Evaluating community participation in planning decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia: Thematic analysis of public planner’s perception

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in planning decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia. The metropolitan region consists of four local planning authorities that are responsible for governing the spatial planning in the region. Rhetorically, effective community participation helps the local planning authority in making better planning decision, hence provided a sustainable and quality living environment to the community. Thus, it leads to the questions; what constitutes to the effectiveness of community participation in the planning process? To what extent does the current participatory avenue offer a genuine opportunity to the community to incorporate their interest in the planning decision? This phenomenological study used thematic analysis to evaluate the insight postulated by selected public planners which gained through a series of in-depth interview. Following the 12 interviews performed; a total of 37 themes and 68 sub-themes are transpired. A table is used to illuminate the factors that influence the effectiveness of the participatory process in Iskandar Malaysia. The findings suggested that public planners in Iskandar Malaysia believed the effectiveness of community participation in the region is significantly associated with the operational than the structural and cultural dimensions of the process.

1. Introduction
A local authority is responsible for providing quality living to its community; as well as accountable for their decision. However, the impact of urbanisation on major cities in Peninsular Malaysia has seen local authorities face with a daunting challenge to accommodate the increasing demand for basic amenities and affordable housing [1]. Besides, the local authority cum local planning authority needs to provide more opportunity for the community to participate in planning decision-making [2]. Community participation in urban planning in Peninsular Malaysia (except Kuala Lumpur) is guided by the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172) [3]. Rhetorically, community participation is essential in achieving a sustainable and quality living environment thru incorporating the present and future interests of the community [3]. Thus, the questions raised in this study are; “what constitutes to the effectiveness of community participation in the planning process?” and “to what extent does the current participatory avenue offer a genuine opportunity to the community to incorporate their interest in the planning decision?” This phenomenological study has employed in-depth interview for data collection and thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data. The sample size is determined using the concept of data saturation with several works of literature that offered the guideline to estimate the sample size for
phenomenological research is reviewed. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in planning decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia. The evaluation is elucidated by thematically analyse the public planner’s perception. Findings suggested that the effectiveness of community participation in planning decision-making is significantly associated with the operational than to structural and cultural dimensions of the process. The paper concluded with the current community participation in the planning process in Iskandar Malaysia has pointed to the ineffectiveness of the process; thus hinder the ability of the community to incorporate their interest in planning decision genuinely.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants
Public planners of local planning authorities in Iskandar Malaysia are initially approached to gain their consent to be interviewed. The selection of public planners is through the purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method based on three criteria; local authority, position and scope of work. However, in this study, several lower-ranked officers are also selected based on the recommendation by higher-ranked officers. Following the concept of the key informant by [4], these criteria ensure that public planners with vast knowledge of the planning procedure were selected to provide comprehensive insight of the current state of community participatory in the planning process in the metropolitan region. The sample size is determined using the concept of data saturation. [5] defined data saturation as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook”. Saturation is explained further in other subsection.

2.2. Data Collection
A series of in-depth interviews with key informants are performed to gain qualitative data from the public planners in Iskandar Malaysia. The questions asked are circled their perception on the community participatory in the planning process. The selection of in-depth interviews for data collection is based on the ability of this technique to allow the researcher to gather a greater picture of a phenomenon through a small number of respondents that are based on their experiences [6]. Furthermore, [7] in his definition of phenomenological research highlight the employment of in-depth interview as one of the techniques in understanding people’s motivation and action, henceforth their experience. Subsequently, in-depth interviews with key informants are fundamental in gathering valuable information on the current setting of urban planning in Iskandar Malaysia.

Interviews are performed in the form of semi-structured to offer to both researcher and interviewee flexibility and fluidity of ways a question been put out and answered. It gives interviewee more freedom in responding to each question hence lead to interesting findings [4]. In other words, the semi-structured interview provides the opportunity to both researcher and interviewee to discuss and expand the knowledge of both parties.

At the start of each interview, the researcher briefly explains the purpose of the study. To put the interviewee to ease, the researcher has agreed to retain his confidentiality. Permission to record the interview is also sought in every session although one of the respondents did not approve. The following variables were recorded from the interviews - intergovernmental relationship in planning; access to information and process; coordination and collaboration between stakeholders; legislative framework; capacity of local authority; skill and attitude of public officer; influencing capability; transparency and accountability; participatory method; public awareness and knowledge; residents committee; and community representation.

