

Factors Determining the Success of Cooperatives as a Business Model in Driving the Sustainability of Community-Based Ecotourism in The Iskandar Region of Malaysia

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 06 June 2023 Revised: 05 Sept 2023 Accepted: 16 Oct 2023	Currently in Malaysia, cooperatives are seen as a suitable business model in the implementation of rural transformation. However, even after several years of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia have been established, they are still faced with various challenges to remain sustainable. This study was conducted to explore and understand the problems and challenges faced by Community-based Ecotourism cooperatives (CBET) as well as the factors that affect the effectiveness of the cooperative's business model towards the sustainability of CBET in Iskandar Malaysia Region (WIM). A qualitative research design with case study and interview methods was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 research participants who were involved in CBET activities and the selected cooperatives, namely Koperasi Penduduk Kg. Sg. Melayu Berhad, Koperasi Aami Johor Berhad, and Koperasi Sri Sekawan Kulai Berhad which are located in WIM. The findings of the study show that cooperatives play an important role in making CBET successful in Iskandar Malaysia, especially from the aspect of socio-economic improvement and environmental conservation as well as biological diversity protection. Cooperatives are established and administered by the local community by working with various parties such as government agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions to ensure the sustainability of CBET. It has goals and roles to ensure environmental conservation, socio-economic development, and empowerment of CBET. However, among the challenges identified to ensure the sustainability of CBET at WIM are sustainable financial management, balancing conservation, and tourism development, ensuring active involvement from the community, as well as ensuring an effective marketing and promotion strategy. CBET's sustainability success factors identified are effective leadership, good collaboration and partnership strategies, diverse capacity building and training programs, ensuring a balance of conservation and tourism development, as well as good marketing and promotion strategies.
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	Keywords: Community-Based Ecotourism, Cooperative Business Model, Sustainable Business Model

1. Introduction

The tourism sector in Malaysia holds significant importance, as it exhibits robust connections to several types of economic contribution, encompassing both direct and indirect impacts (Abbas et al., 2021) and of being the third most significant contributor to the country's overall economic growth. The National Tourism Development Plan, which aims to increase tourist arrivals to Malaysia, has achieved its objective, leading to an increase in the number of tourists before the COVID-19 pandemic hit (Hamid et al., 2021). According to Kaur, Jawaid, and Othman (2016), the latest form of tourism products is

known as community-based tourism (CBT). In this type of tourism, the majority of activities related to tourism are managed and planned by the local community. Since CBT does not allow outside participation, community residents are fully responsible for ensuring that all aspects of tourism management are carried out well (Jee, Ting, & Alim, 2019). The main objective of CBT is to facilitate the production of tourism services and their delivery to customers in a standardized manner. Community-based tourism offers visitors the opportunity to learn about the way of life in the host community, as well as its traditions and customs (Kaur et al., 2016).

Community-based tourism, also known as CBT, is often considered a more responsible method for the growth of the tourism industry. This is mostly due to the fact that CBT maintains a stronger relationship with the local community. CBT is reviewed to be more responsible in contrast to the mass tourism approach, which is criticised for its excessive emphasis on maximising profits and limited local autonomy. This has resulted in numerous adverse consequences, including the outflow of profits from developing economies to developed economies through leakages and the presence of weak backward linkages. CBT is seen to be more accountable because of their reduced emphasis on profit maximisation and increased emphasis on local governance. It is generally agreed that the alternative strategy is the one with greater responsibility. The community is the main beneficiary of the CBT efforts, in addition to playing an important role in its conception and implementation; in addition, the community plays an important role in the initiative. Through community-based tourism (CBT), local communities, especially in developing countries, have the opportunity to build a more suitable type of sustainable tourism than mass tourism, which in turn contributes to local economic growth and poverty eradication. CBT also has the potential to empower local communities. The fact that CBT provides an opportunity makes this realization a distinct possibility. According to Simpson (2007), supporters of CBT say that CBT can pave the way for community empowerment and community development, in addition to the establishment of an equitable community political and democratic system. Supporters of CBT also argue that CBT can pave the way for the formation of a fair political and democratic community system. CBT can contribute to the preservation of culture and the environment, as well as the redistribution of economic advantages among the most vulnerable people, such as indigenous communities, women and children. This is because CBT is based on the concept of community-based tourism (CBT). This is made possible by the fact that the residents living in the area are responsible for controlling the development (Lucchetti and Font, 2013).

