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# Effective Community Participation in Planning and Operational Decision-Making in Iskandar Malaysia: A Qualitative In-Depth Interview Study

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**Abstract.** This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in planning and operational decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia. Iskandar Malaysia region consists of four local planning authorities responsible for planning and managing the spatial development in the region. Conceptually, effective community participation helps the local planning authority make a better decision, hence providing a sustainable and quality living environment. Therefore, the question raised is, "To what extent does the current community participation process offers a genuine opportunity to the community to incorporate their interest in the planning and operational decisions? The study employed in-depth interviews to gather insight of the phenomenon from various key actors to address the question. Following the 43 interviews performed, it is suggested that the effectiveness of community participation; and the incorporation of community interest in Iskandar Malaysia are substantially influenced by the functional variables like a collaboration between stakeholders, community's access to information and process; and intergovernmental relationship in planning. Structural and cultural variables include the skill and professionalism of public planners, capability to influence, public awareness and knowledge, and community's representation.

## 1. Introduction

Community participation provides a clear picture to decision-makers of public preferences by incorporating the community's experiential knowledge into the process [1]. Moreover, it democratises decision-making by inclusively addressing the interests of different community segments and other stakeholders, hence resolving conflicts [1]. Thus, community participation is essential in achieving a sustainable and quality living environment by incorporating the present and future interests of the community [2].

Community participation in urban planning in Peninsular Malaysia (except Kuala Lumpur) has been outlined in Section 9 and Section 21(6) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172) (TCPA 1976). The question raised in this study is; "to what extent does the current community participation process offers a genuine opportunity to the community to incorporate their interest in the planning and operational decisions?"

In this study, qualitative data are collected using in-depth interviews (IDIs), hence thematically analysed. Data saturation is employed to determine the sample size, with several literature reviews to substantiate the selection of this approach in determining the sample size for qualitative research. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in planning and operational decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia (IM), which refers to the development plan-making



and planning permission. The evaluation is explicated by thematically analyse the perception of key actors, namely public planners, the representatives of private developer, community representatives and local councillors. The paper concluded that the current community participation showed limited capacity for the community in IM to participate in development plan-making and planning permission processes effectively.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Key Informants

Various actors are purposively selected as the key informants to gather their perception on the current state of community participation in both planning and operational decision-making in IM. The key informants in the study are public planners at the local authorities, the representatives of private developer, community representatives and local councillors (**Table 1**). The selection of these actors is based on their experiential knowledge of the urban planning process in IM, predominantly concerning the community's involvement. It is grounded by the concept of a key informant [3], ensuring only individuals with vast knowledge were selected to give extensive insight into the phenomenon. The sample size for respective actors, meanwhile, is determined based on the concept of data saturation. Guest et al. [4] defined data saturation as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook”.

**Table 1.** Profile of Key Informant

Profile of Key Informant	N	%
Local Public Planner (Director of department; Deputy director; Head of department; Officer; Assistant officer)	12	28
Private Developer's Representative (Project manager; Assistant project manager)	7	16
Community Representative (Chairman; Secretary; Committee member)	12	28
Local Councillor	12	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100</b>

### 2.2. Data Collection

A total of 43 IDIs are conducted with key informants to gather qualitative data from these actors concerning the community participatory in development plan-making and planning permission processes in IM. The employment of IDI for data collection is justified by its ability to allow the researcher to gain a better insight of a phenomenon by interviewing a small number of respondents that believed to have experience and knowledge on a phenomenon [4]. Moreover, [5] explicated the importance of IDI in understanding people's motivation and action, hence their experience.

In this research, interviews are conducted in the form of semi-structured to ensure the process to be more flexible and fluid, especially the ways a question is being put out and answered. It provides the interviewee more freedom to respond to each question, thus potentially leading to interesting findings [3].

Prior to each interview, interviewees are being briefed on the purpose of the study and warranted to retain their confidentiality. The researcher also sought the interviewee's permission to record the interview, although one of the respondents disagreed. The following variables were retrieved from the interviews - method for communication and engagement, perception of the participation process, community representation in the urban planning process, and the approaches for incorporating community interests.

