TELECENTRE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT DIMENSION[1]

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ABSTRACT

Most writers agreed that community development, is best when such development employs bottom up approach rather than the top-down approach. This is because such development would strengthen the communal solidarity as it is based on communal demands. As such, individuals within a community are able to organise themselves and respond to various problems through communal effort or ability. Its in view of this, that ICT, especially the telecentre is vigorously introduced to communities around the world. In essence, ICT is strongly promoted to improve the socio-economic development of rural areas. Hence, the telecentre is seen as a contributory tool or catalyst to both social and economic empowerment of the community. Therefore, this article explores the impact of telecentre to the rural communities, especially it's psychological empowerment of the community members. To arrive at a logical conclusion in this paper, the research employed qualitative method as it provided an empirical framework to gather quality data. Major finding indicates that the telecentre in the study areas, is seen by these communities as a landmark and a source of proud and development.

Keywords: Telecentre, Empowerment, community, development

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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

160 | P a g e

INTRODUCTION

According to the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. SCDC maintains that it seeks the empowerment of local communities,… hence a good community development is an action that helps people to recognise and develop their ability and potential and organise themselves to respond to problems and needs which they share. One such community development is the introduction of Information Communication Technology (ICT) especially the telecentre.

Information Communication Technology (ICT), a multidimensional communication device or application(s) which is enhancing or changing how human evolves—both in communication and acquisition of know-how. In recent years, telecentre, an integral part of ICT has beenstrongly promoted to improve the socio-economic development of rural areas. Telecentre in another word could be referred as an 'internet café'. However, while internet café is a common sight in most cities and towns, the telecenter is fast becoming an imposing landmark in many rural areas, especially areas tagged as very remote. The importance of this building in these rural areas is to enhance community communication but more importantly to contribute or act as a catalyst to the community's socio-economic development. Telecentre from development perceptive is tailored to reflect bottom up approach rather than the top-down approach. Often, the telecentre project is spearheaded by NGOs, and sometimes the states or governmental organisations.

In sum, Dang, Sultana and Umemoto (2008) observed that much effort has been made to bring ICT to the poor in rural areas in the developing countries. These authors maintained that;

> The pro-poor ICT programs are diversified, involving different agents such as international organizations, governments, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and private enterprises. They provide different ICT services, from fixed phones to mobile phone services, from e-mail and browsing services to more sophisticated information and knowledge services related to health care, education (2008).

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

161 | P a g e

Prior to commencement of the project or construction of Telecentre in most rural areas, an initial 'Needs Analysis[2]' is carried out to assess the level of community's acceptance of the project. The need analysis often last between six months to one year. The outcome of this need analysis determines if the project will go ahead or thrown out. When accepted and completed, the telecentre is more than a building for a mere internet activity for most communities. Its utilisation ranges from internet surf, meeting or lecture hall. Besides, most 'remote'[3]rural community dwellers, view telecentre as a communal landmark for locals and tourist alike.

Accordingly, Zahurin Mat Aji et al. (2010) described telecentre as a public place where people can access computers, the Internet, and other digital technologies that enable people to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others. Most importantly, it provides access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for people who cannot afford to own theirs. In relation to telecentre and rural areas, Zahurin Mat Aji, Shafiz Affendi Mohd Affendi and Wan Rozaini Sheik Osman (2010) stated;

> … community telecentres have been rapidly promoted as a vehicle to provide access to information during the past decade, especially for rural communities in developing countries. They have been viewed as an efficient approach to decrease the digital divide between developed and developing countries. Various telecentre projects have been piloted around the world and experiences have been accumulated. These various ICT-based initiatives are developed to help in reducing the digital gap between the rural and urban communities. Hopefully, by creating community telecentres, the rural communities can eventually improve their economic productivity and social well-being

Telecentre has evolved to accommodate diverse communities or rural people, as such, it is often tailored to provide some level of specific products. Hence, different kinds of telecentre. There are different types of telecentres.These include Micro, Mini, Basic, and Full Service Telecentres. Yet, these different types serve more or less similar purposes in the communities. In fact, Jensen and Esterhuysen (2003)observed that;

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[2]Need Analysis is more commom with social scienece academicians who understand the need for a community to adopt bottom-up approach for community projects. This is ensure community are partners in development rather than a mere observers. Meanin to say, such project is adopts the bottom-up approach rather than the top-down approach which often ends up dividing the state and the community.
[3]Meaning the distance from remote communities to the nearest city or town could be as far as 70 to 200km. Not to mention, these communities may be linked by tarred road and inhibitable forest and jungles.

