

A COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM THROUGH CO-OPERATIVE IN SABAH MALAYSIA: CASE OF KOPERASI WALAI TOKOU KUNDASANG BERHAD (KOPSTAY)

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ABSTRACT

The National Co-operative Policy 2011- 2020 identifies tourism as one of the potential industries that can offer high income to the co-operatives business sector. The tourism industry could create downstream tourism activities as part of community based tourism (CBT) and provide a stimulus for entrepreneurs among the communities. Despite the remarkable potential that the tourism industry can offer, The Malaysia Co-operatives Societies Commission (2015) reported that only 12 (0.98%) out of 1,223 co-operatives in Sabah have actively become involved in tourism businesses. As Sabah is one of the leading tourist attractions in Malaysia, the present study is part of the efforts to promote CBT among co-operative in Sabah by highlighting the benefit of co-operative in managing CBT. Considering this, the present study attempts to investigate the success factors of CBT that based on co-operative business model in Sabah. This is a case study that involved one community based tourism, the Koperasi Walai Tokou Kundasang Berhad (KOPSTAY) of Kundasang, Sabah, Malaysia. The primary data were gathered through field interviews with the board members of the co-operative, and the members of KOPSTAY. The results of this study revealed that the co-operative enables higher community involvement in the decision making process, which generates ideas and implementation of various tourism downstream activities as an addition to the homestay business. The initiatives have boosted the income of the KOPSTAY. Three main factors that supported the development of the community based homestay through co-operative include strong leadership, sharing knowledge and skills as well as the strong support from the government agencies. Therefore, this study recommends the importance of cooperation to achieve successful CBT development.

Keywords: *Community; Community Based Tourism; Co-operative Business Model; Tourism*

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INTRODUCTION

The term Community Based Tourism (CBT) emerged in the mid-1990s. CBT has offered as an alternative to solve the problem of mass tourism, which alienated the host community in their places with no substantial economic benefits (Ravinder, 2017). Additionally, the emergence of CBT also concerns toward the need to incorporate the principle of sustainable tourism as a mean to find a balance between the negative impacts of tourism to create an improved quality of life for the host community and the destination (Yadzi, 2012; Ashley et al., 2001). In this regard, The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) recommended that sustainable tourism should be community based to ensure viable, long term economic operation, providing stable employment and earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation (UNWTO, 2005).

The CBT has been defined in many different ways. Still, most of the definitions share a common nation that CBT is a form of local tourism that is managed and owned by the community, for the community, for interpreting and communicating the local culture and environment to the visitors (Asker, Boronyak, Carrard and Paddon, 2010). Globally, the CBT initiatives aim to involve local residents in the running of small tourism projects as a means of alleviating poverty, especially in the context of developing countries (Sebele, 2009). CBT is considered a strategy that able to contribute more opportunities for the improvement of community livelihood through providing income alternatives in the rural area (Singh, 2008). Thus, CBT also synonyms with the term “rural tourism” which refer to any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for more enriching tourism experience (Aref and Gill, 2009).

Much literature has extensively discussed the benefit of CBT in reducing rural poverty. For the developing countries such as Malaysia, the communities’ participation in CBT projects provide a platform towards the poverty alleviation, especially in the rural area (Hussin, 2006). This is particularly important in the context of Sabah where the poverty rate is still high, especially in rural area (Jipun, 2018). Sabah is popularly known for its nature, wildlife, adventure, culture, and heritage, which serve as the main attractions to both domestic and international tourists (Sabah Tourism Board, 2017). The Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) Blueprint (2007) outlines the vision for tourism is to make Sabah among the most liveable places in Asia by 2025. This development provides vast opportunities among the local people to engage in the tourism sector, especially through the CBT. Despite the remarkable potential that the tourism industry can offer, studies of the local community participation in CBT found several barriers such as lack of capital resources and financial assistance, ineffective management, the problem of marketing, and lack of skills and knowledge (Hussin, 2008).