### 2.3. Saturation of Data

Scholars have employed data saturation to determine the sample size for qualitative research [4][6]. Data saturation is defined as the point where when the data collection and analysis did not produce further information [4][6]. Marshall et al. [7] further associated the concept of data saturation with data redundancy. Even though the idea of achieving saturation in data collection and analysis appears to be fundamental to qualitative researchers nonetheless, data saturation provides a little guideline to estimate the sample size prior to the data collection [4][8]. It is known that most researches require an estimation of sample size during the preliminary stage.

From the review of several literature, it is suggested the data saturation in a phenomenological study is probably achieve between 10 to 12 interviews (**Table 2**). Subsequently, the researcher has estimated 12 IDIs for respective key informants (local public planner, private developer's representative, community representative and local councillor) as the yardstick to reach saturation.

**Table 2.** Summary of Data Saturation in Phenomenological Researcher from Empirical Studies

Authors	Definition of Saturation	Findings
Creswell (2007)	n/a	10 in-depth interviews to reach saturation
Morse (2000)	"..saturation depends on the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the number of interviews per participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study design used".	It requires 6 to 10 interviews to reach data saturation
Guest <i>et al.</i> (2006)	"..the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook".	12 interviews to reach 92% data saturation
Coenen <i>et al.</i> (2012)	"Saturation refers to the point at which an investigator has obtained sufficient information from the field".	9 interviews to reach saturation in deductive approach; and 12 interviews in inductive approach
Guest <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Similar to Guest <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Five focus group discussions to achieve saturation 3 to 6 focus group discussions are likely to reach 90% data saturation

The table is adapted from [9]

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data gathered from the IDIs, hence identifying the key themes concerning the research question - To what extent does the current participatory avenue offer a genuine opportunity to the community to incorporate their interest in the planning decision? The research has employed the [10] framework to explain the analysis process. Braun and Clarke [10] have structured thematic analysis into six (6) main steps.

**Step 1 – Transcribe and familiarise the data:** Audio data recorded from the interviews are listened repeatedly and transcribed using edited transcription approach. It is by omitting the phases that appear irrelevant and excessive whilst maintaining the essence of the text [11]. The readability of the document is essential to make it appealing. **Step 2 – Generate initial codes:** At this stage, the researcher only coded data relevant to the research questions. The code in this study is in the form of a statement. Similarities in responses between interviews are highlighted and organised. Transcripts are reviewed several times with new or modified codes is updated. **Step 3 – Search for themes:** All relevant coded data are organised into different themes.

**Step 4 – Review themes:** At this stage, all themes, sub-themes and codes are revised and modified to established coherent connections between them. At this point, the fundamental question is, does each connection seem relevant? The researcher used the 'cut and paste' function in Microsoft Office to reorganise the data in the transcript. **Step 5 – Define themes:** The main questions asked in this stage are; what are the relations built between themes and sub-themes? How do these relations attain the research questions? **Step 6 – Reporting:** Researcher reporting the findings.

### 3. Results

The result indicated that the local planning authorities (LPAs) in IM are inclined to apply conventional methods within the framework of TCPA 1976 in communication and engagement in development plan-making and planning permission (**Table 3**). It is also suggested that the community's involvement in planning permission is up to the local public planner to inform the neighbouring communities due to the availability of local plan.

"...most of them who are aware of the publicity program and development plan are those who are under the T20 and M40 segments. While for the B40, they did not bother to know."

Public Planner 7

"There is still a lack of publicity by the local authority. The method used is merely *syok sendiri*. Although there are flyers distributed to the community, yet the objectives are not achieved. Local authority only focuses on certain community segments. What about the other segments?"

Community Representative 3

**Table 3.** Methods for Communication and Engagement

In-depth Interview (Local Public Planner)	In-depth Interview (Community Representative)	In-depth Interview (Private Developer)
75% of the respondents agreed that LPAs in IM still depended on the conventional methods for communication and engagement.		
91.7% of the respondents added the platform for collaboration in planning process is within the framework of TCPA 1976	75% of the respondents claimed the LPAs did not provide the low-income segment with sufficient access to planning information.	85.7% of the respondents stated the engagement between private developer and neighbouring community is subject to the requirement by the public planner.
75% of the respondents believed current participatory platforms have marginalised the low-income segment from participate in planning process	91.7% of the respondents believed there is absence of planning program organised near the low-income segment.	
50% of the respondents added the community are legislatively excluded from planning permission subsequent to the availability of LP.		