Ecotourism is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable (Bhuiyan, MAH, Siwar, Ismail, & Islam, 2011). According to Schevyns (1999), the classification of community-based ecotourism enterprises as 'successful' hinges upon the presence of local community involvement and the equitable distribution of benefits. According to Schevyns (1999), it is recommended that the designation of 'community-based ecotourism' be exclusively applied to initiatives that exhibit a substantial degree of community control, wherein the community retains a majority of the benefits, as opposed to projects that are predominantly controlled by outsider operators. Scholars have written about community-based tourism in Malaysia in various aspects and issues. To date, there are three themes that scholars have focused on. First, community involvement and its impact on the economy, social and environment (Jabil et al. 2011; Mohamad Zaki et al. 2011), secondly, is community entrepreneurship which reveals the level of entrepreneurship and the constraints faced by the community, including women, youth and indigenous people (Kalsom & Nor Ashikin 2006; Jamilah & Amran 2007). Third, is the empowerment of homestays that highlight the community as a catalyst for development, product development and limitations of homestays (Pakshir & Nair, 2013; Rosazman & Kunjuran, 2014). According to Noh, Razzaq, Mustafa, Nordin, & Ibrahim (2020), ecotourism is a type of tourism that is often conflated with nature and cultural tourism. Community-based ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as a well recognised approach for biodiversity conservation, demonstrating its potential to foster the growth and prosperity of local communities.

Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) is a form of community-based natural resource management. However, sustainable CBET development through Community Capacity Building (CCB) programs is not something that is easily achieved. Local communities have different capacities from one culture to another. It requires high community involvement, in order for it to reach a level where the community members themselves are motivated to participate and contribute to the development of the program.

Qualitative research from Noh et al. (2020) involved 15 respondents from the community of Kg. Jam, Bekok in Johor, Malaysia. The results of the study show that there are five factors that maintain the development of ecotourism based on Indigenous Peoples in Kg. Jam, namely the development of the existing CBET, the development of the past CBET, local community participation in the tourism planning stage, local participation in the tourism implementation stage and participation in nature conservation. A study by Noh, Razzaq, Mustafa, Nordin, & Ibrahim (2020) has focused on the Orang Asli Hulu (Jakun) community in Kg.Selai. According to the study, it is quite noticeable that they have been left behind from any kind of tourism development in the area. Unfortunately, the minimal attention given to the Orang Asli community there does not only apply to tourism but also other aspects. This circumstance hindered their developmental progress and imposed geographical limitations that isolated them from concurrent advancements in the surrounding region, thereby rendering them a predominantly rural population. Despite being provided with essential resources such as education for the younger generation and oil palm plantations for sustaining their lives, the local population continues to largely depend on forest resources for economic support, while chances for tourism growth remain significantly limited in their vicinity. The little engagement of the local community has a negligible impact on the overall progress of tourism development in the region. One potential factor contributing to this issue could be the limited capacity of local community members to engage in participation, as indicated by governing bodies and relevant authorities. Due to the limited engagement of local people, the capacity of governing bodies and affiliated agencies to foster sustainable Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) development in the region is constrained. Nonetheless, the lack of substantial endeavours in community outreach pertaining to the advancement of tourism in the region exerts a noteworthy influence on the community's ability to engage, consequently impeding their overall involvement and leading to a marked dearth of participation in the crucial phases of implementation and planning. The data indicates a degree of participation that is below the lowest level, known as the "non-participation" level, on Arnstein's (1969) Scale of Citizen Participation.

According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), a cooperative is a group of independent individuals founded on the principles of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and unity. In addition, in line with the legacy of their ancestors, cooperative members uphold the moral principles of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and concern for the welfare of others. There are many intersections between community-based tourism (CBT) and cooperatives. Add Najmah Nawawi, Andin, Qistina, & Shamsiah (2020), cooperatives are organizations that are integrated into the communities where they operate and have deep roots in the communities where they operate. Similarly, community involvement is at the heart of CBT. A community development strategy that uses tourism as a tool to improve the ability of rural community organizations to manage local resources with the active involvement of local tourism is the impetus for the creation of a community-based tourism model (CBT) (Najmah Nawawi, Andin, Qistina, & Shamsiah, 2020). Through the CBT model, local residents are given the primary responsibility to determine the nature and flow of tourism development.