2.3. Saturation of Data
Scholars have used the concept of saturation as the yardstick in determining the sample size for qualitative research [5]; [8]. Scholars had defined data saturation as the point when the data collection and analysis did not produce new information [5]; [8]. Although the idea of achieving saturation in
data collection and analysis is useful for qualitative researchers, it provides a little guideline to estimate the sample size prior to the data collection [5]; [9]. It is because; most of the researches require an estimation of sample size during the proposal stage. Subsequently, some literature that has provided a guide to estimate the sample size for phenomenological research has been reviewed (Table 1). From the literature review, it is suggested the data saturation in a phenomenological study is probably achieve between 10 to 12 interviews. Therefore, in performing this study researcher has estimate a total of 12 in-depth interviews as the yardstick to reach saturation. Similar to [9], the researcher believes that it is better to overestimate rather than to underestimate the sample size.

**Table 1. Summary of Data Saturation in Phenomenological Researcher from Empirical Studies**

| Authors            | Definition of Saturation                                                                 | Findings                                           |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Creswell (1998)    | n/a                                                                                     | Ten in-depth interviews to reach saturation         |
| Morse (2000)       | n/a                                                                                     | It requires 6 to 10 interviews to reach data saturation |
| Guest et al., (2006)| “.the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook”. | 12 interviews to reach 92% data saturation          |
| Coenen et al., (2012)| “Saturation refers to the point at which an investigator has obtained sufficient information from the field”. | Nine interviews to reach saturation in a deductive approach; and 12 interviews in an inductive approach |

2.4. **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is used by researchers whose tend to employ a low-level interpretation. This method is suitable to analyse the information from the in-depth interview of public planners in Iskandar Malaysia. It is justified through the argument by [10] that thematic analysis able to produce an insightful analysis of research questions and facilitates in answering the research questions by capturing the key themes of the data. This study has followed the [10] framework to explain the analysis process.

**Step 1 – Transcribe and familiarise the data:** The audio files from the interviews are listened several times and transcribed using the Microsoft Office program. Nearly all interviews are performed in Bahasa Malaysia with several English terminologies are used. The researcher has employed edited transcription approach in transcribing the audio files. **Step 2 – Generate initial codes:** At this stage, the researcher only coded data that are relevant to the research questions. The code in this study is in the form of statement deliberated by respondents. Similarities in responses between interviews are highlighted and organised using the Microsoft Office. Transcripts are reviewed several times with new or modified codes is updated. **Step 3 – Search for themes:** All relevant coded data are organised into different themes. A table is used to classify and display the relationship between themes and codes that based on three dimensions – operational, structural and cultural as adapted from [11] in evaluating the effectiveness of community participation in planning decision-making. Each dimension comprises several variables (as stated in 2.2). The table helps the researcher in reviewing the level of themes, hence led to the emergence of sub-themes. Also, codes are linked to one theme or more. **Step 4 – Reviewing themes:** In this stage, all themes, sub-themes and codes are revised and modified to established coherent connections between them. At this point, the fundamental question is, does each connection seem relevance? The researcher used the ‘cut and paste’ function in Microsoft Office to reorganise the data in the transcript. **Step 5 – Define themes:** The main questions asked in this stage are; what are the relations built between themes and sub-themes? How do these relations attain the research questions? Contrary to [10] thematic map, the researcher has used the table to illumina
the variables (factors) that possibly influence the effectiveness of the participatory process in Iskandar Malaysia (Table 2). **Step 6 – Reporting:** Researcher reporting the findings.

3. Result and Discussion

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** Themes emerge during analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with public planner (PP)

**Figure 1** shows the whole themes emerged throughout the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with public planners in Iskandar Malaysia. A total of 37 themes are transpired from 124 codes (statements). 94.5% (35) of the themes emerged by the fourth interviews. In other words, saturation of data in this study achieved at the fourth interviews. Furthermore, 68 sub-themes are derived from the themes and codes.

Following the analysis, themes and sub-themes that pertain to the research questions are corroborated through the table below (Table 2). The regularities of both themes and sub-themes emerged in every interview are recorded to determine the scale of impact causes by corresponding themes and sub-themes to the participatory process. The scale of impact is divided into three levels – **low impact (1-4 incidents); medium impact (5-8 incidents); and high impact (9-12 incidents).**

From the thematic analysis, 83% of the respondents believed the current urban planning system in the Iskandar Malaysia, as well as Peninsular Malaysia, is more centralised (Table 2). The upper-tier planning authorities have a more significant influence on the planning decision than the local planning authority [PP2; PP3; PP4; PP5; PP6; PP8; PP9; PP10; PP11; PP12]. As a result, a decision made might not represent the interest of the local. Moreover, 75% of the respondents agreed that local planning authorities in the region still depend on the conventional medium in sharing information and engaging with the community in strategic planning [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP6; PP7; PP10] and operational planning [PP3; PP4; PP9; PP10; PP12]. 11 from the 12 respondents stated that the current platform for collaboration between stakeholders is restricted within the framework of Act 172 [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP7; PP8; PP10; PP12]. Additionally, the community are legislatively excluded from planning permission process whereas only principle submitting person (PSP), applicant and authorities are engaging in the process [PP4; PP5; PP6; PP9; PP10; PP12]. Consequently, the limitation of access to planning information and platform for collaboration among the community may lead to the gap in knowledge and participation among stakeholders, hence benefited to certain stakeholders and community segments.