The CBT can provide a range of development benefits to communities, especially in poor and disadvantage areas, if the possible measures are taken into consideration, and CBT is properly managed (Giampiccoli and Kalis, 2012). Many of the CBT issues stem from internal problems such as weak business models that cannot support CBT activities (Haniza and Hamzah, 2013). Moreover, Mitchell, and Muckosy (2008) reported that one of the leading causes of CBT failure was poor governance. This calls for an appropriate strategy to ensure CBT sustainability. Ostrom (2000) suggested that if community cooperation is to be effective in the long term, it needs to

be characterized by a set of design principles such as boundary rules, rule in use, and active participation by the community members in making and modifying their rules.

Thus, this study suggests that the co-operative business model is deemed appropriate for managing the development of CBT. According to Peric and Djurkin (2013), democratic and locally oriented co-operative structures are more applicable in achieving the objectives of CBT for local development. Generally, co-operative business is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise (International Co-operative Alliance - ICA, 1995). The strong stakeholder's participation through co-operative not only nurtures community empowerment (Aref and Gill, 2009) but also supports necessary capacity building among the local community involved in CBT (Bushell and Eagles, 2007). Despite the benefits of co-operative business model for the development of CBT, not many co-operative in Sabah engaged in tourism industry in general, and CBT in specific. The Malaysia Co-operatives Societies Commission (2015) reported that only 12 (0.98%) out of 1,223 co-operatives in Sabah have actively become involved in tourism businesses. Therefore, the present study is intended to offer an insight into a successful tourism co-operative that managed one CBT located in Kundasang, Sabah. This success story is not only beneficial for promoting the CBT among co-operative in Sabah, but also for promoting the co-operative business model among CBT as a mean to reduce the management problem.

This study involved one community based homestay program located in Kundasang, Sabah. The homestay program is one of the CBT activities which have the potential to expand the rural community's socio-economic through participation in the tourism industry (Merylyn et al., 2017). According to Goodwin and Santilli (2009), the vast majority of CBT initiatives are based on the development of community owned and managed lodges or homestay. Realizing the challenges in CBT, Malaysia Co-operative Society Commission (MCSC) recommended the establishment of a tourism co-operative for enhancing community participation in planning and developing the community-based homestay in Kundasang. This study describes how the co-operative influenced the successful development of community-based homestay, which called as Koperasi Walai Tokou Kundasang Berhad (KOPSTAY).

LITERATURE REVIEW: CO-OPERATIVE AND COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM

A co-operative is an autonomous association of person based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, and solidarity (ICA, 1995). Additionally, in the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others. Co-operatives and community based tourism (CBT) meet at many common points. Co-operatives are the organizations, which have strong community roots and embedded within the communities in which they exist (Verma, 2006). Similarly, the central focus of CBT is the community. The CBT emerges from a community development strategy, using tourism as a tool to strengthen the ability of rural community organization that manages local resource with the active participation of local tourism (Anstrand, 2006). In CBT, the local people play a central role in determining the form and process of tourism development (Timothy, 2002).

According to Verma (2006), worldwide, the co-operative movement has contributed to peace by helping eliminate poverty, sustain the environment, provide employment, and enrich the social standards of the people. Considering the contribution of co-operatives to local community wealth, it is natural that the co-operatives are well-positioned to strengthen the agenda of CBT. CBT initiatives aim to involve local people in the running of tourism as a means of generating income and employment for alleviating poverty among community members, especially in remote areas (Rozemeijer, 2001, p.13 in Salazar).

Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions (ICA, 1995). This principle provides an opportunity for addressing the CBT aims to create a more sustainable tourism development. The target of CBT is to ensure the community members have a high degree of control over the tourism activities taking place, and a significant proportion of benefits accrue to them (Mearns, 2003). According to Salazar (2012, p.10), nobody will dispute the fact that destination communities must benefit if tourism is to be viable and sustainable in the long term. Additionally, CBT aims to create more sustainable tourism, focusing on the receiving communities in terms of planning and maintaining tourism activities through consensus-based decision making and local control of development. The growth of CBT is forced by a growing awareness of more democratic participation in tourism decision making by grass-roots members of a destination society (Dann, 1999).