Community-Based Ecotourism Cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia Region

CBT has the potential to yield numerous societal development advantages, particularly in impoverished and marginalised regions, provided that appropriate measures are implemented and the management of CBT is well executed (Giampiccoli and Kalis, 2012). Numerous challenges in implementing CBT can be attributed to internal factors, such as the presence of a deficient business model that lacks the necessary capacity to sustain CBT initiatives (Haniza & Hamzah, 2013). Furthermore, Mitchell and Muckosy (2008) have documented that inadequate governance is a significant contributing factor to the lack of success in CBT. The sustainability of CBT necessitates the implementation of suitable techniques. According to Ostrom (2000), in order for community collaboration to achieve long-term effectiveness, it is necessary to adhere to a series of design principles. These principles include the establishment of boundary rules, the implementation of rules in usage, and the active engagement of community members in the process of creating and revising these rules. The topic at hand pertains to regulations or guidelines that govern a particular context or situation. Hence, the cooperative business model is regarded as an appropriate approach for overseeing the advancement of CBT. Peric and Djurkin (2013) argue that the implementation of a democratic and locally oriented cooperative structure is more suited for attaining the goals of CBT in the context of local development. In a broader sense, a

cooperative enterprise can be defined as a self-governing organisation comprised of individuals who willingly unite to fulfil their shared economic, social, and cultural objectives by means of collectively owned and democratically managed ventures (International Co-operative Alliance - ICA, 1995). The active involvement of stakeholders through the establishment of cooperatives not only facilitates the empowerment of the community (Aref and Gill, 2009), but also contributes to the development of essential skills and knowledge among local communities engaged in CBT (Bushell and Eagles, 2007). Despite the numerous advantages associated with cooperative business models in the development of CBT, there is a notable scarcity of cooperatives actively engaged in the broader tourism industry, and specifically within the realm of CBT.

In the context of this study, cooperatives as a business model towards the sustainability of community-based ecotourism (CBET) in Iskandar Malaysia Region will be examined. Johor is a state in the south of Peninsular Malaysia. Iskandar Malaysia, is the main southern development corridor in Johor. It was established on November 8, 2006. Iskandar Malaysia's vast land area, strategic location and abundant infrastructure have boosted various economic sectors including tourism as one of the main economic activities. The Iskandar Region Development Authority (IRDA), is a statutory body of the Federal Government of Malaysia, established in 2007 with the objective of regulating and driving various stakeholders in the public and private sectors towards realizing the vision of developing the Iskandar Malaysia region in Johor into a strong metropolis. and sustainable at an international level. Through IRDA's Social Development Vision, the main goal is to have a prosperous and harmonious community based on social involvement and equitable sharing of wealth. Kawan Iskandar Malaysia (KIM) is a strategic program for social development implemented by IRDA to ensure that all citizens enjoy and participate in rapid development in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia. Through the KIM program, IRDA has introduced the Village Enhancement & Empowerment Program (VEEP) to maintain the dynamism of villages and communities to keep pace with development in Iskandar Malaysia. VEEP covers 23 villages in the region of Iskandar Malaysia, and through this program, 7 villages with potential resources have been selected and prepared to become community cooperatives.

Sustainability Issues and Challenges Faced by Cbet Cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia

CBET cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia have been established since 2013, however, until now they are still facing various challenges to remain sustainable. The IRDA has implemented various programs to increase the potential of CBET cooperatives to become sustainable business entities, but most of them are still not able to stand on their own without outside help. This can be seen through the Coaching Motivational Mindset Change Program Report for Participants in the Village Improvement and Empowerment Program (VEEP) in Iskandar Malaysia which was issued on 11 January 2021 by Two on Seven Management Sdn Bhd, a company appointed by IRDA to carry out skills training organizational management to the cooperatives involved. Through this report, several issues and challenges faced by cooperatives have been identified. The management issue faced by CBET cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia is that there is no planning or plan in managing the cooperative's business. This report states that Cooperative Board Members (ALK) lack knowledge in producing a business plan that can be implemented. ALK is also not clear with the mission and vision of the establishment of the cooperative which leads to the cooperative not having a clear direction. Cooperatives also have no smart business ideas and rely only on existing businesses to generate income. The second issue mentioned in the report is the weakness in the operation of the cooperative. Cooperatives have no systematic financial management. Accounting and financial literacy has not reached a basic level. A basic record of buying and selling was created but never used to analyze business performance.

