



## **The Role of Cooperatives in Addressing the Mismatch of Stakeholders' Visions for Sustainable Tourism**

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During my walk to the arrival gate at Labuan airport on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2016, I could notice several advertisements for homestays on Labuan Island. The taglines on some pictures stated “*Experience the true Malaysian culture*”; or “*Best homestay experience.*” These promotional ads at the airport reflect that homestay are an important aspect of Malaysian tourism. Homestays not only give a platform for travelers to experience local culture but also provide financial benefits to the local communities. I had the opportunity to interact with the different stakeholders of tourism development to deepen my understanding of the issues and benefits of the Malaysian homestay initiative during a week-long leadership programme organized by AKEPT and Prosper.NET on ‘*Nurturing local leadership towards sustainable development.*’

Tourism has been identified as an important tool for poverty reduction as it provides opportunities for economic development. Community-based tourism aims to empower local (often rural) communities to become the managers and decision-makers in relation to tourism in their region through their enhanced participation. Homestays are one among several approaches used for operationalizing the theoretical concept of community-based tourism. In theory, community-based tourism provides enhanced economic and social benefits to the local communities and minimal negative impact on the local environment. However, several issues have been reported to arise during the practical implementation of this concept. During my interaction with the different stakeholders responsible for implementing and sustaining homestays in Beaufort, Sabah, I learned the differences and similarities of community-based tourism by three different type of stakeholders, i.e., the government, the local communities, and the private tourism operators.

What does a community have to offer the tourists? It becomes one of the foremost questions to answer when initiating community-based tourism. Community-based tourism in the form of homestays in Beaufort, Sabah has a lot to offer to tourists. The serene natural environment (mangroves ecosystems are home to the rare proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*)) in association with the rich experience of traditional Borneo culture has immense potential for tourism development. The beauty of the landscape and the communities’ unique heritage seem to be attracting numerous tourists already. However, based on my visit to the few homestays, I observed that the participation of local communities in tourism activities was sometimes lacking. Several private tourism ventures have profitably capitalized on the environmental attractions in

the area, with very minimal participation of the local communities. Although the locals and the private tourism ventures do not seem to be in conflict, the narratives of locals did the voice of changing interactions. The most interesting observation that I could make was how the definition of the word 'local community participation' and 'benefit sharing' varied among different stakeholder groups, in particular between the local communities and the private tourism operators.

Our priorities are shaped by the vision of the future we have to ourselves as well as for others. Interacting with different stakeholders, I noticed a broad range of different perspectives on the understanding of participation and effective community-based tourism. Although the interest of the stakeholders may not necessarily be competing, they did indicate different interests. These differing visions, in turn, decide on how the negotiations and participation strategies are made in an arena of diverse stakeholders with different goals and outcomes. Government organizations play a crucial role in how negotiations are made. A shared vision of sustainability is vital in determining the existent sustainability of these community-based tourism initiatives.

The private tourism operators, operating in Labuan, envision local communities as employees rather than the managers of the area's natural resources and culture. Such a view challenges the core ideology of community-based tourism. It becomes necessary to ensure that in a multi-stakeholder environment the rights and the needs of local communities are kept as priorities. A model of sharing and equal participation should be developed to enhance the scope of distributive benefits.

In my opinion, the role of cooperatives or local community associations may be more efficient than any individual leaders in the case of community-based tourism. Cooperative as the word is defined as "an autonomous association of people united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled business". Cooperatives develop around a common goal shared within a community build strong social connections. Moreover, through the formation of cooperatives, the dependency trap of communities on the external support can be minimized if not eliminated. Furthermore, the community as a whole can gain awareness of the social and the commercial value of their natural and cultural heritage and can, therefore, be encouraged to conserve it. Finally, community-based tourism activities, in this case, the homestays, needs to be carefully planned so that the outcomes do not erode the culture and the heritage of the community in the long run - the idea of community over commercialization should always be maintained.