

*Case Study  
Malaysia*

3133

*PRISE*

*M3114*

KANITA

Participatory Research Component

An Exercise in Community Participation:

The Pre-School Project and Comments Beyond

By:

Maznah Mohamad

Prepared For

The KANITA Workshop II

at

Universiti Sains Malaysia

March 17-19th, 1980

## I. Children of Kampung Kota Mengkuang: Parents and Environment

Children who are 12 years and below comprise about 35% of the total population in the village and in fact form the largest age group among the population. Since children form such an essential component in family life where both men and women are drawn into childrearing, the proper development of children should be considered an important basic needs of any community. Before we discuss the action-oriented projects that was initiated in the village it would be useful to understand the children's lives in the village, and their relationship to parents and environment.

Generally, both men and women take part equally in child rearing although women, who are tied to their reproductive functions are more burdened by the demands of child raising. In the village, children are treated with a lot of respect and are seldom punished or reprimanded. Child caring is often communal and most women develop great affection for children and are also not restrained from giving attention to someone else's children. Children in the village exhibit a lot of independence in terms of movement within the village. A village environment is safe and there is tremendous community scrutiny whenever and whenever children wander about. Group attachment or group play begins around 3 years old and this is the age that children are seen to form into a specific pattern of role socialization. At about 5 or 6 years old children are already

segregated according to their gender groups. Most of the play activities are held outside the house. This greater amount of time spent outside the house as compared with urban children is probably responsible for the occurrence of skin diseases that affect almost every child in the village. This amount of time spent outdoors also affects the shoddiness of the apparel that village children wear. This greater sense of physical mobility and ease of movement within the village also explains why little children of six can know every member in the village by name. In fact, during the early stage in field experience these children served as useful guides and informants. Although they are shy to strangers they have a great capacity to want to be attached to them. Thus, when the first moved into the village the children's curiosity in us almost made us feel to be rare specimens in an alien world. Their constant scrutiny was shamelessly repeated day by day. At this time they were also very eager to please us and would not reject any offers to go for long walks or to accompany us at house visits. After many months of being in the field, the scrutinizations have stopped and we are no longer a curiosity. In fact, these children frequent the house less often now.

Apart from education which will be discussed much more substantially in the later part of the paper; health is also an important variable in children's development. Health standards of

children vary from one family to another. The most common health problem is skin infection, running noses, head lice and general unhygienic habits like not washing carefully. As pointed out before, their exposure to the outdoors together with lack of easy access to abundant water supply would naturally result in their susceptibility to skin infections and other parasitic caused diseases. Another reason for the low standards of health among children is improper diet. Their diet has a high sugar content and very little vegetables and roughage. Meal times are also not regular especially during the peak production periods in December as most women would be away for the whole day transplanting or doing other padi work. This time also coincides with the school holidays so most children will be around and unattended. Their daily schedule at this time is most erratic. During schooling time though.

## II. An Experiment in Community Participation: The Pre-School Project

### The Beginnings:

This idea about setting up an educational center first came about when the researcher moved into the field in August 1979. At that time there were many children who were still not at a school going age. The mothers of these children would also remark that a Kindergarten should be set up for their children. The main function of this kindergarten or TADIKA (pre-school child center) as perceived by village women is to be a place in which children's learning abilities

can be improved. The lack of a TADIKA was certainly not the most pressing problem in the village since the care of children during the day are often attended to by close relatives or grandparents who live nearby.

However, since most of these children never receive much attention and guidance if left this way, some form of an organized set up could at least serve to direct the children towards more productive activities.

At this same time too, the Perkumpulan Perempuan (Women's Group) consisting of women in the village was being set-up. It was felt then, that they as a group should work in mobilizing support for The TADIKA and in making the necessary external contacts. This is was like an opportunity for them to exercise self-reliance in order to promote their own development.

They were after all aware of the channels that they could go through, mainly being RISDA (Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority) or KEMAS (Community Development Division of the Ministry of Agriculture). We implied that in order for them to set up the TADIKA they would have to get organised among themselves to plan for some strategies of action. This would involve discussions among themselves, some initial investigation about the feasibility of having a TADIKA at all, and finally, after a consensus had been obtained, the necessary letters could be written to request for the

actual aid. As it turned out, this hardly caught on among the women and they were at a loss as to how this whole process should progress. Their initial reaction was to depend on, since we were there to help them anyway.

