The Formulation of New Model of Decision-Making Process in Malaysian Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Currently we are witnessing significant changes in the nature of policy making and management at local government level. These changes represent a move away from the relatively passive approach to a more purposeful approach in which local authorities attempt to learn about the nature of local problems and to respond accordingly. Thus, this paper tries to propose a model of decision-making process for greater performance in local government by taking Malaysian local government as a case. In the findings, there are a few factors influencing councilors in running their functions. It shows that councilors as representatives at local government level will be a good policy maker in handling local issues by adopting this proposed model. In future research, in order to have a greater practice of rational decision-making, perhaps the stakeholders such as households, business communities, community leaders and non-government organizations will be collaborated effectively with councilors in decision-making process relates to local affairs.

Keywords: Model, decision-making, local government, knowledge, management, policy.

I   INTRODUCTION

The study of power relationships in urban planning has tended to focus on a narrow definition of power rather than using power as the central concept in explanation of decision-making process and formulation of planning policies. Even though few studies of local government councilors are available, there is little doubt that more is known about the roles, values and attitudes of elected members than about any other component of local government. The traditional studies of councilors examined the relationship between councilors, parties, officials and interest groups (Lee, 1963; Rees & Smith, 1964; Newton, 1976, Collins, 1978) and have led to the evolution of interesting but ultimately disappointing models of political behavior in local government. The focus on councilor role orientation and formal political groups assumes that power or influence is concentrated in one, easily recognizable, arena-the council chamber and the political party. Such models assume that local representative is collectively and continuously involved in the process of policy-making. Therefore, the objective of this research is to construct a theoretical framework or model, which leads to a better description, understanding and analysis of decision-making process at local government level, demonstrating a potential of this model among councilors in order to improve influences acting upon decision-making process and formulation of local planning policy. The application of this model will benefits the good governance practices at local government level, and will contribute to a better urban living environment and urban quality of life.

II   LITERATURE REVIEW

A.   Decision-Making in Local Government

Much attention has been focused in recent years on the basic challenge of planning in a democratic society. Decision-making in local government addresses itself in particular to those more strategic levels of choice which tend to be linked with the terms 'planning' and 'policy-making', and to impinge on the future physical and social development of local communities in a variety of ways which may be only imperfectly understood. The planning process in local government requires a technology of choice that explicitly recognizes the particular types of challenge posed at this level. These include the difficulty of isolating one decision from another. If such a technology is to be consistent with the principle of democratic control, new approaches will be necessary of internal organization and communication within local authorities (Friend & Jessop, 1971). In local government, the committee meeting is the only official occasion at which officers and elected members meet together, and at this stage the recommendations of the officers-if acceptable-become translated into formal decisions of the members. However, despite the formal significance of the occasion, it was evident to us that, particularly where the more strategic decisions were concerned, the committee meeting tended to play a strictly limited role in the actual processes of decision-'making', which extended well beyond the formal procedure of decision-'taking' enshrined in standing orders (Friend & Jessop, 1971).

B.   The Role of Councilors

Amongst the most compelling and convincing arguments for any form of sub-national, territorially based structure of representative government is that it brings political decision-making closer to local communities. Decision-making by local elected representatives has a local democratic mandate, and by being more immediate to local communities, it can turn to be far more responsive to local wishes than national government. Thus, local citizens can be assured that the views they articulate will be heard by councilors, and that councilors in turn, will be concerned not only to respond to, but also to anticipate the reactions of the electorate to policies they develop and decisions they make (Gregory, 1969).Despite the general spread of party politics in local government, councilors are well entrenched in their communities and their role is primarily one of 'defending their local interest regardless of party considerations' (Copus, 2004). In the British local context, Jones (1973) noted that, as well as representing a geographical area, the councilor may also act as representative of a broad section of the community, a particular organized group, another local authority or individual citizens.

