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Community Awareness on Environmental Management through Local Agenda 21 (LA21)

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Abstract

This study evaluates the level of community awareness towards the environment and the level of participation of a community in environmental programs through the Local Agenda 21 (LA21). The programme components include social and environmental aspects. Published studies contend that people are aware of the various environmental problems but lack involvement. This study found that reasons of lack of participation are the lack of time, interest and awareness. Recommendations proposed to encourage more interest and involvement from the community include strengthening the coordination between the Local Authority and the community especially in schools and with other stakeholders in line with the objective of Agenda 21.

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Keywords: Awareness; participation; environmental programs

1. Introduction

Community participation in environmental programs has been proven to enable more effective decision making in protecting the environment and its natural resources. More importantly, this process gives an opportunity to the

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community to have a say over aspects that affect their lives. This process is part of environmental management within the context of Local Agenda 21. Within the environmental scope of the agenda, relevant stakeholders of a community i.e. the residents, Local Authority and the Resident Association are expected to work together in protecting the environment. In this aspect, the Local authority usually initiates environmental programs in the hope that residents or the community would participate and manage the programs in partnership. The first step often taken by a Local Authority is to raise the community's awareness about planned programs by disseminating information through various channels. Medium used include website or flyers distributed to residences, schools, and other stakeholders within a community. However, the lack of awareness among residents of a community about LA 21 programs lead to a lack of participation and is a challenge for the Local Authorities (Zan and Ngah 2012). Local authorities also face other constraints in the process of implementing environmental programs under LA 21. This study describes the level of awareness of a community about the environmental programs under LA21. It also highlights aspects that have an association with the behavior to participate. The findings can help inform the Local Authorities in formulating better strategies relevant to the local context to improve community awareness and more importantly encourage involvement in support of the Local Agenda 21 environmental management process. The case study area for this research is Kota Damansara, Selangor. Kota Damansara has a population of close to 500,000. It is adjacent to another township in the southeast, i.e., Bandar Utama. Sungai Buloh is located to the west and accessibility to the town is via the Lebuhraya Damansara Puchong and the Kota Damansara interchange of the North Klang Valley Expressway (NKVE). The town is under the jurisdiction of the Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya (MBPJ) Local Authority. The township is located in the subdistrict of Sungai Buloh in Petaling, Selangor, Kota Damansara and was previously a forest reserve.

1.1. Local agenda 21

Local Agenda 21 Plan (LA21) is a policy adopted by all the urban Local Authorities in Malaysia. It is a process that aims to involve local people and communities towards a better quality of life for the present and future generations. Local Agenda 21 is a local-government-led, community-wide, and participatory effort to establish a comprehensive action strategy for environmental protection, economic prosperity and community well-being in the local jurisdiction or area. It originates from the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992 which led to the agreement of an Agenda 21 document detailing a series of strategies within six key elements for action worldwide (SD21 2012). Environmental management is a crucial topic within the LA21 where the Local Authorities should lead, initiate and implement environmental programs with community involvement to address environmental problems SD21 2012). Although the literature indicates various levels of successes for various LA 21 programs the implementations of LA21 in Malaysia are still at an unsatisfactory level but progressing slowly (Kamariah and Khairul 2012; Zan and Ngah 2012). Limited stakeholders' involvement is due to different reasons. Among these is the lack of awareness and knowledge. This study contributes to the literature that assesses the degree of community awareness about environmental matters and their participation in environmental programs implemented under LA 21. In addition, it assesses the reasons for the lack of involvement in environmental programs.

The Ministry of Housing, Urban Well Being and Local Government of Malaysia highlights that the Local Agenda 21 policy (LA21) includes programs where communities, private sectors, and the local authorities can work together to plan and manage their environment towards sustainable development. Within a broader context, the concept of sustainable development parallels the principles of a Quality of Life. The sustainable development concept place emphasis on the well being of the environment through community involvement. The literature states that having awareness about environmental issues may or may not influence an individual to participate actively in environmental program (Steg et al. 2013). Other factors such as social norm, financial resources, and other psychosocial conditions can affect participation in environmental programs (Zsoka et al. 2013). Both industrialized and developing countries demonstrate that a practical approach to resolving urban environmental issues is to develop a city-specific environmental management strategy and action plan (SD21 2012). A strategic approach to environmental planning and management within urban areas can be based on community participation, building community commitment and choosing effective police interventions. The emphasis include mobilizing public support and participation; choosing policy instruments that will change behavior, relieve conflicts, and encourage cooperative arrangements; building local institutional capacity; strengthening urban service delivery, and increasing

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