Moreover, the result highlighted the limitation of knowledge among the low-income segment in IM, along with the technicality of the planning process and documents that had restricted their access to the public process (**Table 4**). Subsequently, this prospectively resulted in the lack of participation from the community, predominantly the low-income segment. The residents in low-cost apartments in IM are inclined to let the residents' committee decide for them.

"Most of the objectors are private developers who are aware of and have knowledge of the planning procedure. I think the field of urban planning is yet to be recognised by the community like architecture."

Public Planner 9

"In my opinion, their unwillingness to participate in a program is due to time constraints. Besides, they tend to neglect and let other people, including the residents' committee to decide."

Community Representative 11

The public planner's professionalism and judgement also appear to influence the effectiveness of community participation in both planning and operational decision-making. The unwillingness of the public planner to continuously engage with the community, especially the low-income segment, might influence the capability of LPA to incorporate the community interest in both the planning and operational decisions.

"...the public planner needs to be more thoughtful in evaluating and commenting on every application. They should not depend on the act and guidelines. It appears that the technical department incline to support an application without considering other aspects aside from technical."

Public Planner 12

"Maybe let the local authority to decide whether our development is potentially affecting the existing community or not. If they think that we should engage with the community, then we will do it. It is not that we do not want to involve the community, but sometimes they only see the smaller picture."

Private Developer 4

**Table 4.** Perception of the Participation Process

<b>In-depth Interview (Local Public Planner)</b>	<b>In-depth Interview (Community Representative)</b>	<b>In-depth Interview (Private Developer)</b>
66.7% of the respondents stated any objection received during the publicity period is considered based on its relevance to the planning policies and guidelines.		
75% of the respondents believed the community especially the low-income segment are not technically sound.	83.3% of the respondents agreed the community have little knowledge of urban planning.	85.7% of the respondents agreed the needs for private developers to consider neighbouring community's interest to prevent conflict
75% of the respondents underlined the psychology aspect as the prominent factor to the knowledge and awareness of urban planning among community.	83.3% of the respondents stated the community only participate if they can benefit from the program.	42.8% of the respondents added it is unnecessary to engage with the neighbouring community if it only involves housing and commercial development.
58.3% of the respondents believed the community is still immature in making objection.	91.7% of the respondents claimed the local authority rarely engage with the community.	85.7% of the respondents preferred to let the LPA decide on engagement with community.
66.7% of the respondents meanwhile linked community knowledge of planning procedure with property ownership.	50% of the respondents added the public officer being selective in engaging with community.	
58.3% of the respondents stated the needs for public planner should go to the ground and flexible in providing information and participatory platform to all community segments.		

The role of the local councillor in bridging the communication between the authorities and communities have been agreed upon by both public planners and community representatives (**Table 5**). The representation of local councillors, however, is questionable due to their appointment by the state government. The manner of appointment is prone to partisanship due to their political affiliation with the State's Chief Minister.

"Usually we will be informed by the local councillor regarding the information by the authority. ...local councillor effective in bringing forward our interest to the attention of local authority."

Community Representative 6

**Table 5.** Community Representation in Urban Planning

<b>In-depth Interview (Local Public Planner)</b>	<b>In-depth Interview (Community Representative)</b>
75% of the respondents underlined the importance of local councillor as mediator between the local authority and community to constantly share information with community.	91.7% of the respondents agreed the local councillor facilitate the communication between local authority and community.
75% of the respondents agreed local councillor able to influence the decision-making.	91.7% of the respondents added the local councillor represents the community interest in decision-making at local level.
50% of the respondents added the local councillor able to influence the operational decision due to their involvement in OSC committee meeting.	

50% of the respondents highlighted the political influence in planning is due to the political affiliation between local councillor and chief minister.

It is suggested that the current urban planning system in IM and Peninsular Malaysia are more centralised and based on the top-down approach. The upper-tier planning authorities have a more significant influence on the planning and operational decisions than the LPA; hence a decision might not represent the local interest.

