The Challenges of Community-Based Homestay Programme in Malaysia.

Nor Ashikin Mohd Nor[1], and Kalsom Kayat
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, MALAYSIA

Community-based tourism (CBT) is viewed as a tourism development that can benefit the members of the community, particularly in rural areas. In Malaysia, the community-based homestay programme (CBHP), which is a collective project undertaken by community members, is promoted to rural villages by the Malaysian government as a development strategy. In fact, the homestay programme has the potential to generate additional income for the villagers and provide an avenue for them to participate in tourism development. It also offers cultural exchange between the hosts and the guests, and incorporates the surrounding environment, including farms and the rural landscape, as the main attractions. Nevertheless, these benefits cannot be sustained if challenges are extensive. Community-based tourism will then be a failure. Hence, understanding the challenges faced by the homestay programme is mandatory for planners and policy makers. This understanding enables them to react appropriately to achieve a sustainable community-based programme, which can continuously develop the community members. Research on three homestay villages in Langkawi Island, Kedah and Selangor, which was undertaken in 2007, shows that homestay programmes are vulnerable to internal and external challenges. These numerous challenges are embedded in the policy at the various ministerial levels, the system of the homestay organisations and the characteristics of the community members. A total of 90 interviews were undertaken in three homestay villages, in addition to another 10 interviews with representatives from the government and the Malaysian Homestay Association. Semi-structured interviews provided primary data for this study while secondary data was sourced from document analysis.
Besides exposing the challenges, this paper provides an understanding in the conflicts between various stakeholders in the community-based homestay programme.

Key words: Malaysia tourism, homestay, community based homestay

Putting Community-Based Tourism in Context

Beeton, 2006; Britton, 1983; Bryden, 1973; Harrison, 1992). The role of tourism development in contributing to the development of local community is taken up by the community-based tourism (CBT) programmes. CBT has some characteristics of alternative tourism, including small-scale and bottom-up approach. It is said to have

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[1] E-mail: norashikini@uum.edu.my

less negative impacts than mass-tourism since the community approach is the best way to examine opportunities and difficulties associated with rapid tourism development (Murphy, 1985). In addition, CBT is closely linked to Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) and it runs parallel with community development when local participation and local control are at the core (Harrison, 2008; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). It also focuses on long-term benefits (Blackstock, 2005). The emphasis on local participation and the bottom up approach puts the local community at the centre of tourism development and therefore, in theory, will benefit them both economically and socially. Thus, tourism is seen as an approach to develop local communities. In Malaysia, community-based homestay programme (CBHP) is regarded as a tool to reduce poverty among the communities in rural areas.

Community-Based Homestay Programme in Malaysia

The government of Malaysia realises the significance of the homestay programme as a strategy to develop the community in the rural areas and strongly supports it. There is extensive involvement from the various government bodies, at the federal and also the state level. These government ministries and agencies, given their different priorities and objectives, cooperate in the development of the homestay programme. They all recognise the potential of the programme to develop the rural community. For example, since 2003, the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MoRRD) started to adopt the homestay programme as a strategy to combat poverty in rural areas, specifically, in their development lands.It has positive economic potential as homestay programme can generate additional income for the settlers who mainly work on palm or rubber plantations.

As a result of this increased emphasis on the programme, in 2005, the MoRRD allocated almost RM2 million for the development of the homestay programme in eight villages, which involved 220 participants. It is hoped that the homestay programme will bring a supplemental income to the generally poor rural communities in the land administered by the MoRRD. Homestay programme will assist them to gather an additional average income of RM350.00 a month for a family. This will indirectly help the communities in the rural areas to exit from the poverty loop, when the poverty level is where the income is below RM416.00 a month.

Besides the interest from MoRRD, Ministry of Tourism (MOTOUR) has also emphasised this programme as an alternative accommodation to visitors. The community-based homestay programme is one of the many tourism products offered to tourists.

The homestay programme is defined by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (previously known as the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism-MOCAT) as able "to provide supplementary source of income to the host besides providing a choice of alternative accommodation to the tourist" (MOCAT, 2002, p.1). Practically, it is a programme run collectively by the community members, not only those villagers who have registered with the Ministry of Tourism to become hosts. The collective effort of the community differentiates the homestay programme in Malaysia from the typical concept of homestay based on one, single operator, such as bed and breakfast. While host participants are involved in the homestay programme as they offer accommodation, other members of the community participate in the preparation of meals, cultural performances and tour guiding. Technically, the benefits from tourism are therefore, shared by the members of the community through their participation. Hence, it is understandable why this homestay programme is regarded as a

development strategy by the Malaysian government. However, due to some challenges within the homestay community and challenges contributed by factors outside the community, the potential of CBHP as a development tool for rural communities is marginal.

