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Capacity building: enabling learning in rural community through partnership

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Abstract

Education can liberate a poor rural community and partnership can effectively create an informal learning environment with noteworthy results when the appropriate context, process and goal are put in place. A case of Batu Puteh community in the state of Sabah (Borneo), Malaysia that thrives on community based tourism exemplifies how partnership contributed to capacity building of the local people. In-depth interviews with the local community and external partners selected through purposive sampling and direct observations on the physical environment and the local community were used in this study. Findings show that readiness of the local community to embrace changes and the effectiveness of partnership identifiable in its process, context, and outcome were the key factors in capacity building.

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1. Introduction

Partnership plays an important role in capacity building because it can bridge the inadequate resources, inadequate knowledge and weak systems common in a rural setting (Worboys & Lockwood, 2007). Capacity building enables rural communities to participate in rural tourism activities (Forstner, 2004). Establishing dynamic partnerships is essential in moving up CBT along the value chain (Hamzah & Khalifah, 2009). It is equally paramount in the planning and development stages. Collaborative rather than confrontational approach could effectively address issues of communities in protected areas but it has to thrive on shared vision among stakeholders (Borrini-Feyerabend et. al., 2004). Despite investments on capacity building, the benefits took time to transpire (Moscardo, 2005). Effective partnership positively impacts the community (Hockings, et. al., 2000). This paper explains the importance of partnership in enabling capacity building in a rural setting based on the context, process and outcome of a partnership.
2. Methodology

The study used qualitative approach through case study method. The paper shares part of the findings of a bigger scale research project that was carried out in the form of a longitudinal study from 2005 to 2012. Two sets of key informants were identified through purposive sampling: (1) local people directly involved in the CBT programme in Batu Puteh; and (2) external partners (NGOs and state agency). Most of the time, the research team made appointments with the key informants to interview them. In-depth interview (informal and semi-formal), casual conversation and direct observation were the main research instruments. Most interviews were recorded on a tape recorder with the consent of the interviewees.

3. Findings and analysis

3.1. Partnership with external initiator

Batu Puteh sub-district is located in the Lower Kinabatangan region in the state of Sabah in Malaysia and it had a high incidence of poverty. The turning point of the dire economic situation in Batu Puteh was attributed to a local community based tourism (CBT) initiative by the local youths in Batu Puteh in 1997. WWF Norway through its WWF counterpart based in Kinabatangan provided some seed funding to start up the CBT initiative and appointed a facilitator, Mr. M. It provided coordination and funds for the first three years of capacity building. The local youths represented themselves as MESCOT (Model of Environmentally Sustainable Community Tourism) member, with the objective of creating community based ecotourism activities that could provide alternative source of income and job opportunities to alleviate local poverty. Leadership approach and personal qualities of external initiator are crucial in the early stage of capacity building to create a sense of belonging and sense of ownership, the binding elements in capacity building.

3.1.1. Bottom-up approach and experiential learning

From the beginning, Mr. M. used bottom-up approach in all MESCOT decisions and activities. He facilitated workshops and discussions but the final decisions had to come from MESCOT members. In addition, experiential learning through hands-on training and exposure trips provided MESCOT members with the experience to participate in their initiative competently. The success of MESCOT members in their tourism initiatives was always associated with this long process of capacity building that had empowered the local people with the needed attitude, skills and knowledge to embrace change.

3.1.2. Leadership qualities

Mr. M. as an external initiator displayed key leadership qualities. He assimilated into the local culture well. He spoke fluent local River People’s language, assumed a local name, fasted during the fasting month, and ate similar meals as the MESCOT members. Respect for village authorities and elderly was evident, with Mr. M. initiating discussions with the village headman seeking consent from him and other village elderly. The external initiator understood that consent from community leaders would not necessarily expedite the development of the CBT program but it would definitely create a conducive environment to operate the programme and minimize resistance from the community which had much respect for the village elderly. He also showed respect for the parents of the young MESCOT members by visiting them to seek permission to bring their children for exposure trips. Patience and endurance were other evident qualities. Threats and intimidation from angry local illegal loggers who were against MESCOT initiatives were ignored. He demonstrated respectable knowledge and skills but refrained himself from imposing his ideas, values or ideologies on others. He led by example; in the attempt to instill an 8 to 5 working culture within the youthful group, Mr. M. continued to commute 2 to 3 hours daily on gravel road from his home to MESCOT base, reaching MESCOT base by 8 in the morning. In due time, the young members realized that punctuality was important and began to arrive on time. Applauded for his commitment, Mr. M. facilitated MESCOT’s activities during the first three-year-planning stage (1997 - 2000) and the following nine years. After his
3-year-contract with WWF Norway expired in 2000, he continued facilitating MESCOT without gratuities while being engaged himself with other consultation projects in Borneo. He had a goal to achieve in Batu Puteh and steadfastly focused on it. In sum, Mr. M. used appropriate approach and demonstrated winning leadership qualities which had earned him the respect of MESCOT members. It fostered a sense of trust and dependability on Mr. M. thus creating a conducive environment for learning and capacity building.

