

Public Participation in Sustainable Development Programs: Examining Public Participation Methods and Levels at Pustaka Negeri Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

Public participation is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This empowers individuals and communities to participate actively in decision-making and to contribute to the development and implementation of sustainable policies and initiatives. The integration of diverse viewpoints, local expertise, and community feedback improves both the decision-making process and the implementation of sustainable development. Public participation fosters varied perspectives and a sense of collective responsibility. Individuals are more likely to support and participate in sustainable development programs when given the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. The Malaysian Peninsula has been the primary focus of study on public participation in Malaysia. Sarawak, situated in Malaysia's Bornean region, has received less attention in this study. This research utilised a case study methodology, incorporating a focus group discussion with members of the sustainability team of Pustaka Negeri Sarawak. This research project aims to examine the methods and levels of public participation in sustainable development programs initiated and collaborated on by Pustaka Negeri Sarawak. The Eight Rungs Ladder of Citizen Engagement, developed by Arnstein, and the Spectrum of Participation, established by the International Association of Public Participation, will support the discussion on the evaluation of public participation in diverse sustainable development initiatives at Pustaka Negeri Sarawak. The most significant instance of participatory governance within Pustaka's portfolio is the People Accessible Network for Digital Empowerment and Inclusivity (PANDei) which occupies the pinnacle of both models' empowerment in Arnstein's Ladder and empower in the IAP2 Spectrum. This study is significant as it may enhance our understanding of public participation in sustainable development programs in Pustaka Negeri Sarawak and contribute to the wider recognition of public participation in sustainable development practices in the region.

Keywords: public participation, sustainable development programs, participation methods, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

INTRODUCTION

The participation of the public is increasingly acknowledged as a crucial element in the effective realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It serves a crucial function in promoting transparency, inclusivity, and collective accountability throughout different levels of society. By fostering public participation, individuals and communities are equipped to play a significant role in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of sustainable development policies and initiatives. The inclusion of varied viewpoints, particularly from indigenous and rural communities, enhances the policy-making process and fortifies the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives. The integration of indigenous knowledge, local experiences, and culturally informed values enables development planners to devise interventions that are more comprehensive, adaptable, and rooted in the community context. Public participation transcends mere symbolism; it is an essential component to guarantee that sustainable solutions resonate with the genuine needs and aspirations of the community. When communities actively participate in the formulation of policies and practices that influence their environment, livelihoods, and

overall well-being, they are more inclined to assume responsibility for these initiatives, consequently enhancing their sustainability and efficacy.

While its significance is widely recognised, academic inquiry into public participation in Malaysia has predominantly centred on the Peninsular region, leaving a notable gap in research pertaining to the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak. The geographic disparity in literature holds considerable importance, as Sabah and Sarawak demonstrate unique socio-political, economic, and environmental attributes in contrast to Peninsular Malaysia. These encompass varying governance frameworks, increased ethnic heterogeneity, extensive rural landscapes, and a more immediate dependence on natural resources all of which influence distinct sustainability challenges and prospects. For instance, most studies on sustainable development and public participation in Malaysia have mostly focused on Local Agenda 21 (LA21) practices. One example is a study conducted by Siti Mazwin, Puziah, and Norsyamira (2016) which examines the level of community awareness on LA 21. In contrast, another study by Md. Zan and Kamaruddin (2012) aims to determine the impact of LA 21 programs on the community.

This paper is significant as it seeks to fill a research void by exploring the dynamics of public participation in relation to sustainable development initiatives in East Malaysia. Since the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation, the country has unwaveringly affirmed its dedication to sustainable development. Nonetheless, each state encounters distinct developmental hurdles, including environmental degradation, the marginalisation of indigenous communities, and infrastructural inequalities, all of which demand a more inclusive strategy in development planning.

Considering this contextual framework, Pustaka Negeri Sarawak presents itself as a noteworthy and fitting case study. In February 2021, the library received a mandate from the YAB Premier of Sarawak, Datuk Patinggi Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Abang Haji Openg, to lead the Sarawak government's initiatives in fostering awareness and advocacy for the Sustainable Development Goals. This mandate was established in April 2021, marking the state's strategic vision to engage various societal actors, including governmental agencies, the private sector, NGOs, and the public in the pursuit of sustainable thinking and practices.

