

## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS AND WEAKNESS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL PLANS AT LOCAL AUTHORITY MALAYSIA: A REVIEW

*(FAKTOR PENYUMBANG KEPADA KEJAYAAN DAN KELEMAHAN  
PENGLIBATAN AWAM DALAM RANCANGAN TEMPATAN DI PIHAK  
BERKUASA TEMPATAN MALAYSIA: SUATU ULASAN)*

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### **Abstract**

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Public participation plays an important role in the national development, especially those nations that practise democracy. The process of implementing public participation is vital for local government level as it involves the voice of society in the decision making process. However, the success rate or the efficiency of public participation in the decision making process is impossible to achieve and this has become an emerging topic among the scholars. Both success and weakness factors contributing to the outcome of public participation have been studied based on previous researchers and have been discussed in order to develop a better model of public participation which can be used by the local authority in Malaysia local planning. Therefore, this study will be the basis that will be applied in understanding the success and weakness factors of public participation and how these factors frame the model of public participation.

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**Keywords:** Success and weakness factors for public participation, National development, Local planning, Model of public participation, Local authority.

### **Abstrak**

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Penglibatan awam memainkan peranan yang penting dalam pembangunan negara, lebih-lebih lagi bagi negara yang mempraktikkan amalan demokrasi. Proses pelaksanaan penglibatan awam di peringkat kerajaan tempatan adalah sangat penting bagi melibatkan pandangan masyarakat dalam proses membuat keputusan. Namun, kejayaan atau keberkesanan penglibatan awam dalam proses membuat keputusan agak sukar untuk dicapai dan telah menjadi topik yang hangat di kalangan penyelidik-penyelidik terdahulu. Faktor-faktor kejayaan serta kelemahan penglibatan awam telah diteliti dari kajian-kajian penyelidik terdahulu dan dibincangkan bagi membentuk suatu model penglibatan awam yang lebih baik dan cekap untuk digunakan oleh pihak berkuasa tempatan di dalam perancangan tempatan di Malaysia. Oleh itu, kajian ini akan menjadi asas yang akan digunakan dalam memahami faktor-faktor kejayaan dan kelemahan penglibatan awam dan bagaimana faktor tersebut merangka model penglibatan awam ini.

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**Kata kunci:** Faktor kejayaan dan kelemahan penglibatan awam, Pembangunan negara, Perancangan tempatan, Model penglibatan awam, Pihak berkuasa tempatan..

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1960s, public participation has been regarded as the main instrument of democracy where society is given both the freedom and the power to voice out their thoughts and ideas in development planning (Nghah 1991). In the democracy world, public participation allows the redistribution of power among people which simultaneously signals the government's acceptance against public's view (Marzuki 2015). In her first paper, Sherry Arnstein (1969), emphasized public participation as the essential component in national development which later established her theory for "Ladder of Citizen Participation". In this context, public participation is defined as an orderly yet continuous process where it helps the stakeholders to reach to an agreement that will benefit the society in relation to development (World Health Organization 2002; Marzuki 2015). As a country that practices democracy, it is obligation for the local authorities in Malaysia to conduct public participation as a part of preparing and refining the local plan, as allocated within 172 Act. In the context of this study, public participation refers as any process that directly engages the public in decision-making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision (Dietz & Stern 2008).

In Malaysia, the level of public participation is reported to still in the minimal level or satisfactory (Dola & Mijan 2006; Omar & Hoon Leh 2007; Robi 2008; Ismail & Rahman 2011; Rahman 2011; Yaakob 2012; Lee et al. 2012; Nuruddin et al. 2015). Studies revealed that this phenomenon is caused by many factors, such as lack of knowledge and awareness among public (Dola & Mijan 2006). Poorly selection of representatives (Bramwell & Sherman 1999) and lack of participation from the public (Nurrudin et al. 2015). According to Yaakob (2012), civilians who should play a role as stakeholders do not exploit their rights completely in giving opinions and suggestions in the decision-making process. The lack public involvement issue is a reflection of people's disappointments in final decision that has been made before implement a public participation process (Nanz & Fritsche 2012). He explained, it is appropriate for the local politicians involved assume that their ideas or suggestions have taken into account when decisions have been made by the authorities before implement a public participation process. As a result, the local politicians are not interested in participating in the decision-making process. Meanwhile, the paradox of public participation introduced by Universität Leipzig (2013) explains that lack of public participation is engaged on citizens' motivation to participate in the process (Rotthman 2013). The citizens' motivation has reached a high level of maturity and has become relatively concrete, which at this stage, the decisions have already been made or approved by State Authority. If the citizens have the impression that their contribution has no influence or makes no difference, they will not be motivated to participate in a public participation again.