At that stage, our attempt to eliminate this dependency from the women was futile as it was an unrealistic expectation. The time constraints imposed on them as women, i.e. having to indulge in both domestic and production activities (that happened to be the busiest month since transplanting was being done); and the eventual consequence of being cut off from any organisational involvement, contribute a lot to their lack of confidence in initiating any more. After much failed attempts to convince them that they could at least start by writing a letter to state their needs, it was finally suggested that perhaps an experimental TADIKA, run by KANITA could be set up, so that the whole village will be able to experience the existence of a program for their children. We felt that this could at least test whether wanting a TADIKA is indeed a pressing need and if so, how much will they participate to maintain it.

The Experimental TADIKA:

The Experimental TADIKA lasted for seven days. In this attempt we tried to draw in participation from as many interested people as possible. With the suggestion and approval from the villagers we managed to get the young women to be fully involved in the running

of the TADIKA. Much of the coordination was also done by our field assistant who happened to have an experience of her own in the setting up of a pre-school center. We also wanted to make sure that the TADIKA to be set up should be as suited to the local conditions as possible.

The stages in the setting up of the TADIKA went as follows:\*

- 1) The setting up of a Women's Group and the elections of committee members.
- 2) Undertaking a household census survey and tabulating age groups in order to determine the actual numbers of children who would be eligible for pre-school education at projected periods to come.
- 3) Preparation of a data file on each child at the TADIKA.
- 4) Holding discussions for preparation of materials and equipments.
- 5) On the 5th of December, 1979, household visits were conducted to gather information on children as well as to meet with parents. It took about four days to complete this. In the course of which suggestions and responses from parents were carefully considered.
- 6) In the evenings, preparation work was carried out and the curriculum for the TADIKA was set up. The two young women were also briefed on teaching methods.
- 7) The TADIKA was opened on the 8th of December. When it was opened there were a lot of excitement. The

children were highly excited and motivated to be involved in something new. Various activities were set up; creative, cognitive and physical development were all taken into consideration.

According to the report, none of the women in the village had taken any initiative to be directly involved with the preparation and running of the TADIKA.

#### Evaluation and Action

A week after the TADIKA was set up, we moved back into the field to evaluate the reactions of the villagers towards the TADIKA and to find out if any definite steps of action had been taken to ensure the continued existence of the TADIKA.

In the village, the reaction to the TADIKA was positive. Generally, all the villagers felt that the one week experiment had been good since the children were overwhelmingly motivated to continue with it. We had thus hoped that the women's group would have written the necessary letters to request for a TADIKA to be set up in the village.

The development that occurred was quite surprising. It turned out that it was the men who finally took the initiative to request for the TADIKA. The chairman of the Village Rubber Smallholders Association (PPPK) had apparently taken up the matter with the RISDA officer and that RISDA would be willing to subsidize the TADIKA. At

this point, it seemed that the idea of mobilizing the women to take on the initiative had somewhat become an impossibility. As soon as the men had taken over the women's involvement at once became peripheral. We thought then that at this time we had to be realistic with our action program and decided to take some steps ourselves to meet with RISDA in Alor Setar to confirm on their decisions. As it turned out, everything was still indefinite and RISDA had not really classified to the villagers about the bureaucratic procedures that had to be understood before such a request can be made available. Thus the conditions for setting up a TADIKA had to be met before financial aid of any sort could go into the project. The most important condition that had to be met is that the village should have a trained teacher, that is, someone who had undergone a special training by KEMAS or RISDA. This the village obviously lacked since there was no one who had had the training and furthermore even if someone was willing to go for the special training, the course would not be held till the end of 1980. Thus it seemed that if there were the procedures then, RISDA could not give the money to fund the TADIKA even if there could be an untrained person willing to run it. We decided to bring this forward to the villagers and to discuss other alternative arrangements.

A meeting was thus held among villagers. Representatives of RISDA and KANITA. RISDA's condition was that villagers should just get ahead with the application and they will try to look for

teachers through KEMAS. They wanted the application to be done through the HPPK since RISDA's involvement in the village is only through that organization. We, on the other hand felt that this was taking away all chances of women even participating in any self-help projects. The PPK is male dominated and not likely to include the women folks in matters that had to deal with the bureaucracy. In any case, a compromise was reached. Since it would take several months before the application could be processed we suggested that in the meantime. KANITA would take over the TADIKA. This could serve two purposes, one to ensure that women's participation would continue to be included and second to ensure that both villagers and our input could be used to determine the nature and form of the play school centre to be set up. At the meeting, committee members to run the TADIKA were also elected. The members were elected as representative to the various organisations in the village - the Village Working and Development Committee (JKKK), The Village Rubber Smallholders Association (PPK) the Women's Group (PP), RISDA and KANITA. It was decided that the TADIKA would be set up on a self help basis with KANITA supplying the major funds for salaries of teachers and food subsidy.

