



Consensus, Locality, and Local Leadership

Individual reflection for AKEPT-ProSPER.Net Program in Malaysia, 2016.8 (Yi Dou)

During our one-week study tour, I not only deepened my understanding of sustainability in the region, but also recognized the necessity of local leadership crucial for promoting sustainable development in communities. Three questions were in my mind that I hoped to answer in Malaysia:

- What is the definition of a locality, and how is it embedded in global sustainability?
- What is local leadership, and what is its significance in promoting sustainability?
- How should I personally nurture and improve local leadership for sustainability?

Through the lectures and fieldwork that crossed multidisciplinary topics such as poverty, waste management, eco-tourism, and flood disaster management, I comprehensively understood that it is difficult to carry out a universal method for sustainable development without local leadership that provides specific solutions to local problems. Based on local characteristics such as geography, socioeconomic status, and community awareness, local leadership for sustainability occur on a “case-by-case” basis. One typical experience during the program was the survey of Kampung Bangkalalak in Beaufort with regards to flood disaster management in communities.

1. Sustainability, Locality, and Leadership

Through on-site observation and discussion with multiple stakeholders in Bangkalalak, I found the local requirement for sustainable development in flood disaster management has much in common with global trends for flood disaster management, including reliability of government systems, resilient land use and road planning, and redundancy of infrastructure. However, in policies for adaptation and mitigation, Bangkalalak represented local conditions that were unique. Even though Bangkalalak has suffered from serious flooding, with a frequency of two or more times annually, villagers seem to have adapted to the disaster conditions. Before the disaster, a district officer would inform everyone that a flood was approaching, while during the disaster, villagers would individually take measurements for food and water storage. However, any migration policy aimed at relocating residents to safer highland has been refused by the villagers. One reason could be that most of them work in the fishery sector, and had already adapted to flooding due to long-term experience. In addition, they were reluctant to

abandon houses and farmland that tied them to their ancestors.

However, living in hazard area will lead to a non-sustainable life style with current practices, including economic loss (for both public facilities and private properties), working time lost during flood events, and risk of exposure to disease. There appears to be a lack of leadership to coordinate between government and local villagers for migration policies. Before this study tour, I would try to identify a common vision of sustainability and set targets for each period of time through a back casting method. But in fact, learning from this on-site survey, it can be difficult to lead stakeholders to follow a certain path towards sustainability. There is often a need to explore more feasible ways to solve local problems.

2. Local leadership: Personality and Way of Thinking

Learning the facts about local leadership based on local conditions should not only create consensus on what a vision for sustainability should look like, but it should also set a roadmap to solve local problems step by step, so as to create a bridge from the current local reality to future of sustainable development in the area. Through previous learning and academic research, I have improved my ability and skills for creating a vision of sustainable development through analysis from system engineering perspective to develop city master plans. In the future, I will have to consider how to implement the planning through changing social behavior and the allocation of resources. In Bangkalalak, there exist many officers from various sectors regarding welfare to manage civil affairs, even a district officer who could convey the villagers' wishes to the parliament. It seems that currently no effective leadership exists to integrate the various sectors for creating a shared vision of disaster management, and no active coordination for victims to negotiate with the government regarding subsidies. Without effective leadership, perhaps the village will continue to suffer from flood disasters. Reflecting on this, perhaps the best position for local leadership could be a planner who integrates targets from various sectors and establishes a unified action roadmap based on local conditions, as well as a coordinator who negotiates among stakeholders and leads them to transition from the current status quo towards an expected direction of development.

According to the experience from both on-site observation and discussion with members of the community, I have reflected on my previous learning and career plan. The most serious barrier towards leadership on sustainable development appears to be the neglect of locality. Previously, most of my attention and endeavors were paid to academic research, which is relatively closed and isolated from engagement with government, companies and citizens. In the future, my individual learning plan for

nurturing local leadership will include more learning and practice through case studies and more positive participation to contribute to transition management within communities. I will not only work hard for paper publications and consulting with governmental departments, but also contribute to local NGOs and community associations for comprehending local awareness and concern. To paraphrase, “think globally, and act locally”.

I would like to thank the organizers, lecturers, staff, and community members for their efforts and help during the program. This experience was quite fruitful, and helpful for me in modifying my future career plans for promoting sustainable urban development.