Through the principle of “autonomy and independence”, co-operatives promote economic democracy and the empowerment of marginalized groups (Gertler, 2001). This principle is in line with the aim of CBT, which is to benefit local communities, particularly rural or indigenous people or people in small towns, contributing to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their cultural and environmental assets (Ravinder, 2017). CBT is empowering poor communities to take control of their land and resource (Mearns, 2003). In fact, one of the CBT agendas is to reduce the exclusion and exploitation of the local community in mass tourism. Additionally, according to Daniela (2002), co-operative can contribute to rural tourism development through empowering the tourism organization, community, and individual in the community.

Educating members, employees, and the public is a co-operative principle, many co-operatives have been successful in upgrading the technical, managerial, and organizational skills of their membership and staff (Gertler, 2001). This principle can support the development of CBT by providing opportunities to the local community to gain knowledge and skills related to tourism service. Bushell and Eagles (2007) reported that several shortcomings in the development of tourism in rural areas:

- Lack of formal education and appropriate managerial training.
- Lack of foreign language skills.
- Different ways of dealing with hygiene, litter and maintenance of infrastructure.
- Limited knowledge of food preparation for foreigners, including catering to dietary, nutritional and culinary tastes.
- Lack of decision making and planning skills concerning the possible consequences of tourism, coupled with limited ability to control tourism, unpredictable political climates, and long-term funding uncertainty (Bushell & Eagles, 2007, p. 154).

Due to all these shortcomings, the homestay facilities and services may be unacceptable to international tourists. Thus, co-operatives concern on education and training for their members may help address the shortcoming in capacity building.

Overall, the co-operative principles share the same attributes to CBT operations outlined by Ravinder (2017). The attributes are: (i) aiming to benefit local communities, particularly rural or indigenous people's or people in small towns, contributing to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their cultural and environmental assets; (ii) hosting tourists in the local community; managing a tourism scheme communally; (iii) sharing the profits/benefits equitably; (iii) using a portion of the profits/resources for community development and/or to maintain and protect a community cultural or natural heritage asset (e.g. conservation); and (iv) involving communities in tourism planning, on-going decision making, development and operations .

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Sabah is popularly known as the state with rich biodiversity, which contributes significantly to Malaysia is one of the 12 mega biodiversity hotspots in the world (Sabah Parks, 2014). It is home to many nature and wildlife conservation areas and parks, including South East Asia's highest peak Mount Kinabalu. This study was conducted in Kundasang, one of the regions around Mount Kinabalu. Visitors could reach Kundasang by road transportation from Kota Kinabalu town, which takes approximately 2 hours. The majority of the residents belong to the Kadazan-Dusun ethnic group. There are many famous tourist destinations in Kundasang which help the area attracted both domestic and international tourist. Kundasang is located near to Kinabalu National Park, which was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2000. Besides that, there are many other attractions in and around the area, such as Poring Hot Water, Kettle Farm, Sabah Tea Garden, and Sungai Tagal in Kampung Luanti. With all these attractions on hand, the community based homestay in this area has gained high demand not only from local but also foreign tourists that come from various countries.

METHODOLOGY

Using the case study approach introduced by Yin (2003), this study aims to gain a deep understanding of community based homestay success through co-operative. The informants selected for the interviews were based on the purposive sampling technique. An informal face to face interview was held with three members of co-operative board and ten members. The selected co-operative board members are those who actively involved in the management of the KOPSTAY. The selection of members are based on the most active participations in KOPSTAY activities. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were mostly conducted at their co-operative office. Despite relying on primary data collection through interviews, this study also utilized secondary data resources such as the annual co-operative report and photo gallery.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach, which involves six stages, namely familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming each theme, and writing reports (Braun & Clake, 2006).

The Case Study: KOPSTAY

Koperasi Walai Tokou Kundasang Berhad (KOPSTAY) was established in 2008. KOPSTAY continues the legacy of Walai Tokou Homestay that was managed by Mr. Kohadie. He is the local people of Sinisian Village, where the Walai Tokou Homestay is located. The term “Walai Tokou” is the local language, which means our house. The idea to establish homestay business came after he visited some homestay programs at the Peninsular Malaysia in 1999. After the visit, he attended a series of workshop regarding homestay business. In March 2000, a total of 20 participants from Sinisian Village participated in the homestay management course organized by the Institute of Rural Advancement (INFRA). INFRA is the government training agency under the Malaysia Ministry of Rural Development.