Although, there are various opinions that have been raised by researchers on the challenges of public participation in local planning, rational specific to enhance the effectiveness of public participation is not always clearly stated (O'Faircheallaigh 2010). According Chess and Purcell (1999), a clear definition of "success" is important to explain the effectiveness of public participation. Public participation is considered "successful" or "effectiveness" when the goal of the public participation process is achieved. However, the formations of definition become a problem due to the diversity of perspectives on the process of public participation goals. Therefore, this study focus on the development of a public participation model which includes success and weaknesses factors in order to have a better understanding and give a new foundation to understand the true meaning of the effectiveness of public participation.

### **The contributing factors for the success of a public participation**

There are various criteria that have been suggested by researchers in defining "success". Chess and Purcell (1999) distinguish between two approaches used to define success which are those based on outcome and those based on process. Table 1, shows a summary of previous studies on contributing factors for the success of public participation.

Table 1. Previous study on the contributing factors for the success of a public participation

Previous study	Factors			
	Communication	Process managemen t	Social learning	Publicity
Dietz and Stern (2008)	X	X		x
Rottmann (2013)	X	X	x	x
Yaakob (2012)	X			x
Peelle et al. (1998)	X	X		
Webler et. al. (1995)	X		x	
Pelle and Farhar (1995)	X	X		
O'Faircheallaigh (2010)	X		x	x
Garmendia and Stagl (2010)			x	
Abelson et al. (2003)	X	X		x
Cayford and Beierle (2001)	X	X	x	x

For some researchers, the concept of “success” in public participation is more visible to the implementation of the public participation outcomes. A public participation process is seen as “successful” when there is an improvement in the quality of decision to achieve (National Research Council 1996). According to Dietz and Stern (2008), the contributing factors to these increasing are the level of information been transparent in the public participation. Rottmann (2013) explains that transparency is a prerequisite basis for many types of public participation. The information that has being discussed and used throughout the public participation process is important to be shared between the local authorities, civilians and stakeholders which required in an agreement on the decisions that need to be achieved. If a high level of information transparency exists among public participants, decision makers will lead to better decisions which has considered by the public (Morrison-Saunders & Early 2008).

This factor is often associated with publicity where according to Rottmann (2013) these also a factors of success in public participation. He explained publicity not only can lead to social learning among the people but also to raise their awareness and attention to the issues discussed in the public participation process. If the level of information transparency is very high especially when involves the process, this will lead to a high publicity which then indirectly, promoting greater participation from the public.

In this regard, the management and implementation of public participation process plays an important role. Dietz and Stern (2008) discuss how each phase in the process of public participation has a significant impact on the outcome of the public participation itself. This refers to the process design and settings the accurate time. According to the researcher, every phase in the process of public participation requires different types of public inputs and although extensive participation is advised in the process, however, there are some phases in the public participation process that require little participation when compared with other phases. This study is supported by Rottmann (2013) and Peelle et al. (1998) which stated that wide participation will lead to different types of input from the public and not all of these inputs are needed or used in every phase of the public participation process. They also emphasize that timely arrangements between the involving of civilian with public participation will increase the success of the process. In other words, in order to achieve the success of public participation, the local authority should have adequate and relevant resources in designing the public participation process and implementing this process with timely arrangement.

Social learning is also seen has a significant impact on the success of public participation. Webler et al. (1995) explains that community agreements in quality decisions can be achieved and

develop through social learning. This is because the social learning process enables the community to become a democratic and responsible society (Barber 1984). This type of learning encourage participants who involved in the process of public participation to collaborate in finding solutions on the issues discussed, and at the same time they shared knowledge in order to to identify the effective and socially acceptable strategies by each of party (Chavez & Bernal 2008; Diduck & Mitchell 2003; Fitzpatrick 2006; Van den Howe 2006; Webler et al. 1995). The strategy or solution will then be voted on in accordance with the agreement of the public and subsequently terminated to the public participation process. With this, the public perspectives can be considered and integrated to produce quality results and socially been acceptable from the civilian.

### The contributing factors for the weaknesses of a public participation

The weaknesses of public participation refer as the failure of the process which involve the public in decision-making process and quality decisions that can be accepted by the public. In the context of this study, the weaknesses are more on discouraging and low participation among the people of Malaysia. Therefore, the factors to be discussed are related to these weaknesses. Table 2, shows a summary of previous studies on contributing factors to the weaknesses of public participation.

Table 2. Summary of previous studies on contributing factors to the weaknesses of public participation

Previous Studies	Contributing factors to the weaknesses of public participation				
	Motivation	Support	Lack of trust	Publicity	Knowledge
Yaakob (2012)				x	
Nanz and Fritsche (2012)	x		x		
Universtität Leipzig (2013)	x	x	x	x	x
Dietz and Stern (2008)	x	x	x		x
Cayford and Beierle (2001)	x	x	x		x
Rottmann (2013)	x	x	x	x	

Based on Table 2, the factors most often discussed by previous researchers are motivation, support and lack of trust. These two factors refer as psychological factors of the public followed by support, publicity and knowledge.

