



## **IS COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING IN ISKANDAR MALAYSIA EFFECTIVE ENOUGH? A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in planning and operational decision-making in Iskandar Malaysia. The Iskandar Malaysia region consists of four local planning authorities who are responsible for planning and managing the spatial development in the region. Conceptually, effective community participation helps the local planning authority to make better decisions, hence, providing a sustainable and quality living environment. The study employed in-depth interviews to gather insights into the phenomenon from various key actors to address the questions. Following the 31 interviews performed, it is suggested that the effectiveness of community participation; and the incorporation of community interest in Iskandar Malaysia are substantially influenced by functional variables such as collaboration between stakeholders, community access to information and process, and intergovernmental relationships in planning. Structural and cultural variables include the skill and professionalism of public planners, the capability to influence, public awareness and knowledge, and community representation.

**Keywords:** community participation, urban planning, Iskandar Malaysia, qualitative research

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Community participation in urban planning provides a clear description of the decision-making process based on public preferences, leading to better decisions by incorporating the community's experiential knowledge into the process (Innes & Booher, 2004). Community participation is fundamental in achieving the agenda of sustainable development as it helps the government, as a decision-maker, to understand the community preferences, and thus make a better decision (Innes & Booher, 2004). Urbanisation has resulted in fast population growth and spatial development in the main urban territories, including Iskandar Malaysia (IM). As a result, it has instigated challenges to the local authorities in the metropolitan region to govern their local areas.

The local authorities in Johor Bahru and Kulai face a daunting challenge to govern urban development, together with providing effective community participation in the process (Ahmad *et al.*, 2013). Subsequently, the study anticipates addressing the questions, "To what extent do the current participatory platforms in Iskandar Malaysia offer a genuine opportunity to the community to effectively participate in both the development plan-making and development control?" and "What constitutes the effectiveness of community participation and the incorporation of community interest in the planning and operational decisions?"

In-depth interviews (IDI) and thematic analysis have been employed to collect and analyse the qualitative data. A total of 31 IDIs are conducted involving key informants, namely, local public planners, private developers' representatives, and community representatives. This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of current community participation in urban planning in Iskandar Malaysia. This study concludes that the improvement of the functional dimension of the participation process in urban planning in Iskandar Malaysia will potentially enhance the capability of the community to participate effectively, henceforth, incorporating their interest in the development plan-making and planning permission processes.

## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

Urban planning in Peninsular Malaysia (excluding Kuala Lumpur) is guided by the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (TCPA 1976) as the main legislative instrument (Ahmad *et al.*, 2013). Urban planning in Peninsular Malaysia is based on the relationship between the development plan-making and planning permission processes. According to Section 22 (2) (a) of TCPA 1976, it is obligatory for the local authority, as the local planning authority (LPA), to refer to the gazetted Local Plan (LP) in granting planning permission, ensuring that a proposed development complies with the LP (Town and Country Planning Act 1976). Therefore, this research focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of

community participation in both the development plan-making and planning permission processes.

Community participation in the development plan-making is underlined in several sections of TCPA 1976. The primary platform for community participation in the process is through public publicity, as stated under Sections 9 and 12A, with the former concerning the State Structure Plan (SSP) and the latter concerning the Local Plan (LP).

In addition to participating during the publicity stage, the community is also eligible to participate in decision-making. This is highlighted under Section 10(3)(a) and Section 13, where the former is related to objections made during the publicity of the drafted SSP, and the latter is related to objections made during the drafted LP. Both sections indicate that objectors can justify their concerns in front of the Public Inquiry and Hearing Committee.

Likewise, communities are eligible to participate in the planning permission process, which is the operational decision made by the LPA. According to Section 21(6), in the absence of a local plan, the LPA must inform the adjacent landowner about an application for planning approval. Following the notification by the LPA, the adjacent landowner has the right to object to the application. The applicant and objector are invited to justify their stance in a hearing session (Town and Country Planning Act 1976). Likewise, this research focuses on community participation in development plan-making and planning permission processes in IM. There are five (5) local authorities within IM, namely Majlis Bandaraya Johor Bahru, Majlis Bandaraya Iskandar Puteri, Majlis Bandaraya Pasir Gudang, Majlis Perbandaran Kulai, and Majlis Perbandaran Pontian. However, this research focuses only on the Johor Bahru and Kulai Districts, as they cover a significant portion of IM and experience more development growth compared to Pontian.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Key Informants***

Various key informants have been selected using purposive sampling to gather their perceptions on the current state of community participation in both planning processes- development plan-making and planning permission in IM (**Table 1**). These key informants are selected based on their experiential knowledge of both processes, especially concerning the community's involvement. This is based on the understanding of the notion that the key informant is someone who has vast knowledge of a phenomenon, and thus is able to provide extensive insights into the phenomenon (Zanudin et al., 2022; Edward & Holland, 2013).