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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)
162 | P a g e

> All Telecentres aim to stimulate and respond to the demand for information and communication services, yet each Telecentre is (sic) likely to have its own unique qualities that match the needs of the community. Of course, all Telecentres believe that they are relevant to the community they serve. An important indicator of the success of any Telecentre is the degree to which it becomes an integral part of the community it serves. Telecentres often start out small and expand their services in response to demand.

Thus, thisarticle explores the impact oftelecentre tothe rural communities, especially it's psychological empowerment of thecommunity members. Detailed discussion on the notion of psychological empowerment is dealt with in subsequent sections.

Ever since the inception orthe creation of the telecentre as a bottom-up development project or development programme (see W'O Okot-Uma, Alamango and Yeomans 1999), one issue that kept surfacing among many rural development writers and academicians are the issue of sustainability and utilisation of the centre given the educational level of most members of the communities and using the equipment in the centre for vices rather than productivity. Yet, none of these writers or academics discussed the importance of the telecentre outsides its socioeconomic benefits to the community members of individuals. Therefore, it is logical to argue here that most of the negative conclusion made in relation to telecentre could be an over sensualization that many academicians thrived upon. But having made such a strong stand, it is necessary to examine what the telecentre means or represents to a community or members of that community. This is vital as most telecenters are built in remote or areas with little and scanty physical development projects.

BACKGROUND

The Telecentre Project for Orang Asli (TPOA) is an offshoot of a "Need Analysis" research on four Orang Asli Pos (Division/region) in two Malaysian states of Kalentan and Pahang. TPOA is made of academic researchers from social sciences, ICT and building engineers from the University Malaysia Sarawak. While the academic researchers and ICT and building engineers provided technical assistance and directions, the locals in these four Pos construct the telecentre building and formed the core management human resource. Each Pos are entitled to one Telecentre. Prior to the building, each project site is organized by a local steering committee known as the Telecentre Management Committee (TMC) and supervised

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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)
163 | P a g e

by TPOA members. More details on the four Pos and funding of the building are provided below.

THE NOTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPLORING

According to Oladipo (2009),

> Psychological Empowerment (PE) has been operationalized as an individual's cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalization. PE is thus considered as a multi-faceted construct reflecting the different dimensions of being psychologically enabled, and is conceived of as a positive integrate of perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment, which is rooted firmly in a social action framework that includes community change, capacity building, and collectivity.

The core theme is the "sense of perceived control". Perceived control may sound or connotes elusiveness or abstract, yet the sense of control in some ways implies empowerment (this could be power-within or power-with). This is very obvious given that empowerment is not linear process orone directional but rather a spiral process. And because empowerment is intrinsic with most human prognosis and in some instances achievement, certain projects may not directly enhanced individual advancement, but it creates a psychological empowerment. In this sense, PE often shapes individuals or community sense of achievement. It could also encourage or even enz], force individuals or community to inspire for a greater development height. The development could be individual or communal oriented. In essence, the primary understanding here is the fact that individual(s) or community/ies recognizes (his/her)their ability to be in charge.To be in charge is to be empowered. Such empowerment transcend beyond material possession, but also psychological empowerment.As Oladipo (2008) argued,

> When people are psychologically empowered, there will be a change in attitude, cognition and behaviour, which most assuredly will lead to a positive change in value orientation, increased patriotic actions, the ability to postpone gratification of one's desires, improved Self-esteem,

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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

164 | P a g e

self-efficacy, self-consciousness as well as better psychological well-being which will culminate in a peaceful and developing society.

However, the above sum must not be taken literally because in most human activities or achievements, certain factors are vital in order to achieve the projected goal(s). Such factor(s) may be directly or indirectly linked to socio-cultural or environmental matters. Nonetheless, when thinking about community empowerment, unlike none academic papers, social scientist draws on decades of theory and practice concerned with developing and understanding communitydevelopment (see www.cdx.org.uk). They (cdx uk) argue,"Community development is about building activeand sustainable communities based on social justiceand mutual respect... it is about changing powerstructures to remove the barriers that prevent peoplefrom participating in the issues that affect their lives". In relation to telecentre establishment, if its construction is based on collective effort, and prominently bottom up approach, the centre will often generate in the mind of the community members a sense of developmental change or empowerment. This empowerment here denotes a process which endows an individual or individuals with the ability to orchestrate their lives to provide a degree of autonomy and control over the world (see Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988, Mayo and Craig 1995, Speer and Hughey 1995). Thus, construction of telecentre in the most remote settlement or village will internalize some element of intrinsic value or empowerment on the dwellers of these settlements. Especially given the fact that empowerment is of intrinsic value and relevant at both individual and collective levels.

