

EXPLORING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

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Article history

Received date : 15-9-2022
Revised date : 10-10-2022
Accepted date : 30-11-2022
Published date : 15-12-2022

To cite this document:

Tangit, T. M., Foo, J., & Saibeh, B. (2022). Exploring Asset-Based Community Development In Intangible Cultural Heritage Management. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 7(51), 39 - 50.

Abstract: Intangible cultural heritage is important to any community and a community-driven approach encourages communities to avoid becoming overly dependent on external agencies that are held responsible to solve the problems of the community. Thus, an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach may be a better option as one of the positive aspects of ABCD is the focus on local resources as assets, specifically in identifying existing human resources and evaluating their sustainability. The authors propose that the recently launched TABIK, a culture and innovation theme park in Kundasang, Ranau district, in Sabah, Malaysia, meets this criterion of valuing their own community members as resources or assets.

Keywords: Community, Development, Culture, Asset, Heritage, Sabah, Malaysia

Introduction

Community development entails a community-driven approach that requires members of a community to act collectively in their pursuit of goals that enhance their quality of life as well as use a variety of strategies and tools to achieve desired outcomes (Phillips & Pittman, 2019). Community development processes typically involve creating general awareness among the community (of the problem at hand); training project leaders; discussing community involvement; and developing confidence working with outside groups seeking to collaborate (Mohammad Shatar, 2003). At times, community development can be complicated due to a high degree of mistrust towards outside assistance: Aboriginal communities, for instance, are often viewed as problems that require solving by the public including the government (Welsh & Burgess, 2021). Yet, communities hold the key to improving the lives of their members. In this paper, the authors argue that an asset-based community development approach (ABCD), which prioritises local resources, can be applied to the management of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Communities who undergo capacity building are investing in their members' potential as human resources and are viewed as "assets" under the ABCD scope.

Literature Review

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) typically refers to the aspects of culture that are not material in nature. That is, while material or tangible culture refers to architecture, clothing, weaving, accessories, weapons, farming implements and other items like these; intangible cultural heritage are music, language, rituals, chants, knowledge, art and similar items. Further, ICH also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, 2018). Malaysian festivals, for instance, typically showcase the ethnic community's celebration of culture, which ensures that the ethnic harmony in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society continue to exist (Johnes et al., 2022). The impact of climate change, however, has seen a negative impact on communities who lack the plants and animals that are tied to their reproduction of cultural practices such as songs and musical instruments (Pearson et al., 2021). The loss of ICH in a community is also imminent in the face of growing globalisation and usually marked by sadness and fear. Culture provides a community with a unique identity and a way to connect to their ancestral past, but the heritage loss means that there is now a lack of key resource people in the community who have the knowledge and know-how in ICH development. The wealth of knowledge and skills that is usually transmitted from one generation to the next may also not have occurred or properly occurred. For instance, younger Fijians lack the indigenous knowledge pertaining to cyclones; they are unable to predict the change in the nature around them as their elders would (Janif et al., 2016).

Since ICH also has great impact towards the economic, social, and environmental domains, it has become more and more important to consider how ICH may be managed and developed to prevent a decline. In needs-based community development, a heritage in decline may be approached as a project to preserve history and culture, an ontological study to be carried out so that the community can be informed on parts of ICH that remain intact, or not, over time. This "salvage" type study is often reported in a "doom and gloom" style by experts who may have technical expertise but are not part of the community concerned. To appeal for financial aid, communities need to demonstrate the dearth of expertise in their midst and this unwittingly paints a sense of hopelessness and positions the community as being helpless. Conversely, a community-driven approach encourages members of a community to combine strengths and know-how. Calls to integrate approaches in conserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage have further been made by the UNESCO owing to the interdependency between elements in the two forms of heritage (Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage, n.d.).

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in Community Development

As culture is often viewed as an "asset" from the community's viewpoint, the authors argue that it is possible to consider how an Asset-based Community Development or ABCD approach may be utilised in the ICH development of a community. Started by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight in 1993 as a guide for urban troubled communities with low income and social issues, the key philosophy behind the ABCD approach is in the idea that the local community possesses the resources to develop and thus development must start from within the community. Such a community will seek to mobilise existing albeit unrecognised resources and refrain from waiting for external help to arrive. The ABCD approach is antithetical to a needs-based approach: the latter is deficiency-oriented and 'expert' driven; it ignores the strength within the community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). By building assets in the community, this can greatly help residents improve their quality of life (Green & Haines, 2015).