The cooperative was also found to have no system or procedure in business operations. cooperative staff are not clear with their assignments. Information technology literacy is also low among cooperative workers and management. Low youth involvement also limits the potential of cooperatives to grow. Mohd Zulhafiz Said, Ibrahim Komoo, Edy Tonnizam Mohamad (2020) stated that the existence of the issue of marginalization mainly involves cooperative membership and management, limitations to appointing new members for cooperatives, and also cooperative membership is open to outsiders who are not from the village community. This study conducted in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia also states that the weakness of cooperative management is clearly visible especially in the less popular KIM

areas. The presence of tourists in this area is very less and their ecotourism packages are also not well received. When the IRDA helped to promote, the number of tourist arrivals was encouraging. Most cooperatives only depend on tourists from Singapore and also during school holidays only. The COVID-19 pandemic, movement control orders, the ongoing closure of domestic and international borders have worsened their situation as most of these CBET cooperatives depend on the arrival of international tourists, especially Singaporeans, as their main target market. These issues have contributed to the unstable economic situation for CBET cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia.

Therefore, a study needs to be conducted to explore and understand the issues and challenges faced by CBET cooperatives as well as the factors that affect the effectiveness of the cooperative's business model towards the sustainability of community-based ecotourism in the Iskandar Malaysia region. If no study is conducted regarding these issues and problems, CBET cooperatives in the Iskandar Malaysia region will lose their competitiveness and eventually will not be able to continue operating. Improvement efforts to reduce these problems and challenges must be addressed together. Integrated commitment and integrated solutions will ensure the sustainability of this program is achieved. The socioeconomic well-being of the community will be felt and the beauty of nature will continue to be preserved.

2. Materials And Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, where data is collected through semi structured interviews among 12 key informants who were selected among important individuals involved in the development and implementation of community-based ecotourism cooperative business model in Iskandar Malaysia region. The main criteria for selection are their knowledge, experiences and involvement in the process of cooperative development and management. These people include cooperative leadership, community members and government agencies involved in the development of CBET cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia region.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of interviews conducted among key informants all have the same view that cooperatives can be an effective and sustainable business model to empower CBET in Iskandar Region. An effective governance structure and decision-making process is essential to the success of a cooperative. Cooperatives that have transparent and inclusive governance practices, with clear roles and responsibilities, facilitate the involvement of community members. Among the important management carried out by cooperatives is the development of capacity and human capital, especially through various training programs and courses to help community members improve their skills. CBET cooperatives in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia are run by local communities in the area itself. In order to make the CBET program successful in their area, and improve and create various opportunities for the local community, regardless of whether it is income-increasing opportunities, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and opportunities to promote the culture and heritage of the village as their pride, cooperative members need to play a very important role at handling each program. Indirectly, it trains them in good leadership characteristics so that all the programs held can run smoothly, as well as training more young generations to also manage the cooperative.

CBET Cooperatives in the Iskandar Malaysia (WIM) Region play an important role in helping community members in local villages acquire the skills and knowledge needed to effectively manage and implement CBET activities. As a body responsible for the development and management of the social economy in the local area, the CBET cooperative in WIM has developed various training programs and courses to help community members improve their knowledge and skills. Training programs and courses offered by the CBET cooperative at WIM can provide benefits to community members in various aspects. Among the trainings carried out is homestay management training allowing community members to learn the correct way to manage their homestay, cooking food, providing accommodation and other related tourism activities. This will allow them to provide better quality services to tourists who come to their village, and further increase their income.

"..The training programs and courses offered by the CBET cooperative at WIM can provide benefits to community members in various aspects. Among the training conducted is homestay management

training allowing community members to learn the correct way to manage their homestay, cooking food, providing accommodation and other related tourism activities. This will enable them to provide better quality services to tourists who come to their village, and further increase their income”.

“..The tour guide skills course allows community members to become more skilled and experienced tour guides. They will learn knowledge of the history, culture, flora and fauna of the local area, which will enable them to convey better information and allow tourists to appreciate the local area.”

by improving knowledge and skills in management and sustainable tourism, communities can gain long-term economic benefits without damaging environmental resources. These programs can also help in fostering the spirit of cooperation and strengthening the relationship between the community and the management of the CBET cooperative. By increasing awareness of the importance of CBET sustainability, the community will be more careful in taking care of the available natural resources. They will understand that environmental sustainability is key to the sustainability of CBET. Through capacity building programs, communities will learn ways to minimize the negative impact of tourism activities on the environment and how to restore damaged resources. Overall, the training programs and courses offered by the CBET cooperative at WIM provide various benefits to community members to improve their knowledge and skills in managing and implementing CBET activities. This gives them the opportunity to increase their income and economic well-being, while preserving the cultural and environmental diversity of the local area. Therefore, the capacity development program followed by the community is a good step in strengthening the sustainability of CBET in the area. Through the awareness and knowledge gained, the community can work with the CBET cooperative management to develop effective strategies in preserving the sustainability of CBET in the area.

