

The Secret to A Successful Homestay Development: Lesson from Miso Walai Homestay (MWH) Kinabatangan Sabah, Malaysia

Abdul Razzaq, A. R. *, Tan, K. H. , Mustafa, M. Z. and Bokhari, N.

Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The homestay, as community tourism, can become a catalyst for economic development of rural communities. However, the issue of sustainability of the homestay programme in the context of community development remains debatable. Previous studies revealed that the actual impact of homestay on the local community, especially in terms of the economy, remains at a minimum, and most of the homestay programme is not competitive or it is short-lived, especially when there is less or no help from external parties such as the government, NGOs etc. This study was conducted to explore the secret to successful homestay programmes using Miso Walai Homestay (MWH) in Kinabatangan, Sabah as a case study. A total of 15 key informants from the local community and external bodies who had been involved in the MWH starting from its early development were selected as research respondents. The data were collected using the semi-structured interview and analysed based on theme. The analysis revealed that the involvement of the local community in the initial development process utilising the bottom-up approach was the key to the successful operation of Miso Walai Homestay, which has received domestic and international recognition. The sense of ownership among the local community stimulated the whole community to participate in and to sustain the homestay.

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E-mail addresses:

rasid@uthm.edu.my (Abdul Razzaq, A. R.),

tankh@uthm.edu.my (Tan, K. H.),

mzaid@uthm.edu.my (Mustafa, M. Z.),

norzellabokhari87@hotmail.com (Bokhari, N.)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, after the manufacturing sector, the tourism industry is the next most highly contributing sector to the national income (Ministry of Tourism, 2010). The tourism sector has continued to grow rapidly with active involvement by all

parties including the Ministry of Tourism and other agencies over the last six decades (Tourism Malaysia, 2011). The homestay programme was introduced officially in Malaysia in 1995 through the launching of the Village Homestay Programme in Desa Murni, Temerloh, Pahang. Subsequently, the Ministry of Tourism officially made the homestay programme one of Malaysia's tourism products and is actively promoting it to the world. The idea itself came from the Japan youth exchange programme that made the village of Desa Murni its base in 1988 for housing the foreign students during their study in Malaysia. In 1995, the concept began to be expanded. Homestays do not merely provide accommodation but also allow visitors to experience the lifestyle of the host family (Ministry of Tourism, 2010).

Homestays can be categorised as a catalyst for socio-economic development of communities, especially rural areas (Abdul Razzaq et al., 2012, p. 10; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Ibrahim & Abdul Razzaq, 2009, p. 8; Scheyvens, 2007). The wealth of natural resources due to location factors especially in remote areas as well as the cultural life of the local community transformed the homestay experience into a unique alternative tourist attraction. Theoretically, community tourism such as the homestay is capable of contributing to sustainable community development, but in actual fact, the homestay was mainly acknowledged as a form of rhetoric as the previous studies revealed the weakness of the homestay in staying competitive and earning an economic income for the local

community (Harrison & Schipani, 2007). Community tourism projects that were termed successful contributed moderately to the economic development of the local community (Ashley & Goodwin, 2007; Butler & Hinch, 2007). This is supported by Goodwin and Santilli (2009) whose study of over 15 community tourism projects in Asia, Africa and America, categorised only five as being successful based on their ability to manage governance, ownership and economic impact for the benefit of the local community.

The continuous attitude of dependency of the community on external parties partially reflected the failure of the related agencies to train the local community to be independent at the early stage. Previous studies had demonstrated that certain community tourism projects were not able to carry on after the termination of external assistance (Mitchell & Muskooy, 2008; Blackstock, 2005; Kiss, 2004). The study conducted by Goodwin and Santilli (2009) showed the problems stated above, in which, nine of the 15 community tourism projects were still depending on external assistance even though they had been in operation for more than five years. Hamzah and Khalifah (2009) used the term "handout mentality" to describe the effects of dependency of the community on external parties that often become the barrier to the success of the homestay programme. In the Malaysian context, Mohd Nor and Kayat's (2010, p. 70) study on Malaysia's homestay programme demonstrated that the community was not able to move alone without assistance from

the government. The practice of depending on government subsidies is still high, and not surprisingly, there are communities that participate in the homestay programme merely for the government subsidies. Another study conducted by Zapata, Hall, Lindo and Vander-Schaeghe (2011, p. 736) on community tourism projects in Nicaragua that intended to eradicate poverty also revealed that the rate of contributing to direct employment generation was below satisfaction. This is contrary to the concept of community-based tourism projects developed, managed and controlled by local communities (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009) because the development of the homestay programme is able to empower local communities to deal with economic, social, political and environmental matters (Scheyvens, 2007). Based on the above stated challenges, this paper discusses what makes a homestay sustainable. Sustainable here refers to development that contributes to socio-economic development of the local community and ecology. For these purposes Miso Walai Homestay was chosen as a case study.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was carried out by selecting Miso Walai Homestay (MWH) as a single case study. A total of 15 key informants were interviewed using the semi-structured format. The informants comprised the chairman of MESCOT (Model of Ecological Sustainable Community Tourism) (Respondent 1), an NGO (Respondent 2), pioneer members of