The ABCD approach recognises five building blocks of community:

1. Gifts, skills, and capacities of local residents (“gifts” refer to what members of the community freely give from their heart, head, and hand)
2. Associations (refer to small groups who volunteer for the benefit of their community)
3. Institutions (refer to formalised structures such as business groups, agencies, and governmental groups)
4. Physical assets (refer to land, buildings, space, and other items)
5. Connections (refer to economic-based and interactive exchanges in the community)

The ABCD approach thus has three important defining characteristics:

1. It is asset-based (because it starts with assessing what is present in the community, the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area)
2. It is also internally focused (as it recognizes the agenda building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, associations and institutions)
3. It is relationship driven (building and rebuilding relationships between and among local residents, local association and institutions is central to the success since strong ties form the basis for community-based problem solving)

The ABCD approach appears to be versatile in nature and has since been extended to other domains. For instance, educational practitioners in Canada use the ABCD approach because they have seen the disempowering effect of problem-focused development and found that the ABCD approach suits the dynamism, fluidity, and differentiation of their diverse communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). In other cases, those practising the ABCD approach may translate it into a form of community participation in their respective projects. In Samoa, principles of using local resources per the ABCD approach are already in place and that NGOs and outside collaborators, while needing to further align themselves within the facilitation process, are viewed positively as mediators in activating the social change (Fuimaono, 2012: 142). In “Asset Based Community Development and Needs Analysis for Telecentre Programme among Orang Asli West Malaysia” (Bala, 2016), Associate Professor Dr Poline Bala of UNIMAS (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) uses the ABCD approach to highlight Aboriginal youth as community resources and the need for a mentoring program as part of program sustainability, among others. The ABCD approach has since been expanded to ensure that four integral elements are fulfilled: 1) Resources 2) Methods, 3) Functions and 4) Evaluation (McKnight & Russell, 2018). These elements encapsulate the basic ABCD premise in the five building blocks of community and the three defining characteristics aforementioned.

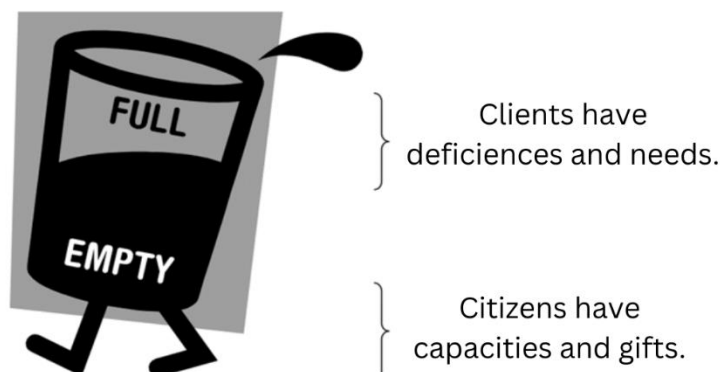


Figure 1: The asset-based Community Development approach always considers the resourcefulness of the community (“Is the glass half full or half empty?” ref. Mathie & Cunningham, 2008)

Methods

This paper is qualitative and explorative in nature with the aim of demonstrating the applicability of ABCD in an existing program dedicated to ICH promotion and development. TABIK (“Taman Budaya dan Inovasi Kundasang” (launched on April 1, 2022), a culture and innovation theme park in Kundasang, Ranau district, in Sabah, Malaysia, is the source of application for the ABCD approach being proposed in this paper. Research data comes from observation and interviews with TABIK informants. The data is analysed is to determine whether the TABIK can utilise—or perhaps already utilise—the asset-based approach inherent in the ABCD approach with the focus on the five building blocks of ABCD and its defining characteristics. Note that due to the *Suara Buluh Perindu Kinabalu* (SBPK)’s sheer influence on the formation of TABIK, SBPK and TABIK tend to be treated as a single community in literature.

