilitation of people. These organizations are operated by individuals or foundations and welfare divisions (Lee, 2010). The community development process takes time, requires energy and needs participation of people at all levels of project implementation (Colmen, 2003). Since community involvement in any project is an essence of development initiatives, communication triggers the strengthening of the relationship of community and NGO (Cem and Halil, 2010).

This paper focuses on the communication flow between NGOs and communities for enhancing community participation. A general description of the assumptions and implications of communication in NGOs is given. The role of NGOs in Malaysia is presented in the first part of this article and later, issues like how the communication pattern ensures community participations are discussed.

NGOs in a Snapshot

NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) include any group of citizens engaged in collective action for self-help or involved in advocacy outside the aegis of the state (David and Wayne, 2003). Cem and Halil (2010 p. 188) define NGO as a civil society, "an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values". David (2010) differentiates between two types of NGOs or 'civil society organizations' based on service delivery and advocacy. Several projects are implemented by NGOs for communities often with some core services. Advocacy related initiatives influence public decision-making in the country. Few NGOs focus on a combination of both types of activities but a balance is difficult to

deal with (Samaun, 2006). In developed countries NGOs are mostly engaged in advocacy related activities. On the other hand, in developing countries, NGOs play an active part in providing the necessities to people.

NGOs' role in Malaysia: People living in rural areas of Malaysia suffer from poverty so this must be addressed as an important issue by the government and NGOs (Zakaria, 2002). Interaction across ethnicities is unavoidable in multi-racial Malaysia (David, et al., 2012). Infant mortality rate is a one among the most profound signs to measure the health status of countries (Yusoff, 2012). In response to the problem, the roles of government and the service provider sector are obligatory and the efforts for human welfare and socio economic development need to be enhanced (Navaratnam, 2003).

NGOs have become increasingly active in Malaysia and there are now about 1000 groups (Amy, 2000). The government seeks to control the activities of NGOs to fill the existing space in civil society with state-sponsored institutions so as to preempt the entry of citizens into the civic realm. Based on this ideology, the government seeks to regulate independent and semi-independent NGO initiatives by adopting legislations that require NGOs to seek prior approval for all their projects on community development, so that they will work within a legal framework that limits access to public information and protects human rights (Vidhu, 2002).

Community Participation

The notion of community participation is gaining considerable attention as an operative approach in community development which boosts community involvement (Craig and Mayo, 2004). Atkinson (2005 p.26) states community involvement refers to “combined influence of a community’s commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build community strengths and address community problems and potential opportunities”.

Partial involvement or participation of communities while responding to the economic, environmental and social problems cannot lead towards community empowerment. It is essential to understand the appropriate concept of community participation and empowerment in NGOs sector to comprehend the idea of pursuing the process of their involvement (Awio, 2010).

Communication Enlivens the Organization

The language or languages are the source of communication among people and organizations (Parungao, 2011). Communication is all about human interaction and it is the process of creating understanding between the originator of a concept and its receiver (Angus, Sally et al. 1993). ‘Understanding the context of awareness and insight enable one to understand how people perceive reality because meanings,

which include attribution of values, come from human interaction' (Parungao, 2011). Human interaction is a rich blend of facial, language and body movement, and symbols (Winston, 2008). People are very much linked with each other so they cannot live without communication (Parungao, 2011).

Organizations cannot function properly without communication. Schultz and Mogens (2000) emphasize that four elements are important in communication within organizations: message, constituencies, organization itself and constituency responses. If communication is hampered or diminished, the entire organization suffers. An organization tends to be effective and vibrant when communication flow is functional. Communication plays a pivotal role when it works in a thorough, accurate, and timely manner (Ellen, 2001).

System of Communication in NGOs: Robert (2002) states that connection of organizational networks is perceived as key sources behind globalization. NGOs are also the part of these networks. Several studies reveal that NGOs rely more on communication than other organizations (Mohammad and Charles, 2004). The main purpose of communication in NGOs is to provide the required information to employees of the NGOs to carry out the project activities of their respective organizations effectively and to encourage communities, so that they can participate in NGOs' activities and programs.