The TADIKA:

In January the first meeting to discuss the setting up of the TADIKA was held among the committee members. Several items

were discussed regarding the TADIKA, mainly about the general administration, the finance and suggestions about fund-raising drives. Fund raising could be done in several ways. One of which is showing filmshows and the other to set up a consumer center where used clothes could be sold. It was hoped that there used clothes could be obtained through donations from people in the urban centers.

The two young women who had participated in the experimental TADIKA agreed to serve as teachers. The two women had not really expressed their interest in doing the TADIKA permanently. Since they are both waiting for their examination result and might have other employment plans later. In the meantime regular visits to RISDA and KEMAS were made so as to try to get some funds to continue the TADIKA.

When the TADIKA first got started we were worried that there would not be enough funds to sustain it. There was also a lack of skilled expertise to organise the curriculum. It was a tedious job since little children need more care and attention than anyone else. Women and men in the community could do little to contribute except in giving the encouragement and support.

After much discussions with the villagers we felt that if sufficient funds and expertise could not be secured, we should just concentrate on building a play center. This then would not have the set schedule of schooling but would comprise of a children's library

and perhaps be equipped with constructive toys and other learning aids. Another proposal could be to build a simple playground beside the community center, using local materials and self-help efforts. Since this would also need some funds we felt that we should try some other channels to request for such an assistance.

By this time, we could sense that villagers were a bit apprehensive about requesting for aid since they were now aware of the bureaucratic impediments that will be faced. Anyhow we proceeded to request for the funds from the District Office. At this stage there was hardly any villagers input since it just involved going directly to the district office and enquiring about the possibility of getting the necessary funds.

The result was surprising because it turned out that the district office has ready funds to facilitate such small scale projects. In fact there was no bureaucratic impediment at all since it only needed the District Officer's approval. The \$200 that was requested was thus immediately approved.

The playground would be built by villagers and would try to use free and available materials like logs, tree trunks, tyres, bamboo and ropes. At this moment villagers would be in the process of building the playground.

### III: Setbacks And Recommendations

One of the greatest setbacks during the formation of the TADIKA was the lack of enthusiasm shown by government officers. Every procedure had to be followed by the book, in which case certain stipulations had to be maintained despite their irrelevance. For example, both RISDA and KEMAS refused to give any funds if there are no trained teachers available in the village for running the TADIKA. Thus, areas which lack their own teachers will be totally neglected. The irony is that funds are already made available but can be left unused as long as the above conditions are not met. There were no provisions to deal with exceptional cases like for instance when the villagers were also willing to just have a children's centre and playground if nothing else was possible. RISDA has a rigid breakdown of items that should be bought for the TADIKA. An unimportant item, the see-saw would cost about \$300.00. They would also be supplying expensive items like furniture for the room. One alternative would be to allow the villagers to determine what they really need to equip the TADIKA with. RISDA's initial budget allocation should be made more flexible. In fact, this way the community can decide whether books are more important than the see-saw or whether money to be spent on furniture could instead be spent on buying educational toys.

As a final note, we would like to propose a revision of existing Children's Development Programmes in the following ways:-

1) TADIKA run along the system that KEMAS and RISBA had established could be continued on the basis that greater community participation should be encouraged. This could also mean increasing the amount of financial assistance given, since often times self-reliant development cannot proceed without sufficient material basis.

2) Ensure that in areas which conditions for setting up the programmes are not met, be given the necessary resources to sustain on. Thus, in places where the TADIKA cannot be set up, an alternative form of learning opportunity be given. Most feasible of all would be to set up a play and learning centre in which the necessary tools could be supplied. Such projects have a better chance of being sustained, unlike the TADIKA where it can close as soon as the teachers are not available.

3) A more systematic system of health care be delivered to ensure proper development of children. This should not only be done through regular medical check-ups but also through an educational programme set up for parents and the community in general.

All these recommendations are put forward with the impression that community participation can be better mobilized if bureaucratic setbacks are also minimized.

