Factors Influencing Rural Community Empowerment to Achieve Telecentres' Ownership

Bahaman Abu Samah and Mohammad Badsar
Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Empowering the target groups of Medan InfoDesa (MID) telecentres who are local community members, including youth, schools, farmers, disabled people and women requires paying attention to the component of ownership and empowerment for different groups at the same time. The present conceptual lens using Zimmerman Theory of empowerment and Hur empowerment models identified the components of empowerment as interpersonal and interactional which are act as exogenous factors. Further, collective empowerment found to be a mediating factor on the relationships of aforementioned exogenous factors and telecentre ownership as endogenous variable. The theoretical contribution of present study is on designing a conceptual framework that extends the knowledge on the components of empowerment in the context of telecentre ownership as a behavioral component of empowerment as telecentres ownership. Application of present conceptual lens is beneficial to various groups that are directly or indirectly involved in the planning, execution and evaluation of ICT projects as well as enhancing individual empowerment in rural community. Further, recommendations on how to apply the provided framework in the future research have been presented.

Key words: Empowerment, telecentres' ownership, interpersonal empowerment, interactional empowerment, collective empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional, social process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. This process creates the power to use these choices in his or her own life, community and society with individuals acting on issues that they define as important. The three basic issues in understanding empowerment includes first, empowerment is multidimensional in that it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, political and others. Second, empowerment occurs at various levels, including individual, group and community. Third, empowerment is an outcome because it can be measure against expected accomplishments and it is a social process because it occurs in relation to others which make it fluid, unpredictable and changeable over time and place (Hur, 2006). Thus, present study to make a comprehensive view considering the common issues of empowerment looking at the social and psychological dimensions from individual level will investigate the process and outcome of empowerment to achieve the telecentre ownership as an expected accomplishment.

Other studies show the path of empowerment from different perspectives (Adamson, 2010; Christens et al., 2011a, b; Kasmel and Andersen, 2011; Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001; Lawrencejacobson, 2006; Ljunggren et al., 2010; Lord and Hutchison, 1993; May et al., 1995; Pigg, 2002; Speer and Hughey, 1996; Varkey et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Yoo et al., 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2011). While looking at empowerment from individual level and looking at the process to achieve collective empowerment as outcome in rural area and more specifically in rural area of Malaysia regarding telecentre is lacking. According to Turro and Krause (2009), most of the existing literature about empowerment has been developed within citizen or community organizations while less attention being given to the individual aspects inherent to the process of empowerment. Thus, the present conceptual lens would fulfill the theoretical gap regarding the empowerment and more specifically regarding the rural community of Malaysia, as according to the Zimmerman (2000), empowerment is context and population specific.

The importance of this discussion further related to the scope of study in terms of the selected projects where the respondents of study come from. The Medan

---

Corresponding Author: Bahaman Abu Samah, Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

InfoDesa (MID) centers built with the objective of encouraging community ownership, empowerment and sustainability. The concept of the project is based on government led and community managed model. The MID is owned, managed and sustained by the local community. While Malaysia and its partners have implemented rural community ICT service projects in various parts of the country. Many of these experiences have been only partly doing well and very few of these projects have turned out to be sustainable for access to developmental targets which is the projects ownership. Thus, present investigation would help to fulfill the practical gap regarding increasing concern for ownership of MID centers.

Telecenters in Malaysia: Knowledge grasps one of the important keys for success of any community development program. Level of knowledge of a community is highly impinged by the flow of information; how much it is provided to them. To ensure persistent information flow is vital with regard to community development particularly those in the remote areas and failure to do this will result in a wider digital gap between those in rural areas and their counterpart in the urban areas. The government has admitted the importance of this matter and in response towards this, they have come out with a number of initiatives and one of it is the establishment of telecentres. There are a number of telecenters in Malaysia established by various agencies, either by the government or private agencies. Within the government context, telecenters are administered either by the federal or the state governments. Among the established telecenters in Malaysia are rural Internet Centre (PID), Medan InfoDesa (MID) and Broadband Community Centre.

Rural Internet Centre (PID): Rural Internet Centre (PID) is among the earliest telecenter in Malaysia and it was established back in April, 2000 by Ministry of Energy, Water and Communication (MECW). Up to date, a total of 42 PID are established across the country. Typically, a PID is located adjacent to the post office and equipped with a number of computers, printer and internet connection. In tandem with its objective which is to embolden rural community to utilize the ICT services offered and enhance their awareness on the importance of ICT usage, PID offers a number of relevant programs such as ICT basic training and web and blog developments, courses and seminars. Currently, PID has set a new mission of developing vibrant communities whereby attempts to acclimatize community daily life towards learning and networking activities via ICT.

Medan InfoDesa (MID): Medan InfoDesa (MID) was established by Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD). MID is a telecenter equipped with ICT infrastructure located in rural areas across the country. MID is one of the government catalysts for narrowing down the digital divide in rural areas, as well as serves as training and meeting center of virtual interaction. MID has set its objective which are; to create a knowledgeable society by 2020; to offer equal opportunities to all communities with respect to ICT and to attain a knowledge-based economy. MID was first implemented in 2001 and divided into two categories; area MID and district MID. Area MID equipped with 10 computers and the district MID is equipped with 20 computers and a meeting room. Similar to PID, MID offers a number of ICT services and uniquely, MID offers information with regard to all of the villages across the country. Currently, there are a total of 236 in Malaysia.