At present the working environment in NGOs is rapidly changing and they are becoming more professional than the past. It is therefore important that NGOs quickly identify the issues in sending and receiving information that is strategically relevant and accurate (Cem and Halil, 2010). A clear and accurate information sharing system must be implemented in NGOs to guarantee their effectiveness. Top management of any NGO should take communication as a strategic agenda within and outside the organizations. Proper communication with employees and communities contribute in increasing the level of participation and that leads to organizational performance (Scholes, 1998).

Being effective agents of community development, NGOs have a comparative advantage, because of their proximity approach to the grassroots, relative administrative simplicity, cost effective mode of operation, efficiency and ability to identify the needs of the people and proficient flow of communication (Yetude, 2009). While the role of networking is well established in community work many people in communities are not interested in, or are unable to comprehend the importance of the work. In addition, lack of community ownership in development projects is a high problem.

Malay Society and Social Issues

Malaysia is a multi-cultural multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country with a total population of 23.27 million (David, DeAlwis, Dumanig, & Hui, 2012). Malaysia is

considered as rapidly developing country in the world however, traditionally a top-down policy is applied (Wiryomartono, 2012). The Malay society can be seen in both rooted and fragmented in multifaceted influence of culture such as Islamic beliefs, tradition and progressive ideals simultaneously (Abdullah, 2011). 'Linguistically and culturally, the early Malay ethnic groups belong to the Austronesian family' (Wiryomartono, 2012). The explanation of characteristics and features of any community can be reflected through the socio-demographic factors (Kamarudin, et al., 2012). In Malaysia middle class has contributed a lot and played a key role as a driven force in social democracy, human rights and environment (Abdullah, 2011).

Crime in youth is one of the social problems in Malaysia (Kamarudin, Fauzi, & Mohammad, 2012). FRHAM and other various NGOs and the government are taking measures to control youth crimes in the country. The geographical factors, socio-demography and land use are vital in relation to the crime-related assaults occurrences (Kamarudin, et al., 2012). Therefore, government has distinct intention to improve the socio-economic indicators of the country. Mortality and morbidity rates can be considered as a sensitive indicator of socio-economic development of a country (Yusoff, 2012). Human Development Index (HDI) also addresses the infant and maternal mortality as key measuring area. In Malaysian context the public and private sectors are responsible to focus on health problems of the country. There is dire need that the authorities should make their efforts to provide or allocate resources for availability of major determinants of health, such as stocks of food and clean water etc. (Yusoff, 2012). However, in this study the selection of the NGO is made on the basis key problems of the country such as health and youth issues.

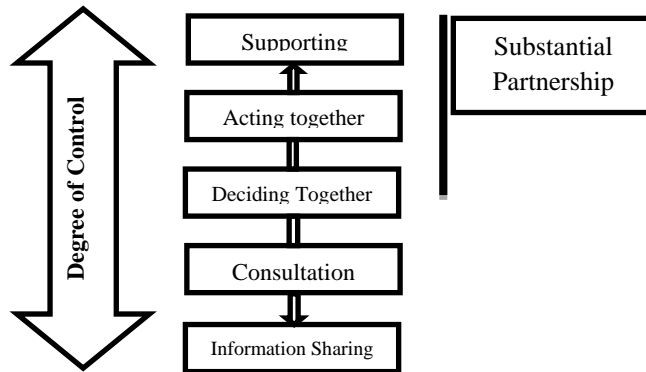
Theoretical Framework

In community development sector a number of community participation approaches are used by NGOs. The term community participation has been used as a resourceful approach to resolve economic, social and environmental problems of communities (Wilcox, 1994).

Wilcox (1994) provides a framework for measuring the level of community participation (figure 1) known as the five rung ladder of community participation. The diagram shows the degree of control that represents the state of community empowerment. The first step is the sharing of knowledge and information with communities, second consultation, third deciding together, fourth acting together and fifth is supporting community interests. However, this study measures three steps of the guide including: knowledge and information sharing, consultation and decision making along with communication and networking. Acting together and

supporting community interest seem insignificant. Therefore, the study is limited to three steps of the framework.

Figure 1: The guide of Effective Participation



Source: Guide to effective community participation by David Wilcox 1994 p.5

Research Methodology

One Malaysian NGO was selected for this study. This NGO is running several projects with the support of numerous donor agencies. The Government of Malaysia also supports it and has financed few projects to serve some communities. The NGO works mainly on reproductive health in Malaysia. Selangor, a state of Malaysia was selected as the location to conduct the study. The data was collected from the communities where the projects were implemented and quantitative research method was used to analyze the data.