The analysis has highlighted the importance of the planning statutory and guideline as the main references to the state and local authorities in making strategic and operational planning decisions [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP4; PP5; PP6; PP7; PP8; PP9; PP10; PP11; PP12]. All respondents have concurred that technical factor is the main reason behind any decision taken. However, some of them believed the community unable to participate effectively in preparing the strategic plan due to the technicality of the process and document [PP3; PP11].
| Dimension                        | Variable                   | Theme                                                                 | Sub-theme                                                                 | FP1 | FP2 | FP3 | FP4 | FP5 | FP6 | FP7 | FP8 | FP9 | FP10 | FP11 | FP12 |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Interorganizational             | relationship in planning   | Translation of development strategy                                   | Top-down approach                                                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                 |                            | Relationship between authorities                                       | In decision-making                                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Coordination &                 | Collaboration between      | Factors considered in decision-making                                 | Technical factor                                                            | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| operational                     | stakeholders               | Incorporate community interest                                         | Ministry instrument                                                         | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Collaboration between stakeholders                                      | Planning platform                                                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Access to information &        | process                    | Access to information                                                   | Role of community representative                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Access to planning process                                              | Knowledge related access                                                   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Technical capability           |                            | World view                                                              | Change management                                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Structural                      | Capacity of local authority| Administration capacity                                                  | Lack of manpower                                                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Financial capacity                                                       | Lack of capital                                                             | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Development of community participation                                  | In development planning                                                    | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | In planning permission                                                  | Participation in planning                                                  | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | Skill & attitude of public | Public officer's profile and skill                                       | Public officer's professionalism                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | officers                    | LPA's perception                                                        | Participation in associated activities with psychological factor          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Participation & participation                                           | Influence in planning decision                                            | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Empower the community                                                   | Through knowledge                                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Through access to process                                               | Participation in associated activities                                      | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Local councillor's influence                                            | Participation & participation                                             | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | LPA's influence                                                         | Participation & participation                                             | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Legislative framework          | Guideline for public       | Lack of guideline                                                       | Lack of guideline                                                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | participation              | Lack of localizing the local development plan                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | legal framework            | Incorporate transparency                                                | National planning amendment                                               | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                           | Incorporate accountability                                              | Evaluate the local development plan                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Participatory method           | Current method             | Weakly consistent                                                       | Evaluate the local development plan                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | In strategic planning                                                    | Evaluate the local development plan                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | In operational planning                                                  | Evaluate the local development plan                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Public awareness &             | Awareness & knowledge      | Related to interest                                                     | Related to interest                                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | knowledge level            | Unrelated to income                                                    | Unrelated to income                                                       | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | Willingness to participate | Associate with capacity                                                 | Associate with capacity                                                    | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Associate with psychological factor                                    | Associate with psychological factor                                        | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Cultural                       | Efficiency of local        | Instrument to perform                                                   | Instrument to perform                                                     | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | councillor                 | Attitude of local councillor                                           | Attitude of local councillor                                              | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Proficient of planning procedure                                       | Proficient of planning procedure                                          | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | Logistical in representation                                           | Logistical in representation                                              | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Community representation       | Role of local councillor   | In strategic planning                                                    | In strategic planning                                                      | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | In operational planning                                                  | In operational planning                                                    | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                |                            | As mediator                                                              | As mediator                                                                | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | Local councillor background| Appointment of local councillor                                         | Appointment of local councillor                                           | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | Initiative by local        | Facilitate with information & processes                                  | Facilitate with information & processes                                      | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
|                                | councillor                 | Relationship between theme and sub-theme that has high impact to the effectiveness of the community participation | Relationship between theme and sub-theme that has high impact to the effectiveness of the community participation | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   | ●   |
All respondents concurred that technical factor is the main reason behind any decision taken. However, some of them believed the community unable to participate effectively in preparing the strategic plan due to the technicality of the process and document [PP3; PP11]. Thus, the legitimacy of both statutory and guideline to represent the community interest is questionable. Furthermore, 91.6% of respondents highlighted the current approaches undertaken by local planning authorities to include the community interest in planning decision. Initially, during the development planning, a series of focus group discussion is conducted to gather public opinions [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP7; PP10]. As for planning permission, it is down to the professionalism of a public planner to advise the developer to consult with the community if their proposal potentially affects them [PP4; PP5; PP9]. In the event of an objection, after permission is granted, a dialogue between community, developer and local planning authority is held to resolve the dispute [PP4; PP5; PP6; PP9; PP10; PP11; PP12].