IV: Comments on Community Participation And Participatory Research

The underlying reasons for the low level of active community involvement in self-reliant development in Kota Mengkuang could be specific to the kampung, that is, situation in the village might not necessarily be the same for other rural communities. Some of the structural reasons have been touched upon in the background paper on women\* What is meant then by community participation?

When we moved into the field to do Participatory Research, we carried with us the idea that villagers and us together would develop a conception about what development needs would be. However we were soon faced with a dilemma. While we are formulating these needs we began to see that there are many discrepancies with such an approach. Scheme I below is a breakdown of what the writer perceives to be the basis of the problems associated with community participation. The participants in the project are the researcher and the villagers. They together should interact and dialectically come out with the measuring of development, essentially determining development needs. However, the inequality begins with the differences in background. The researchers come from a separate entity whose outlook, status and position are all determined by variables that are characteristically different from those that surround the villagers. The research boundary is enclosed within the world of the villagers and the researchers are thrown into it by initially intervening.

The researchers come with several perceptions. The with the idea that they themselves have needs for self-development and the other with the purpose to understand what villagers needs are, also at some levels to make them realise what their needs should be, and finally to mobilize them for action. The process of determining needs are, however more complex than that. When the researchers more into the field, it is only the villagers' needs that are focussed upon. Needs, however can be schematically divided into those that are attainable and those that are aspired. Aspired needs are those that could never be attainable as long as structural constraints of the system remains. Attainable needs can be achieved if all the necessary instruments recognised by the system are fully utilized. However, inconsistencies within the system create barriers from development needs being realised. Those barriers could include political setbacks that might be rooted in vested interests and and corrupt practices, bureacratic impediments or most importantly due to complete absence of critical consciousness among the people. At the other level though where development ideals are available, villagers could still have minimal accessibility to strategic benefits. Now this could largely be due to the absence of organization and effective leadership at the village level, or due to the total lack of information or simply apathy. What is significant in this whole scheme is to see that the community participation aspect of

of Participatory Research can only be contained within the last process. So, what had been done, particularly in the projects that we have tried to set up in the village, are merely efforts at rectifying some of the features within boundary I in the scheme. Thus, trying to set up the TADIKA is merely an exercise at educating, and making strategic information available to the villagers. Throughout the process we are also mainly trying to eliminate apathy among the people. This seems to be the most important contribution of community work since the act of doing, even if it is a simple village project can arouse a lot of response from people. But the futility of present efforts in community development can be understood from the limitations that they are forced to fit into. However, at this stage it is also crucially important to mobilize villagers to transgress conditions that they have the legitimate rights to overcome. Thus, any community projects that can open up the way towards widening the accessibility to information and knowledge should be duly encouraged. Similarly, the effort to set up an effective village level organization can also result in some development goods to come. For example, much as the Village Working and Development Committee (JKKK) is there for vested purposes, it can be utilised more beneficially if villagers strongly exercise their rights and not just withdraw into indifference. From our experience villagers are most of the time not aware of the proper channels to express their demands. In the example of the TADIKA, they were not

aware of the proper procedures for setting up the project. Most important of all, they were incapable of making contacts with the bureaucratic institutions. This is difficult for villagers since their mobility is restrained. This is the problem that should be seriously tackled by these government agencies. Development mobilization could be more effective if their personnel are made more accessible to villagers.

The one most important role of community development workers is to educate. Educational programmes to educate villagers on such things as literacy, legal rights, health or other topics of relevance to villagers self-development can be a useful project to undertake. A consciousness-raising process should be worked out so that eventually villagers should be able to be outwardly-looking beyond the confines of boundary I. It is only when this occurs that they can initiate self-reliance among themselves. Only then would villagers be able to determine their direction of change.

Conclusively, we suggest that in order for rural development to be effective, the government should train more development workers. These development workers should at least be given the necessary backing to ensure the attractiveness of the employment. Basically, the development worker should live in the village, maintain an objective and neutral stand and establish a cordial rapport with the villagers. In line with the principles of Participatory Research, these development workers should also undertake research to observe village

life based on a personal capacity and on a guideline carefully formulated. A suggestion would be to examine whatever key variables useful for understanding village processes. In this way, research can be used to directly benefit the community, since the problem areas looked into will have direct relevance to the question of social change. Thus, despite various setbacks to the successful use of Participatory Research, it should nevertheless be further developed and improved for the purpose of bringing underprivileged population closer to their deserved needs, and eventually for them to determine their own goals through a self-reliant process.