Communication flow (internal and external) and the information sharing system with communities were investigated to find out how the NGO ensures participation of the community through its communication mechanism. Data was collected through field research. Graphical diagram presentation and multi-linear regression methods were used to present the data.

Sample: As mentioned above the selected NGO is running several projects in the country. However, only one project on reproductive health was selected for the study. Data was collected from 100 participants randomly selected from the adult population (20–45 years old). They all were direct beneficiaries of the project. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted to collect the data from communities. A total number of 100 (N = 100) participants out of 270 (37.03%) were interviewed. A questionnaire was also used in addition to the interviews as a data collection instrument.

Literature review such as several research papers and dissertations were studied to design an appropriate questionnaire, which was then reviewed by experts in the communication and community development fields. Several points were incorporated and necessary changes were made based on the feedback given. The questionnaire was translated into *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian Language) to facilitate communication with the respondents.

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the understanding of the respondents through which 10% of the total population was interviewed. Consequently, items that needed clarification in the first draft of questionnaire were revised.

The questionnaire consisted of 41 items and was based on five components; personal information of the respondents, knowledge and information sharing consultation, decision making and communication and networking.

SPSS software was used to analyze the data. Multi-linear regression method was used for the data analysis.

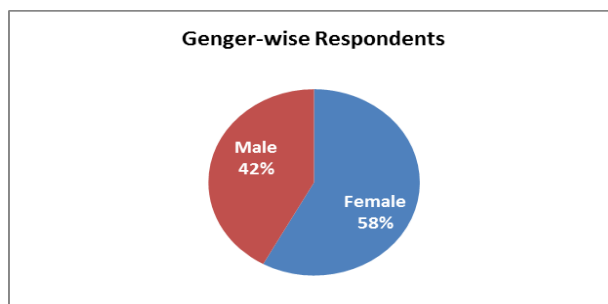
Ethical considerations were given priority and strictly followed in this study. Due respect of respondents and their willingness to participate was ensured and before filling the questionnaire a consent form was signed by the participants. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

Results

The selected NGO is working in communities with male and female members. However, selection of respondents was made according to the prescribed research method (see research methodology section).

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of female participants (58%) was higher than males (42%). The result demonstrates that the number of female community members was higher than the male members which may be due to the fact that the data was collected on a household level in communities where most only adult women were present in their homes at the time the data was obtained. The mean age of participants was 39.7.

Figure 2. Ratio of male and female participants



Knowledge and Information Sharing: Knowledge sharing ensures effective communication in organizations and a very wide range of approaches can be used for to enhance the proper communication(Keith, 2005).