C. Crisis of Representation

A crisis of representation occurs when the councilor react to a council policy pronouncement, a specific local issue, or decision that stimulates the interest of the community, or section of it, and motivates them into action. The issues must be significant salience for the community, to mobilize and to begin to articulate. The crucial importance to the generation of a crisis of representation is that the councilor agrees with the views of the electorate on the matter, and expects the councilor to oppose the council decision and work in support of the position. The crisis is further intensified by two different sets of assumptions held by representatives and represented. Whilst the group meeting is the decision-making forum, the group itself will still expect the councilor to publicly adhere to the decision or policy that is cause of public concern (Copus, 2004).Councilors generally recognize that the responsibility of representing the interests of an electoral area will involve conflict with the group, particularly over very sensitive local issues. Another way in which the councilor may seek to resolve the crisis is to change the group's decision. However, this is a closed process, which involves private debate within a group meeting and private negotiations between councilors. It does not lead to public deliberation, which is still shunned as a way of resolving matters (Copus, 2004: 192). Eulau et al. (in Copus, 2004) explored the concept of representative 'focus' that is where the representative will concentrate his or her attention when it comes to the political processes. Jones (1973) noted that, as well as representing a 'geographical' area, the councilor may also act as a representative of a broad section of the

community, a particular organized group, another local authority or individual citizens.

III   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This grounded theory/model focused on literature review, observation on previous theories or models and application of those theories or models in local government's decision-making process. The main objective through this application is to determine what factors influence councilors in their decision-making process. Qualitative method through interview was carried out with councilors of Kuantan Municipal as well as key informants with informal discussion with external discussion at different level of society.

IV   FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

A.   The Process of Decision-Making

The study indicates that most councilors perceived the decision-making is a complex process, by referring to the second and third level of formal sequences of steps in the decision-making process.

In some conditions, the formal process of decision-making became more complex due to the involvement of various inter-departmental inputs. The agencies may unable to reach any decision or majority councilors may disagree with the decision that needs to be endorsed.

The study also sharing the similar finding as carried out by Fried and Jessop (1969) in the City Council of Coventry, United Kingdom, on the complexity of the decision-making process. There was a constant sense of the direct exposure of the elected or appointed member to many conflicting pressures of the electorate and, for this reason, the resolution of conflicts through discussion within the party group often appeared to embody a higher level of realism than did attempts to reach decisions involving similar conflicts of interest either in the committee or departmental meetings.
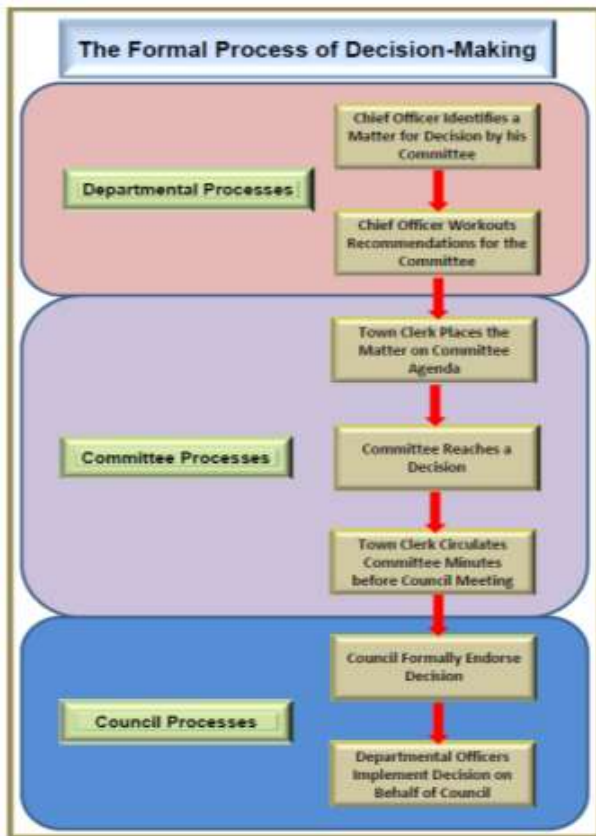
Figure 1. The Formal Process of Decision-Making