**Motivation factor.** Paradox of public participation is used to explain the motivation of the public when they joint public participation (Universtität Leipzig 2013; Rottmann 2013). This model has been used by most researchers in studying the public participation process, including in understanding the contributing factors to the failure of public participation. As illustrated in Figure 1, public motivation increasingly from phase of the problem to the phase implementation of the public participation. According to Universtität Leipzig (2013), the public are only motivated to give their views when it has reached a high level of maturity. For example, in Malaysia when a project has been implemented, people will start giving their views by objection, as reported by Robi (2008). At this time, as mention in Figure 1, the possibility of the public to influence public decision outcome is very low, this is because the project has already been accepted and approved by the top authority. At the initial stage of the public participation process, the public has low motivation which shows the failure of public participation and this factor is also closely linked to other failure factors such as publicity and knowledge. This is also supported by Cayford and Beierle (2001) which has revealed that there was a positive correlation between the motivation of the public and the success of the public participation process.

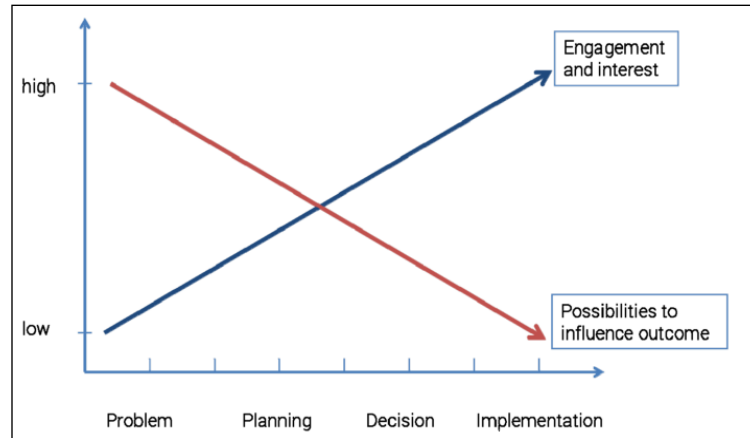


Figure 1. Paradox of public participation (Universtität Leipzig 2013)

**Lack of trusts factor:** Based on previous studies, the lack of trust factor is frequently discussed and linked to other factors such as communication and publicity. Cayford and Beierle (2001) list out that reputation of the parties with the public, reputation of the parties concerned with the involvement of public participant, the history of the detained information, the unpopular history of management and the history of ignoring management problems as the major causes of trust and low public credibility. Without the trust of the public, this resulted in low public involvement and lack of encouragement.

**Support factor:** The third factor attributes to the contributing failure of public participation are the lack of support from local governments, relevant agencies and stakeholder involvement in the public participation process. As discussed by Rottmann (2013) and Dietz and Stern (2008), a public participation process was seen as failing or weak in the absence of the willingness of the authorities in implementing the results to achieve. Some research focus on the commitment of the parties' aspect and how this commitment is caused by the lack of resources needed to carry out the design. In other words, this refers to an irregular or efficient design. Lack of support gives bad reputation and image to the agencies involved and consequently contributes to the decline of public participation in a long term (Dietz & Stern 2008).

**Publicity factor:** This factor is seen as one of the factors that contributes to the success of public participation, however, Yaakob (2012) reports that publicity is also one of the failures of public participation. Proper use of publicity and high costs are some of the obstacles that governments should consider in implementing public participation. Rottmann (2013) stated that the publicity used can give different insights and intentions to every individual or agency. In fact, the less interesting or less understood features can affect the outcome of the public participation process (Ayodele & Abiodun 2015; Yaakob 2012). This is because the public also include people who are living in the rural areas where have a limited knowledge of the publicity. Hence, the proper use of publicity at reasonable cost is one of the great challenges for local authority in Malaysia.

**Knowledge factor:** Knowledge in this context refers to the knowledge of the public discussed in the public participation process. According to Nurrudin et al. (2015), Ayodele & Abiodun (2015) and Sweeney (2004), the potential of public participation in improving decision quality is limited due to lack of knowledge among the public. Some researchers then explain that individuals with deep knowledge of the issues discussed in the public participation process have a tendency to be more influential regardless of the quality of argument (Kameda et al. 1997). While, less knowledgeable individual that have the tendency not to engage themselves with public participation.

## Conclusion

Although many factors contribute to the weaknesses of public participation, there are some critical factors to be taken into account due to their significant effects on low public participation in Malaysia. The factors that contribute to the success of public participation also need to be taken into account in order to mitigate the adverse effects which contributed by these weaknesses factors. By doing these, a framework model for measuring civil participation can be developed and used for the implementation of the public participation process at the Malaysia Local Authority. This model can improve the diversity of the public's perspective on the results that are to be sought in the local development aspect of Malaysia.

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