Figure 3. Knowledge and Information sharing with communities

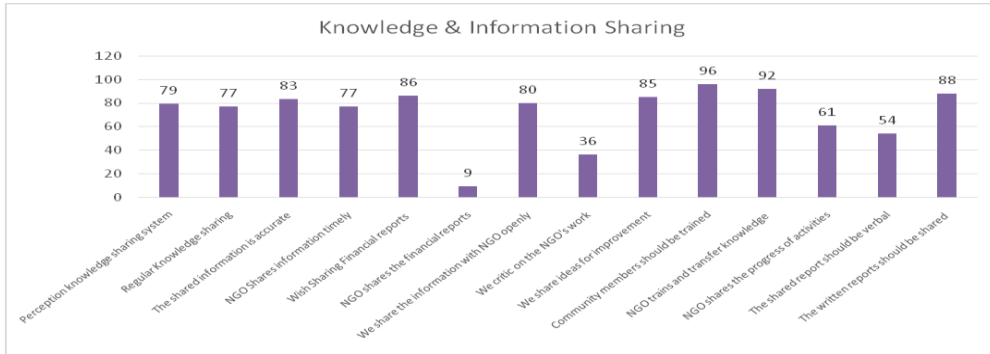


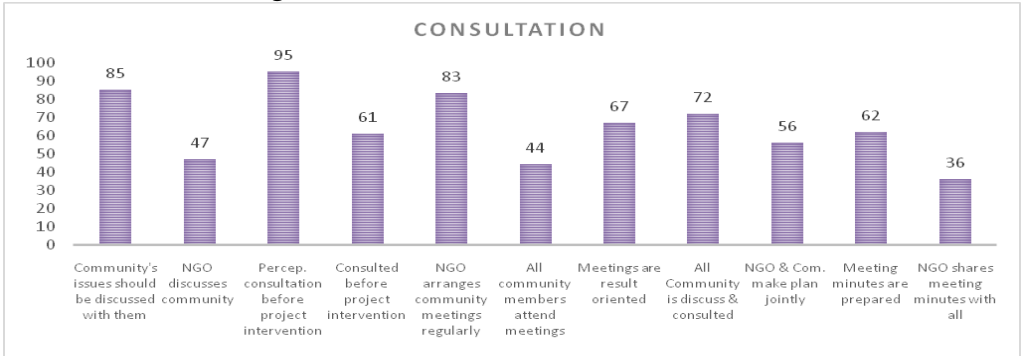
Figure 3 shows that 79% of community members wish that the NGO had a knowledge and information sharing system with communities. 77% responded that the NGO shared knowledge and information on a regular basis. 83% of participants voiced their satisfaction with the accuracy of the information shared and 77% mentioned that this information is shared on a timely basis. However, although 86% of community members wished that financial reports should be shared with them. Only 9% of community members replied that the NGO actually shared financial reports with them. 80% of community members said that they shared all information regarding community matters with the NGO. 36% of community members mentioned they were allowed to criticize the work of the NGO. 85% of community members responded that the NGO encouraged them to share new ideas/suggestions for improvement of project progress.

Consultation: Consultation is one of the most important factors of community participation. This process supports and creates a participatory and enabling working environment where the NGO and community can perform together.

Figure 4 shows that 85% of community members wish that issues related to communities should be discussed with them plainly while 47% of respondents said that the NGO shares its issues with them. 95% of community members stressed that the community should be consulted before the initiation of any project and 61% of respondents stated that the NGO consulted them before starting any project activity. 83% of participants responded that NGO arranges community meetings regularly. 44% of community members attended these meetings and 67% of respondents mentioned that the meetings were result oriented. When participants attended meetings 72% of attendees discussed and consulted on community issues.

56% of community members were ensured that NGO and community developed activity plan jointly. 62% of participants reported that the minutes were prepared and 36% of the participants commented that these minutes were shared with them.

Figure 4. Consultation with communities



Decision Making: Collective decision making enhances the sense of community ownership. The community members feel good when they are invited to make their own decisions. NGOs should enhance the joint or collective decisions making culture where implementing of their projects.

Figure 5. Decision making with communities



Figure 5 represents the decision making process placed in communities. It shows that 89% of community members felt that the community should be part of decision making in the NGO's projects but 51% of community members thought they were part of the decision making. 69% of community members stated that there was fair participatory decision making system in place and 85% of community members said that community members followed decisions made in the meetings.

Networking and Communication: NGOs need to develop and use an effective communication and networking system with employees inside the organization and externally with communities so that the partnership of both

segments can be strengthened in useful ways. A smooth communication and networking system leads to the employees and communities being more involved and motivated in the long run (Cem and Halil, 2010).