**Table 1: Profile of Key Informant**

<b>Profile of Key Informant</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Local Public Planner (Director of the department; Deputy Director; Head of the department; Officer; Assistant officer)	12	39
Private Developer's Representative (Project manager; Assistant manager)	7	22
Community Representative (Chairman; Secretary; Committee member)	12	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100</b>

### **Data Collection**

A total of 31 IDIs are conducted which involve various key informants in order to gather qualitative data concerning the community participation in development plan-making and planning permission processes in IM. The application of IDI for data collection is because the method allows the researcher to gather a greater understanding of a phenomenon by interviewing a small number of respondents with experience and knowledge of a phenomenon (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Furthermore, the IDIs conducted in the research are semi-structured to instil flexibility and fluidity in the process, especially the ways a question is being put out and answered. The semi-structured interview provides the interviewee more freedom to respond to each question, thus potentially leading to interesting findings (Edward & Holland, 2013). Before each interview, interviewees are briefed on the purpose of the study and assured that their confidentiality is guaranteed. The interviewee's permission for the interview to be recorded is also sought, although one of the respondents has disapproved.

### **Saturation of Data**

Scholars have employed data saturation to determine the sample size for qualitative research (Coenen *et al.*, 2012; Guest *et al.*, 2017; Guest *et al.*, 2006). Data saturation can be defined as when the data collection and analysis do not produce further information. According to several literature, it is suggested that data saturation in a phenomenological study can be achieved between 10 to 12 interviews. Subsequently, the researcher has estimated 12 IDIs for respective key informants (local public planner, private developer's representative and community representative) as the yardstick to reach saturation.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis has been employed to analyse the qualitative data that have been gathered following a series of IDIs, henceforth identifying several key themes concerning the research question, "To what extent does the current participatory platforms in Iskandar Malaysia offer a genuine opportunity to the community to effectively participate in both the development plan-making and development control?" and "What constitutes the effectiveness of community participation and the incorporation of community interest in the planning and operational decisions?"

### DATA SATURATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES

Eventually, 12 local public planners, 7 private developers' representatives, and 12 community representatives were interviewed to gather their perceptions about the effectiveness of community participation and the incorporation of community interest in the development plan-making and planning permission processes. The number of interviews (12 IDIs for each category of an actor) performed is predetermined based on the data saturation approach. Only seven out of the 12 private developers' representatives who have been approached have agreed to be interviewed.

Figure 1 displays the themes that emerge throughout the analysis of 12 IDIs with the local public planners in IM. A total of 37 themes have transpired from the 124 codes (statements). By the fourth interview, 94.5% of the themes have emerged. In other words, the saturation of data in this study is achieved in the fourth interview.

