

Multiple Evolutions of Citizen Engagement Systems in Regional Development: A Case Study of Penang Regional Development Authority (PERDA), Malaysia

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Abstract: Citizen engagement is an important element in achieving success in public project development. Thus, the mechanism of engaging them is considered crucial to obtain a significant commitment from citizens. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the mechanisms used in engaging citizens and incorporating their preferences from the perspectives of Penang Regional Development Authority (PERDA) management and the citizens of the public project in affordable housing. The qualitative method was applied, and data were collected through a semi-structured interview. The retrieved information was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings identified that various mechanisms used by PERDA in engaging with citizens comprise both official and unofficial methods with ICT utilization. Most respondents favoured the 'direct engagement' approach, which involved less hassle of protocol, face-to-face interaction, and use of non-verbal communication such as gestures. This study verified that continuous and further enhancement of preferred mechanisms is necessary to gain genuine citizen involvement for the sake of community development, which contributes to project implementation improvements. This study recommends that other government organizations or entities evaluate the mechanisms used in citizen engagement and their preferences from the stakeholder perspective to achieve improved governance towards attaining the country's pledge for SDGs and becoming a developed nation.

Keywords: citizen engagement, engagement mechanism, public project, affordable housing.

アブストラクト：市民参加は公共プロジェクト開発の成功を達成するための重要な要素の1つである。それゆえ市民参加を促すメカニズムは市民が大きな目標を達成するために不可欠であると考えられる。本稿では、ペナン地域開発庁（PERDA）のマネジメントとアフォーダブル住宅における公共プロジェクトの受益者の視点から、市民の関与と選好のメカニズムを探究している。質的手法を適用し、半構造化インタビューを通じてデータを収集した。取得した情報は、主題分析法を使用して解析した。PERDAが市民との関わりにおいて用いる様々なメカニズムは、ICTを活用し、さらに公式・非公式の手法を用いていることが明らかとなった。多数の回答者は、行政手続が煩瑣でなく、対面での相互作用、物理的に意思表示ができるPERDAによる「直接関与」アプローチを支持した。本研究では、最終的にプロジェクト開発の改善に貢献するコミュニティ開発において、真の市民の関与を得るためには、好ましいメカニズムの継続的かつさらなる強化が必要であることを確認した。また本研究は、他の政府機関または団体が市民の視点から市民参加のメカニズムとその選好を評価し、SDGsの宣言を達成し、先進国になるためのさらに優れたガバナンスを経験することを推奨している。

キーワード：市民参加、参加のメカニズム、公共プロジェクト、廉価な住宅

1. Introduction

It is acknowledged worldwide that citizen engagement plays a significant role in developing a progressive nation. A citizen is a person who resides in a specific town or city or is a resident of a specific country and has rights because they were born there or was granted rights (Cambridge, 2023). In this article, the community and the public were also referred to as citizens. The ability of citizens to be active in community life is universally recognized as fundamental to the health of local democracy (De Weger et al., (2022). As a response to issues that arise when community needs and design choices diverge, such as the underutilization of renovated features (Crewe, 2007), or to guard against unintended consequences of development, such as gentrification, urban planning initiatives have included citizens more frequently. Because of this, many local governments worldwide attempt to include citizens in the services, policies, and choices that affect their health, lives, and communities (Nabatchi and Blomgren 2014; Lewis et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2011). Engaging citizen in planning initiatives highlights the value of fairness, inclusion, and community revitalization over relocation and increased marginalization of vulnerable communities (Moore et al., 2021). According to Rowe and Frewer (2005), the methods intended to enable public engagement comprises “public communication, public consultation and public participation is known as engagement mechanisms (generically) or engagement initiatives or exercises (specifically)”. The variety of engagement mechanisms is enormous and expanding and comprises of different techniques and terms. For example, ranging from “structured procedures to broader concepts such as workshops, task forces, citizen referenda, citizen employment and public information programs” (Rosener, 1975). Others are “computer-based (IT) techniques, meeting-neighbourhood (location-based), publicity (leaflets, newsletters, exhibitions), surveys, community forums and citizen training” (Democracy Network, 1998; Rosener, 1975; Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Other studies that relate to citizen engagement, that is, community engagement, have used different participative levels of community engagement (CE). It ranged from consultation, where people cannot influence decision-making, to partnership and shared leadership, where people have more authority (O’Mara et al., 2013; Rowe and Frewer 2005; Carman et al., 2013; Ocloo and Matthews 2016). Particularly in policymaking, local governments have been experimenting with various participation strategies, including more formal top-down techniques (such as The Right to Challenge in the UK and the Netherlands) and less formal bottom-up strategies such as community-led initiatives (Michels and De Graaf 2017).

