

## RESEARCH PROGRESS/ *NOTA PENYELIDIKAN*

### Developing a Governance Partnership Between the Traditional and the Modern: The Quest for Sustainable Development Governance in Malaysia

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#### INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of governance for sustainable development is dependent, among others, by the society's awareness of the idea, and its willingness to participate in the general process of governance. A question that extends from this is whether this awareness and willingness to participate only exist among academicians, intellectuals, the middle upper class and the western culture only. Or are the awareness and potential for participation to be found among the lower income groups, the rural and within traditional culture and customs, but are currently unexplored by those promoting the governance structure for sustainability. The result has been the marginalization of these groups from effective participation. The language of governance used is often alien to many of the rurals and the basis of the structure is foreign to that currently in existence.

Sustainability is often seen in terms of the physical aspect of the environment. There is a tendency for governance issue to be seen in the same light. This is especially true in the case of planning. The technical understanding of the physical focuses on engineering and the determination of suitable standards. Cultural needs of the society are arranged around economic, social, political and administrative aspects. These are modern aspects of society that have traditional equivalences, yet these are often only seen in rural communities.

An important aspect pertaining to the problem of sustainability governance is the language used to inform specific portions of the public and the channels of communication used to convey these messages. The assumption is that the channels of communicating sustainability must necessarily be through formal modern structures. The other end of the communication spectrum involves personal communications which are informal in nature.

The difference in language relates to the presentation and type of information used in the different fields used to develop a governance for sustainability. The scientific language of sustainability is often incomprehensible to many portions of the population in developing countries, especially the rural and the elderly. Yet, within traditional societies that depend on the elderly for guidance, and social sanctions, their involvement in governance is crucial to the success of the sustainability agenda.

As a result of the inconsistencies and inaccessibilities of the languages, of science and rationality, the support base for many sustainable agenda is fragmented. Technical statements on environmental impacts are seldom written for the people at large but more for the expert scientists. The same goes for engineering specifications that meant little to the general public. When such technical literacy is missing, an alternative means of communication and driver of social action need to developed. While most of the efforts in sustainable management have focused on getting support from the common public, little effort has been done in trying to make use of the traditional governance setup to garner local support, especially with respect to rural communities.

#### TRADITIONS, CUSTOMS AND GOVERNANCE

Within a developing country such as Malaysia, traditional forms of governance are still very much a part of everyday. A system of colonial governance, extended to the current modern post colonial setting, have separated this traditional form of government from the modern, delegating the traditional to issues of traditional laws and customs. Malaysia's communities are based on traditions and cultures that pre-date modern forms of governance but these traditions are often seen as being outdated and inadequate to articulate modern ideas such as sustainable development and governance. Such a perspective often ignores traditional knowledge and principles that have contributed towards the sustainability of local communities.

The article presents an example from the Malay community in Malaysia, and a sub section of that community, the Papatih of Negeri Sembilan to highlight the possibilities of developing a partnership between the modern and the traditional for governing sustainability.

The structure of governance in a post-colonial society often try to separate itself from its pre-colonial vestiges, one that is often seen as backward and outdated. The drive towards modernity has left the vernacular and the traditional behind and focuses solely on the modern.

The modern concept of sustainable development is based on ideas of democracy and developing from

the ground up, as with programmes such as Agenda 21 that requires public participation. Sustainability is an agenda of modernity, yet it can benefit from traditional culture. The ordinary people in many post-colonial societies live in a nexus between the modern and the traditional and people attempt to negotiate between the two.

Governance, and sustainability governance in particular, is concerned about bringing together various agents of development within a structure that allows for involvement at various levels of decision making to realise an ideal. For rural and traditional communities, there is need for a governance structure that allows these communities to engage modernity and its agenda effectively.

### **The Role Of Traditional Values And Traditional Governance For Sustainable Development**

The use of traditional governance structure can help introduce and allow the people, especially the rural, to participate in the efforts towards sustainable development. The traditional Malay communities in Malaysia and Indonesia are structured by Adat, a set of rules of conduct and norms that govern local communities. There are two major Adats for the Malay community, Adat Temenggungan and Adat Papatih. Temenggungan is patrilineal in nature while Papatih is matrilineal, an interesting demarcation considering both are based on Islamic tenets. Adat sets ways of behaviour and principles for steps towards public action, and with that covers modes of public participation and engagements.