MESCOT (Respondents 3-14) and a Sabah Forestry Officer (Respondent 15), all of whom were involved in developing Miso Walai Homestay from the early stages. All the interview sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded, categorised and themed and reported as research findings.

Location of the Research Site (Case Study)

Miso Walai Homestay is located in Mukim Batu Puteh, Kinabatangan in Sabah. It started operation in the year of 2000. It has received domestic and international recognition. It was among 20 community-based tourism projects that received recognition in the form of awards such as the Equator Prize (UNDP) Award, Best Cooperative in the State of Sabah (Travel Category), National Cooperative Award (Tourism Services Category) and the UNDP Equator Prize-Equator initiative case study local sustainable development solution for people, nature and resilient communities, among others. 'Miso Walai' is a combination of two words taken from the language of the indigenous people, the *Orang Sungai* from Sabah. 'Miso' means 'live' or 'stay' and 'Walai' means 'together'. The combination of these two words means 'staying together with the host'. The Miso Walai Homestay programme involved several villages in Mukim Batu Puteh, namely Batu Puteh Village, Menggaris Village, Perpaduan Village and Paris Village. Batu Puteh is a sub-district located near the edge of the Kinabatangan River that itself is a tourist attraction. In terms of location, Miso

Walai Homestay is situated on the main road connecting Sandakan city to the town of Lahad Datu. It takes about two hours to travel from Sandakan to the research location, while from the town of Lahad Datu, it is approximately one hour. This area is the 'entrance' to nature because there are several forest reserves, including the Pin Supu Forest Reserve, located nearby. In addition, the area is also home to the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. The villages that make up Miso Walai Homestay are located near the Kinabatangan River, which is the longest river in Sabah and the second longest in the country. The area around the river stretching 560 km from the mountains in southwestern Sabah to the Sulu Sea in the east covers some of the most important tourist attractions in Sabah. This has made Kinabatangan one of the most famous ecotourism destinations in the world. Figure 1 shows the location of the Miso Walai Homestay.



Figure 1. Location of Miso Walai Homestay

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MESCOT Initiative

The development of Miso Walai Homestay started with the initiative of MESCOT (Model of Ecological Sustainable Community Tourism). The purpose of MESCOT at the early stages was to develop ecotourism activities that acted as a catalyst for generating economic resources for local communities while contributing to conservation work in the area (UNDP, 2012). MESCOT initiative began in 1997, focusing on tourism development planning. A task force was formed to plan and develop tourism. MESCOT initial task force comprised young people from several villages in Batu Puteh sub-district including Menggaris Village, Batu Puteh Village, Perpaduan Village and Batu Puteh Village who displayed awareness and interest in tourism development. At the early stage, one volunteer from the NGO, Mr. M, was responsible for assisting these groups of youth. Besides being the main architect in the developmental planning of Miso Walai Homestay, members of MESCOT were also involved in the work of conservation and restoration of forests. They were involved in helping the recovery efforts of the wildlife corridors over 1,000 hectares of Pin Supu Forest especially after its destruction by fire in 1998. Members of MESCOT acted as

volunteers and helped JPS to put out the fire. They were also involved in restoring and conserving lakes around the Kinabatangan River from infestation of the water weed, *Salvianav Molesta*, which can destroy the system of freshwater aquatic life and wildlife, especially in the vicinity of Lake Tungong (UNDP, 2012).

Bottom Up Planning Approach

This study revealed that the development of Miso Walai Homestay was based on the bottom-up planning approach. This means the existence of MWH is a result of local community planning made up of the members of the MESCOT. Initially, the members of MESCOT were involved in several phases as follows:

Research phase. The findings of this study showed Miso Walai Homestay started with an information gathering phase conducted by members of MESCOT. Members of MESCOT were divided into three groups, namely, the nature study research group, the Orang Sungai cultural study group and the business review group. This study allowed the members of MESCOT to accumulate knowledge and skills to carry out their own research and understand the attractions around them. All information collected was vital to enhance their capability to identify the factors that contributed to the success of the project development.