Even with a sizable body of research supporting CE, prior studies have revealed that public sector organizations, particularly municipalities, continue to need help putting CE practices that are appropriate for their local settings into practice (De Weger et al., 2022). As an illustration, several research (Eversole 2011; Pagatpatan and Ward 2017; Mitton et al., 2009; Street et al., 2014) have discussed various strategies for including citizens in the policy-making process and looked at facilitators and obstacles to their practical use. The breadth, credibility, and decision-making abilities of the techniques, for instance, have all been topics of

discussion in other research (Fung 2015; Boivin et al., 2014) that have looked at significant factors impacting the success of such methods. The need to allow citizens to participate in ways that suit their interests has also been underlined in earlier writings. Understanding citizens' goals and interests make it easier to tailor engagement strategies, laws, and services to the needs and experiences of the public rather than to the viewpoints of professionals and organizational mandates (De Weger et al., 2018). The research also demonstrates that organizations struggle to become more citizen-centred and find it challenging to consider people's needs, interests, and goals to enable citizens to participate on their terms (De Weger et al., 2020). Most of the prior research on citizen involvement in policymaking has been devoted to classifying many methods of engagement in policymaking (Conklin et al., 2012; Mitton et al., 2009) and discussing ways to enhance organizational structures and processes related to citizen involvement (Fung 2015; Pagatpatan and Ward 2017). Comparatively, few studies have examined how citizens perceive and interact with policymaking (De Weger et al., 2022). Besides that, there is a lack of knowledge on how individuals would like to participate in policymaking and what assistance they feel is necessary for successful participation. Additionally, there isn't much literature on how businesses and professions may engage citizens more effectively by beginning with their viewpoints, experiences, and needs. This indicates minimal data on the citizens' perspective and their preferences on the engagement approach.

As a progressive developing nation, Malaysia has put its way to involve citizens in the administration and public project implementation. Since citizen involvement is highlighted as one of the components of good governance principles (UNESCAP 2009) and vital for the effectiveness and legitimacy of global governance (Fox and Stoett, 2016), the mechanism of engaging with them is considered necessary to produce successful citizen involvement. This is because people of various racial backgrounds, religions, and races live in Malaysia. Three major races, namely the Malays (69.9%), Chinese (22.8%), and Indians (6.65%), make up most Malaysians, while others (0.7%) are the remaining group of people (DOSM, 2022). The Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay ethnic groups comprise Peninsular Malaysia's native population, known as Orang Asli. While there are 27 different ethnic groups in Sarawak, the Iban make up most of the people there, and there are 32 different ethnic groups in Sabah (MyGov, 2023). With an annual population growth rate of 0.2 percent, Malaysia's estimated total population in 2022 will be 32.7 million, up from 32.6 million in 2021 (DOSM 2022). Thus, citizen involvement is seen as an entrance to sustainable progress, given that it is well-managed based on the demands of the citizen, extending benefits for current and future creations (Marzuki, 2015). A logical approach to involvement at the beginning is essential to create adjustments to sustainable community development. The approach must be capable of establishing and inspiring the transition process through a local community-based method (Ahmad, 2016). Concerning this, Malaysia has officially embedded citizen involvement in its Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172). It asserted that citizens need to be enlightened, taught, and involved in town and country planning (Zolkafli et al., 2017a; Maidin, 2011). The act's amendments have been done

until now (PLAN Malaysia, 2021). This applies to all development, including public projects such as affordable housing. With the ongoing effort of the country to obtain a developed nation status and pledge to achieve certain attributes of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Malaysia progressively works towards attaining the overall SDGs. Currently, the country ranked 72 places from 163 countries with a 70.4 score for the overall 17 SDG performance (Sachs et al. 2022).

Besides that, in recent years, Malaysia emphasizes 'citizen inclusion' in its policy known as 'Shared Prosperity Vision 2030', whose main goal is to deliver proper essential livelihood to all citizens by 2030 (MEA, 2019). The vision outlined the government's dedication to making the country accomplish sustainable progression. Citizen involvement is seen in the first objective of the vision. It stated 'Development for All' via restructuring the economy to be more escalating, knowledge-based, and superior-valued with full 'community participation' (MEA, 2019). The effort has been continued in The Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021-2025 (EPU 2021)), a medium-term plan with the objective of 'A Prosperous, Inclusive, Sustainable Malaysia' that embedded the inclusion of citizens in attaining sustainable growth of the nation. Moreover, citizen involvement is depicted in the structure of project development and programs via its authorities or government agency such as Regional Development Authorities (RDA). Penang Regional Development Authority (PERDA), one of the RDA in Malaysia, has embedded this element in its mission since its establishment in 1983. The motto spells out 'to be an agency that drives local community development through effective implementation of socio-economic programs and projects via good governance'. In other words, citizen engagement and its mechanism play a crucial role in achieving the stated mission of the nation. Thus, the mechanism of engaging with citizens for genuine involvement is needed to be evaluated based on their perspective and preferences with current conditions.

Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the mechanism used to engage citizens and their preferences from the perspectives of PERDA's management and the citizens in PERDA's public project of affordable housing. The housing development is one of PERDA's focuses on functioning as an RDA in Malaysia. In this study, citizens in PERDA's affordable housing project have been selected for the research. It is located at Taman Perumahan Sungai Dua Utama, Seberang Perai Utara, Pulau Pinang. This residential area was one of PERDA's project development in providing affordable housing for citizens since 2010, which is still ongoing. The findings of this study will assist PERDA and other government agencies in Malaysia and other nations in improvising engagement mechanisms with the citizen. The structure of the paper starts by introducing citizen engagement and its importance. Then the next section represents citizen engagement in the public project-affordable housing. The third section explained the methodology. The fourth and fifth sections indicated the findings and discussion. The sixth section concludes some significant findings and recommendations on citizen engagement mechanisms and preferences from the perspectives of PERDA's management and the citizens. Finally, the article explained about the study's limitations.