Figure 6. Communication and networking

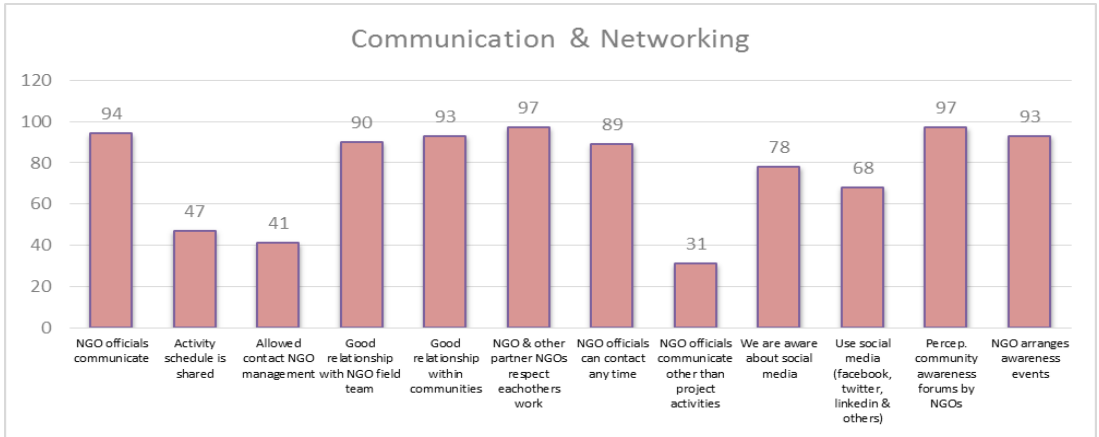


Figure 6 represents the communication and networking mechanism in the selected NGO. It shows that 94% of community members said that the NGO's officials communicate with them on a regular basis but such communication is limited to respective project activities. There were other organizations working in the same area with the NGO on different projects. The perception of the participants was that all the NGOs respected each other and acknowledged each other's work and contribution. 97% of community members wished that the NGO arranges awareness programs for them, in response 93% of respondents replied positively. 89% of community members mentioned that NGO officers are allowed to contact them any time. Mostly, NGO officials concentrate on specifically as their project and only 31% of respondents replied that the officers discuss and communicated with them on other issues apart from project activities. 75% of community members commented that they were aware about the social media but only 68% of the members reported that they used social media.

Multi Linear Regression Analysis Multi linear represents a state of linear relationship existing among some or all the predicted variables in a regression model (Rabby, 2012, p. 177). It occurs when explanatory variables in the model are highly correlated to each other. Testing multi linear regression is considered significant for model specification in this study.

Table 1 provides the R and R square value 0.792 and 0.627 respectively. The result shows that the R value is almost 79%. The effect size, as estimated by

adjusted R² is 0.612 (61%). This, following Cohen’s classification, is an over large value.

Table 1: Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.792	0.627	0.612	0.466

Table 2 shows the value of F, which is 40.217 with significance *p* value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. It represents high goodness of fit for the model with degree of freedom of 8.

Table 2: ANOVA^b

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	69.749	8	8.719	40.217	0.000
	Residual	41.406	191	0.217		
	Total	111.155	199			

Table 3: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.530	0.266		1.994	0.048
	Community is allowed to contact with managerial staff of NGO any time	0.135	0.044	0.228	3.051	0.003
	NGO and other partner organizations complement each other’s work with each other	0.210	0.081	0.188	2.576	0.011
	NGO officials are allowed to contact community any time	0.369	0.072	0.380	5.145	0.000
	Community is the part of social media (facebook, twitter, linkedin& others)	0.036	0.036	0.051	0.989	0.324
	NGO arranges community social/awareness events for communities in our area	-0.004	0.067	-0.004	-0.055	0.956
	Good relationship within the communities	0.198	0.073	0.202	2.690	0.008
	NGO officials communicate apart from project activities	-0.139	0.044	-0.227	-3.149	0.002

Dependent Variable: Effective communication and good relations between NGO staff and community

Coefficient table 3 illustrates all beta value for dependent and independent variables. The result demonstrates that few variables significantly contribute to the model: like 'community is allowed to contact with managerial staff of NGO any time': 0.003, 'NGO and other partners compliment with each other's work': 0.011, 'NGO officials are allowed to contact community any time': 0.000, 'good relationship within the communities': 0.008 and 'NGO officials communicate apart from project activities': 0.002. The *p*. value is less than 0.05 that reflects significant effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Further, with every unit increase in all independent variable will affect the dependent variable with the same amount.

The variables 'NGO arranges community social/awareness events for communities': 0.956 and 'community is the part of social media (facebook, twitter, linkedin & others)': 0.324, seem not to be significant with regard to affecting the dependent variable.

Discussion

In the past, the operation of non-profit sector organizations was seen as esoteric and irrelevant but nowadays there is much interest in their procedures. The community wanted a knowledge and information sharing system to be in place within the NGO and it appears that such a system exists but needs to be improved and expanded. The NGO shared information with the community regularly and on a timely basis. Community members were satisfied with the accuracy of the shared information. The NGO did not share financial information on their projects since NGOs generally avoid sharing their financial reports with communities. This could be a hurdle in the trust building process between NGOs and communities. The study suggests that the financial matters should be shared with the community properly. However, the communities shared their matters openly with the NGO and were encouraged to give ideas and suggestions. Community members wanted the NGO to share progress reports in writing reflecting the high literacy level of this community.