About TABIK (Taman Budaya dan Inovasi Kundasang) or Kundasang Culture and Innovation Park

Kundasang Culture and Innovation Park (TABIK) is a heritage conservation centre focussing on culture and environment. TABIK sits within the district of Ranau, which is a well-known site for both tangible and intangible cultural heritage and diversity in Sabah. Mount Kinabalu (4,095m) is in this district and it is the highest mountain on the island of Borneo and in Malaysia; it is also among the highest mountains in Southeast Asia. The symbol of the mountain and nature is integral to the people of the Kundasang area, who are famous for their occupation in agriculture (temperate vegetables). The predominant people in the area are the Dusun people and their intangible cultural heritage is being preserved through the collective efforts of communities. The state of Sabah is also heavily involved in both tangible and intangible cultural projects in Ranau, as parts of the district are within the Kinabalu Geopark (aspiring to be ratified as a UNESCO Global Geopark).

TABIK, which was launched on the 1st of April 2022, started as a project in 2020 under the leadership of Dr Jurry Foo, a researcher from a local university, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The model of TABIK was designed by via the grassroot research grant project (SDK0244-2020) funded by the Universiti Malaysia. the community invites UMS to

collaborate to upgrade the Buluh Perindu gallery. Therefore, UMS has implemented the transfer of knowledge and skills in managing natural and cultural resources as a tourism product and community development centre through by optimizing resources and local wisdom.

TABIK creates a space where people could be empowered to become the source of economic and social opportunities and that can ultimately form the backbone of sustainable community development in their area. Dr Jurry Foo and her research team worked closely with *Suara Buluh Perindu Kinabalu* (SBPK) [loosely translated as “the voice of the magical bamboo tree”], a bamboo-based music band from Kundasang. Now managing the TABIK, this community of musicians has innovated musical instruments, delivery style performance and techniques of handling bamboo music in accordance with current music needs. They maintain their art as their intangible cultural heritage and every member of this band is obliged to learn and master handling techniques, or to make at least one tool or instrument for traditional bamboo music. Bamboo is an affordable resource and readily available resource in the Kundasang area.

Previously, according to Foo et al. (2021), the efforts of the SBPK in developing TABIK had shown that the five stages of the development process proposed by Muhammad Shatar (2003) had taken place, namely creating general awareness among the community about the importance of conservation of cultural heritage and the environment, conducting related preliminary studies to identify problems that exist, training of the project leader, involving members of the community and creating confidence with the outgroup or external collaborators. In general, the process of community development through TABIK involves changes in the physical, social and personality aspects of the SBPK members themselves. TABIK has not only provided a physical space but also a social space where there is interaction between communities involving the sharing and transfer of knowledge and skills about bamboo music and other cultural aspects. While appreciation for the bamboo plant as the source material for the musical instruments at hand increased TABIK members’ appreciation for the natural environment, the overall appreciation also developed their awareness on the importance of protecting natural habitats. Their appreciation and spirituality towards heritage culture was also seen as being fostered at TABIK.

Findings and Analysis

Overall, TABIK as a community project managed by *Suara Buluh Perindu Kinabalu* (SBPK) closely follows the aspects and characteristics outlined in the Asset-Based Community Development approach.

(i) Gifts, skills, and capacities of local residents (“gifts” refer to what members of the community freely give from their heart, head and hand)

Dr Jurry Foo may have initiated the idea of a theme park in TABIK but the Kundasang community responded by offering their gifts, skills, and capacities as resources, namely SBPK members had the unique ability to create music from bamboo instruments with their members continuing to innovate upon their expertise and create a variety of bamboo-based instruments. For instance, Khamarul Azman Kowasin aka “Payuki”, a second-generation member of the *Suara Buluh Perindu Kinabalu* (SBPK) invented a 200cm-long flute flute that has three different notations starting from ‘G’ (the end of the flute), ‘C’ (in the middle), and at the top of the flute is ‘D’. The sound produced by this flute is unique: all low, medium, and high sounds could be heard at once. The Payuki flute or the Akinabalu flute or the Panjang [long] flute can play local, Malaysian as well as international songs (“SERULING PAYUKI’- Inspirasi Anak Muda Mengoptimumkan Sumber Dan Kearifan Tempatan Di TABIK,” 2021).