Pustaka Negeri Sarawak, with its varied programming and community outreach efforts, exemplifies a focal point for analysing the mechanisms of public participation in the realm of sustainable development advocacy. Its collaborative framework brings together civil society organisations, educators, students, local leaders, and general citizens to collectively advance sustainability objectives. This institution serves as a rich environment for exploring the possibilities and limitations of participatory governance within the larger context of Malaysia's sustainable development agenda.

Sustainable development and public participation

The concept of sustainable development gained significant attention in recent years, particularly following the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), commonly referred to as the Global Goals, by the United Nations in 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals, comprising 17 distinct objectives, represent a worldwide initiative aimed at eliminating poverty, safeguarding the environment, and ensuring that by the year 2030, all individuals can experience peace and prosperity. Achieving these global objectives necessitates a steadfast commitment from every nation across the globe.

Although it has gained popularity in recent times, the journey towards sustainable development has spanned over four decades and has encountered numerous challenges. The pursuit of sustainable development constitutes a worldwide initiative that necessitates comprehensive foresight and strategic actions prior to the manifestation of tangible outcomes. The Brundtland Commission Report of 1987 articulated sustainable development as "development that fulfils the demands of the present without jeopardising future generations' ability to satisfy their own needs." Sustainable development represents a systematic approach to structuring society in a way that ensures its enduring existence over time. This involves considering both present and prospective necessities, including the safeguarding of environmental and natural resources, alongside the pursuit of social and economic equity.

Subsequent to this report, a United Nations Conference on the Environment convened five years later in Rio de Janeiro from June 3rd to 14th, 1992. The conference serves as a forum for member states to collaborate in tackling matters pertaining to sustainability. The summit effectively garnered the commitment of numerous countries to advance economic development alongside the imperative of safeguarding the environment and non-renewable resources. This summit also observed the endorsement of three significant action plans aimed at sustainable development namely Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests. Among these three action plans, Agenda 21 stands out as the initiative that underscores the significance of public participation in all sustainable development efforts and become the basis for SDG 17, Partnership for the goals.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation and the IAP2 Spectrum in understanding public participation

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation and the International Association for Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation serve as significant frameworks for comprehending the depth and character of public participation in the decision-making process. Arnstein's Ladder, first introduced in 1969, delineates a hierarchical framework consisting of eight levels, extending from manipulation to citizen control (Retnaningsih, Muttaqin, Kurniashi, Budianto, Ghazali, Mutohar, Susanto, Widodo & Loka, 2013). The lower levels signify a lack of engagement, where the aim is to inform or "remedy" participants instead of authentically seeking their contributions. Advancing within the hierarchy, the processes of informing and consultation often reflect a superficial participation, wherein individuals are presented with information or invited to share their views, yet their insights may not be genuinely integrated into the ultimate decision-making outcomes. The upper levels, including partnership, delegated authority, and citizen governance, signify escalating degrees of citizen impact and independence. Arnstein's Ladder functions as an essential framework for analysing the genuineness and profundity of citizen participation initiatives, allowing stakeholders to rigorously evaluate whether engagement efforts truly empower citizens or are merely superficial gestures.

Conversely, the IAP2 Spectrum delineates five levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower (IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, 2023). Each level signifies a distinct commitment to the public concerning their impact on decision-making processes. The Spectrum seeks to establish a comprehensive framework for practitioners to effectively design and execute public participation processes, emphasising the degree of influence that the public will exert (IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, 2023). In contrast to Arnstein's Ladder, the IAP2 Spectrum delineates various levels of participation while refraining from suggesting a hierarchical structure.

The fundamental distinctions are rooted in their composition and emphasis. Arnstein's Ladder presents a structured critique of the distribution of power, whereas the IAP2 Spectrum offers a framework for the design of participatory processes (IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, 2023; Retnaningsih et al., 2013). Arnstein's Ladder serves as a critical framework for examining the allocation of power within participatory processes, drawing attention to cases where participation is superficial or strategically deceptive. The IAP2 Spectrum seeks to establish a framework for practitioners to effectively design and execute public participation processes, emphasising the degree of influence that the public will exert (IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, 2023).