These principles are often articulated in the form of poetry, pantun and teromba for the Adat Papatih. Teromba is a rhythmic articulation of Adat as a guide or the practice of Adat in a community. It is a free form poetry that might be different from pantuns, defined by its function with respect to Adat. It is these free form poems that the paper will use to present traditional principles for sustainability governance. Modern methods of public engagement often approach individuals directly at the grassroot, however rural communities, at least in the Malay communities are more structured and often resist direct engagements. Lack of knowledge about one's place in society, and the proper paths for participation often hamper government agencies and NGOs in their attempt to include the ruralites in sustainability agendas. Attempts to approach individuals by government agencies or NGOs for any programme face the possibility of being ignored by the local communities if proper channels of communications are ignored. Unfortunately, the response from government agencies and NGOs often sidelined these communities with respect to their participation.

### **Traditional and modern structures of governance**

Traditional structures of governance are often hierarchical in nature and it is seldom seen as being democratic. Yet power relations within the structure are often hidden, and only understood and employed by those within the system. Governance and participation in governance are social actions that are performed within a given structure, modern or traditional; and agents or participants often adapt their participation in governance given specific structures.

### **DEVELOPING A PARTNERSHIP IN GOVERNANCE**

The program for sustainability governance in Negeri Sembilan involves the development of a partnership in governance that incorporate not only local governance structure but also its strategies and principles. To implement such a partnership the entire post colonial structure of government would have to be reassessed to allow for such relationships. Previous connections have often emphasized on separate realms of power, each jealously guarded by its custodians. The British system of government has ensured that the traditional system of governance is only relegated to matters of Malay customs, specifically distancing the traditional structure from the modern. There is a lot of understanding that need to be developed between the two parties that begin with findings common shared values and terms, as well as the translation of values into operational sustainability terms.

### **Articulation of Sustainability Goals**

Part of the role of tradition is to set goals and ideals for the society. The ideals are social as well as environmental at all levels of society. Within these, ideas about the environment are already set within societal norms articulated as metaphors, environmental practices, and governance principles. The modernity agenda has perhaps placed these aside but they merit a deeper look within the process of achieving sustainability.

### **The use of environment as metaphor**

There are many metaphors on life that use the environment as its basis. The development of environmental consciousness based on the Adat can be used as a basis to introduce various concepts of sustainability to the communities. Among the teromba include principles for learning from the environment, Alam.

*Setitik jadikan laut  
Sekepal jadikan gunung  
Alam berkembang jadikan guru.*

*Turn a drop into an ocean  
Turn a fistful into a mountain  
Make the unfolding nature as a teacher  
Teromba 1*

### Reusability and recycling

There are many agendas of environmental sustainability that can benefit from local knowledge and guiding principles. Intergenerational investment has long been propagated through the planting of trees that will take more than one generation to benefit from, the coconut and durian trees for example. It is common practice for the head of a traditional family to plant a coconut tree to mark the birth of a child, and to provide for the child when he or she grows older.

Other examples that relate to ideas of sustainability that can be used to garner support of the ruralites include concepts of reusability and recycling;

*Usang-usang diperbaharui  
Koyak ditampung  
Pendek disambung  
Panjang dikerat  
Yang elok dijadikan teladan  
Ibu adat, muafakat  
The worn renewed,  
The torn patched,  
The short lengthened  
The long shortened  
Make from what is good an example  
The mother of Adat is consensus,  
Teromba 2*

### Bottom-Up Governance Principles within the Traditional Hierarchy

An important element of sustainability governance is that of bottom-up participation. Traditional governance is often seen as being top-down in nature, strongly hierarchical to maintain order, and thus often deemed undemocratic. Such is also the assumption of the structure of the Malay communities. However, the Adat provides principles of participative bottom up decision making that can serve as the basis for actual power sharing within the traditional everyday governance structure. The Teromba 3 below emphasizes the importance of proper manners between those who are governing and those being governed, while Teromba 4 describes the principle of bottom-up decision making where the people (anak buah) determines their leaders (buapak), and the subsequent levels of governance are determined by those below them.