2. Citizen Engagement in Public Project-Affordable housing

The development comprises public projects such as affordable housing, including citizen involvement and engagement. The requirement to involve residents in redevelopment efforts is now common in federal housing complexes, but the extent of resident participation in these activities varies (Moore, et al., 2021). A broad spectrum of citizen engagement in redevelopment initiatives has been noted in prior studies, from establishing effective tenant groups to resident mentorship initiatives (Bennett and Reed, 1999; Keene, 2016). Although engagement has significantly varied in terms of both extent and intensity and has yet to be widely examined in the academic literature, participatory planning in housing and community development is a method that is progressively being used. With participatory planning techniques, marginalized people are encouraged to make meaningful, not merely symbolic, contributions to the planning process (Alexander, 2009). Ideally, inclusive planning procedures provide marginalized groups with more clout and validate their viewpoints on societal developments that affect their localities (Ebunoluwa and Kimberly, 2021). A citizen can be involved in the planning process in various ways, from less time-consuming actions, such as disseminating information about planning to ask for their more insightful comments, such as including residents in higher-level decision-making on a project. For example, small-town housing planning offers the chance to investigate local stakeholder groups' citizen involvement, as mentioned by Ebunoluwa and Kimberly (2021). They expressed that local governments must evaluate and analyse the housing needs in their communities, design a plan to address those needs, and identify public and private partners and financial sources to carry out changes as part of the housing policy and planning process. They added that two typical housing issues for small towns are the lack of affordable housing and the availability of a housing stock that satisfies local inhabitants' needs. These issues are difficult to fix and have a long-term character. Thus, citizens must have both human and social capital to entice various stakeholder groups to collaborate on addressing local issues (Etuk et al. 2013; Skobba and Tinsley 2016). It is admitted that the citizen organization of a community has an impact on its ability to recognize housing issues and mobilize members to create and implement solutions, according to Morton et al., (2004) research. Small towns usually possess the qualities required for citizen engagement, including solid social ties, regular interactions and linkages between residents, and inhabited stability (Catlaw and Stout 2016; Salamon 2003).

More democratic decision-making, a better sense of responsibility for public issues, the inclusion of a diversity of perspectives, and a higher degree of legitimacy of decisions are all associated with citizen engagement in policymaking (Michels and De Graaf, 2010, 2017). Improved equality through better redistributive policy outcomes may be obtained when a wide range of stakeholders, especially those most disadvantaged in society, are included in the local decision-making process (Hong and Cho, 2018). This is critical for municipal decisions about affordable housing since these decisions are sometimes thwarted by potential bad outcomes, such as concerns about crime and poverty, expenses for services and education, and perceptions of decreased property

values (Nguyen et al., 2013; Scally, 2013). Governmental approaches to regulation rely on the interaction of public and private interests since they are predicated on the idea that the government cannot control society and the economy alone (Beauregard, 1996; Pierre, 1999). The messages of local governance and the transfer of power frequently emphasize the encouragement of citizen engagement and social action, the empowerment of local communities through decision-making, and the enhancement of services through competition (Buser, 2013). More equitable policy solutions are associated with this bottom-up, participatory utilization of local knowledge (Fung, 2006; Hong and Cho, 2018). Notably, in Western nations, stakeholder groups have become more significant in decision-making and policy implementation as local government structures and practices have shifted from traditional, hierarchical models to horizontal, multi-stakeholder networks of local governance (Ebunoluwa and Kimberly, 2021). However, although the importance of involving citizens in rehabilitation initiatives has grown, ensuring their participation is meaningful is sometimes difficult to achieve (Chaskin et al., 2012). Therefore, the need to investigate citizen engagement mechanisms to enhance their involvement is crucial.

3. Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative method for collecting, analysing, and reporting data. The qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study, as it can be used for any research that involves symbolic interaction, phenomenology, or post-positivism (Merriam, 1998). The case study approach was chosen, and a semi-structured technique was utilized in collecting data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with expert respondents from PERDA management involved in public projects in the category of affordable housing and citizens represented by the residents in Taman Perumahan Sungai Dua Utama, Sungai Dua, Seberang Perai Utara, Pulau Pinang. The project began in 2009 and completed in 2021. The data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic from September 2021 until March 2022. Respondents in this study were chosen based on their management group's experience with affordable housing projects. While for the citizen group, their affordability and period of living in the residential area, their involvement in the community, and their familiarity with PERDA.

The interviews were arranged in a focus group via an online application using Zoom meetings and offline meetings. It was conducted in PERDA's office. A total of 12 respondents were involved, and their group name was referred to them to preserve the confidentiality of their real names. A1 to A7 represent the management group, while B1 to B5 represent the citizens. The number of interviews was adequate, as semi-structured interviews require a minimum sample size of between 5 and 25 (Saunders, 2012; Cresswell, 2007). The Malay language was used during the interview, though English words or phrases were used in some cases. The interview sessions were recorded with the consent of all respondents. For this article, all the conversations were translated into English for better understanding. The interview data were transcribed and encoded. Thematic

analysis was then applied to investigate the mechanisms utilized in engaging citizens and their preferences from the perspective of PERDA's management and the citizens in the project. The thematic analysis focuses on recognizing, examining, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Daly et al., 1997; Braun and Clarke, 2006), where coding is the primary process for developing patterns or themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Coding was created to help answer the following questions: "How has PERDA engaged with citizens?" "What is the preferred method of engagement?" The data and information gathered from the interviews reflect the respondents' experiences and knowledge.

