Abstract

This case study of local organization established to organize development activities in a Malaysian village demonstrates the ability of local groups to sustain development. A mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology was used. Local organization was an important means of continuous economic and social development. Factors contributing to the perpetuation of local groups included acceptance by the community, institutionalization of the groups, able leadership, member gratification with group goals and functioning, ability of the groups to adapt to changing situations, democratic and self-management practices, and support from external agencies. It was concluded that local organization, with appropriate guidance from development agencies, can organize development efforts that are internally sustained by a community.

Introduction

Organizations are structures of recognized and accepted roles, operating on a formal or informal basis (Uphoff, 1986). In the rural sector, a local organization, meaning a collective of local groups, is fundamentally an institutional system performing social, economic, administrative and/or political functions. The system contributes to rural development by increasing the efficiency of resources used in the development effort (Esman & Uphoff, 1984).

Sustainable development can be viewed as a process of improving the economic and social conditions of a community, and perpetuating this improvement over time. Sustainable development requires dependence on local rather than outside resources (Oakley & Marsden, 1984). It implies the need for community self-management, and is also referred to as internally sustainable development. This kind of development is desirable for a developing nation like Malaysia, because available government resources cannot continuously meet the development needs of all communities. Furthermore, sustainability implies self-reliance, meaning independence from external assistance.

Development becomes possible through individual and collective efforts. Local groups provide the structure for collective actions. The question that can be posed in this regard is "What is the role and influence of local organization in developing and sustaining progress in a community?" This question was addressed by examining local groups in Perlok, a village in Jerantut district, Pahang State, Malaysia.

The backdrop of this case study of Perlok village is a regional agricultural development project in the western part of the state of Pahang. The project was started in 1985, and is
known as the West Pahang Integrated Agriculture Development Project (IADP). Perlok is one of the villages included as a pilot under the West Pahang IADP. The project was aimed at coordinating the activities of government agencies within a specific area, and fostering agriculture and a rural development system that would take into account field conditions and the views and needs of local people (Ibrahim, Daut, Yaakub, Omar & Mustafa, 1993).

Perlok was first settled in 1961 by a group of landless farmers from neighboring villages. The village covers an area of about 900 hectares and is inhabited by 450 persons (72 families), the majority (70%) of whom are Malay. The average age of the heads of households was 53 years. The villagers' main economic activity is farming: planting cocoa, paddy, rubber, and fruit trees, and rearing cattle and fresh water fish. Except for rubber and cocoa which are sold, the families are primary consumers of the farm products.

The introduction of IADP brought to Perlok a more organized and systematic delivery of inputs and services by participating government departments, which included the Departments of Agriculture, Fisheries and Veterinary Services, the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority, the Agricultural Bank, and the Farmers' Organization Authority. Extension agents from these agencies advised villagers on matters related to farm production. An officer from the West Pahang IADP head office coordinated the extension agents. The extension service was also responsible for managing the community's local groups. To facilitate the utilization of recommended technologies and to give a head start to new projects, limited inputs like planting materials, fingerlings (baby fishes), and calves were subsidized by the IADP.

**Objective**

The purpose of the study was to determine the role of local organization in developing and sustaining development in the village of Perlok.

**Objectives**

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. Determine the organizational setup, functions, and characteristics of local groups in Perlok.

2. Determine villagers' perceptions of local groups in Perlok, and factors contributing to the perpetuation of these groups.

**Methodology**

A mixed methodology, qualitative and quantitative inquiry, was used to gather data for objectives 1 and 2, respectively.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 11 key informants. Nine informants were chosen purposively to represent Perlok’s local groups. The other two informants were the most influential men in the village, namely the village head (formal village leader), and the secretary of the Village Development and Security Committee (the main governing local institution in Perlok). A set of questions focusing on the organizational structure, purpose, and features of local groups was used to guide the interviews. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. Two researchers who stayed in the village for one week to collect data observed the activities of the local groups chosen for study. These observations complemented the in-depth interviews and were recorded as field notes. Both the interviews and field notes were read carefully, noting the themes that emerged. Related content was grouped together as a theme. Some of the emerging themes were consistent with the research questions, while some were new. The new themes were those that were categorized as factors that contribute to the perpetuation of local organizations, such as institutionalization of local groups, capable leadership, member gratification, and effective programming.

Quantitative data were gathered through structured personal interviews focused on the
perceptions of villagers regarding their participation and role in local groups, and characteristics of these groups. Twenty-three leaders and villagers were randomly chosen from the total population of 72 heads of households to be interviewed. The selection was done by picking the names from a container in which the 72 names of heads of households were placed. The 23 respondents selected for this part of the study were different from the 11 informants interviewed earlier. The data were analyzed for frequencies and means using the statistical package SPSS for MS Windows Release 6.0.