Note that from time to time, members of the wider Kundasang community also seek to donate goods, e.g., electric generators to TABIK (see “Taman Budaya dan Inovasi Kundasang” on Facebook). Ranau is one of the districts that often experience power outages in Sabah owing to insulation problems with conductors that can easily malfunction (“Sabah Hopes to Reduce Power Cuts Caused by Insulation Problems by 30%-50% in Three Years,” n.d.).



Figure 2: Payuki with his long flute
(Ref. “Payukie by Arcadia Gate Pictures,” n.d.)

(ii) Associations (small groups who volunteer for the benefit of their community)

While the TABIK quickly gained the support of SBPK members, many members from the wider Kundasang community also took part in the inception of TABIK because they were interested in the idea of a theme park in TABIK. Kundasang families, for instance, supported and volunteered to set up the TABIK. In the instance of Payuki above, his mother Mariana Taliban became instrumental in his support together with his father, Kowasin Watiman. Both parents are musically talented with Payuki’s father being a member of the SBPK and a teacher in the art of bamboo music. In other instances, parents also brought their children from as young as seven years old to the TABIK to learn about bamboo music (Jurry et al., 2021) showing that families formed associative ties with TABIK and lent their support to the initiative in their community.

Another group is made up of the elders in the community who are acknowledged for their selfless sharing of knowledge and know-how in the art of bamboo music. According to Payuki (pers. comm.), his father had learnt the art from Malius Gintal, an elder from an adjacent district (Tamparuli), who had taught bamboo music to other communities. Payuki’s father, Kowasin, taught Payuki how to play a flute when he was four or five years old. The constant help from elders ensured that the art as an asset was passed down to younger generations.

(iii) Institutions (formalised structures such as business groups, agencies, and governmental groups)

Meanwhile, institutional support was evident in the start of the TABIK program. Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) had provided the initial research grant to Dr Jurry Foo and her team to explore the aspects of ICH with the Kundasang community. However, it should be noted that the Kundasang community itself took interest in the TABIK, namely the Bumiputera Vegetable

Wholesale and Retail Association and the Walai Tokou Guest House who lent their financial and moral support. These institutions also provided food to workers who built the TABIK and donated over 100 plants and herbs for the botanic garden at TABIK. TABIK also receives promotional support from Malaysian Radio and Television Stations (RTM) and Borneo Daily Bulletin. The Sabah Tourism Board also sponsored and promoted Payuki's long flute performance in the UN's 2022 Human Right Convention in Geneva ("Malaysia Mengharumkan Nama Di United Nations Geneva Switzerland," n.d.). The district council of Ranau (as discussed below) also provides tremendous institutional support.

(iv) Physical assets (such as land, buildings, space)

The district council of Ranau provided TABIK with a location free-of-charge off the Ranau highway within the vicinity of the Kundasang Town. The council is currently looking for a larger lot for TABIK. The spectacular views from TABIK show the mountain (Mt. Kinabalu) and the surrounding valleys (Fig. 4). Off the highway, TABIK is easily accessible from the city of Kota Kinabalu (about an hour and a half by car).

It is important to note that the opening of TABIK itself is to provide a place not just to train in music or to make musical instruments but a space to run activities including documenting the arts (the setting up of a mini gallery), making traditional handicrafts and growing a botanical garden, one that stores species information that has value for the local life of the community. The latter idea has the ability of simultaneously making the TABIK a landmark for conservation in cultural and environmental heritage, especially as the bamboo musical instruments are derived from nature. Additionally, the musicians in TABIK are also creating a space for the design of traditionally-inspired clothing. As part of their repertoire, musicians prepare their own garments made from natural materials such as bark and seeds from plants and aquatic animals (curated freshwater snails are added as ornaments) (Jurry et. al. 2021). TABIK thus provides a space for the SBPK community to work continuously: to discuss with each other and revisit their mission and vision in fighting for and preserving heritage music in their culture.



Figure 3: Dr Jury Foo, far left with children, youth, and adults from TABIK.
 (Ref. “Taman Budaya Dan... - Taman Budaya Dan Inovasi Kundasang,” n.d.)