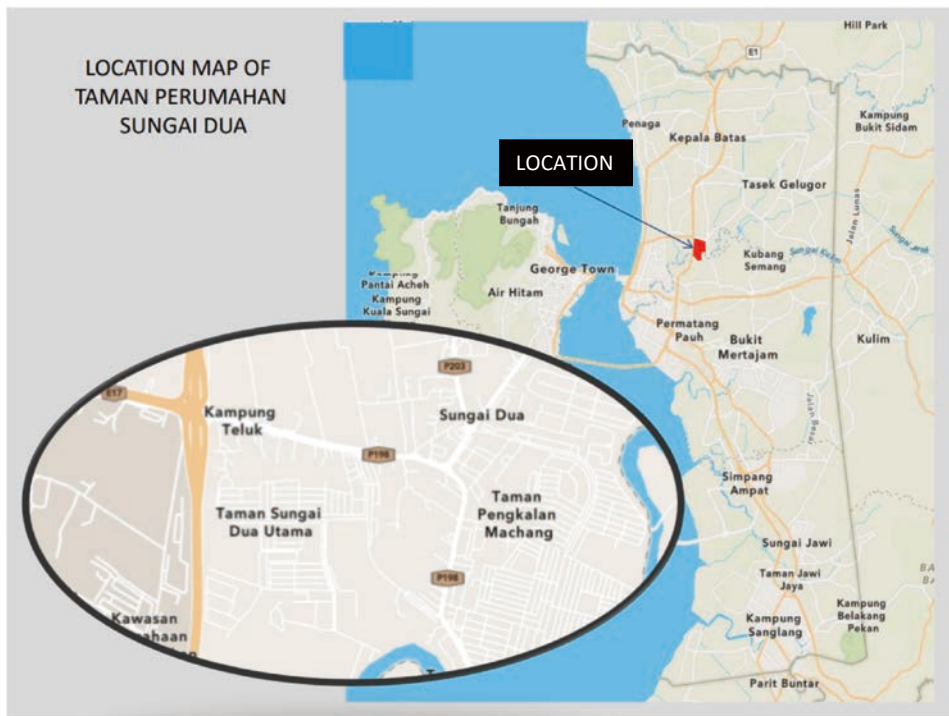


Figure 1. Research Area of Taman Perumahan Sungai Dua Utama. (Source: PERDA)

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic Data

This is an overview of the respondents from the research area, which comprises PERDA's management and the citizens in Taman Perumahan Sungai Dua Utama. The management group has a vast experience in public projects related to affordable housing, which is under the category of property and development in PERDA. In contrast, the citizens in the Taman Perumahan Sungai Dua Utama have lived in the area for more than seven years. All respondents were from the majority ethnic group in Malaysia, the Malay race, who

professed Islam and were between 35 and 59 years of age. 58% of them were male, and the rest were female. All respondents have a degree or higher qualification, representing a higher educational background. Furthermore, the respondents' educational background also represents a higher income range. Moreover, 59% of respondents have been employed in the public sector, while the rest have been in the private sector with more than ten years of working experience, as exhibited in Figures 2 and 3.

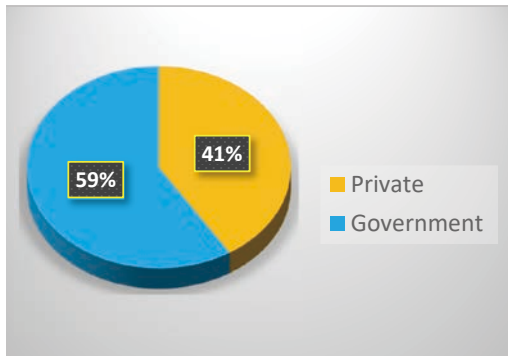


Figure 2. The Sector of Employment

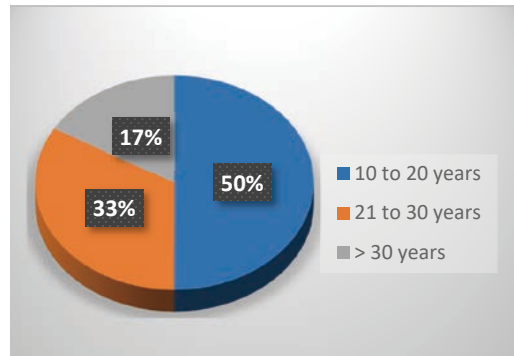


Figure 3. Years of Employment

Regarding income level, most respondents (82%) were categorized as having an income range between MYR4,500 and MYR10,000, and the remaining (18%) earned more than MYR10,000 per month. It also showed, especially for the citizen's group, that they could own an affordable house in the residential area where they had bought it. Besides that, most of the respondents from the citizen group were actively involved in various community programs within their area and familiar with PERDA. Due to that, the experiences, thoughts, and information they shared were valuable and considered reliable enough to be taken into this study. Apparently, from the interviews, it was discovered that 30% of the respondents were designated to certain positions in the community. All respondents were actively involved with the program conducted within the area. Such programs comprise religious association activities, official and non-official community events, informal gatherings, PERDA's engagement programs, and other occasions within the residential setting.