Before the establishment of KOPSTAY, the homestay entrepreneurs handled their operations individually. During that period, the tourism activities mostly focused on homestay service only due to the financial limitation as well as human resources. By the recommendation from the Malaysia Co-operative Societies Commission (MCSC), the individually community based homestay entrepreneurs at Sinisian Village established the KOPSTAY in 2008. Through KOPSTAY, the community based homestay forms a management board that consisted of 15 board members with 55 members. By 2015, the KOPSTAY’s members increased into 300 participations, which come from eight villages: Kinasaraban, Liwagu, Mesilau, Pinosuk, Cinta Mata, Lohan, and Singaran.

The Co-operative Contributions on the Successful Development of CBT

The importance and success of CBT in KOPSTAY are evident when examining how tourism activities have boosted the cooperative’s income due to the development of various tourism downstream activities in the village. Within four years, the co-operatives’ revenues increased from RM4, 620.00 in 2011, to RM119, 222.75 in 2014. One of the board members, Mr. Alex said,

We are very proud of our achievement... we consider that we are still in the baby stage, we are still crawling, but we satisfied with our progress so far...

i. The factors contributed to the increase of income.

The increase in revenues associated with the growth of many downstream tourist activities offered by KOPSTAY. KOPSTAY provides the opportunity among the members to plan and decide together about the development of the homestay activities. KOPSTAY has evolved from providing homestay services to tour package offers, cultural and heritage performances, handicrafts production, restaurants, transportation services, and licensed tourist guides. As one of the board members stated that,

...we provide tourism packages, mountain climbing package for four days and five nights, package for local student... we also offer tourist tour package for student group... in that package, we include jungle tracking, handcraft, preparing local food demo, climb Kinabalu mountain, learning the local language, traditional games, visiting vegetable farms, culture performance... (Mr. Peter)

Photo 1 to 4 show some of the downstream tourism activities.



Photo 1: Preparing Local Food Demo



Photo 2: Traditional Game



Photo 3: Jungle Tracking



Photo 4: Visiting Vegetable Farm

Source : KOPSTAY photo gallery

The ability of the co-operatives to grow from providing only one activity (homestay only) to offer a variety of activities has enabled them to increase their annual revenue, subsequently providing employment opportunities to both members and local communities. This proves that the co-operatives have realized the potential of increased revenue through the tourism chain concept. According to Abdul Aziz (2007), the concept of the tourism chain is to provide facilities for tourists to move, stay, eat, shop for groceries, and be involved in leisure activities. Tourism co-operatives in Sabah perceived this development as an opportunity to add creativity value in enabling tourists to receive everything they need from the co-operative.

ii. The factors supported the development of CBT through co-operative.

Several factors supported the success of tourism co-operative. Some of the dominance factors are the commitment and leadership of board members, competency of the board members, active participation of members and support from government agencies.

a) Commitment and leadership

The study showed that commitment and leadership of board members was a dominant internal factor in supporting the success of the tourism co-operative. This commitment included the

accountability attitude not only for planning but also in the monitoring of business implementation. One of the board members Mr. Don shared how they care about financial management,

Yes, we have profit, but we hold the dividends... we want to make sure we have enough cash flow to run all the planned activities... we still have more to do, all the landscape upgrading...

The importance of top management commitment to a business is one of the success factors which is crucial in any enterprise (Herzog et al., 2007; Prout, 2017). In considering the application of co-operative in tourism development, the role of the leaders deserved consideration (Aref & Ma'rof, 2009). A leader frequently plays an essential role in these processes. Crucial goals of leaders concerning rural co-operatives in tourism development would include facilitating, encourage participants, encouraging learning, and developing social skills in rural areas.