**Table 6.** Intergovernmental Relationship in Urban Planning

In-depth Interview (Local Public Planner)
83% of the respondents believed the current urban planning system in IM, as well as Peninsular Malaysia, are more centralised and based on a top-down approach. The upper-tier planning authorities have a greater influence on the planning and operational decisions than the LPA.

Following the analysis, it is indispensable that both planning and operational decision-making in IM are based on the technical aspect (**Table 7**). The lack of collaboration between stakeholders in making a decision has potentially resulted in a decision made benefited only a particular stakeholder.

"We have to remember that whatever we have imposed must be abided by the policy and guideline. At the end of the planning permission process, there will be an appeal board. That is why we never apply anything beyond what is stated in the document for planning control. We must ensure that when the applicant appeals, we are ready with strong justification."

Public Planner 11

**Table 7.** Approaches for Incorporating Community Interest

In-depth Interview (Local Public Planner)	In-depth Interview (Private Developer)
All respondents agreed the technical factor is the central for any decision taken.	
83.3% of the respondents stated technical comments by agencies are being deliberated in reviewing objection in planning decision-making.	All respondents agreed the community interest mainly the provision of low-cost housing and public amenities are incorporated through the planning policies and guidelines.
83.3% of the respondents stated operational decision made according to the LP, planning policies and guidelines. LPA wants to avoid any dispute to the decision made.	85.7% of the respondents agreed the current planning procedure compliments their interest.
41.7% of the respondents stated FGD conducted during the development plan-making.	85.7% of the respondents stated the engagement between private developer and neighbouring community is subject to the requirement by the public planner.
58.3% of the respondents stated dialogue is held to resolve the dispute between community and private developer.	

#### 4. Discussion

Following the triangulation of the findings, the effectiveness of community participation and the incorporation of community interest in both planning and operational decisions are substantially influenced by the community's access to planning information and process. The LPAs in IM apparently, depended on the conventional methods for communication and engagement with the community during the development plan-making and planning permission. This current practice has dampened the effort to offer extensive information and opportunity to participate to all community segments in the process. In relation to planning permission, the community are legislatively excluded from the process due to the existence of LP for Johor Bahru and Kulai districts.

Besides, it is indicated that community awareness and knowledge of the planning process are associated with their ownership of property, resulting gaps in participation between community segments. The technicality of planning documents and processes also indirectly marginalised the community, especially the low-income, from participating in development plan-making and planning permission, thus widen the gap.

The findings also suggested the effective community participation depends on the skill and attitude of a public planner in handling the process. The public planner should be more thoughtful and go the "extra mile" in delivering information and implementing the participatory process. It is apparent that the LPAs in IM are inclined to decide planning and operational decisions based on technical factors.

As the community representative at the local level, the local councillor should consistently share information with their community. The local councillor should be able to influence the decision on planning permission due to their involvement in the One-Stop Centre's committee meetings. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that political influence is incorporated in the decision-making following the affiliation between the local council or and the State's Chief Minister.

Finally, the incorporation of community interest in planning and operational decision-making in IM is also influenced by the intergovernmental relationship between planning authorities. It is demonstrated by the translation of national development strategy into the state and local development plans. Furthermore, the state and local authorities have significantly considered the technical aspect in making planning and operational decisions.

## 5. Conclusion

The study anticipates the continuous debate on the effectiveness of community participation in urban planning to instigate community interest in planning and operational decisions. The researcher has derived the factors that constituted the effectiveness of community participation in IM, which is based on the perception of public planners, private developers' representatives, community representatives, and local councillors.

It was recommended that effective community participation and the incorporation of community interest are greatly influenced by the functional variables like the collaboration between stakeholders, the community's access to information and process, and intergovernmental relationship in planning. These variables, followed by structural and cultural variables, namely the skill and attitude of public planners, capability to influence, public awareness and knowledge, and community's representation.

It is safe to conclude that the improvement to the functional dimension of the participation process will prospectively improve the process's structural and cultural aspects in the long term. It will improve the capability of the community, predominantly the low-income segment, to participate effectively hence incorporating their interests in both the planning and operational decisions.

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