METHODOLOGY

The key research method in this study is qualitative. According to Creswell (2014)… qualitative research approach focuses on how the researcher interprets the understanding about a phenomenon as from the participants' point view. As this study focused on the relationship between telecentre building in a remote settlement and its psychological empowerment of the dwellers, qualitative methodenables the researcher to provide a logical meaning to each respondent's interpretation or meanings of the telecentre in their community. Hence Silverman (2011) argued that qualitative research enables the study of phenomena, such as areas of social reality which cannot be measured by statistics. Reid (1987) on the other hand, maintains that qualitative is often the most appropriate research strategy to study the social processes of complex human systems. This study has especially emphasized on how the changes would affect the society, making qualitative method a more suitable way to study the telecentre and the psychological empowerment among the Orang Asli. Data

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

165 | P a g e

collection for this article, therefore, was through face-to-face interview and observation. These data were obtained from a target group with age range from 25 years and above. This target group was chosen given their aptitudeand understanding of what 'the telecentre' building in their community means to them and their community.

This study has been an on-going telecentre project initiated since 2013. Four remote 'Pos[4]' were chosen as study areas. An initial "Need Analysis" was carried out in the four Pos to assess the level of acceptability of the project. The four Pos arePos Sinderup, Pos Lanjang, Pos Balar and Pos Gob. The first two are located in the state of Pahang while the other remaining two are located in the state of Kelantan. The four Pos vary in geographical size, population, number of villages and household members. The study focused on the Temiar[5]and Semai subgroups within the Orang Asli group classified as Senoi. Although many members of these two subgroups still practise hunter-gathers, others have embraced farming. Hence, many were optimistic that the telecentre when fully operational could enhance their socioeconomic status. In fact, the result of the 'Need Analysis', significantly indicates that more than 80% of the population of the four Pos are in support of the telecentre project.

Yet, there were few that either outrightly rejected the project or adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. Data from the field indicated that these rejection or 'wait and see' position was an upshot of years of frustration and distrust of the outsiders and their so-called development projects. If in fact, one frustrated elder in one the four Pos said; "When you want our lands and trees you did not come to enquire from us, now you want to build telecentre you want our opinion, what difference does it make (Elder G, Pos Lanjang)". However, when the community members began the construction of the telecentre buildings, such voices or opinion was not heard or even reflect on the communal commitment toward the buildings.

Our understanding of this position is not because the voice died or simply ignored us, but because the community members recognized our commitment and dedication to telecentre building and their well being. Besides, the 'Need Analysis' process, enhance our understanding of the communities and create trust and faith in the program/project. What is more, because our relationship with them is based on mutual respect and understanding, the

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[4]A Pos is a cluster of villages known as kampong in Bahasa Malayu.
[5] According to the Center for Orang Asli Concerns as of 2000, the estimated population of the Temiar stood at 17,706 and that of Semai at 34,248.

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

166 | P a g e

community recognised of power of the project and how it may enhance their personal growth and wellbeing. Indeed, in most of our interactions and associations with them, we abide by the community protocols. That is, high reverence to their custom, traditions,and sensitive to certain issues or their taboos.

TELECENTRE BUILDING AND COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

The construction of the telecentre buildings tagged e-Gob, e-Sinderup, e-Lanjang and e-Balar were through communal effort or locally known as *gotong royong*. The community members organised and allocate tasks based on individual or community's specialisation. While some building materials were bought and supplied to the Telecentre Management Committee (TMC)[6], from the project's fund, other materials were sourced or constructed by the members of each community. The first building was completed within six months, and the three others were completed within two and three month interval. Although there were drawbacks and complaints from the community members, the telecentre building was completed and celebrated by most of the community members. The sense of self and communal accomplishment was undeniable. Because, this was the first building to be directly built and supervised by the members of these Pos.Most of the respondents view the telecentre building as a community landmark and testimony of the communal determination and power. In fact, two of the TMC chairmen stated;

> In my mind, I thought it's impossible to complete this building when UNIMAS team talked about it. But we have demonstrated here we can move forward if we join hands to together. This building has given me confidence to believe the sun has started to shine in my kampong.