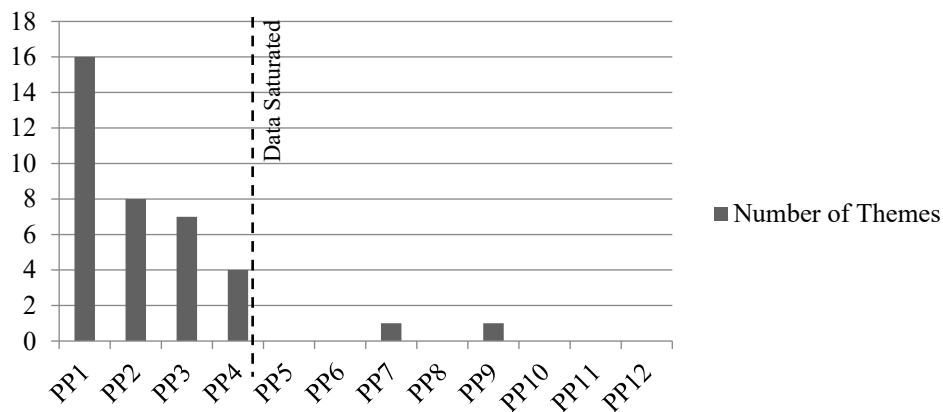
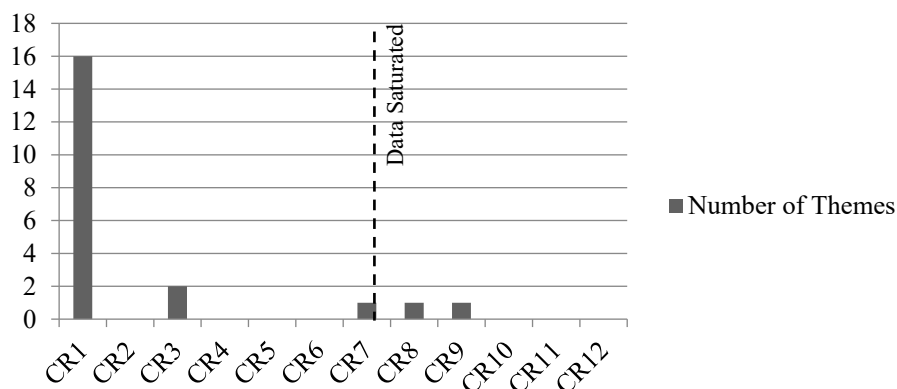


Figure 1: Themes that emerge during the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with local public planners (PP)

Whereas, from the seven IDIs with the private developers' representatives, a total of 28 themes have transpired from 63 codes (statements) with 92.8% of the themes emerging in the first interview. No new theme emerges after the fourth interview, indicating that 100% data saturation is achieved. This is followed by 39 sub-themes that have been derived from the themes and codes.



**Figure 2:** Themes that emerge during the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with community representatives (CR)

Meanwhile, **Figure 2** illustrates the themes that emerge following the analysis of 12 IDIs with the community representatives for low-cost apartments around IM. A total of 21 themes have transpired from 53 codes (statements), where 85.7% of the total themes have emerged by the third interview. Saturation is achieved at the seventh interview, with 90% of themes emerging. Thirty-five sub-themes are then derived from the themes and codes.

Following the analyses and data saturation, both themes and sub-themes are organised in tables (**Table 2 – Table 4**) based on three dimensions of the participation process, namely, functional, structural and cultural which is adapted from Mustapha *et al.* (2013) and Tosun (2000). The incidents of themes and sub-themes that have emerged in each interview are then divided into three impact levels which are low impact (1-4 incidents), medium impact (5-8 incidents), and high impact (9-12 incidents). The purpose is to determine which variable significantly impacts the effectiveness of community participation and incorporation of community interest in decision-making.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results indicate that LPAs in IM tend to use conventional methods within the TCPA 1976 framework for communication and engagement in development plan-making and planning permission. It is also suggested that informing neighbouring communities about planning permission is the responsibility of the local public planner, given the availability of local plans. Furthermore, the results highlight limitations in community knowledge, the technicality of the planning process, and restricted access to public documents, resulting in a lack of participation, particularly from the low-income segment.

The professionalism and judgment of public planners also appear to influence the effectiveness of community participation in development plan-

making and planning permission. The reluctance of public planners to engage continuously with the community, especially the low-income segment, may affect the LPA's ability to incorporate community interests in planning and operational decisions. Nonetheless, both public planners and community representatives agree on the role of local councillors in bridging communication between authorities and communities.

Based on the analysis, both development plan-making and planning permission processes in IM need to consider the technical aspect. The lack of collaboration between stakeholders has potentially resulted in decisions that primarily benefit specific stakeholders.

According to the findings, community participation and the incorporation of community interests in planning and operational decisions are substantially influenced by community access to planning information and processes. LPAs in IM appear to rely on conventional methods for communication and engagement with the community, thus hindering efforts to provide comprehensive information and opportunities for participation to all community segments. Additionally, the community is legislatively excluded from the planning permission process for Johor Bahru and Kulai districts due to the existence of LP.