Community broadband center: The Government via Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has cooperated with TM Berhad a private telecommunication company in setting up the community broadband center. Up to date, there are a total of 246 community broadband center across the country. The main objective of such center is to offer collective community internet access to remote areas covered by the Universal Service Provision (USP) program. The community broadband center is accommodated with IT equipment and personal computers connected to internet broadband access which permits the rural communities to enjoy the benefits of the internet. To further strengthen their ICT skills and interests, software and training programs are also offered at the broadband community center. It is a hope that this telecenter will able to strengthen their social and economic status.

THE ZIMMERMAN THEORY OF EMPOWERMENT AND HUR EMPOWERMENT MODELS

The Zimmerman (1995) Theory of empowerment and Hur (2006) empowerment models have been chosen to explain and clarify the problem. Zimmerman (1995) in his theory of empowerment discussed about three components, including intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral. The intrapersonal component of empowerment refers to individual's perception of control over the sociopolitical sphere and individual's belief about their ability as self-efficacy. The interactional component refers to understanding of social environment regarding different elements, such as nature and sources which also it is conceptualized in a community organization context.
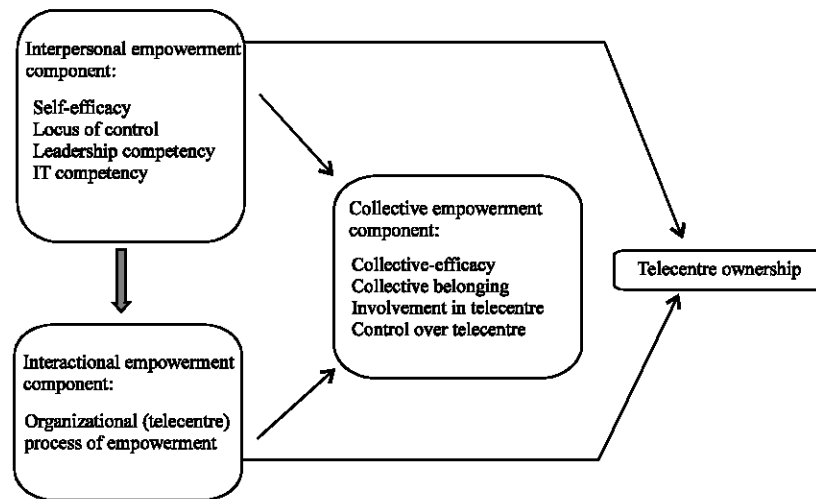
Fig. 1: The research framework

The behavioral component refers to individual participation and coping behaviors with the social changes (Christens *et al.*, 2011a). Thus based on the Zimmerman Theory, researchers hypothesized the direct effect of interpersonal and interactional component of empowerment on the behavioral component of empowerment as telecentre ownership (Fig. 1).

Hur (2006) conceptualized the empowerment in terms of individual empowerment which affects the path towards empowerment. Further, he discussed on the collective empowerment as from one side affect path toward empowerment and from other side affected by individual empowerment. In his view, the goal of individual empowerment should be consistent with that of collective empowerment to avoid empowerment traps. Thus, individual empowerment cannot be completely separated from collective empowerment in its practice. Thus, researchers hypothesized the mediating effect of collective empowerment first on the relationship between interpersonal component of empowerment and telecentre ownership and second on the relationship between interactional component of empowerment and telecentre ownership (Fig. 1).

CONCLUSION

Based on the integrated theoretical model and the literature reviewed, the major identified variables influencing rural community empowerment to achieve telecentres' ownership depicted in Fig. 1. The framework portrays the direct effect of interpersonal empowerment component and interactional empowerment component on the telecentre ownership. Further, collective component of empowerment would treat as the mediator between the

interpersonal and interactional empowerment components as exogenous factor and telecentre ownership as endogenous factor.

The interpersonal empowerment component refers to individual's perception of control over the sociopolitical sphere and individual's belief about their ability as self-efficacy. The interpersonal factor variables includes self-efficacy, locus of control, leadership competency and IT competency in which the first two variables supported by the Zimmerman Theory and the last two variables supported by the Hur Model.

The interactional empowerment component refers to understanding of social environment which conceptualized as processes of introducing and giving the information and skills to the telecentre users. The process of empowerment is a continuing development which involves many changes to strength the ability to act, gain control and mastery over life. The interactional empowerment component consider as a dynamic process of thought and action which happen in relation of rural community people and telecentre operators.