3.2. Partnership with pro-community development organization - LEAPS

3.2.1. Context

When MESCOT was ‘abandoned’ by NGOs after their stipulated terms expired, it had to seek help from a fund raiser, Ms. O to continue its capacity building and conservation activities. The potential partner was identified based on the capacity to raise funds for community work and environmental issues. It was a bottom-up partnership where MESCOT sought the help of Ms. O. who had access to international charity foundations which could support the project in Batu Puteh. Ms. O. then established LEAPS (Land Empowerment Animals People) to facilitate the fund seeking process. Willingness of LEAPS to consider partnership was based on the genuine enthusiasm of the local community to make its project a success. MESCOT in particular, championed environmental conservation. Ms. O. articulated the community issues and aspirations on paper to be forwarded to the appropriate audience and funders started to come, a signal that MESCOT project was a worthy cause that should be pursued. Commitment to the partnership was based on the principle that any form of assistance must be premised on the needs of the local community. The potential, the desire, the human resources and natural resources were there but there was a huge gap between NGO thinking, corporate thinking, government thinking, and what the needs of the community were. Therefore, it is imperative that external agencies listen to the local community and provide the needed capacity building. The approach was to become an ally that could find funders who were willing to contribute to the community projects and capacity building in a sustainable manner. The bottom line is that support from LEAPS had enabled MESCOT members to continue enhancing their capacity through capacity building funds made available through LEAPS.

3.2.2. Process

Quality of stakeholder representation takes time to transpire. As evident in Batu Puteh, the readiness of the community was symbolized by them making the connection and making the effort to reach out to external agencies to regain its footing. Since its inception, MESCOT has had clear visions of what they wanted in terms of community development in Batu Puteh and they never swayed from those visions. Strong leadership and trust between stakeholders is important in a partnership. A real partnership is reciprocal that it transforms and inspires change in partners. It has to been done in a spirit of mutual change that partners could help and learn from each other. MESCOT had shown a leadership that was pioneering and groundbreaking for the rural community. LEAPS and MESCOT trusted each other and carried out their roles religiously with integrity which had allowed LEAPS to gain trust with its funders and its partner on the ground. The availability of relevant knowledge, skills and capacity is also important in capacity building partnership. Ms. O. was first approached for her forte in finding corporate entities to contribute to community development projects as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility programme. Subsequently, through LEAPS, funding that was compatible with the needs of the community was sought in a sustainable manner. LEAPS acknowledged that every community had a different learning curve which required different incubation periods. Therefore, its approach was not to push but to grow alongside the community.

3.2.3. Outcome

The extent to which key objectives can be achieved was anchored on the sheer determination of MESCOT to restore the health of the ecosystem in Batu Puteh. Their first successful collaboration to clear a salvenia molestainfested lake released a new inspiration and motivation for MESCOT members as they regained a sense of belonging to the environment which had earlier gone out of balance. MESCOT had since proven itself reliable in achieving its objectives. Partnership objectives were envisioned by the community and LEAPS played the role of a
spokesperson that sought corporations that were interested in the local community’s agenda. The extent to which this partnership had influenced state policy was significant. LEAPS had indirectly influenced policy by proactively creating some pressure for the state government to look into critical community issues through the meetings that it had facilitated. Unavoidably, government systems were a little rigid and time was required before any change in the systems could take place. The bottom line is that the mediator role played by LEAPS was crucial in enabling such conversations or meetings to take place, so that perceptions could be changed thereby leading to policy changes. LEAP’s perceptions of the value of the partnership working had always been positive because LEAPS had managed to bridge the disconnections between government and community, industry and government, industry and community. More importantly, working with MESCOT had shaped LEAPS approach and vision. The ethos of the organization now is to support similar kind of initiatives but the first impetus has to come from the community itself.