4.2 Mechanism of Engagement

The result in Table 1 from the interview displayed various mediums being utilized by PERDA in engaging with citizens. Thus, the study's objective has also been addressed via the interview findings. The respondents were asked: "How has PERDA engaged with citizens?" "What is the preferred method of engagement?" The respondents were asked to provide mechanisms utilized by PERDA in engaging with them. It was found that the standard method used by PERDA was thru official and unofficial mediums. Meeting platforms such as District Action Committee Meetings served as the official medium. The meeting involved local representatives

Table 1. Mechanism of Engagement

Subject	Item	Approach
Mechanism	• Official events and meeting	Districts Action Committee Meetings, local expos-Penang Bumiputera Entrepreneur Expo (PENBEX), road tours
	• 'Direct engagement'	<i>Gotong royong</i> Community development programs: K-Komuniti, upgrading skills, workshops Religious events Informal discussion Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program Flyers, streamers, and banners Survey
	• Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	Social media: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, website, Google form-online survey, infographics tools

such as the chief of the village, better known as Penghulu, political representatives known as JKKK (Village Security and Development Committees), the non-political group consisting of local communities with numerous backgrounds of expertise, district officers, local authorities, and other related agencies. The meeting was held at least once a month to discuss issues, public concerns, and any developments in the designated area under the jurisdiction of PERDA. As mentioned by the respondent:

A4: "As I remember, we have various platforms... including virtual platforms. PERDA is included in the meetings at the state level, especially District Action Meetings. At the district level meeting, the members are from the district level leaders... including leaders from the JKKK (Village Security and Development Committees), who come from political or non-political groups".

PERDA makes 'direct engagement' with the citizens that reside within their area, which is commonly involved in unofficial and official mediums through programs conducted for the citizens community by PERDA. This is accomplished through community-based programs and the chairman of the JKKK's commitment to bringing the public together to participate in community activities. The activities include gotong royong (public awareness campaigns for neighborhood cleanliness), community development initiatives like K-Komuniti, religious gatherings at the mosque, and direct, in-depth conversations with the locals. As stated by the respondent:

A3: "...So, in this case, we try to use the mediums available in the village and the mediums available in the development areas we want to develop to get the inputs. This is a form of community involvement in developing a housing project. Before the pandemic, we dealt with the public directly via 'direct engagement'. We dealt with the village committee chairpersons, whom the Government has appointed as a medium for us to discuss with the community. Then, we go

directly to the areas we want to develop and meet with the community. We also hold meetings with local leaders such as politicians and NGOs, and so on for each area for us to get direct input. Besides that, we also meet them through the implementation of community activities. Community activities such as the gotong royong program in the villages... but there was an agenda behind the gotong royong program to make it easier for us to communicate with the community without asking directly. From this program, we will get information on the needs and demands of the community...not only in terms of housing development but social, economic development, entrepreneurship, and education. The programs were carried out from time to time in the form of gotong royong, community development programs, K-Komuniti programs, workshops, and religious activities at the mosque. All that is our platform to engage with the community to get input...."

As explained further by the respondent, discussions with the citizens' community also involved non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local representatives from political parties who joined the community activities. The purpose was to get direct input or information regarding the community's needs and requests. Direct input gathered by PERDA from the meetings in this way is essential not only to collect housing development matters but also to social, economic, and entrepreneurial development concerns within the area. Thus, citizens' community activities were held frequently from time to time by PERDA to meet the objectives. Another respondent supported this statement and mentioned that PERDA had programs with JKKK (Village Security and Development Committees). In the program, the chairmen and local state representative informed PERDA about the community necessity as quoted by the respondent:

A7: "We used to have lots of 'direct engagement' with the community. We used to have a program with JKK (Village Security and Development Committees). So, we saw what the chairman of JKK informed us about the community's needs... then we had YB (state assemblymen). YB also knows what is needed in his area, ...his state assembly area..."

Thus, this kind of approach ties a closer bond between PERDA and the citizens, where they unreservedly deliver critical messages to the organization for the betterment of their community, as mentioned by the respondent:

A4: "...and we used to be closed with the society. the villagers and local community... and what they wanted PERDA to deliver, PERDA did it".

This 'direct engagement' approach was preferred by most of the respondents, where they could meet, interact, and discuss with one another. The connection that all parties cherish provides a good feeling of acceptance and care. Eventually, the created and continuously flourishing relationship helps tighten the bond between PERDA and the citizens. Additionally, it will also assist in solving problems that need serious attention. Therefore,

unofficial physical meetings with the citizen by PERDA are primarily welcome and admired, as cited by the respondents:

B1: "... before this, it is usually the best method... interact face to face if there are any issues. The warmth touch is different. So, PERDA should continue that kind of engagement. But it can be done after the government restores the pandemic situation. The face-to-face approach can solve many things...we can discuss, get opinions, and so on. But in this situation, you know, it isn't very easy. But maybe I'm a bit old school in that I prefer PERDA to keep the way of face-to-face engagement. The warmth, smiling... that thing will create love... finally, we, the community... in return will also love PERDA".

Face-to-face discussions and gatherings with PERDA's representatives were held at least once a year with the strata type, or "flat", in the area. Besides that, the respondent mentioned that they can at any time come to PERDA's office to get the organization's point of view and decision on any affairs:

B2: "... the meeting for the flat house was held approximately twice a year ... and no matter what the matter is, there is no problem for us to go to PERDA directly to get an opinion or even get a decision".