“... The CBET cooperative in WIM has a strong emphasis on sustainable development in the tourism sector. It encourages visitors to understand the importance of nature conservation and provides opportunities to experience ecotourism activities that focus on the sustainability of nature.”

Cooperation and partnership are important factors that contribute to the sustainability of community-based ecotourism cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia. IRDA or Iskandar Regional Development Authority is an area development agency responsible for accelerating economic and social development in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia. IRDA's support for the development of CBET in Iskandar Malaysia is very important and has a great impact on the success of ecotourism development. IRDA provides support through several initiatives such as the Iskandar Regional Economic Transformation Program (Pemerksa), the Iskandar Malaysia Friends Program (KIM), the Village Economic Enhancement Program (VEEP), the Business Partner Program, and the Community Impact Program. Through these initiatives, IRDA provides technical, financial, and marketing support to CBET cooperatives and community members in developing and promoting local tourism products and services. In addition, IRDA also works with various parties including CBET cooperatives, local authorities, and other government agencies to develop the infrastructure and facilities needed to promote and accelerate the development of ecotourism in the Iskandar Malaysia Region. With support from IRDA, CBET cooperatives and community members in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia can continue to acquire the skills, knowledge, and support needed to develop their own CBET projects. This helps increase their income potential and further benefits the local economy as a whole.

The support of government agencies to the development of CBET is very important and has a great impact on the success of ecotourism development. Several government agencies such as the Department of Fisheries, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Forestry have provided technical support and funding to CBET cooperatives in Iskandar Malaysia. In addition, several government initiative programs such as the Rural Retail Store Program (PKRD) and the Community Store Program

(PKK) have helped to increase local community income by promoting products and services produced by CBET cooperative members across the country. Overall, the support of government agencies in the development of CBET in Iskandar Malaysia is very important and has a positive impact on the success of ecotourism development in the local area.

4. Conclusion

The CBET Cooperative in the Iskandar Region functions as a vehicle for sustainable tourism development that empowers local communities and promotes environmental conservation. They create opportunities for economic growth, cultural preservation, and community participation, while fostering a greater sense of ownership and pride among community members in their cultural and environmental heritage. This study investigates community-based ecotourism cooperatives in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia and examines their role and impact on ecotourism sustainability and local community development. Based on the analysis of data and information gathered, the conclusion is that ecotourism cooperatives play an important role in promoting sustainable development and environmental sustainability in the tourism sector in this region. First of all, ecotourism cooperatives successfully bring environmental awareness to local communities and tourists. Through various ecotourism activities organized by cooperatives, the local community is exposed to the importance of caring for and protecting nature. Local residents are also involved in the conservation and management of natural resources to ensure their sustainability for future generations. This contributes to increasing community awareness and responsibility towards the environment.

Second, ecotourism cooperatives make a significant contribution to the socioeconomic development of the local community. By involving local residents in cooperative business activities, job opportunities and income are expanded. Local communities can generate additional income by providing accommodation services, tour guides, or selling local products. This improves the standard of living of the local community and strengthens the community's economic capacity. Third, ecotourism cooperatives play a role in enriching the experience of tourists who come to the Iskandar Malaysia Region. By offering tourism packages that focus on environmental sustainability and local community life, tourists are given the opportunity to interact with nature and local culture. This provides a profound and authentic experience to tourists, fostering awareness of the uniqueness and importance of the sustainability of nature and cultural heritage. Fourth, ecotourism cooperatives act as strategic partners in environmental conservation efforts. By collaborating with conservation organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders, ecotourism cooperatives help implement conservation programs and natural resource sustainability initiatives. The involvement of these cooperatives is important to ensure the sustainability of conservation efforts and the sustainability of ecotourism. However, this study also identified some challenges that need to be overcome by community-based ecotourism cooperatives in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia. These challenges include lack of funding, limited management, as well as enforcement of laws and regulations related to environmental protection. Efforts need to be taken to overcome this challenge and ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of ecotourism cooperatives in implementing the goals of ecotourism sustainability and local community development. Overall, community-based ecotourism cooperatives in the Iskandar Region of Malaysia play an important role in promoting sustainable development and environmental sustainability. Through these efforts, environmental awareness increases, socioeconomic development of local communities is strengthened, tourist experiences are enriched, and nature conservation is emphasized. Therefore, ecotourism cooperatives have the potential to continue contributing to the sustainability of ecotourism and local community development in Iskandar Malaysia.

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