The collective empowerment component and telecentre ownership are two aspects of behavioral empowerment component. The behavioral empowerment component, according to Zimmerman Theory refers to individual participation and coping behaviors with the social changes. In this study, the collective empowerment component consider as the initial step of behavioral component of empowerment that conceptualize by collective-efficacy, collective belonging, involvement in telecentre and control over telecentre which all supported by the Hur Model. The last step of behavioral empowerment component originally for the present freamwork conceptualized as telecentre ownership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This conceptual study theoretically would contribute to the general knowledge regarding empowerment by establishing valid and reliable criteria for investigation of the telecentre users' empowerment. Further, predominantly this framework would fill the theoretical gap in the body of knowledge pertaining to the empowerment of telecentres users by incorporating the mediation effect of collective component of empowerment in the relationships between above mentioned criteria as independent variables and behavioral component of empowerment as telecentres ownership.

From a practical view point and on the bases of the emphasis of the government of Malaysia on the importance of developing information and communication technologies programs, as a major approach to achieve knowledge-based community in the year 2020, this framework will provides a more in-depth understanding of the nature and role of the ICT project in rural community empowerment through investigation of individual and collective empowerment components as well as looking at the processes. Therefore, practical lessons might be used by donor agencies and governments involved with development-oriented telecentres. Moreover, this conceptual lens is beneficial to various groups that are directly or indirectly involved in the planning, execution and evaluation of ICT projects as well as enhancing individual empowerment in rural community.

The researchers recommend the application of presented framework in a cross sectional research design by implementing a quantitative approach. The product moment correlation, factor analysis and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could be employed as inferential analysis to answer the recommended objective as follow:

- To determine the level of telecentres ownership among telecentre's users
- To identify the relationship between interpersonal empowerment component and telecentres ownership among telecentre's users
- To identify the relationship between interactional empowerment component and telecentres ownership among telecentre's users
- To test the mediating effects of the collective empowerment component on the relationships between first interpersonal empowerment component and telecentres ownership and second interactional empowerment component and telecentres' ownership among telecentre's users

REFERENCES

Adamson, D., 2010. Community empowerment: Identifying the barriers to purposeful citizen participation. Int. J. Sociol. Soc. Policy, 30: 114-126.

Christens, B.D., N.A. Peterson and P.W. Speer, 2011a. Community participation and psychological empowerment: Testing reciprocal causality using a cross-lagged panel design and latent constructs. Health Educ. Behav., 38: 339-347.

Christens, B.D., P.W. Speer and N.A. Peterson, 2011b. Social class as moderator of the relationship between (dis) empowering processes and psychological empowerment. J. Commun. Psychol., 39: 170-182.

Hur, M.H., 2006. Empowerment in terms of theoretical perspectives: Exploring a typology of the process and components across disciplines. J. Commun. Psychol., 34: 523-540.

Kasmel, A. and P.T. Andersen, 2011. Measurement of community empowerment in three community programs in rapla (Estonia). Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health Nurs., 8: 799-817.

Laverack, G. and N. Wallerstein, 2001. Measuring community empowerment: A fresh look at organizational domains. Health Promot. Int., 16: 179-185.

Lawrencejacobson, A.R., 2006. Intergenerational community action and youth empowerment. J. Int. Relat., 4: 137-147.

Ljunggren, A., Z. Huang, F. Wang and E. Johansson, 2010. Promoting community empowerment among rural tibetans in china using focus group discussions. Qualitative Health Res., 20: 1183-1191.

Lord, J. and P. Hutchison, 1993. The process of empowerment: Implications for theory and practice. Canadian J. Commun. Mental Health, 12: 5-22.

May, K.M., C. Mendelson and S. Ferketich, 1995. Community empowerment in rural health care. Public Health Nurs., 12: 25-30.

Pigg, K.E., 2002. Three faces of empowerment: Expanding the theory of empowerment in community development. J. Commun. Develop. Soc., 33: 107-123.

Speer, P.W. and J. Hughey, 1996. Mechanisms of empowerment: Psychological processes for members of power-based community organizations. J. Commun. Applied Soc. Psychol., 6: 177-187.

Turro, C. and M. Krause, 2009. Beyond survival: Tracing individual empowerment processes in a poor chilean settlement. J. Commun. Psychol., 37: 381-403.

Varkey, P., S. Kureshi and T. Lesnick, 2010. Empowerment of women and its association with the health of the community. J. Women's Health, 19: 71-76.

Wilson, R.J., F.Y. Abram and J. Anderson, 2010. Exploring a feminist-based empowerment model of community building. Qualitative Soc. Work, 9: 519-535.

Yoo, S., N.E. Weed, M.L. Lempa, M. Mbondo, R.E. Shada and R.M. Goodman, 2004. Collaborative community empowerment: An illustration of a six-step process. Health Promot. Prac., 5: 256-265.

Zimmerman, M.A., 1995. Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. Am. J. Commun. Psychol., 23: 581-599.

Zimmerman, M.A., 2000. Empowerment Theory. In: Handbook of Community Psychology, Rappaport, J. and Seidman (Eds.), Kluwer, New York.

Zimmerman, M.A., S.E. Stewart, S. Morrel-Samuels, S. Franzen and T.M. Reischl, 2011. Youth empowerment solutions for peaceful communities: Combining theory and practice in a community-level violence prevention curriculum. Health Prom. Prac., 12: 425-439.