Experiential learning phase through field trips. The MESCOT representative from the NGO, Mr. M, tried to enhance the

understanding of the local communities towards tourism by arranging field trips to tourist destinations and recreation centres in Sabah dan Sarawak. A series of visits were organised by MESCOT in 1998 and 1999 that included a visit to Tanjung Aru, the Danum Valley, Mount Kinabalu and Mount Mulu in Sarawak (Respondent 1). According to Respondent 5, the experience of joining tours and participating in recreational activities enabled him to understand the needs of a tourist and the process of managing tourism activities. The knowledge gathered from the series of visits was a very useful input during the tourism planning. A few respondents also mentioned in particular that Mr. M also arranged for them to stay in several hotels in Sabah to expose them to the experience of hotel accommodation and the hotel management works.

Capacity building phase. Besides going on tours, the members of MESCOT were also exposed to tourism information through seminars and courses. Courses organised for MESCOT members included English proficiency and computer literacy. Mr. M was responsible for organising the courses after conducting a needs analysis. The members of MESCOT were also informed of current tourism development matters, tourism policies and legal issues regarding tourism-related matters. Several government agencies such as the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW), the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment, the Sabah Wildlife Department and the Department of Forestry,

Sabah were invited to speak to the group. The idea of a homestay programme was mooted by an officer from the Ministry of Tourism during one of the talks, who cited the Ministry's experience of implementing the programme in Peninsular Malaysia. The respondents stated that the presence of the tourism officials and government agencies increased their motivation to develop a homestay project.

Brainstorming session. Once the information was collected by MESCOT through research, tours, seminars and courses, the next step was to discuss and generate ideas to determine appropriate forms of tourism development. The information collected by MESCOT was finalised in a workshop guided by Mr. M. Ideas generated during the workshop were recorded. The participants were then divided into several discussion groups with Mr. M facilitating the discussion. Each group prepared a presentation on their proposed tourism activities. The workshop ran from morning to evening to give the group enough time to understand the requirements and types of tourism activity that suited them. The workshop also, indirectly, inculcated positive values such as open-mindedness, openness to criticism, self-confidence and respect for the views of others among the workshop members (Respondent 1). Several suggestions were listed down, and they included the homestay, kayaking activities, boat rides down the Kinabatangan River, recreational activities in the forest,

handicraft and cultural activities, among others. The group finally settled on the homestay as their main activity, with other activities to supplement the endeavour.

Miso Walai Homestay implementation stages. The Miso Walai Homestay programme was implemented as early as year 2000. A few respondents agreed that the homestay programme was the prime project, while the other activities, boat rides, kayaking, handicraft, cultural shows and tourist guiding, were supporting activities. Initially, all these tourism activities were placed under the responsibility of associations such as the Association of Mayah De Talob Boat Service, The Association of Tulun Tokon Handicraft and the MESCOT Kayaking Club, while the Association of Miso Walai Homestay acted as the 'umbrella' (Vogel & Abdul Hamid, 2005). However, these associations were not registered. Each association had its own logo created by MESCOT. Figure 2 below shows some of these logos, which displayed the creativity of MESCOT members (Respondent 1).



Figure 2. Some of the logos of the participating bodies

According to Respondent 1, he was elected as chairman of the Miso Walai Homestay Association in 2000. In the early stage, only seven households participated as members under the flagship of MESCOT (Respondent 1, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, Respondent 5, Respondent 7, Respondent 8, Respondent 11). The number increased every year due mainly to the fact that the confidence of the local community increased after they observed the returns of the pioneer homestay. Currently, there are 34 households participating in the homestay programme (KOPEL, 2010). Interested households have to undergo assessment by the Ministry of Tourism before they are awarded a licence to operate a homestay. The same process was also undergone by the pioneer group in 2000. The Miso Walai Homestay programme was officially launched by the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Sabah at the end of 2000 in conjunction with the programme, 'One Stop Tourism Fair' in Kota Kinabalu.

CONCLUSION

The sustainable development of MWH was due mainly to the involvement of local communities in the planning, development and implementation stages of the programme. The involvement of local communities is a process of empowerment to the community and acts as a strong foundation to sustain a community tourism project like MWH. The bottom-up approach in planning compared with the top-down approach established a sense of belonging to the local community, and the community

viewed the success of the programme as a shared achievement that stemmed from the efforts of all seen as a core responsibility of the whole community. The success of this homestay project encourages all local communities that seek to establish such a project to be fully involved as a community in the early planning stages as well as the later stages of the project. This will ensure that the community homestay programme is sustainable.

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