(v) Connections (based on economy and interactive exchanges in the community)

TABIK clearly functions as a connection for the community in the economic sense. It creates employment opportunities and sources of income to the community. Among them is the business of bamboo musical instruments, bamboo-based handicrafts and various other business opportunities including generating income through performances for visitors. The TABIK experience also encouraged community members to consider diversifying their abilities and types of services that they can offer through methods of optimising knowledge and music-based skills to increase their livelihood potential. For instance, members sold online performances and took part in online busking activities as a method of generating income. This step to further their connections shows an increase in terms of digital literacy among community members and their competency in adapting to the new norms in the double disruption of technology and the COVID19 pandemic.

The TABIK also demonstrates that the ABCD approach’s three important defining characteristics can be adopted:

(i) It is asset-based

TABIK may have started as a research project to see how communities might drive their own development particularly in the area of ICH and the term “asset” was not used as such. However, much of the earlier effort of the founders has been to assess what are the present assets in the community in terms of gifts and talents, as opposed to what is lacking or even missing. As such, TABIK as a space for cultural heritage has itself become an asset to the empowerment of human capital through community involvement. Besides creating job opportunities for musicians, TABIK can generate economic development to the wider

community because of the tourism potential it can draw. The area of Kundasang is one of the major tourist destinations in Sabah, if not in Malaysia, given the boon of nature tourism there.

(ii) It is internally focused

Of the three aspects, this is the clearest feature of TABIK. Community members had the drive from the very beginning to recognise that they need to solve problems based on the strengths in their community. The core members represented by the SBPK sought to establish the core of their program being the bamboo music and musical instruments and ensured that the youth in the community were made welcome and appreciated as being part and parcel of the initiative. The Mini Gallery documenting their arts and the botanic garden at TABIK came as original ideas of the youth of this community, the majority of whom are in the age range of 20 to 30 years. TABIK possesses a local definition, a human capital investment and the creativity of younger generations that spark hope and future stability. It recognises that problem solving is not only the work of the associations and institutions they collaborate with but something that their own members should spearhead.

(iii) It is relationship driven

SBPK as core to the management of TABIK maintains a good relationship with outside groups and realises that relationships with external parties are a way to strengthen the function of TABIK to society. It is important to reiterate that families are treated as assets and as the means to mobilise other assets of the community, such that the community can make their own plans, develop their own strategies and determine their long-term plans.

The following table summarises the key points in the application of Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) approach to TABIK:

Figure 4: Summary of key points in the ABCD approach in TABIK

Aspects and characteristics outlined in the ABCD approach	ABCD approach's three important characteristics	The ABCD approach and TABIK
(i) Gifts, skills, and capacities of local residents (“gifts” refer to what members of the community freely give from their heart, head and hand)	Asset based & Internally focused	Focussing on community as “asset” aside from physical assets, the ABCD approach is clearly compatible with the TABIK program given the program’s strong core values of maintaining relationship with collaborating groups and institutions as well as continuing the focus on building up the resourcefulness of the community’s skillsets and knowledge base.
(ii) Associations (small groups who volunteer for the benefit of their community)	Relationship driven	
(iii) Institutions (formalised structures such as business groups, agencies, and governmental groups)	Internally focused	
(iv) Physical assets (such as land, buildings, space)	Asset based	
(v) Connections (based on economy and interactive exchanges in the community)	Relationship driven	



Figure 4: The view of Mount Kinabalu from the TABIK entrance.
(Ref: “Google Maps,” n.d.)

Conclusion

The case of the “Taman Budaya dan Inovasi Kundasang ” or TABIK shows that the ABCD approach is wholly compatible with existing community-driven approaches. The TABIK’s main approach is to prioritise the character development of the community so that members may become self-reliant and sustainable in their ICH pursuits. This capacity building approach inherently takes on the view that community members should see themselves as solutions rather than hindrances to the development at hand. In other words, communities are made up of members who are assets to development. As the ABCD approach continues to be tied to understanding the social capital of the community, it will be important to continue to study the TABIK in greater detail to see if and how the community has achieved critical autonomy, collective action and community profit, the key end goals of asset-based community development. To end, TABIK shows that it is committed to a community-driven process. In this respect, the TABIK community may also consider challenges of the ABCD approach. One aspect is to consider the ongoing role of the external agency and the level of involvement that can induce (a return to) dependency (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

Acknowledgement

Thank you Universiti Malaysia Sabah for the grassroot research grant project (SDK0244-2020) and *Suara Buluh Perindu Kinabalu* (SBPK) for the collaboration.

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