

# Internal and External Factors that Influence the Success of Mah Meri Indigenous Community through the Pro-Poor Tourism Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is one of the development strategies that support economic growth in Malaysia. Tourism can stimulate the economy, promote infrastructure development, and protect natural and cultural resources. The government realizes that the special features of the indigenous community are part of the attraction for cultural tourism. The Pro-Poor Tourism approach can be used to help the success of the indigenous community but is not widely used in Malaysia. In order to empower this Pro-Poor Tourism approach, there are several internal and external factors that influence this indigenous community to achieve success. Lack of basic infrastructure, high incidence of poverty, education issues and changing mindsets are the main issues affecting the indigenous community. Therefore, this study aims to find out the internal and external factors that influence the success of the Mah Meri Indigenous community in the Pro-Poor Tourism approach. Observations, interviews, and documentation were used to collect data. Thematic analysis was used in the data. From the analysis of the data that has been released, interest, motivation, skills and attitudes are among the internal factors that influence the success of the indigenous community while the cooperation network is the most important external factor for this indigenous community to achieve success. The findings of this study are only suitable for this community and not suitable for other communities. However, this study can be adapted to other communities that have the same characteristics or context as the indigenous Mah Meri community. The researcher hopes that other researchers can do more in-depth research on this Pro-Poor Tourism approach in the future.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Community, Pro-Poor Tourism Approach, Poverty

## INTRODUCTION

According to RMKe-12 (2021) states that the incidence of poverty among the indigenous is still high which is 33.6% in 2019. As an ethnic minority and considered behind compared to other races, the government through various agencies especially the Indigenous Development Department (JAKOA) always pay serious attention to developing the Native community (Don, Mohd Nasir & Ibrahim, 2019). The unique heritage of the indigenous community can attract the interest of tourists as well as increase the economy of this community.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

According to Ab Manaf & Abdullah (2021) stated that this community still lives below the poverty line which is categorized as poor and extreme poor. The result of this mainstream implication is that the indigenous

community is easily exploited by outsiders (Zahidin & Abdullah, 2020). In addition, the issue of lack of infrastructure in indigenous villages, high poverty rates, education issues and change of mindset among the indigenous community are the main issues that are often given attention by the government (JAKOA, 2021).

There is a lot of evidence showing that the involvement of the indigenous community brings many benefits to the country's tourism sector. However, there is a problem that needs to be considered where their success in this industry is not well monitored which causes their real benefits to be unmeasurable (Roddin et al., 2019). According to Ab Manaf & Abdullah (2021) in the study "Challenges of Indigenous Community Participation in Social Development Programs: A Case Study in Sungai Pergam Village, Kemaman Terengganu" states that although many social development programs have been implemented, the achievements are not encouraging including the level of education, level health, income level and their participation issues in the programs carried out.

The factor of low education which is only at primary and secondary level makes it difficult for them to work outside (Jamal et al., 2022). Although the indigenous community of the Mah Meri tribe still practice self-sufficient economic activities, they are open in developing the economy to improve their opinion (Mohamad Asri, Roddin & Ahamd Hariri, 2018). According to Jamal et al. (2022) stated that in terms of carving equipment, they did not have enough equipment due to insufficient capital.

The PPT approach is an approach that aims to use tourism as a strategic method to reduce poverty among marginalized communities (Roddin et al., 2022). This PPT approach is appropriate in reducing the poverty rate in the indigenous community. Various initiatives combining PPT elements have been used but still fail to link between poverty, environment and development. Therefore, this study is expected to help improve the standard of living of the indigenous community in the implementation of PPT.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Indigenous Community in Malaysia

The indigenous community is divided into three groups, the Senoi, Negrito and Malay-Proto groups. The Senoi group is the largest group followed by the Malay - Proto and Negrito groups (Mohd Sam, 2015). Referring to JAKOA (2021) states that the Senoi group consists of the Semai, Temiar, Jahut, Che Wong and Mah Meri tribes. The Malay - Proto group consists of the Temuan, Semelai, Jakun, Kanaq, Orang Kuala and Orang Seletar tribes while the Negrito group consists of the Kensiu, Kintak, Jahai, Lanoh, Mendriq and Bateq tribes. Table 1.1 below shows the tribes of the three main groups of the indigenous community in Malaysia:

Table 1 : Tribes of the Indigenous Community

Negrito	Senoi	Malay – Proto
Kensiu	Semai	Temuan
Kintak	Temiar	Semelai
Bateq	Mah Meri	Jakun
Lanoh	Jah Hut	Kanaq
Mendriq	Che Wong	Orang Kuala
Jahai	Semoq Beri	Orang Seletar

### Mah Meri Indigenous Community

According to JAKOA (2021) states that Mah Meri means forest people while in the term, Mah Meri is called scaly. The Mah Meri indigenous community is categorized in the Senoi tribe. In addition, this community is

also known as sea people because they live close to the sea and work as fishermen. Although there is no accurate historical evidence about their origins, they are believed to have migrated from the islands in the south of Johor to the coast of Selangor because they were running away from the enemy. Now, the Mah Meri indigenous community has experienced changes in terms of thinking and development as a result of mixing with other communities.

### Pro-Poor Tourism

According to Roddin et al. (2022) stated that pro-poor tourism aims to open economic opportunities to the lives of the poor to enable the poor to earn income or reduce poverty through the benefits of tourism while for Ashley & Roe (2012) stated that pro-poor tourism is defined as tourism that generates net profit for the poor. Pro-poor tourism is not a product or sector but an approach aimed at opening up economic opportunities for the lives of the poor to enable them to earn a source of income through tourism. In a study by Mitchell & Ashley (2010) stated that pro-poor tourism encourages local communities to invest in training and self-development to improve skills to escape from poverty with the help of stakeholders. The involvement of local communities in tourism activities will facilitate the improvement of the quality of life that includes economic and social aspects as well as a conducive environment that will ensure a productive and healthy life (Che Leh & Hamzah, 2012). Goodwin claims that tourism activity, to ensure it is sustainable, must earn income in a market economy and its role in eradicating poverty is only possible when tourism is linked to the local economy and generates new jobs and business opportunities (Lowry, 2017).

### METHODOLOGY

This study employs a case study design with a qualitative approach based on purposive sampling. Data collection was carried out through interviews and observation involving five participants, three men and two women, who directly involved in tourism activities in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Pulau Carey, Selangor. In qualitative studies, the size and number of study participants are not the main measure, but the correct selection of participants is an element that determines the quality of the study data obtained (Patton, 2014). The selection of five participants was deemed sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the study. According to Dunwoodie et. al., (2023) stated that the number gives the researcher the opportunity to deepen the experience of each participant and gives the researcher the opportunity to deepen the experience of each participant that can give meaning to the process of change that has gone through. Observations were also made on the study participants and their environment.

Table 2 is the background of the participants involved in this study. PK3 and PK4 have been recognized by JAKOA. They become a model for other indigenous communities to make tourism activities a success. All the selected participants are seen living well in Kampung Sungai Bumbun due to the development, provision of facilities and the centralization of many activities carried out in the settlement. The selection of Kampung Sungai Bumbun is a symbol of the involvement of the indigenous community in tourism activities on Carey Island.

Table 2: Background of the Study Participants

No.	Research Participants Coding	Skills
1	PK1	Make handicrafts
2	PK2	Dancing and play instruments
3	PK3	Engrave
4	PK4	Weaving, dancing (culture), singer and play instruments
5	PK5	Weaving

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The research data were analysed using the thematic analysis method. This method involves the process of identifying and extracting themes from the interview transcripts that were transcribed from audio recordings obtained during the interview sessions with the study participants. In addition, the researcher sought input and feedback on the study findings from the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Tourism Malaysia, JAKOA Selangor dan JAKOA Kuala Langat. Several internal factors were identified as influencing the success of the Mah Meri Indigenous community in tourism activities, namely interest, motivation, skills and attitudes.

Me, yes...one, interest...it has to be there, if there's no interest, it won't be...like PK1 used to be interested in crafts, wood carving, back then...interest too..."	PK1
I don't have that interest, suddenly... I feel like doing something like this, don't I... when I've done it, I've done it..."	PK2
"The interest is there..."	PK3
"Interest..."	PK4
"Have interest..."	PK5

Interest is the tendency of an individual to be attracted to an object and like it. PK1, PK2, PK3, PK4 and PK5 state that interest must be present in oneself to produce unique handicrafts to attract tourists to buy.