Consultation is one of the indications of community participation. The study showed that most of community members wished that the problems, issues and all matters relating to them should be discussed with them. The community wished to be part of consultation process before project designing but the NGO only consulted with them before starting the project. It is important that communities should be consulted before and during designing projects. However, community members are mostly consulted through community meetings. The minutes are made but not shared properly.

Participatory decision making is an essential instrument to increase community participation in development projects. This study found that the community anticipation as part of the project decision making is important. This

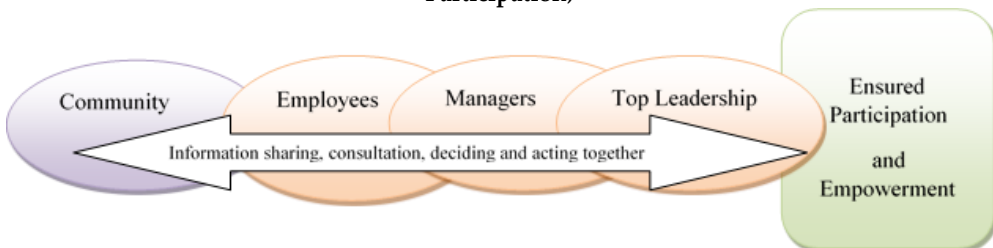
NGO involved members of the community but needed to improve the joint decision making procedures. The community thought that the NGO had a fair participatory system and that decisions made together were adhered too.

Communication and Networking are very important in the NGO. This study shows that the community members were also aware about the significance of these two factors. NGO officers communicated with community on a regular basis but communication was limited to issues relating to particular projects. NGO officers could contact community members at any time but community members were restricted to contact with management during duty hours only. This gap could create mistrust in community work. However, communication and networking among community members seemed positive. The NGO arranged awareness programs for the community.

Communication and community participation are interlinked for NGOs. The findings of this study show that proper communication for the sake of community participation and system placement should be enhanced. The NGO should realize community desires through scientific need assessment methods and before any intervention, those same needs should be addressed. Literature discusses that communication skills should be considered as a priority area of learning for employees of NGOs as field teams are directly involved in interaction with communities (Yetude, 2009). Community capacity building activities should be conducted to enhance communication skills. NGOs mostly use a top-down communication approach (one way) in their work. Nevertheless, NGOs should come-up with innovative community partnership projects where proper communication prior to implementation of any project should be done. Two way communications is preferred.

This study argues that communication is an important tool that creates and builds good relationship between a NGO and the community. Therefore a model to implement community development projects is suggested. This model (figure 7) indicates how communication and community participation can be interconnected with each other.

Figure: 7. Flow of Communication in NGOs (Communication Enhances Community Participation)



Adapted CECP Model

As demonstrated in Figure 7 if the community, employees, managers and top leadership of the NGO ensures proper information sharing, appropriate consultation and joint decision making; communication and networking would enhance and NGOs can perform well and the communities will be empowered.

Conclusion

Proper knowledge and information sharing systems should be put in place and followed by NGOs and communities. Two way communication can be more helpful to ensure community participation and resolve community issues. Community participation is the essence of development in project accomplishment. NGOs should follow and prefer community driven and participative approaches. Communication and building relationships are the most priority management functions of NGOs and this is a supportive approach for global partnership (Robert, 2002).

Communication Enhances Community Participation (CECP) and provides a way forward to ensure community involvement in NGO projects. In Malaysia, there are several networks of NGOs playing their part to enhance community capacity. Lack of coordination between institutions and the NGO sector means that the available resources have been used less efficiently than they might use optimally (Nalini, 2002).

The study suggests knowledge based approaches, consultation, participatory decision making and networking should be adopted appropriately to enhance communication between NGOs and the communities they serve. A good relationship between NGO officials and communities provides a capacity for a more effective policy enhancement. Future research could be conducted as a comparative study on communication and community participation with different other NGOs and government to support and expand the findings of this paper.

Acknowledgements

Researchers are thankful to the Malaysian NGO that participated in this study.

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