3.3. Partnership with state agency (Sabah Forestry Department)

3.3.1. Context

Despite existing disputes over land issues between the community and Sabah Forestry Department (SFD), a changing pro-partnership political climate started in 1998 when the Batu Puteh community helped SFD in fighting rampant forest fires, followed by MESCOT’s involvement in forest monitoring, raising conservation awareness, tree planting activities and silviculture treatment within the Pin-Supu Forest Reserve in 1999. Moreover, at that time SFD faced constraints in manpower, experts, logistics, and communication to carry out conservation activities and it acknowledged that MESCOT could readily complement these limitations. The willingness of SFD to consider partnership with MESCOT was triggered by a mutual need for conservation manpower for the former and, funds and access to the forest for the latter. The departure point of a real partnership occurred in 2003 where MESCOT was granted access to and use of a 4-hectare Pin Supu Forest Reserve for its ecotourism activity. SFD’s flexibility and perspective towards community forestry, unseen in other forest management in Sabah and Malaysia, was considered revolutionary. Commitment to the partnership was demonstrated through direct awards granted to MESCOT. Although submitting tender was the stipulated procedure, it was decided that direct awards was appropriate to avoid competition against MESCOT so that the community could get direct economic benefits. SFD awarded MESCOT two contracts from the Federal government worth RM1.3m. in 2008 and RM600, 000.00 in 2012. Although the fund did not include capacity building, it allowed conservation skills and knowledge to be reinforced in a more consolidated and practical manner.

3.3.2. Process

For SFD, quality of its stakeholder representation was evident through MESCOT’s meticulous documentation of conservation plan, process, and outcomes, and the expected results on the ground. In addition, MESCOT never wavered from its focus to conserve the environment. MESCOT had done some ground-breaking forest and habitat restoration works and has contributed much to the overall knowledge of forestry in Sabah. Strong leadership and trust between stakeholders nurtured the partnership. MESCOT’s leadership had winning qualities while the result-oriented approach of SFD’s highest leadership was instrumental in reducing red-tapes. Availability of relevant knowledge, skills and capacity within MESCOT attracted SFD towards a partnership. MESCOT members could identify the trees that grew in the forest and their seedlings, and ways to decrease seedling mortality rate caused by seasonal flooding. SFD monitored MESCOT activities periodically and the former had full trust in MESCOT to carry out stipulated activities - a formula for a win-win situation for the stakeholders.

3.3.3. Outcome

The extent to which key objectives can be achieved was measured by MESCOT’s ability to adhere to the contracts. SFD was highly satisfied with MESCOT’s ability to abide by or implement the agreed action plans. The partnership between SFD and MESCOT took three different forms which were: 1) granting access to and use of the forest reserve for ecotourism activity, 2) awarding direct contracts for forest conservation and restoration projects; and 3) providing a jetty. The extent to which this partnership influenced policy was not immediately evident.
However, plans to replicate such partnership in a few other villages in Kinabatangan were in the pipeline. As the SFD fund does not cover capacity building, it would initiate partnership between SFD and other NGOs. Government systems and policy may be rigid but SFD believed in finding groundbreaking measures to achieve its conservation objectives by empowering the communities. SFD’s perceptions of the value of partnership were affirmative because this partnership had given SFD national and international recognition for its pioneering collaboration effort with local community.

4. Conclusion

Partnership is essential in building the capacity of the rural communities which often lack resources, skills and knowledge to adapt to the changing economic landscape. Prior to establishing a partnership, the first impetus towards change should come from the community itself, not from an external organization. This demonstrates that the community is ready to embrace change because learning and capacity building have been proven to take place effectively when the local community is ready. Partners who are willing to commit to the partnership have to be true to the engagement and they have to address the local community’s needs and concerns. Now, more agencies, public or private are gradually learning and accepting that the approach to develop the rural community has to change. While some policies and systems may be rigid, there is room for innovative partnership that allows flexibility for the benefit of the local community. Stability in partnership is needed in order to create real change and therefore partnership has to be sustainable until the job is completed. In a partnership, emphasis should be placed on promoting sustainable ecological co-existence through engagement with local communities, government, donor agencies, the general public, and industry. In the process, it is imperative to build meaningful and effective partnerships and collaborations that are transformative yet able to balance the needs of all stakeholders. In short, when partnership involves a local community, the wisdom should come from the ground because the local community must be with their indigenous wisdom which in return can expedite learning. It is more organic compared to stipulating what the community needs to do base on what outsiders viewed as good for them.

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