"PK1 motivating yourself is sometimes better than waiting for other people's motivation...we are motivated ourselves..."	PK1
"That's right, self-motivation... I thought, what if I wanted to go on my own, I would have to spend thousands of dollars... so, I did it, and finally I was able to go abroad."	PK2
"Self-motivation is lacking... only when we are encouraged by others do we feel like doing it, and then we have the enthusiasm... if motivation alone is not enough..."	PK3
"How to motivate yourself"	PK4
"...yes, motivation from people around me"	PK5

Motivation is needed to encourage someone to succeed. For the Mah Meri indigenous community, self-motivation is more important than motivation given by others. PK1, PK2, PK3, PK4 and PK5 stated that motivation is very important to the success of the activities that this community carries out.

"That skill, you learn it yourself..."	PK1
"In terms of skills, I'm not good at weaving, but for the finishing process, that's all I can do..."	PK3
"Yes, skills"	PK4
"Yes, there are skills"	PK5

The skills possessed by the indigenous community in producing handicrafts using forest products cannot be doubted. PK1. PK2. PK3 and PK4 supported by stating that skills are very necessary to support their daily lives.

"Aaa...hardworking attitude, main interest...no interest, no matter what you do it won't happen..."	PK1
"Success is because I worked hard, our own attitude has to be worked on, has to be instilled in us, then we shouldn't trust people too much, just do the right thing..."	PK2
"In terms of attitude, we have to get rid of that lazy attitude, we really have to get rid of it... if we don't get rid of it, we won't be able to get income..."	PK3

Attitude means an action or view based on an opinion. PK1, PK2 and PK3 state that to achieve success, one must have a diligent attitude and always strive to succeed.

"Collaboration between communities is a must...I'm now trying to bring a new approach, like working with wood carvers, with weavers, my aunt Maznah...trying to bring a new approach to join forces and then we want to combine so that we can move in this craft center..."	PK1
"If there is a collaborative plan, it's okay, no problem...the person said, just give it equally..."	PK2
"Collaboration is also necessary...collaboration in the tourism sector like Tourism Selangor, like private tourism agencies is also important to deal with them..."	PK3
"Collaboration is important..."	PK4
"Aaa, cooperation...."	PK5

While the study primarily focused on internal and external factors influencing success, observations during the fieldwork revealed in gender roles and generational perspectives within the Mah Meri community. Women were predominantly involved in weaving and singing, while men focused on carving and musical performances. These gendered roles not only reflect traditional divisions of labour but also offer potential for designing targeted capacity-building programs. Additionally, younger generations expressed openness to digital marketing and social media promotion, in contrast to the older generation who prefer traditional methods of selling crafts. Understanding these intergenerational preferences is crucial for designing inclusive tourism strategies that appeal to both age groups while preserving cultural values.

All participants stated that cooperation between the community, JAKOA and other agencies is very important in increasing tourism activities and opening up job opportunities for them. To increase the daily income of this community, several strategies of the PPT approach need to be used such as planning, management, cooperation, economic development, community involvement, promotion and assistance from others. With this approach, the indigenous community can increase their income while also developing the national economy.

"The plan is already there...cooperation also necessary...the increase in the economy is because we work hard...community involvement has to....yes, we really need strengthen promotion...it is what we waiting for, help from others to attract tourist"	PK1
"There is, there is...the planning, management is there but it's really hard to implement it...the planning is there but you want to do the tasks, to do the work, fuh...for community involvement, have....there have a food, they will come..hahaha...while, I suggest promoting it on social media, spread it again...JAKOA, Malaysia Handicrafts, Padat Museum and NGO always give us help if we needed"	PK2
"There is no planning for the environment...cooperate is also necessary...yes, community involvement also have...for promotion, yes! We promote from social media on our own, the village page and friends also promote too...help is really necessary."	PK3
"In the planning, you want to make flower patterns, like that... cooperation is important...a'ah, promotion is a must to increase the income...color aid, medicines is really necessary"	PK4
"Cooperation for weaving...be able to increase the family's economy...for promotion, there are other people who do the promotions"	PK5

From the data analysis, the theoretical framework of the study was adapted from the balance theory developed by Talcott Parsons (1927) and the transformational leadership theory from Bass's study (1985), all of these elements are summarized in the diagram below.

