

RSOG & MAJLIS BANDARAYA MIRI

A Joint Luncheon Talk on “Effective Community Engagement”

with
Professor Makoto Nagahata

When : 29 November 2016
Where : Hotel Pullman Miri Waterfront, Sarawak
Speakers : Professor Makoto Nagahata

About the Seminar

A famous poet once said “A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm”. It is about the people, the relationships, and the community. The theory and practice of community-centric public service is increasingly concerned with placing community at the center of policymakers’ considerations, not just as a target, but also as an agent. The aim is to develop policies and design services that respond to individuals’ needs and relevant to their circumstances. Concepts such as ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’ have emerged to describe this systematic pursuit of sustained collaboration between government agencies, non-government organisations, communities, and individual citizens. In adopting such approaches, leaders must avoid the temptation to act in a top-down manner. Instead, they should design and implement programmes in ways that engage community members directly in the work of social change. This Luncheon Talk aims to discuss, amongst others on how to have an effective community engagement and its potential impact to governance.

Summary

Professor Makoto Nagahata began the session by sharing his randau ruwai experience (informal interaction) at Rumah Panjang Patrick Libau near Niah National Park just the day before. The atmosphere felt with the community was constantly lively, relaxed, and full of positivity. In reflection, he felt it was a stark contrast to rapid changes taking place in urban areas where individuals are busy with their daily lives which somehow diminishes the role of community as a self-governing institution. Historically, local communities serve various functions in people’s lives such as for management of natural resources, production (and reproduction) for traders and traditional market, and as a source of identity by being part of religious or other organisations. However, modernisation led to the rise of nation states and market economy, rendering local communities merely as a place to reside.

As individuals become engrossed in their pursuit to earn income for their livelihood, people in the community become more dependent on public services instead of trusting the traditional role of local community. Due to busy lifestyles, people in communities tend to

grow further apart from one another and as a result, it can lead to diminished trust among one another. It is argued that the loosening ties in communities is also the reason for growing global trend to have less trust on government. Considering that the adage that government knows best no longer applies, the importance of communities to participate actively in designing and implementing activities to solve social issues is necessary. Thus, initiatives through collaboration and co-production between the government and other entities, including individual citizens, can be considered as a shift from centralised top-down method to a collaborative bottom-up approach.

Achieving this requires engagement, and the quest for effective and meaningful engagement is no small feat. For instance, engaging in friendly dialogues – one that is based on trust and openness, can serve as a means for governments to understand communities better. Bali Barat National Park was highlighted as an example of successful community facilitation. Both the authority and community had specific interests – the former focused on preserving natural heritage and the latter needed to survive. In addressing the lack of trust between two parties, a common ground was identified – the need to preserve the areas' biodiversity. Leadership shone through when the authority set up informal dialogue sessions, listening to the communities' stories and challenges, all towards building a partnership with the community. In short, it was the simple act of wanting to listen that unshielded the community's guard and contributed to eventual trust for cooperation and collaboration. If this can be replicated in urban areas, it will certainly reignite the spirit of communities and ensure it provides more meaning than just a place to live in.

Key Issues Raised

- In community engagement, promises must not be made by those who hold public office, whether appointed or elected. It appears that such a task is harder to do for the latter.
- Interestingly, one's ability to do effective community engagement is often seen as the ability to make friends.
- An effective community engagement does not require money but is more of a collective responsibility, just like at home where the husband and wife help each other willingly.
- Bottom-up collaboration is gradually being embraced in this country by the community, even in less known areas such as nature conservation in Sarawak.

About the Speaker

Professor Makoto Nagahata is presently the Acting Dean of the Professional Graduate School, Meiji University, Japan. He graduated from the University of Tokyo, Faculty of Law, and obtained a Master's Degree in International Relations Theory from Sophia University Japan. He formerly served as Director of Overseas Project Division for the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) Shapla Neer (Citizens' Committee in Japan for Overseas Support). He possesses extensive experience in community development and alleviation of poverty, including comprehensive community development project planning and operations in Bangladesh and Indonesia. Professor Nagahata teaches courses such as, "Human Resource Management," "NGO/NPO Policy," "NGO/NPO Management".

Contact

To get more information on this event, you can contact us via email at programmes@rsog.com.my