Moreover, it is implied that community awareness and knowledge of the planning process are associated with property ownership, thus resulting in gaps in participation between community segments. The technicality of planning documents and processes has eventually marginalized the community, especially the low-income segment, from participating in development plan-making and planning permission.

The findings also suggest that effective community participation depends on the skill and attitude of a public planner in handling the process. The public planner should be more thoughtful and go the extra mile in delivering information and implementing the participation process.

As the local councillor has the capacity to influence the decision on planning permission due to their involvement in the One-Stop Centre's committee meetings, the local councillor should regularly share information and engage with their community. Furthermore, there is a possibility that political influence is incorporated into the decision-making following the affiliation between the local councillor and the State Chief Minister. Finally, the incorporation of community interest in planning and operational decision-making in IM is also influenced by the intergovernmental relationship between planning authorities. This is demonstrated by translating the national development strategy into state and local development plans.

**Table 2:** Results of an in-depth interview with the local public planners (PP)

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	PP1	PP2	PP3	PP4	PP5	PP6	PP7	PP8	PP9	PP10	PP11	PP12	
<b>Functional</b>	Intergovernmental relationship in planning	Translation of development strategy	Top-down approach	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Top-down & bottom-up approach	•					•							
	Relationship between authorities	In decision-making	Intervention in decision-making		•											
			Technical factor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Coordination & collaboration between stakeholders	Factors considered in making decision	Political factor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Market factor	•												
		Incorporate community interest	Statutory instrument	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Through engagement	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Collaboration between stakeholders	LPA's initiative	Planning platform	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Non-planning platform	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Access to information		Limited medium	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		Role of Community Representative	•													
Access to information & information process	Access to the planning process	Knowledge related access	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		Selected location	•													
	The capacity of local authority	Technicality of document	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		Administration capacity	•													
<b>Structural</b>	Skill & attitude of a public officer	Treatment of community participation	Financial capacity	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Development plan-making	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	Public officer professionalism & skill	Public officer professionalism & skill	Planning permission	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Public planner's professionalism	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	LPA's perception	LPA's perception	Public planner's initiative	•												
			Participation is time-consumed	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		Participation is associated with knowledge.	•													





Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	PP1	PP2	PP3	PP4	PP5	PP6	PP7	PP8	PP9	PP10	PP11	PP12		
	Initiative to improve knowledge and awareness	Cultivate the community	Diversity and constant public engagement	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
			Extensive and constant information sharing	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Define the target group	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Instrument to perform	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			The attitude of local councillor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Proficient in the planning procedure	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Equitable in representation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			In strategic planning	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			In operational planning	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			As mediator	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Community representation	Role of local councillor	Local councillor background	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
		An initiative by local councillor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
		Facilitate information & process	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
Residents committee	Role of the residents committee	n/a	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact	Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact but did not address the research question																

Table 3: Results of an in-depth interview with the private developer's representatives (DP)

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	DP1	DP2	DP3	DP4	DP5	DP6	DP7		
Functional	Intergovernmental relationship in planning & access to information & process	Relationship between authorities	In decision-making	•								
			Information Sharing	Before approval	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	Coordination & collaboration between stakeholders	Engagement with community	After approval	•				•			•	
			Associate with community interest	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Associate with local authority requirement		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Through community representative	•			•	•	•	•	•	
	Treatment of community engagement	Treatment of community engagement	Willingness to acknowledge	•				•			•	
			Reluctant to cooperate		•							
	Structural	Influencing capability	Developer's perception	Coordinating multiple interests	A balance between market and community interests	•		•	•	•	•	
				Factors considered in making the decision	Financial factor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Technical factor					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Social factor					•							
Incorporating community interest				Incorporating community interest	Through engagement	•						•
					Statutory instruments at the state and local level	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Engagement with authority				Engagement with authority	Planning platform	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
					Non-planning platform			•				
Skill & attitude of a public officer				The efficiency of the appeal board	The efficiency of the appeal board	Public officer's professionalism and skill	•	•	•	•	•	•
						Did not involve	•	•	•	•	•	•
Structural	Influencing capability	Developer's perception	Involved	•						•		
			Role of a private consultant	As mediator	•						•	
				On the planning procedure	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			Developer's perception	Developer's perception	Willingness to engage with the community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
					Towards community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
					Challenge associate to community engagement	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
					On low-cost housing provision	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Developer's attitude	Developer's attitude	In relation to community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
					In relation to statutory instrument	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Developer's influence	Developer's influence	In relation to low-cost housing	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
n/a	•	•			•	•	•	•	•			
Relationship with authority	Relationship with authority	n/a	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
		n/a	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	DP1	DP2	DP3	DP4	DP5	DP6	DP7
		Relationship with local councillor	n/a	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Political influence	n/a	•						
	Legislative framework	Planning law and guideline	Current practices	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Transparency & accountability	Incorporate transparency	Community involvement in decision-making	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Participatory method	Initiative to increase participation	Consultation with community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Awareness & knowledge level	Medium for information sharing	•	•					
			Community knowledge level	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Public awareness & knowledge	Initiative to improve knowledge and awareness	Consultation with community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Community Background	n/a	•						
<b>Cultural</b>	Residents committee	The type of issue raised	During planning process	•	•					
			During construction	•						
	Role of local councillor		Mediator between community and local authority	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Community representation	Local councillor background	Appointment of local councillor	•						
		Efficiency of local councillor	Attitude of local councillor	•						
		Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact	Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact but did not address the research question							