Results and Discussion

Local Organization

Nine institutions existed in Perlok, namely the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK), Agricultural Commodities Groups, Small Agricultural Unit, Village Cooperative, Youth Association, Women Extension Group (KPW), Mosque Committee, People Volunteer Corps, and Political Group. The study showed that 88.9% of the respondents were members of a local group. A majority (62.5%) was found to belong to more than one group. Generally, respondents were members for about 9 years, and spent an average of 4.6 hours per month participating in their group's activities. Most (66.7%) were members of the Village Cooperative. This was followed by the Political Group (25.9%), Agriculture Commodities Group (25.6%), Small Agricultural Unit (22.6%), Mosque Committee (18.5%), Youth Association (14.8%), JKKK (14.8), and KPW (7.0%).

The Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) is the main governing institution in Perlok. It is made up of elected village leaders and representatives of organizations in the village. Chaired by the village headman, JKKK consists of committee members and heads of bureaus. A bureau is a group of four to six people that provides leadership to the community on a particular concern or project. For example, the bureau of agriculture is concerned with village farming activities. The JKKK is responsible for planning, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating the village development program. Through the bureau heads, the JKKK also acts as a platform for interaction among the various village institutions. Some JKKK members are also leaders of economic groups, such as the cocoa farm group. Members holding multiple positions facilitate communication between the JKKK and the particular projects they lead. As an extension of the district office administration, the JKKK also acts as liaison between the village and the government.

A number of agriculture commodity groups were established in Perlok with the aim of dealing with various agricultural activities. These included cocoa, aquaculture, cattle, and rubber. The cocoa group was the most popular. Although cocoa has the potential to bring good return, villagers could not plant the crop on a larger scale due to limited farm size and lack of capital. To overcome this problem, the Department of Agriculture (DOA) advised farmers to practice group farming. They quickly took to the idea. Group farming generally entails the cultivation of a crop on a contiguous piece of land by a group of farmers. The group has its own management structure, rules, and regulations. By operating the farm collectively and adopting recommended practices, cocoa production in Perlok has increased from 1.2 to 2.6 metric tons per hectare. To market cocoa and other farm produce, a village cooperative was set up. The cooperative also provides credit facilities, sells/loans farm inputs, and implements and operates post harvest-processing facilities.

The Women Extension Group (KPW) serves to enhance the quality of family life by promoting leadership and involvement of women in agro-based economic activities. The group conducts education programs on vegetable gardening, food-processing, nutrition, and child care. The Youth Association was set up to encourage the youth to participate in village projects and cultural activities. The association also serves
As a "school" to groom the village's future leaders.

The Political Group, United Malay National Organization (UMNO), its women's wing, Wanita UMNO, and its youth wing, Pemuda UMNO, are the ruling government political arms of the village. The group is responsible for assuring that the ruling party has strong allegiance from villagers. Matters related to the villagers' religious concerns are under the jurisdiction of the Mosque Committee. Daily prayers and religious classes are conducted at the mosque.

**Characteristics of Local Organization**

All respondents agreed that the community accepted the groups' existence. A majority (96.3%) reported that the groups have an organizational structure. They (74%) foresee that the groups would continue to be accepted by the community. The groups communicated well (92.6%) with each other, mostly (69.2%) through the JKKK Bureaus. From these observations, it could be inferred that the groups have been institutionalized as the village’s local organization.

Most groups in Perlok cooperate in local activities. This is known as "gotong royong". Through "gotong royong", members voluntarily and cooperatively undertake to perform specific tasks, such as construction of public buildings, clearing of farmland, and preparing of wedding feasts. A majority of the respondents (96.3%) reported that they were involved in "gotong royong". Most (92.6%) contributed an average of 5.2 hours per month to this activity. When they were asked about the future of "gotong royong", a majority (77%) believed that the activity would be practiced by the next generation.

With reference to involvement in farm groups, more than half the respondents reported that they were involved according to their own interests. On the question as to who normally makes decisions in the project group, 76% said members did, while 20% reported that group leaders and committee members made decisions for the group.

Characteristics of farm groups as reported by respondents included fairness in member selection (72.7%), fairness in site selection (72.7%), specification of every member's responsibility (90.9%), and specified project procedure (72.7%).

With regard to the future, a majority believed that characteristics of local groups would continue to be observed, and the groups themselves would continue to exist. However, the percentage of respondents holding this belief varied: 100% for Youth Organization, 96.2% for JKKK, 92.6% for Mosque Committee, 88.9% for Village Cooperative, 57.7% for Commodity Farm Group, and 50% for Small Agricultural Unit.

**Factors Contributing to the Perpetuation of Local Organization**

Evidence from the study reveals factors that suggest local groups in Perlok will be perpetuated and contribute to its development.

**Acceptance by the community**. The survey showed that the respondents accepted the existence of local groups. Almost all respondents had been members of an organization of some form for a long time (about 9 years) and are likely to continue into the future. This finding suggests that the village values and accepts local organization as a part of its system. With this recognition and acceptance, organizations are likely to continue to exist and function.