*Berjenjang naik  
Bertangga turun  
Stepping up the stairs,*

*Walking down the ladder.  
Teromba 3  
Bulat anak buah menjadikan buapak  
Bulat buapak menjadikan Lembaga  
Bulat lembaga menjadikan penghulu/Undang  
Bulat Penghulu/Undang menjadikan raja  
Consensus of the anak buah elects the buapak  
Consensus of the buapak elects the Lembaga  
Consensus of the Lembaga elects the  
Penghulu/Undang  
Consensus of the Penghulu/Undang elects  
the Raja  
Teromba 4*

### The Concept of Consensus Building and Common Shared Values

The Adat places a strong emphasis on consensus building. In traditional societies, the individual is often subsumed by the community and the seeking of mutual agreements is paramount. While the hierarchical structure commands obedience from the people, the Adat often reminds those in power that the voice of the common people, the rakyat, must be heard, else the those governing face the possibility of rejection (Teromba 5 and 6);

*Sekali air pasang sekali berubah,  
Sekali raja mangkat sekali adat beralih  
Water changes with tide  
Adat changes with the passing of the king  
Teromba 5*

*Bulat air kerana pembentung  
Bulat kata kerana muafakat  
Ke gunung sama didaki  
Ke lurah sama dituruni*

*Water is made whole (round) by the pipes,  
Words are made whole by consensus,  
To climb up the hills and,  
To walk down the valleys together  
Teromba 6*

### Meeting Points as Well as Points of Contentions

Both traditional and modern governance require participants that understand their positions and rights within the system. Although the basis of the principles are different, the goals are similar. Figure 1 below shows the current system of government in the study area, Negeri Sembilan, that links the modern and the traditional through the head of government, the Yang diPertuan Besar. While there is a connection, currently this is not taken advantage of. Rather, governance agendas are developed independent of each other. If governance is argued to be the interface between the (modern) government and the people, then it must include a structure familiar to the people, and Adat serves such a purpose.

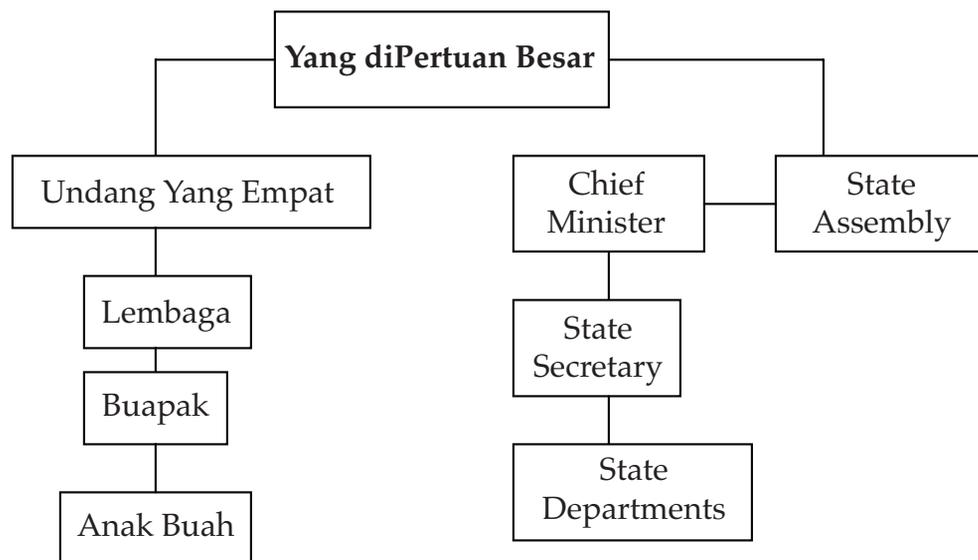


Figure 1: Duality of Power: linkage between traditional and modern government structures of Negeri Sembilan

There is a lot of potential in linking these two sides for sustainability governance. State departments need to find proper links with the traditional governance setting. In fact the role of religious and community leaders, including the village heads, teachers, active and retired, as well as respected elders in influencing traditional communities need to be enhanced and included in the modern system of governance.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that the traditional must be incorporated in the modern with respect to the governance for sustainability. Developing partnerships should go beyond setting up administrative structures, rather partnerships should begin by understanding principles that make up each component of society and develop respect for these principles, working together with traditional structures of governance. The idea of partnership that makes up an intergrated form of governance for sustainability is articulated by the following Teromba;

*Tungku tiga sejerang,  
Tali tiga sepilin.  
Three legs of the burner are needed to boil  
a kettle of water,  
Three strands make a strong rope.  
Teromba 7*

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