Ways of community participation are treated by the local planning authority has also greatly influenced the effectiveness of the process. Following the interviews, it is comprehended that any objection and suggestion received throughout the publicity period of the development plan is considered based on its relevance to the notion of urban planning [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP7; PP8; PP10; PP11; PP12]. Unfortunately, the majority of the respondents (75%) believed the community did not have the technicality sound in urban planning [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP5; PP6; PP7; PP9; PP11; PP12]. This will dampen the capacity of the community to participate, hence influence the planning decision effectively. 9 of 12 respondents concurred the community participation is associated with psychological factor [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP6; PP7; PP9; PP10; PP11; PP12]. They believed the public planner’s perception towards the community had influenced the way they handle the participatory process [PP2; PP3; PP7; PP11]. They too believed that our society is still immature in making objection and suggestion concerning urban planning [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP7; PP9; PP11; PP12].

The capability of the community to participate effectively is also substantially rest on the professionalism of a public planner in handling the process. 58% of the respondents believed that public planner should be more thoughtful and understand their area well, mainly associated with the community interest. The public planner should put extra effort to go to the ground and flexible in delivering information and implementing publicity process to ensure all community segments relish access to the information and process [PP3; PP4; PP5; PP6; PP7; PP8; PP12]. Operationally, the public planner will not grant permission until all the technical requirements are fulfilled by the applicant [PP2; PP4; PP8; PP9; PP10]. The professionalism will ensure the community interest documented in the development plan and guidelines are protected and realised.

Structurally, the current platform for community participatory which is limited to development planning and within the framework of Act 172 has led to the community mainly the low-income segment to have little access, hence capacity to engage in the planning process due to the scarce of opportunities [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP6; PP7; PP9; PP10; PP11; PP12].

From the cultural aspect of the process, more than half of the respondents (58%) stated that the community only willing to participate if it involves their interest. This has become a challenge for the authority to attract their involvement especially the low-income segment [PP2; PP3; PP6; PP7; PP9; PP10; PP11]. Substantially, public planners do believe there is a connection between awareness of planning procedure and the ownership of property [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP5; PP6; PP7; PP10; PP11]. Therefore, there is a gap in awareness between the private and large property owner and ordinary people. 75% of the respondents believed that the community generally did not know anything about urban planning [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP5; PP6; PP7; PP9; PP11; PP12]. Allegedly, there is a gap in participation between urban stakeholders as current procedure only serves certain segments [PP11].

The final factor that significantly influences the effectiveness of the community participation is the role of local councillor as the representative of the community. As the mediator between the local authority, community and private developer, it is essential for the local councillor to continually share information on planning with their community [PP1; PP2; PP3; PP4; PP6; PP7; PP8; PP10; PP12]. Also, the community can indirectly exert their interest in planning decision through the local councillor. The ability of local councillor to represent their community depends on their competency especially in
relative to their attitude [PP3; PP6; PP7; PP10; PP12] and proficiency of planning procedure [PP3; PP7; PP9; PP12]. The findings from thematic analysis suggested that the current community participation in planning decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia required improvement mainly to its operational dimension. It is corroborated with the majority of respondents concurred that operational variables such as intergovernmental relationship in planning, collaboration and coordination between stakeholders and access to information and process are fundamental to the successful community participation. From the elaboration of the relationship between themes and sub-themes, it is plausible to conclude the improvement of operational aspect will prospectively improve both structural and cultural aspects of the process in long-term. By mitigating the operational-related shortcomings, it will initiate further enhancement to other aspects and create a planning milieu. Subsequently, it will spur for greater collaboration between stakeholders; thus empower the capacity of the community to participate in the planning decision-making effectively.

4. Conclusion
This phenomenological study anticipates in the continuous debate on the effectiveness of community participatory in urban planning as the vehicle to incorporate the community interest in the planning decision, hence produce greater living to the community. Thematically, researcher has derived the factors that influenced the effectiveness of the current practices in Iskandar Malaysia which is based on the perception of public planners of local planning authorities. The current state of community participatory in Iskandar Malaysia highlighted the inability of the present avenue to provide genuine participation to all community segments. The prominent limitation highlighted is associated with the operational aspect of the process. Prior to the finding, it helps decision-maker to address the shortcomings of current practice, henceforth promote genuine participation to the community.

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