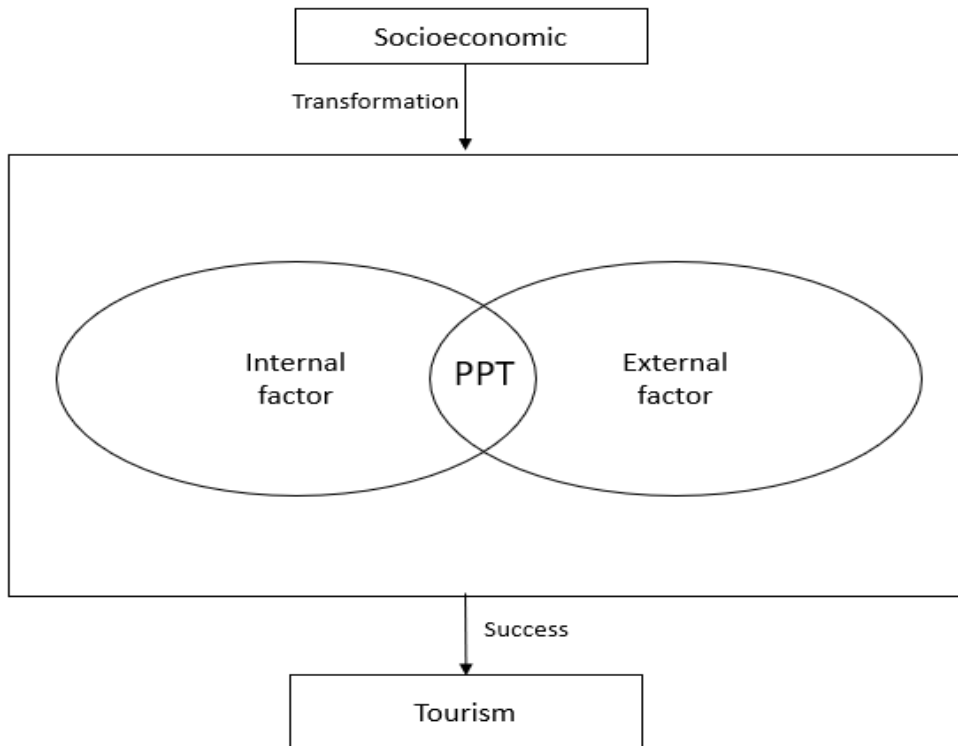


Figure 2 : The theoretical framework of the study adapted from the theory of equilibrium built by Talcott Parsons (1927) and the theory of transformational leadership from the study of Bass (1985)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study present valuable insights for policy development. Agencies such as JAKOA, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, and Tourism Malaysia are encouraged to consider the following interventions likes :

1. Provide accessible grants or micro-loans specifically for indigenous tourism enterprises including craft production, performance outfits, and promotional activities.
2. Conduct workshops and training in areas such as entrepreneurship, digital marketing, customer service, and language proficiency.
3. Develop mentorship programs where experienced elders pass on traditional skills to youth, while the younger generation aids in modernizing and promoting the heritage.

## CONCLUSIONS

The indigenous community showed their commitment to increase tourism activities in their area. Various activities to attract tourists are planned. Internal and external factors play an important role in making this pro-poor tourism approach a success. Interest, motivation, skills and attitude are among the internal factors that influence the success of the indigenous community while the network of cooperation is the most important external factor for the indigenous community to achieve success. The findings of this study are only suitable for this community and not suitable for other communities. However, this study can be adapted to other communities that have the same characteristics or context as the Mah Meri indigenous community. The researcher hopes that other researchers can do more in-depth research on this pro-poor tourism approach in the future.

While the findings highlight several internal and external success factors within the Mah Meri community, the study also recognizes potential challenges in scaling the Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) approach more broadly.



Among these are inconsistent funding, limited infrastructure in remote areas, and varying degrees of community readiness across different indigenous groups. Moreover, sustaining interest and motivation over time requires long-term support mechanisms that may be difficult to institutionalize without strong inter-agency coordination. The absence of comprehensive monitoring and impact measurement also limits the replication of successful models. These factors must be addressed to enable PPT to serve as an effective poverty alleviation strategy at a national scale.

The findings of this study underscore the need for integrated policy efforts that support indigenous-led tourism. Agencies such as JAKOA and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture should consider establishing structured capacity-building programs that develop skills, enhance motivation, and promote leadership among indigenous community members. Furthermore, inter-agency collaboration is essential to ensure continuity of support, including financial aid, marketing assistance, and infrastructure development. Embedding Pro-Poor Tourism principles within national tourism policies can help institutionalize inclusive development and create sustainable income streams for marginalized communities.

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