PERDA is also well-known for its corporate social responsibility (CSR) for the citizens in the field it pioneered. According to the respondent, CSR was part of PERDA's mechanism for reaching out to the citizen even before the pandemic occurred to gather new information and responses for its future development:

B3: ".... PERDA is known to carry CSR in the places they have developed. PERDA employs this method of engagement, particularly with residents in the development area. So, through that engagement, we can get information about upcoming PERDA projects and other information. For example, before COVID occurred, every time that kind of engagement occurred, we would get updated information upon any development or other related information by PERDA".

Another respondent mentioned that PERDA's CSR activities were still carried out even during the pandemic when most families were affected. It was acknowledged that PERDA is 'not leaving' or "ignoring" the citizen of their development area even though the residential area has been delivered to the owner and PERDA supposedly has no responsibility towards the residents:

B2: "I remember before the pandemic it was ok... well, even after the pandemic, I feel good, and I think PERDA management involvement still has... based on experiences. For example, during the pandemic, many families were

affected. I have been told that PERDA also helps the residents in that area. This means that PERDA, as a developer, does not ignore the buyers, or, in other words, they are still in contact with the buyers”.

Furthermore, PERDA also engaged further with the citizens by guiding them in setting up resident associations such as JMB (Joint Management Body). PERDA even brought them to workshops, programs, and site visits to upgrade their skills in specific areas for their survival. This was seen by the respondent in the low-cost housing residential area, as cited:

B4:” For instance, in terms of low-cost housing section in the area, the residents’ association wants to learn how to set up a JMB organization, MC, and others. So, PERDA was there to assist them. The agency brought them to the best MC places and held workshops to improve the efficiency of the residents and the residents’ association there”.

The “direct engagement” sometimes occurred in several official ceremonies and other forms like road tours and local expos such as Penang Bumiputera Entrepreneur Expo (PENBEX). It involved massive public participation, as admitted by the respondents:

B4:” Hmm... if before this... before COVID, there were ceremonies.”

B5:” The ceremony... we call road tours... Like before the pandemic happened, we had PENBEX and local expos. Advertisements will be made there, and housing for leaflets on the road tours will be provided. PERDA will be involved in the road tours. From there, we can take the flyers given to us and see all the details. We can compare it with JKP Bertam Properties, and other housing projects by various projects”.

Flyers, streamers, and banners were also provided to the citizens during the official and unofficial programs conducted by the organization. Besides that, flyers were also distributed to government agencies for citizen acknowledgement and to retrieve information on PERDA’s program and project, as mentioned by the respondent:

B5:” ...flyers were disseminated to the government office or from events we attended”.

Surveys are another functional mechanism utilized by PERDA in engaging with citizens. The purpose is to gather inputs from the ground for current and future development. As told by the respondent:

A3:” ...a housing development impact study that we do, on which we collaborate with universities and so on. In the study, residents are given questionnaires and surveys about the shape of their house, the type of house, how many rooms

they have, and so on. So, from there, they responded to that, and we will take the inputs that have been analysed and use them as guidance in PERDA to propose or plan a housing project that we will implement. For instance, PERDA is preparing a master plan for developing PERDA lands that have not yet been developed. So, in this master plan, we have surveyed the residents around the undeveloped PERDA lands. The survey is being carried out, and we will get the results as they input. We will use the input in the development plan for each piece of land that we will develop”.

The survey was done with the collaboration of several other parties, such as universities, to conduct the research thoroughly. The study distributed questionnaires containing information about the different types of houses, their sizes and shapes, bedrooms, amenities, and other pertinent questions to the public to learn about their preferences or tastes. As a result of the analysis and findings, PERDA will use them as a guide to propose future housing projects based on citizen demand. For example, PERDA recently began developing a master plan for undeveloped land. Thus, they have conducted a survey of the citizen in those undeveloped areas and analyzed the inputs that will be given by the public to be embedded in the development of the undeveloped land. This was supported by another respondent acknowledging that PERDA does evaluations every year for most of its projects and programs. This was done to know the effect and rank PERDA’s priority for each project based on its importance to the citizen as quoted:

A4: “We used to be closed to society—the villagers and local community—and what they wanted PERDA to deliver, PERDA delivered. Every year, we assess the tasks that we believe are most important to us”.

As confirmed by another respondent who has experience filling out the survey form provided by PERDA, they usually conduct surveys to get citizen feedback before any construction or development takes place in the area stated by the respondent:

B4: “...PERDA likes getting opinions from the local community. For example, before doing any construction, PERDA conducted a survey among the residents of the area. Survey the needs of the people who lived there with the help of community leaders. I had previously completed the survey... lots of questions need to be answered”.

The utilization of information and communication technologies (ICT) was also adapted to reach out to citizens. Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and PERDA’s website, as illustrated in Figure 4 and Figure 5, are among the ICT tools and platforms applied to notify citizens about PERDA projects, programs, and activities. As cited by the respondent:

A3: “However, we also follow technology development, not just waiting for the pandemic to occur for us to act. Even

before the pandemic, we utilized the ICT developed with internet hosting, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on. "PERDA has taken the initiative to create and establish Instagram, Twitter, and other social media platforms as a medium for us to communicate information to the people and the community about the programs we run".