This paper presents the result of a study which analyses how a homestay programme may have contributed to sustainable community development in three villages in Malaysia. As the homestay programme is regarded as a strategy for developing rural areas, it is important to assess the challenges of such a project. In this paper, focus is given to internal and external factors that contribute to these challenges. Three different categories of homestay villages were selected; active, moderately active and not active. However, the names of the selected homestay villages are not disclosed. In each of the homestay villages, 30 villagers were selected to represent three different groups relevant to the homestay programme: the host participant, non-host participant and non-participant. This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the issues relating to the homestay programmes. In addition to the villagers themselves, ten representatives from the government and Malaysia Homestay Association (MHA) were interviewed to provide their perspectives on the programme as a sustainable development strategy.

Challenges of the CBHP

These challenges emerge from within the community as well as from outside the community. In this paper, challenges derived from within the community are described as internal, while challenges contributed by factors outside the community are termed as external challenges.

External Challenges

Misconception of homestay programme

To ease the planning, development and promotion process, the MOTOUR encourages the community homestay hosts to register. Registration with the MOTOUR is not compulsory and is voluntary in nature. Nevertheless, hosts are advised to do so as there are noticeable advantages. By registration, the MOTOUR can undertake a collective approach in promotion by publishing the homestay directory with all the names of the registered hosts in it. As part of host registration, the applicants had to attend homestay courses. It was compulsory for these applicants to attend the basic homestay course, jointly organised by the MOTOUR, MoRRD and Malaysia Homestay Association (MHA), for their application to be approved by the MOTOUR. Another requirement is the house inspection. The inspection panel includes representatives from:
1) the MOTOUR, usually the officers at the State Tourism will represent the Ministry,
2) health department, and
3) the MHA.

Having attended the Basic Homestay course and receiving the endorsement from the inspection panel, an applicant is considered successful. A registration certificate bearing the host's name and his/her address will then be produced by the MOTOUR. However, in the registration process, some host respondents observed that there were some deviations between the theory that they learnt from the course

and the expectations of the inspection team for the registration to be approved. This led to dissatisfaction and confusion because of the discrepancies between what the host participants learnt from the course and the actual requirements, particularly by the inspection panel. Some comments from respondents include:

> When we went to the course, we learnt from the course. They sent us to attend a course in the state of Pahang. In Pahang, we stayed with a foster family with 12 children. The house was crowded and the bed sheet was worn out. But, when we returned here, we were required to make our house at par with the hotel standard. Where could we get the capital? It is different with what we learnt from the course. It was different back then, when we attended the course, and it is different from what we actually do. We are confused. They (members of inspection team) want luxury (Host 15).

Hence, State Tourism Action Council (STAC) was seen as a barrier to villagers who wanted to participate in the homestay programme. Nonetheless, there are limitations to the quantity of local participation in the homestay programme. As much as the government would like to develop the rural villages through the homestay programme, it can be argued that government too acts as a barrier in increasing the participation from the local villagers. The priority of the MOTOUR to focus on commercialisation and tourism earning has implications in terms of setting a higher benchmark and raising the requirements for host applicants. It was found that some villagers' applications to become registered hosts were declined during the inspection because their houses were not equipped with the necessary facilities for the comfort of tourists. Similarly, Liu (2005) found that shabby, wooden houses were not considered proper for tourists. These requirements eliminate participation from the poor.

In summary, it was apparent that the deviation from the theory in the course resulted from the high expectations of the inspection group, which normally included the representative from the MOTOUR. Applicants were required to upgrade the facilities in the house to maintain the standard. Accordingly, more capital was needed for the purpose and these villagers did not have the capital to invest.

Method of Payment

Most of the visitors to homestay programme were from government agencies' programmes. For instance, the MoRRD has the role of developing rural areas through related courses targeted at increasing the income of the villagers. These roles were delivered by its agency, the Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA). Through the INFRA, many domestic guests had been supplied to the homestay programme around Malaysia. They were largely villagers from other parts of Malaysia. There were two main components of villager guests supplied by INFRA:
i) The participants of homestay management course who were undertaking practical training in homestay villages as part of their host registration requirement.
ii) The participants of the 'Village Integration' programme, who were brought by INFRA to see the development in successful homestay villages as an inspiration to develop their own villages. The group usually comprised Village Development and Security Committee (VDSC) members of other villages.

Although such programmes are capable of bringing a large number of visitors to the homestay villages, the income from these visitors cannot be earned instantly due to the payment by LO (Letter of Order). Villagers frequently experienced late payments from trip organisers and therefore, constrained their cash flow. This LO takes almost three months to be cashed. As homestay programme is regarded as a business entity, cash flow is an essential element. The problem of late payment was significant as one of the homestay villages in this study relied heavily on groups organised by government bodies. Most of the time, the Chairman had to use his own money to pay the hosts when payment by government bodies was delayed. "Where would the villagers get the money for the next two, three months? All of them would run away from the programme. I don't want that to happen. The villagers do not know what is LO" (Host 60, Present Chairman Homestay Programme, Village Y).

Beside the two challenges related to external bodies, there are also challenges from within the community.