Our leader helped us a lot regarding the right training for us and where we should go for that, he has the contact... (Mrs. Juki)

b) The competency of board member

The second internal factor concerns the competency of the co-operative board members. According to Lussier (1995), businesses run by well-experienced people in their respective fields have the potential to succeed rather than those who have just started to learn their businesses. In this study, the KOPSTAY chairman's experience as the Deputy Chairman of the Malaysian Homestay Association helped the growth of the co-operative because he already had considerable exposure to homestay business activities. As the member said,

We depend a lot on him (chairman) in term of how to run our homestay activities... who focused on this... who focused on that... so in the end we actually supporting each other... he learnt from his experience. (Mr. Philips)

The importance of having an experienced leader is evident in the case of Cooperative Trading Service (Tricoop) in Vietnam. The experienced leaders had the vision to help the success of the co-operative (Norhayati & Juliana, 2013). In the context of this study, the leader has broad exposure through his participation in some series of visits to homestay business in Peninsular Malaysia.

c) Cooperation of members

The third internal factor is the cooperation of members of the co-operative. As a co-operative is based on a partnership concept among a group of individuals in society, teamwork is, therefore, a crucial requirement. The study of McAdam and O'Hare (1998) found that the working spirit in a team is one factor driving the success of an organization, whether governmental or private, in achieving their goals. In this study, KOPSTAY's success in developing its business activity was the result of members' cooperation. The members are not only contributing to financial capital but also providing ideas and commitment by being actively involved in the activities carried out by the co-operative. For example, the members become the singers, musicians, and dancers of the cultural group established by the co-operative.

Photo 5 and Photo 6 show some of the cultural group participations in the World Music Festival. The participations created good marketing channel to promote their tourism business.



Photo 5: Participation in the World Music Festival Pulau Pinang 2008



Photo 6: Participation in the World Music Festival Simpang Mengayau 2011

The business that is based on sharing by many members will be more developed than a business initiated by an individual (Lussier, 1995). This is because an individual business may face significant problems in terms of its ability to plan and monitor the business. Thus, the active participation of members in the co-operative is one key to the success of co-operatives. This is particularly true in the context of tourism, where the activities are depending on the other chains.

d) Support from government

Social networking, support, and cooperation of other agencies such as government have assisted in advancing the co-operatives. KOPSTAY not only received financial assistance but also gained recognition awards and the opportunity to promote their homestay abroad from the Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia. The Sabah State Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment (KePKAS) plays a role in financial support to KOPSTAY in the landscape project. The KOPSTAY also accredited with three-star recognition by the Malaysia Co-operative Societies Commission (MCSC). In fact, as mentioned earlier, MCSC is the commission that recommended the establishment of KOPSTAY. While the focus of CBT is primarily at the community and local level but it to be successful, it is essential to build critical linkage with other sectors of operation. Moreover, the ability of CBT to generate benefits is often bound by the key policies that originate from a variety of sectors (Ravinder, 2017). In general, the financial assistance, as well as training and marketing business opportunities from the government, can help improve the entrepreneurship success of Bumiputera small and medium entrepreneurs (Mohd Nor Hidayat, 2011).

e) Location

The final factor influencing the success of co-operatives is the selection of a business site. In this study, the location decision was supported by the demand for services related to tourism activities. KOPSTAY operates in the area of Mount Kinabalu, which is a famous tourist destination in Sabah for outdoor activities such as hiking, jungle trekking, bird watching and mountain climbing.

CONCLUSION

CBT has real potential to increase economic benefits; however, an appropriate business model must be in place. This study shows that the idea of running a CBT through a co-operative business model strongly supports the economic development of the local community. This is in line to create “one community one co-operative” to match the “one district one industry” aim emphasized by the Malaysian government. Through this case study, it can be concluded that downstream activities showed a high potential for expansion on a large scale when the CBT is managed through co-operative business model. The co-operative encourages the members to work together rather than to compete with each other. Through cooperation, they generated many downstream ideas as well as strategies to implement the ideas. The specialisation in certain downstream activities helped them to be more focused on increasing the quality of their services. The existence of committed and competent board members for managing and monitoring activities played an essential role in CBT success. The co-operative supported the members in terms of providing advice and assistance in managing the financial matter, finding external support from the government, and improving knowledge and skills in running the CBT systematically. The increase in revenue showed the success of CBT through co-operative business model. The co-operative promotes the culture of sharing and caring to achieve the vision toward reducing poverty among the local people, especially in rural area.

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