In summary, both Arnstein's Ladder and the IAP2 Spectrum provide insightful frameworks for comprehending the nuances of public participation. Arnstein's Ladder serves as a vital tool for analysing power dynamics and the genuineness of citizen engagement efforts, whereas the IAP2 Spectrum presents a pragmatic framework for crafting and executing participatory processes that encompass diverse degrees of public influence. Both frameworks enhance the inclusivity and efficacy of decision-making processes by fostering a profound comprehension of the significance and influence of public participation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised focus group talks with members of the sustainable committee of Pustaka Negeri Sarawak to thoroughly evaluate the sustainable development activities. Seven informants participated in face-to-face discussions facilitated by structured questions. The inquiry was explicitly formulated to examine the approaches employed by the library and to assess the degree of participation in sustainable development practices within the

institution. The utilisation of focus group discussions facilitates a comprehensive grasp of the intricacies and complications associated with the implementation of sustainable practices in an organisational context. Focus groups can uncover diverse perspectives and discoveries that quantitative methods may overlook (Ja'afar, 2023). The information collected from these discussions can subsequently be analysed to assess the degree of involvement and the overall efficacy of the library's sustainable development initiatives. The study acquires useful insights into the internal dynamics, problems, and triumphs of promoting sustainability inside the institution by concentrating on the perspectives of the sustainable committee members.

Public Participation in Pustaka Negeri Sarawak's Sustainable Development Programs

Pustaka Negeri Sarawak, the official state library of Sarawak, has transcended its traditional function as a knowledge repository. In recent years, it has become a leading institution advocating for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through an extensive array of programs. These programs encompass a diverse range of thematic domains, including digital empowerment, environmental sustainability, educational advancement, cultural preservation, and community inclusivity. The incorporation of public participation into these efforts is a crucial element that enhances their legitimacy, efficacy, and enduring influence.

To thoroughly evaluate the participation dynamics of Pustaka's initiatives, two analytical frameworks are utilised: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum. Arnstein's Ladder, established in 1969, delineates a typology of citizen engagement that spans from non-participation (manipulation and treatment) to varying levels of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), culminating in degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). The IAP2 Spectrum classifies public involvement into five hierarchical levels of influence: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower. These frameworks provide organised viewpoints for the systematic evaluation of the participation quality of each program.

Table 1 Summary of Sustainable Development Programs by Pustaka Negeri Sarawak with Public Participation Analysis

Program Name	Belonging SDGs	Public Participation Method	Arnstein's Ladder	IAP2 Spectrum
Sarawak Sustainable Seminar Series II	SDG 3, 11, 16	Seminar with public dialogue and community feedback	Consultation	Consult
MySarawak STYLE Challenge 2024	SDG 12	Public competition with youth involvement and judging panels	Involve	Involve
GlobeSync Community Research and Sustainability Conference (GlobeCoReS)	SDG 17, 11	Conference-based collaboration with researchers and community input	Partnership	Collaborate
Sustainable Sarawak Webinar Series (SSWS)	SDG 3, 4, 10, 11, 16	Webinars with open Q&A and policy dialogue sessions	Consultation	Consult
Hydroponics for Sustainability	SDG 2, 12, 13	Hands-on workshops and practical learning sessions	Involve	Involve
Tree Planting Project	SDG 13, 15	Community planting events and environmental awareness campaigns	Involve	Involve
People Accessible Network for Digital Empowerment & Inclusivity (PANDei)	SDG 4, 10, 17	Training sessions, e-learning modules, and feedback mechanisms	Empowerment	Empower
Reading Seeds Programme	SDG 4, 10	Parent-child reading activities and educator engagement	Involve	Involve
Sustainable Preservation of Public Records and Archives	SDG 11, 16	Workshops and consultations with archivists and agencies	Consultation	Consult

The Sarawak Sustainable Seminar Series II and the Sustainable Sarawak Webinar Series (SSWS) exemplify projects that predominantly employ a consultation methodology. These programs aim to spread knowledge and

enhance understanding of critical societal issues related to SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Public participation is encouraged via structured conversations, interactive panels, and question-and-answer sessions, offering citizens a forum to express their thoughts, albeit without the power to affect choices. Consequently, these activities are positioned within the consultation tier of Arnstein's Ladder and the consult category of the IAP2 Spectrum.