B. Factors Influencing Decision-Making

The results of what councilors thought the most important factors influence their decision-making throw some light on the issues central to understanding the dynamics of political preference in the process. Four factors indicate councilor's preference, namely; i) the interest of the public/tax payers, ii) the interest of state government, iii) the interest of the party, and iv) economic and infrastructure development. From the list, it can be summed up that most councilors realize that their actions should not be contradictory and against the policies decided upon by the state or interest of the party and the people. At the same time they carry the responsibilities to draw the policy to determine the direction of the local council and the direction has to augur well with the state policy and meet the people's expectations.

The similar approaches has been conducted by Young and Rao (in J. Curtis et al., 1995) for Widdicombe Committee, United Kingdom, in identified what was the councilor focus of representation, from the point of view of the public. Electors' expectations of their councilors are inescapably conditioned by the prominence in local government elections and local politics of national party politics. Equally important are electors' attitudes towards the balance needed between a councilor's own personal views, those of his or her party and those of the people he or she

represents (Copus, 2004). Young and Rao conclude that in a system dominated by the party group: 'there is an overwhelming expectation that councilors should place local interests-either at ward level or across the local area-first. And there is also a clear indication that the public thinks there are limits to the role of party politics (Young & Rao, 1995). As the link between the party and councilor is stronger than that between the councilor and the electorate, the councilor will act as a trustee when it comes to developing a representative relationship with citizens, but will act as a delegate when it comes to his or her relationship with the party or the party group.

V   RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

A. Enhancing the Role of Councilors

It requires serious questioning of the nature of local representative democracy and the role played within it by political parties and party people. By playing the role as community advocate, councilors will ensure looking inwards to the needs of micro-managing the party group and its internal factional machinations, rather than outwards towards the needs of community leadership and governance (Copus, 2004). However, as perceived by Friend and Jessop (1971), the test of 'improvement' can only be an empirical and to some extent a political one; whatever change is proposed in existing mechanisms of choice, it must be such as to gain acceptance in practice, by convincing a sufficient number of people that it offers them a better instrument for achieving the things they want to achieve.

B. A New Proposed Model of Decision-Making Process

The new proposed model of decision-making process at local government level is based on 13 factors that influence any decisions made by councilors in regards to council's affairs. The rational of having this option is to assists councilors in making a right, efficient and effective decisions by considering all those factors, collectively and comprehensively. The six main factors; i) The expectation of tax payers; ii) the interest of political party; iii) in parallel to the state; iv) in parallel to the federal; v) the impact on environment and vi) the socio-economic will give a different weight on the importance of each factors. In conjunction to the recommendation of becoming advocate councilors, they need to be alert to the characteristics and needs of the people they serve, and, where inequalities exist, councilors need to help ensure that they are well addressed (Figure 2).
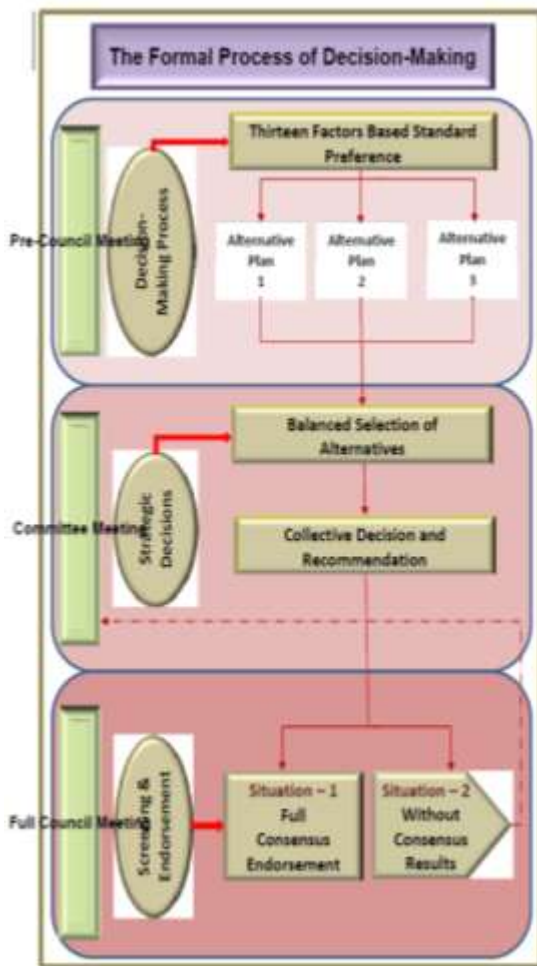
Figure 2. Proposed Model of Decision-Making