**Institutionalization of local groups**. The respondents believed that systematic, organized, and consensual efforts through some form of institution makes a difference in their desire to develop. Local groups have been institutionalized in Perlok as an essential ingredient of development. Institutionalization refers to the process through which organizations are given structure, and social actions and interactions are made predictable.
(Loomis, 1967). As reported by almost all respondents, the structure of the various local groups was clearly defined. Clear structure and procedure facilitate the management and functioning of the group since members are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and ways to get things done (Cernea, 1993). For example, JKKK has established divisions or bureaus to look after specific activities, such as agriculture, education, youth, and religion. Respondents indicated that each bureau is given a free hand to plan and implement its own program as long as it is consistent with JKKK's development objectives. These institutionalized systems and sub-systems, each contributing to the whole, should produce a holistic development approach in Perlok.

**Capable leadership.** A capable leader is essential for an effective group (Shaw, 1981). In Perlok, leaders of groups have been the major actors in development efforts. For example, JKKK leaders were reported to be able, committed, dedicated, knowledgeable, skillful, and optimistic. They work relentlessly to continuously develop the village. Chairpersons of the JKKK have had wide government and political contacts, and command high respect from the villagers. What is more important is that the villagers believe that these leaders can contribute to the attainment of Perlok's development goals.

**Member gratification.** According to Gale (1991), development can be sustained when it is appropriate to the concern of local people. Members continue to participate in a group if they are gratified with the group, with the group's goal, and the norms they have helped to set (Mills, 1967; Shaw, 1981). In Perlok, most of the groups were established to deal with differing needs of villagers. For example, the Youth Association served as a platform for youth participation, KPW met the needs of women, the Village Cooperative was set up to address the problem of marketing agricultural products, and villagers participated in the farm group out of self-interest and the benefits gained from collective farming. Therefore, as long as individual and group needs are met, and members are gratified, local groups can be expected to endure.

**Ability to adapt.** The ability of a group to adapt to changing situations is crucial for its survival. Local groups in Perlok demonstrate that they are sensitive to their environment. For example, recognizing that farmers and most of the village leaders are getting older, the Youth Association conducted projects to encourage members to participate in agricultural activities and to groom them to provide future leadership to the community. In a similar manner, the Agriculture Commodity Groups encouraged their members to learn the management of their farms as well as agronomic practices. Learning and improving themselves in these ways will increase the ability of local groups to adapt to changing situations, and continue to facilitate village development.

**Democracy and self-management.** Open and free participation of group members in group activities and decision making is essential to effective organization (Gale, 1991; Oakley & Marsden, 1984). There was consensus in Perlok on the selection of group leaders and sites for group projects. Group members were involved in decision making. This participatory approach is a major factor that has helped to realize Perlok's development goal. Self decision making by the local groups with minimum long term involvement of outsiders enabled the villagers to participate in the management of their own community, thus empowering them to control their own lives. Self-dependence contributes to sustainable development.

**Effective programming.** Generally, programs carried out by the groups were well planned in collaboration with all involved: group members, group leaders, and change agents. According to Boone (1985), continued interaction and collaboration between the client and change agent leads to more effective programs that are systematically planned and implemented, and constantly monitored. According to the respondents, the JKKK screened, monitored, and evaluated the planned programs to assure their appropriateness and
effectiveness. Furthermore, JKKK ensured that facilities or services directed at the villagers were accounted for, which confirms the role of local organizations in keeping a check on rural administration (Uphoff & Esman, 1974).

External support. Government departments participate in Perlok's development. However, the intervention strategy used is designed to make people more independent, rather than dependent upon the agencies. This approach has potential for long-term, as well as immediate and intermediate, positive consequences (Carter, 1989). The organization of villagers into viable economic and social groups to take care of their own activities and welfare could be attributed to IADP's philosophy and management, and promotion efforts. For example, the cocoa farm group which the Department of Agriculture helped establish received guidance and training for leaders and members from the extension agent. In the beginning, the agent made frequent visits to farms. The visits became less frequent as farmers became more knowledgeable and skilled to manage the group and the project themselves.

The alignment of the village political group with the ruling party is another dimension that has contributed to the prosperity and development of Perlok. This association has brought both material and moral support to the village from district and state politicians who want to reward the villagers for their continuous support, as well as making their own presence felt.

Conclusions

The institutionalization of local organization is essential for the long-term economic and social development of the rural sector. Evidence from this study suggests that Perlok village has accomplished a level of institutionalization through the establishment and nurturing of local groups to meet specific and differing needs of people. Significant contributing factors include acceptance of these groups by the community at large; operating structures and procedures enabling efficient and effective group functioning; capable group leadership; satisfaction of group members' needs; the ability of groups to adapt to changing situations; democratic decision making and self-management; sound programming; and judicious external support that inculcates and promotes self-reliance.

Perlok's development founded in large measure on institutionalized local organization is in line with the philosophy and aspirations of IADP's management, and extension system. Increased reliance on villagers' knowledge and skills, as well as collective group efforts, can free up resources so that IADP can facilitate development in other villages of West Pahang.

References