The Sustainable Preservation of Public Records and Archives program aligns with the consultation framework of both models. It aims to preserve institutional memory and improve the transparency of public governance by engaging archivists, researchers, and governmental stakeholders in consultative workshops. Public engagement is confined to expert opinions and commentary, excluding collaborative decision-making. These programs, however praiseworthy for their transparency and openness, operate within the confines of institutional control, offering scant opportunity for authentic cooperation or empowerment.

A more captivating form of engagement is observable in initiatives such as the MySarawak STYLE Challenge 2024, Hydroponics for Sustainability, the Tree Planting Project, and the Reading Seeds Programme. These projects correspond with the involve category of the IAP2 Spectrum and the involvement level on Arnstein's Ladder. The STYLE Challenge combines sustainable fashion with youthful creativity, allowing participants to collaboratively produce ideas and engage in evaluation processes. While decision-making authority resides with the organising institution, the program's collaborative nature fosters active participation and accountability for results.

The Hydroponics for Sustainability program provides practical expertise on sustainable urban agriculture through hands-on training. Participants are active learners rather than passive recipients, fostering a sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship. The Tree Planting Project involves communities in environmental protection, promoting ecological awareness and intergenerational responsibility. The Reading Seeds Programme integrates parental engagement with the promotion of early childhood literacy, strengthening educational values through participatory activities within the home environment. These projects exemplify significant engagement without completely relinquishing authority to the community.

The GlobeSync Community Research and Sustainability Conference (GlobeCoReS) operates at a more collaborative level. This program exemplifies a conscious transition from conventional top-down methods to collaborative decision-making frameworks. It unites scholars, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, and community stakeholders in a dialogic framework that emphasises research-based practices and interdisciplinary collaborations. This kind of engagement reflects Arnstein's partnership and IAP2's collaborates by facilitating the co-design, co-implementation, and co-evaluation of sustainability solutions by communities and institutions. GlobeCoReS illustrates the potential of participatory governance in promoting localised, inclusive, and scalable sustainability outcomes.

The most significant instance of participatory governance within Pustaka's portfolio is the People Accessible Network for Digital Empowerment and Inclusivity (PANDei). This effort occupies the pinnacle of both models' empowerment in Arnstein's Ladder and empower in the IAP2 Spectrum. PANDei beyond ordinary knowledge transmission decentralises the authority of knowledge production and application. PANDei empowers marginalised populations by imparting digital literacy skills and facilitating access to self-paced learning platforms, hence placing control in the users' hands. This user-driven methodology enhances capacity building, fosters equity, and maintains engagement, establishing it as a model of civic empowerment via digital transformation.

By analysing various involvement models across initiatives, one might identify a strategic hierarchy of participatory strategies. Informative and consultative methodologies predominate in programs focused on policy discourse and public awareness, whereas engagement and cooperation are prominent in community-based or skill-oriented projects. Empowerment is constrained yet profoundly influential in its instances. This distribution aligns with existing literature on public participation, indicating that elevated engagement levels are typically resource-intensive and necessitate ongoing institutional commitment. Pustaka's ability to sustain this range of participation across several thematic domains demonstrates its institutional flexibility and dedication to inclusive development.

The incorporation of several participation models signifies an adaptive governance strategy from a policy and institutional design viewpoint. It recognises that many forms of participation are suitable based on the program's complexity, target audience, and intended results. Consultation effectively facilitates agenda-setting and awareness-raising; involvement promotes behavioural change; collaboration enhances ownership; and empowerment ensures long-term community resilience. This levelled participation structure not only facilitates SDG implementation but also bolsters democratic legitimacy and program sustainability.

Moreover, the participative tactics utilised by Pustaka have significant ramifications for the localisation of the SDGs. By including public input throughout the programming process from inception to assessment, the library guarantees that its sustainability initiatives are culturally pertinent, socially inclusive, and democratically valid. This localisation is especially crucial in a varied culture such as Sarawak, where various ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic settings must be considered in program design. Participation in this environment is not simply an operational decision, but a normative necessity that validates community agency and cultural significance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Pustaka Negeri Sarawak's sustainable development programs demonstrate a sophisticated approach to public participation that is both varied and well anchored in the library's institutional philosophy. Pustaka, as a public institution engaged in knowledge dissemination, community involvement, and policy advocacy, demonstrates a commendable alignment with global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through its adoption of participatory governance mechanisms.