The application of the model begins at the pre-council meeting. The pre-council meeting should providing a forum for the debate of particular controversial issues at the stage before a formal committee decision was reached, either at the Committee Meeting or Full-Council Meeting. A consensus result or a firmly stand could be finalized, after considering the few alternatives or possibilities as propose by the member of the party. All members (councilors) of political party should voice out their views and there was always a strong possibility that, meeting in a politically charged atmosphere and deprived of the guidance of their professional advisers, the members might find themselves becoming committed to resolutions, as perceived by Friend and Jesop (1971).

The Committee Meeting is an official occasion at which councilors and officers meet together, listen to the issues and recommendations from the officers, before translated into official decisions. Where the more strategic decisions were concerned, councilors seemed unable to address itself successfully to the task of making a balanced selection between alternatives. This tendency could be avoided by having a clear assessment on any particular contentious matters, based on 6 factors, as what have been debate and agreed at the pre-council meeting.

At the third level of decision-making process, all councilors of the parties met as a group prior to the monthly Full-Council Meeting. The task is to screen the minutes of the various committees, and also to formulate their tactics for any items to be dealt with on the council agenda (Friend and Jessop, 1971). The process will be much easier if the alternative and consensus have been develop and agreed at the first and the second level of the council's meeting, as what have been proposed under this new model. If the Full-Council Meeting unable to resolve any matters arises, or failed of having consensus results, then that particular minute is formally referred back to the Committee Meeting for further consideration and evaluation. The process of decision-making will goes through the same consequences process until the final and consensus results endorsed in the next Full-Council Meeting.

C. Accuracy of Decision

Under representative democracy, citizens elect their leaders, and the leaders are supposedly to make decisions that are best represent the interest of their constituents. In making such decisions, the leaders use two major criteria; i) what they think their constituents want them to do, and ii) what they (the representatives) think its best (Sewell & Coppock, 1977).

The study also looking to the question on how do councilors know that the decision they make is the most accurate one? Most of the councilors believe and depend on the formal and informal feedback systems, either from the council, their parties or the tax payers. Therefore the two-ways communication approach, either traditionally method such as informal meetings, dialogues or through internet facilities, will enable the public to responds or make an informed opinion or objection. This not only ensures better quality of participation but also to judge the accuracy of any decision made by councilors in achieving the stated objectives or target-groups.

Tuler and Webler (in Azizan, M., 2009) feel that it is important for the decision makers to provide adequate information and explanation while at the same time allowing feedback from the public. Many planning authorities in United Kingdom have taken the initiatives to improve the provision of planning information to the public. A good example would be the Nottinghamshire County Council which has a website dedicated to provide information about their planning proposals or programs.

VI   CONCLUSION

The complexity of the decision-making process at local government level always causes the difficulties for councilors to make a rightful, objectively and effectively decisions. The existing model of decision-making did not provide them with a clear set of factors that guided them while debating any issues at the council meeting, and as a result, to some extent, we saw an inevitable outcome of the contrast between the complexity of choice and the limited options for acceptance or rejection of recommendations permitted by conventional committee procedures. Therefore the study, based on the theoretical conceptual of

decision-making process, successfully develop a set of decision-guideline consisting of 13 factors to be used by councilors while dealing with decision-making process.

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