**Table 4 Results for in-depth interview with community representative (CR)**

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	CR1	CR2	CR3	CR4	CR5	CR6	CR7	CR8	CR9	CR10	CR11	CR12
	Access to information & process	Access to the planning process	Absence of planning program near the community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Access to information	Access to planning information	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Functional</b>	Coordination & collaboration between stakeholders	Collaboration between stakeholders	The initiative by the residents' committee	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Capacity of local authority	Capacity of local authority	The initiative by the local authority	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			n/a												
<b>Structural</b>	Skill & attitude of a public officer	Public officer professionalism & skill	Public officer professionalism	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Efficiency of public officer	Efficiency of public officer	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Influencing capability	Empower the community to influence	Through Association							•					

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	CR1	CR2	CR3	CR4	CR5	CR6	CR7	CR8	CR9	CR10	CR11	CR12		
Participatory method	Initiative to increase participation	Diversify platform for public engagement		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
		Promote collaboration		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	Community Background	Attitude of community	Low-income segment		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
			As community member		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Awareness & knowledge level	Community knowledge level		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Related to interest		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Willingness to participate	Associate with the psychological factor		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Low level of participation		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Participation increasing		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Extensive and constant information sharing		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Initiative to improve knowledge and awareness	Stage of information sharing		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
	Responsive & accountability		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
Cultural	Efficiency of residents' committee	Knowledgeable & informative		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
		Constant engage		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	The type of issue raised	Better living environment		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		Residents' committee & local councillor		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	The current state of engagement	Residents' committee & local authority		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		To increase participation		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	The initiative of residents' committee	To improve the living environment.		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
		To increase engagement with authorities		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	Role of residents' committee	Mediator between community & local councillor		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	

Category	Variable	Theme	Sub-theme	CR1	CR2	CR3	CR4	CR5	CR6	CR7	CR8	CR9	CR10	CR11	CR12
			Promote community value		•									•	•
		Initiative by local councillor	Regularly engage with the community	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
		Role of local councillor	Deliver information to the community	•					•						•
		Community representation	Mediator between community & local authority	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
			Responsive & constantly engage			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
		Efficiency of local councillor	Correspondence in representation								•			•	
			Knowledgeable & informative												•
		Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact	Theme/ Sub-theme that has a high impact but did not address the research question												

## CONCLUSION

The study anticipates the continuous debate on the effectiveness of community participation in urban planning to instigate community interest in planning and operational decisions. The researcher has derived the factors that constitute the effectiveness of community participation in IM, which is based on the perception of public planners, private developers' representatives, community representatives, and local councillors.

It was recommended that effective community participation and the incorporation of community interest are greatly influenced by functional variables such as the collaboration between stakeholders, the community's access to information and processes, and intergovernmental relationships in planning. These variables are followed by structural and cultural variables, namely, the skill and attitude of public planners, capability to influence, public awareness and knowledge, and community representation.

It is safe to conclude that the improvement of the functional dimension of the participation process will prospectively improve the process's structural and cultural aspects in the long term. This will improve the capability of the community, predominantly the low-income segment, to participate effectively, incorporating their interests in both the planning and operational decisions.

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