Internal Challenges

Unbalanced Demography

In one of the three villages under study, the composition of the age groups was not balanced. Due to its remote location, this homestay village suffered a migration problem among the youngsters. Most of them migrated to the nearby towns for employment opportunities, leaving the elders behind. The participation from the youngsters in the homestay programme was limited. In this village, the registered host group consisted of hosts aged 40 and above. The lack of youngsters means a lack of replacement of homestay hosts which can affect its vulnerability and sustainability. When a community is facing migration from its young members seeking jobs outside the village, there is a risk associated with its human resources if only older people are left to do the work. Sustainability of the homestay programme is also at stake with this unbalanced demographic structure because future replacement of the hosts is limited.

1. Passive community

A passive community is a challenge in the development of the homestay programme. The respondents from state tourism agency agree that the participants of homestay programme need help. However, there seems to be a problem that when government continues to help, the community expects even more help on a continuous basis.

> The problem is, when we helped them, they want more help. And the problem with these Malays, they just do not want to initiate things on their own, subscribing to the needs, to the requirements and to the wants of the tourism segment itself, the homestay segment (State Tourism L).

Most of the homestay villages are incapable of being independent. They need closer monitoring from the government and once they are ignored by the government agency, the homestay programmes end. The villagers need close and constant supervision in terms of regular visits from the representative of state tourism agency to ensure the programme progresses. Thus, the homestay programmes are not self reliant and are dependent upon government officers making regular checks on them.

This challenge is contributed by the leader of the homestay programme, who could not mobilise the community. As the community is dependent on the government, a sudden discontinuation of the government's support increases its vulnerability.

2. *Leadership problems*

The challenge can also be in the form of the type of leadership. In one of the villages under study, the homestay programme was very successful (from the year of establishment, 1996, until 2000) with groups of guests from Malaysia and abroad. Following the change of leader in the village, the programme slowed down dramatically. There were various reasons associated with the leader such as poor communication, poor external relations, lack of transparency and alleged corruption. Good leadership style can successfully mobilise the community towards greater development.

3. *Informal organisational structure*

The challenge can also be detected from the organisational structure of the homestay association. There was no formal system in place in the homestay organisation as there were no working committee and no meetings in one of the homestay villages under study. It was entirely informal and revolves around one man – the Chairman of the village's Homestay Association. There is also a lack of recorded data in the operation of a homestay. The homestay entrepreneurs are not exposed to methods of recording and things are done informally. Consequently, information regarding this homestay segment is hard to retrieve and is not normally updated.

The lack of records means correct statistics cannot be obtained and the growth of the homestay programme cannot be identified when the guest numbers are missing. This is attributable to the lack of an efficient system to collect the data when there is no formal homestay management.

4. *Over-commercialisation*

One village under study is regarded as a successful homestay village. The expansion of business relations with private travel agents enables the growth in the demand of the homestay programme. However, commercialization can also be a challenge when it requires the management of the homestay programme to be more analytical in prioritizing. Although the tourist number is generally the yardstick to determine the success of a homestay programme, it is perhaps unsuitable to measure the overall development in the community. In this village, the link with private sectors only benefits a certain group of villagers, while the benefits to the majority have been marginalized. Driven by commercialization, self-interest among the leaders of the village has replaced community interest. Leaders and local elites striving for personal interests have been found to be a common failure factor in the community-based tourism initiatives in Kenya (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Similarly, the trend is starting to emerge in the homestay programmes under investigation. This is because they have access to financial resources as well as political advantage (Kayat & Mohd Nor, 2005).

5. *Conflicts in the community*

The basic requirement for a successful homestay programme is the acceptance from all community members. In one of the homestay villages, the conflict between its community members, particularly between VDSC and Homestay Association, has seen the homestay programme being suspended as a way of preventing further deterioration in the situation. There was a negative attitude towards the Homestay Association committee members, especially from those who did not obtain any benefit from the programme or among those in power (particularly members of VDSC) who felt they were being neglected. The management of the Homestay Association was regarded as poor by some respondents, including its own members, due to the lack of transparency. These conflicting parties threaten the sustainability of the programme as a development strategy and the integrity of the community as a whole. In this case, the tourism development project has failed to develop the community. Thus, the community-based tourism project is capable to deteriorate (instead of developing) the community when it is not accepted by the community at large. When unity cannot be achieved, the homestay programme may not be successful. The benefits from the homestay programme can no longer be received by the community when the programme is suspended and the costs in terms of disintegration are borne by all community members. This study recognizes and places an importance on unity and harmony within a community in order to sustain a homestay programme as a development strategy.

Conclusion

The community-based homestay programme has potential to develop the community members in rural areas. It can be seen as providing a platform to achieve development since the homestay programme focuses on local participation and local resources. However, there are challenges that may reduce its potential as a development strategy. These challenges may derive from both external and internal factors. Misconception of the programme when theory of homestay diverts from its practice and the slow method of payments imposed by government agencies are external challenges which are beyond the villagers' control. Nevertheless, it can be amended at the government level. Although some of internal challenges, such as unbalanced demography, are hard to manage, other challenges are manageable at the community level.

A community-based initiative like the homestay programme can only be successful when the villagers perceive that it benefits the general community members. Acceptance by the general community leads to the programme being sustained when it continues to benefit the community at large. In return, the community continues to accept the programme. As a result, this type of development programme will continue to develop the community in the present as well as in the future.

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