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The PRA tools for qualitative rural tourism research

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Abstract

Participatory Rural Appraisal, PRA, had been widely used in the western tourism research studies as an useful qualitative research and engineering tool in gathering qualitative information. This research had been carried out in a rural, exotic Iban village (the indigenous people of Borneo) named Nanga Sumpa, whom involved in the longhouse tourism. The researcher applied several PRA research tools in gathering opinions from Iban communities regarding authenticity and preservation of their culture for tourism purpose. The PRA tools appeared to be a very functional, easy-to-understand and easy-to-use engineering research tool, for both the researcher as well as the rural community, in gathering descriptive feedback and information.

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1. Introduction

The PRA tool is originally used as a policy making tool which helped the policy maker to gather information from grassroots or general public and at the same time, the general public can present clearly their problems or needs to the government and related authorities.

PRA tools as a new research and engineering tool, had been popularized by researchers from United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, from 1970s to 1980s [1]. There are over hundreds types of PRA techniques and tools had been used and described in variety of books or articles and the numbers are still growing today. These techniques can be categories into four groups [2]:

- **Group dynamics**, e.g. learning contracts, role reversals, feedback sessions
- **Sampling**, e.g. transect walks, wealth ranking, social mapping
- **Interviewing**, e.g. focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, triangulation
- **Visualization** e.g. venn diagrams, matrix scoring, timelines

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The very special characteristic of PRA tools are these techniques avoid writing but promote oral communication such as pictures, symbols, physical objects and group memory to gather information needed. New PRA tools are added to the list from time to time.

2. The PRA tools

According to Pratt and Loizs [3], PRA is tool that upgraded/reformed from RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) which emphasized on 'public participation'. The advantage of PRA compare to RRA is that the 'shifting of project' from researchers/ authorities to the communities themselves. As the result, the power of 'determine' and 'implement' the project also will be shifted from local authorities to the communities as well. It is believed that the more commitment of the local community to a project, the higher the chances for a project to achieve it target.

One of the specific characteristic of PRA is to be 'together' with the local community. Being together can be in the form of overnight in the village, live in the village for certain period of time, work with the villagers, doing their household chaos, farming, fishing etc together. The PRA research method is quiet similar to the method used by 'applied anthropology' such as discussed by King [4] through his research on colonialism in South East Asian countries.

PRA is a dual function research tool which means the PRA acts as a tool for data collection and at the same time, it is also an immediate analysis tool on site. The PRA engineering research tools help the researcher to analysis the responses from the local community immediately through activities and discussions. The answers gathered can be followed up with other research methods, such as semi-structure interview or in-depth personal interview for further detail information. The PRA tool can function better if the researcher is able to use it with open-minded and good communication skill [3].

Through the PRA activities, the lifestyle, way of thinking, way in solving problems and ability to monitoring of the community members can be easily revealed. In the other hand, PRA is also an engineering research tool to reveal the ability of individual or group in handling the project within the community. The function of researcher or facilitator is to kick start and enlighten the discussion but not to intervene or misleading the decision of the community members.

For the purpose of this research, five PRA tools had been chosen, i.e. the Activities Map, Matrix Scoring, Pairwise Ranking, Daily Routine Diagram and Focus Group Discussion. These PRA tools were chosen to analysis the local opinions on their involvement in longhouse tourism and authenticity of their culture. These tools helped the local community in understanding the research topic in a more simple and easy-to-understand way. In compliment to the PRA tools, the researchers can later follow-up with other quantitative supporting methods, such as questionnaire survey or face to face in depth interview to gather additional information needed.

3. Nanga Sumpa: the authentic longhouse tourism community

Nanga Sumpa received their first tourist in the year 1987 which was also the date for the completion of Batang Ai Hydroelectric Dam. Nanga Sumpa, an Iban village with 28 families stay under one roof, is located upriver of Ai river and take about 1 1/2 hour boat ride from the Batang Ai Dam (Figure 1).

Nanga Sumpa started the cultural tourism activities when a travel agency at Kuching, i.e. Borneo Adventure, signed the agreement of understanding with the villagers. With this agreement, the villagers would served the tourists, preformed the culture dance, selling of cultural product etc while the travel agency only promoted and brought the tourist, either local or international, to the longhouse [5]. Also in the agreement, the tourist may stay in a natural tourist lodge beside their longhouse which this lodge was built by the travel agent. Until today, Nanga Sumpa only received tourist bring by Borneo Adventure. The villagers who involved in any kind of touristic activities will be paid accordingly to the tourist packages. The rates of payment for different activities are various following the mutual agreement among the villagers. A tourism headman was selected among the villagers, to make daily duty rotation as well as managed the touristic activities with the travel agent [5].