A considerable portion of Pustaka's initiatives function within the consultative and participatory levels, exemplified by the Sustainable Sarawak Webinar Series and Hydroponics for Sustainability, however, there is evident institutional readiness to transcend passive engagement methods (Riggs, Langston, Margules, Boedhijhartono, Lim, Sari, Sururi, and Sayer, 2018). These consultative formats function as essential gateways, particularly for public awareness and behavioural modification programs. They provide citizens access to information and opportunity to express their ideas, yet do not necessarily engage them in decision-making or agenda-setting.

However, the introduction of increasingly collaborative and empowering initiatives signifies a notable advancement in the institution's participatory ethos (Porcaro, 2021). Initiatives such as the GlobeSync Community Research and Sustainability Conference (GlobeCoReS) exemplify an advanced participatory paradigm that incorporates cross-sector collaboration and participatory decision-making. These forms are not simply superficial gestures but structural improvements that allocate influence more equally among stakeholders, promoting a culture of shared responsibility and co-ownership of results.

The PANDei initiative exemplifies community empowerment via digital literacy. PANDei exemplifies the 'Empower' layer of the IAP2 Spectrum by establishing platforms that enable marginalised people to independently access, generate, and utilise information. Their success demonstrates the viability and significance of expanding such models to other subject domains. This indicates a fundamental transformation from the library serving as a top-down distributor of knowledge to functioning as a facilitator of community empowerment and resilience (Tait, Martzoukou, & Reid, 2016). The ramifications of participatory governance reach well beyond the initiatives in question. Restructuring institutional frameworks to incorporate community perspectives enhances the likelihood of achieving equitable, durable, and locally pertinent outcomes (Srinivasan, 2024). In Sarawak, a state marked by significant cultural diversity and differing levels of urban and rural development, such adaptation is crucial. Engagement cultivates ownership, which subsequently guarantees the sustainability and social legitimacy of developmental initiatives.

Pustaka Negeri Sarawak is poised to enhance its role as a civic innovator by formalising participatory approaches in program planning, execution, and evaluation at all levels. There is significant opportunity to enhance the 'collaborate' and 'empower' levels, not merely through separate programs, but as a fundamental mindset that shapes organisational culture. This may encompass the establishment of citizen advisory panels, the collaborative development of program agendas with community organisations, and participatory evaluation methods that incorporate user perspectives and comments. Furthermore, an emphasis on assessment and feedback mechanisms

is essential. Participatory initiatives must incorporate public input and illustrate how such input influences outcomes. This transparency is essential for preserving public trust and preventing participation from deteriorating into mere performative tokenism. Employing participatory metrics, impact assessments, and longitudinal tracking could improve accountability and facilitate ongoing learning.

Pustaka may contemplate implementing a hybrid participatory model that harmonises community involvement with professional oversight, thereby guaranteeing that initiatives are both technically sound and socially relevant. Collaborations with academic institutions, civil society organisations, and governmental agencies may enhance capacity building, resource sharing, and innovation. This ecosystem approach would enable Pustaka to surpass its conventional status and function as a dynamic laboratory for sustainable government.

The trajectory of Pustaka Negeri Sarawak's sustainable development programs exemplifies how cultural and educational organisations may facilitate participatory government. Pustaka redefines its role as a public library by unwavering dedication to diversity, openness, and empowerment. This serves as a paradigm for libraries throughout Malaysia and public institutions globally that seek to connect with the Sustainable Development Goals while promoting democratic government. Therefore, by further expanding empowerment-oriented projects like PANDEI and duplicating collaborative models demonstrated by GlobeCoReS in various sectors, Pustaka Negeri Sarawak can enhance its transformative influence. By means of strategic expansion, the library can establish itself as an enduring component of Sarawak's sustainable development framework, one that not only teaches and informs but also equips, empowers, and uplifts the communities it serves. Consequently, Pustaka will not only maintain its relevance but also become essential in Malaysia's overarching pursuit of equitable and sustainable development.

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