It was acknowledged that during the pandemic of COVID-19, ICT utilization was the utmost form used by PERDA in interacting and engaging with the citizen, as stated further by the respondent:

A3: "...when this epidemic occurs, it becomes a constraint. But we tried to solve that constraint through our technological improvements. For example, we had meetings with local leaders through various mediums... Google Meet, for example...and we are improving our Facebook page so the community can respond to the Facebook group. Second, we have a Google form on our Facebook page. So, the community will use this Google Form to fill in the information we need, and we will pick it up in the Google Form. For example, we tried to help our land tenants, stall tenants, poor house tenants, and entrepreneurs during the pandemic by giving them an exception because we could not meet them physically. So, we used Google Forms and asked them to answer some questions in the Google Form. Based on the inputs in the Google Form we retrieved, we tried to solve the problems they faced because of the pandemic. So, the incentives we want to give them are effectively delivered to them".

Another management group respondent says the same thing about the use of social media and the Google Form method as PERDA's mechanism for connecting with citizens:

A7: "Right now, it is true that in this pandemic situation... we are using social media concepts. Even now, we use more infographics, surveys and can now use Google Forms. So, we have used those methods as well. More new methods are being used in this pandemic. In the past, as I mentioned earlier, it used to be a 'direct-engagement' approach where we could do workshops and use conventional methods. Normally, we can meet face-to-face, but in this pandemic situation, it is better to use these new mediums".

PERDA used ICT through social media networks and platforms such as Google Meet to conduct meetings with local leaders. Besides that, PERDA's efforts have been recognized in upgrading their Facebook site, where they created a page for the citizen to leave feedback or their information that is required by PERDA, as illustrated in Figure 4. In addition, a Google Form is provided for the public to fill out the information. This Google Form has been used to help the tenants of PERDA land, shops, houses, and their entrepreneurs who are struggling to foresee if they need further assistance in their daily routine activities during the pandemic. The input inserted by those people was gathered and analyzed by PERDA before they came up with solutions to the issues or problems. This was to ensure that the aid given by PERDA was handed over to the person in

need with the right approach. As supported by another respondent acknowledging that PERDA continuously connects with them via WhatsApp and Facebook:

B4: “... if there were events before this... before COVID. However, now that this is common, PERDA engages with residents via WhatsApp and Facebook, and we can see what PERDA is doing through Facebook.”



Figure 4. PERDA’s Facebook (Source: PERDA)



Figure 5. PERDA’s Website (Source: PERDA)

This was also agreed upon by another respondent, who was enlightened that even until now, she had received valuable information regarding any new development or upgrading skill courses executed by PERDA via WhatsApp and Facebook as follows:

B2: "...from what I understand and recognize, they still sent information for our acknowledgement. For example, if PERDA has courses on improving skills, they still share the information with us. Concerning the gathering, if it is necessary, it will be held. WhatsApp and Facebook messages were sent "via PERDA's official Facebook and the Residential official Facebook."

While another respondent asserting that information was blasted to the citizen in the residential via WhatsApp from the local community leader to disseminate information was acknowledged by PERDA:

B4: "If regarding any ceremonies...it usually goes through the local community chief. The head of the residential area. The chief will blast the information to the community".

Infographics and online surveys were other ICT tools used in publicizing information and collecting citizen opinion for the development. Thus, this shows that before the pandemic occurred, face-to-face interaction was often used. However, with the current occurrence of diseases like COVID, the online method seems to be regularly practiced by PERDA in reaching out to the citizens.

5. Discussion

This research study was conducted to investigate the mechanisms used in engaging citizens and their preferences from the perspectives of PERDA's management and the citizens in the affordable housing project. The analysis indicated that PERDA utilized various mediums in engaging with the citizens represented by its beneficiaries in the affordable housing project. The various mediums used were official and unofficial platforms. The official platform was demonstrated by District Action Committee Meetings that were held at least once a month with JKKK (Village Security and Development Committees) members, the non-political group consisting of local communities with numerous backgrounds of expertise, district officers, local authorities, and other related agencies. Other official ceremonies include local expos, such as the Penang Bumiputera Entrepreneur Expo (PENBEX), and road tours.

The unofficial medium usually took the form of citizens community activities with less hassle than protocol, such as gotong royong (public awareness and action for the cleanliness of the residential areas), community development programs known as K-Komuniti, CSR programs, religious events in the mosque,

gatherings, and direct heart-to-heart discussions with the community. Besides that, citizens get assistance and further guidance from PERDA in setting up resident associations, such as the Joint Management Body (JMB). Citizens were also brought to workshops, programs, and site visits to improve their survival skills. In these programs, the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local representatives from political parties was recognized. They work hand in hand with PERDA, seeking direct input from citizens regarding their needs, feedback, and suggestions for current and future development by PERDA. Many respondents considered this medium “direct engagement” because it involved face-to-face interaction and physical gestures with PERDA. Thus, by including citizens, policies may be better matched to their real-world experiences, which should improve the democratic legitimacy of decision-making (De Weger et al., 2022).

This study also emphasizes other essential mechanisms in PERDA’s approach to citizens, such as surveying. The survey, which PERDA included in its assessment of the housing project, was carried out with the help of several other organizations, including universities, to conduct comprehensive research. The citizens were given questionnaires about types of houses, sizes and shapes, bedrooms, amenities, and other pertinent information. The data were analyzed to conclude a guide for proposing future housing projects responding to citizens’ demands. Additionally, other mechanisms of engagement stated by respondents were through flyers, streamers, and banners that contained information about projects and programs conducted by PERDA. This is a one-way method practiced by PERDA in disseminating information to citizens.