The second respondent, beaming with life when he was asked; what does this telecentre symbolizes for him? He answered; *able to dream and fly.* This respondent, pointed out that his position as the TMC chairman, was his first major role to serve his community. He noted, there were times he thought of quitting, but he knew if he does, his name will forever be remembered in his community as a failure. So, he held on, even when the going was very

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[6] TPOA members worked with each Pos to form a the TMC. The TMC act as supervising and coordinating team for effective execution of the telecentre building.

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

167 | P a g e

tough. He said; *today I am delighted, and can always encourage the younger generation by pointing at the telecentre building.*

Besides, the telecentre has not only brought many factional community groupstogether, but also provided an avenue for them to learn new things or share ideas on how to accomplish a set out goals. And since the telecentre is not attached to any NGO or GO, it was built through communal effort, thus, it is owned by the entire community. Therefore, members visit the building or utilises the equipment in them without feeling intimidated. The same could be said in terms of voicing out their concerns and ideas. Unlike other buildings such as the clinics, schools or community halls built by the state, there is a strong bond between the community members and the telecentre. Partly because it is a creation of their collective effort and sweat. This bond and collective effort have all the elements of psychological empowerment.As noted above;

> PE is a multi-faceted construct that reflects the different dimensions of being psychologically enabled, and is conceived of as a positive integrate of perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment, which is rooted firmly in a social action framework that includes community change, capacity building, and collectivity…When people are psychologically empowered, there will be a change in attitude, cognition and behaviour, which most assuredly will lead to a positive change in value orientation, increased patriotic actions.

That change in attitude or increase in patriotic actions, are very obvious with many residences of these four Pos. Some have taken the opportunity to participate in our 'training trainers' programs'; so they will in return, train their community in telecentre usage and ICT education. I recalled instances, participants in such training, designed training dates and time for the communities.Two participants have these to say;

> I'm glad about this training and I will make sure others in my village learn a thing or two from me. But I am lacking in confidence…it will be good if you'll conduct a confidence building training. That will help many of us to share the knowledge we acquired from the telecentre workshops.

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)
168 | P a g e

Another respondent added; *from what I have heard and seen since the telecentre was built here, it has given me hope ...some ideas on how to exchange knowledge with my friends and others in the neighbouring villages. I do not have this kind of hope before its construction.*

This notion of psychological empowerment is clearly visible when the community members participation in meetings or workshops at the centre were relaxed, and show no sign of intimidation or presuraized in any. This is basically as most respondents or community members that visited these telecentre feel like winners and sense of accomplishment. Their body language connotes sense of belong and ownership rather than a visitor or customer to internet Café.Data from the field shows, within the premises of the telecentre building, most community members are calm, and voluntarily contribute ideas. Issues were discussed effortlessly in a manner that portrays respect and social equality. Although, it is difficult to simply generalised as a result of the data presented above, the views and understanding of the respondents strongly inclination to psychological empowerment as result of the Telecentre building in these four pos.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of Telecentre Project for Orang Asil is to reduce the digital gap. As mentioned in the introduction section of this article telecentres are public places where people can access computers to use the internet and other digital technologies, that enable them to gather information, learn, and communicate with others. Yet, TPOA project module is designed in such way that even though the primary goal of telecentre is deliver basic ICT services, the value added goals are to develop agribusiness, primary health care, education, tourism and man-power training in relation to the Telecentre.

Psychological empowerment as depicted in this article so far is apparent, with the completion of the telecentre through communal effort. Hence, such achievement creates a trust in one's personal abilities in order to act with confidence. The structure is not a mere building for ICT activities but a landmark showcasing the community 'power-within' and commitment to growth for self and others within the same community. It equally implies individual or communal ability to access and influence decision making processes on various levels in order to ensure the proper representation of one's interests. As some importance decisions and knowledge sharing are carried in this building—telecentre.

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.
International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

169 | P a g e

In a nutshell, this article notes that a building can represent multi-facts and ideas for a community, especially if such community is remotely located. The telecentre in these four localities, is seen by the community members as a source pride and a sense of accomplishment. This is because the building represents communal effort and forward looking. To outsiders, the building may not be attractive or a world class, yet, it is not the outlook that matters, but the embodiment of what it represents to the community. To most respondents, the building—telecentre is a landmark, community effort, voice and negotiation springboard. To them (the communal members), this is our house, the product of our sweat and perseverance. In view of this, I argue, the telecentre evokes a psychological empowerment to rural communities that are at socio-economic advantages.

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170 | P a g e

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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences (IRJHRSS)

171 | P a g e