In the study, it was acknowledged that ICT was also applied in reaching out to citizens. Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google Forms for online surveys, and infographic tools were utilized to notify the citizens about PERDA projects and programs and get feedback. PERDA’s preferred method of communicating with citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic was the ICT application. For example, a Google form, which is a one-way method, assists PERDA in knowing the conditions of the citizens and helping them throughout the pandemic. WhatsApp, which can be a one-way or two-way communication channel depending on the settings, aids in disseminating PERDA’s current projects and programs to citizens. Thus, the ICT that has emerged nowadays may assist in increasing citizen involvement (Soomro et al., 2017). Furthermore, to create new opportunities for engaging people, new channels of information and communication, particularly the internet and social media, are also required (Chen, 2013; Latchimanan and Rahman, 2017). From another point of view, it indicated that PERDA is always alert and aware of the need to innovate a different mechanism for engaging with citizens under different circumstances. Hence, this illustrated the priority on citizen engagement and the genuine intention to gather actual information from the ground.

The study underlined citizens’ preferences in the method of engaging with them. As mentioned by most respondents, the ‘direct-engagement’ approach, which involved face-to-face interaction and physical gestures with PERDA, was the most favored. The connection that existed and was cherished by all parties did provide a sense of being cared for. De Weger et al. (2022) stated that “citizens felt like they had established a better

connection with their municipality and felt more heard". While according to Thurston (2005), "measuring public participation should include both the creation of new partnerships as well as whether governance decisions were made successfully...". Thus, it created a significant relationship and helped tighten the bond between PERDA and the citizens. In addition, it will also assist in solving problems that need serious attention.

Finally, it signaled that housing is not just a box for a living but the foundation of basic human needs, social connections, and participation. For example, low-income communities depend more on local social networks than knowledge and skills. Their lives are embedded in a social structure in which they mutually recognize, earn an income, and receive life support. PERDA understands that people's well-being is embedded in social systems, and it is not a good idea to separate community development venues, government venues, religious organizations, and events. Instead, by superimposing these places and opportunities, PERDA is trying to provide people with peace of mind and joy. This has already been pointed out in Clarence Stone's classical study of Atlanta's regime politics (Clark and Southerland, 1990), where he concludes: "An imbalance in abilities to contribute to the capacity to govern is at the core of the Atlanta regime. Until that imbalance is corrected, biased governance and weak governance appear to be the only real alternatives. That is the lesson to be learned from a social-production model".

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the mechanisms used in engaging citizens and their preferences from the perspectives of PERDA's management and their beneficiaries in affordable housing projects. Findings from the study showed that various mechanisms were utilized in engaging with citizens, including official and unofficial platforms together with the utilization of ICT, such as regular formal meetings, local expos, road tours, citizens community activities-gotong royong, religious events, CSR programs, community development program (K-Komuniti), upgrading skills programs, workshops, informal discussions-heart-to heart discussions, surveys, Facebook, Twitters, WhatsApp, Google Form, Info-graphics and others. The study displayed that most respondents preferred the 'direct-engagement' method, which was depicted in the unofficial medium, as it involved less hassle of protocol, face-to-face interaction, and physical gestures with PERDA. This is crucial since genuine citizen involvement requires effective participation and a successful mechanism for supporting any projects, programs, and activities conducted by a responsible organization or authority, in this case, PERDA. Furthermore, the apparent message shared by the study's respondents demonstrated their satisfaction in dealing with the agency in conveying their thoughts, feelings, and criticism, particularly on the development of a project within their residential area. Secondly, it showed that the agency has emphasized citizen engagement as one of its priorities in the development process and dynamically adapts to any circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although ICT has the aspects of convenience and safety from infection, they are not overemphasized and are used "appropriately". Moreover, continuous engagement even after the project has ended revealed that

social obligation objectives are adhered to and cherished by PERDA and the citizens. Therefore, in the case of PERDA, it indicated that the government's role is not just to provide housing but to maintain and develop the overall framework of a good society. Continuous and further enhancement of the preferred mechanism is necessary for constant and genuine citizen involvement. Hence, experience much better governance that contributes to betterment in project development, achieving the country's pledged SDGs, and being a developed nation. This study recommends that other organizations, entities, or authorities investigate the mechanisms of citizen engagement and their preferences in other fields from the citizens' perspective.

7. Study Limitations

Study limitations included that this case study only examined one public project category and one area of the development implemented by PERDA. The development context of this case study, it is assumed, influenced several vital factors in the development process, such as citizens' priorities, the extent to which PERDA already involves citizens, and the extent to which citizens link with PERDA. Respondents in this case study covered a range of ages, employment, and educational statuses, were involved in their community and had some connection with PERDA. Citizens involved in their communities are likely to have similar policy priorities but may feel differently about their roles in addressing the priorities. However, as far as the authors are aware, this case study was the first attempt to show PERDA how their engagement methods with citizens were perceived and what the preferred methods were. Most respondents, especially the citizen group, seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences with the researchers and PERDA. It helped them feel more heard by PERDA. The study limitations were mitigated by PERDA management in the housing development area, which validated and enriched the focus group findings. PERDA's suggested that the focus group result was representative as they were long-term citizens, which comprise original citizens, first buyers of affordable houses, and have vast experiences in community engagement in the residential areas.

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