

# Malaysia's Environmental NGOs: Case Studies for Communication and Participatory Approach toward Sustainability in Penang

Hamoon Khelghat-Doost



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Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Unter den Linden 6

10999 Berlin, Germany

Tel. +49-30-2093 66031

Fax +49-30-2093 66049

Email: [hiwi-soa@rz.hu-berlin.de](mailto:hiwi-soa@rz.hu-berlin.de)

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## 1. Introduction

NGOs play a vital role in capacity building and providing solutions for challenges facing societies around the world. When reflecting on the nature of NGOs as non-governmental public-led institutions, it is assumed that NGOs are closer to the heart of many problems in comparison to other agencies or institutions. Ngeri Nwagha (1995) states that, “NGOs have a comparative advantage as effective agents of development because of their relative administrative simplicity, their proximity to the grassroots, their ability to identify the felt needs of the people and their efficient and cost effective mode of operation.” At the same time, NGOs can vary according to their functional strategies namely: NGOs which engage primarily in designing and implementing projects, and advocacy NGOs – whose main purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause.

NGOs are gaining an active, progressively significant role in environmental dialogue. During the Rio Earth Summit process, NGOs (especially environmental NGOs) were full partners in setting the environmental agenda for the years following the Earth Summit. It is important to note that solutions to environmental problems occur in small steps, with themes developed at the global level translated into actions at the local level. Local NGOs function to identify external threats and opportunities and may then decide how to act or what to do based on their organization’s strengths and weaknesses, their ability to mobilize other groups, and their political environment. However, the key element in turning NGOs to powerful tools of change is their participatory nature.

Malaysian environmental NGOs are quite numerous and actively engaged in environmental protection and natural resource conservation issues. In recent years, the issues addressed by NGOs have covered a wide range of areas, including environmental professionalism, ethical practices, advocacy, improving environmental quality, capacity building for environmental protection, community participation, environmental education and awareness, information dissemination, nature appreciation, conservation of special ecosystems, sustainable agricultural practices, policy analysis and wildlife trade monitoring.

With a wide range of activities and close interactions with grassroots initiatives, NGOs are undoubtedly one of the strongest components of Penang’s civil society. Consequently, their impact on environmentally related issues in Penang is indeed significant and warrants further exploration.

## 2. Significance of Study

Environmental NGOs need to build a mass social movement of people who place their ethics into practice. They promote sustainable development, protect the environment and are dynamically involved in different types of environmental activities. NGOs have been long recognized as possessing the vision to change people's unsustainable attitudes and behaviors toward more sustainable trajectories. In order to achieve this vision, environmental NGOs need to draw attention from the public, business organizations, and even politicians by using different means and strategies of communication. Such means and strategies have yet to be well explored in the context of Penang's environmental NGOs.

Penang's environmental activism is rooted in Penang's civil society and can be attributed to its educated and engaged population – a legacy of its colonial status. Penang is host to a number of environmental NGOs such as Water Watch Penang (WWP), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Penang Environment Working Group (PEWOG), Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and many such NGOs. Addressing the challenges ahead of sustainability requires NGOs to adopt a new approach. This research attempts to have a closer look at the participatory function of these NGOs and the methods and strategies they use to communicate with different sectors of society based on their responses to environmental challenges through a number of case studies.

Although the general tactics utilized by some environmental NGOs are rather well-known, there are no systematic studies employed in Malaysia to account for the similarities and differences in the specific tactics used by different organizations in influencing policy decisions. By analyzing these specific tactics, the public in general (and the members of such organizations in particular), will be able to gauge the effectiveness of these NGOs in influencing policy decisions.

## 3. Objectives

This research aims to investigate and analyze the different rationales, methods and strategies utilized by selected Penang environmental NGOs to communicate with their stakeholders in confronting environmental challenges over the years through a couple of case studies.

To this end, the research objectives are:

1. To examine NGO strategies in communicating with their audience.
2. To identify challenges in effective communication with target audiences.
3. To assess past and present methods of communication with their audience.

## 4. Literature Review

Both the cause of environmental problems and possibilities for addressing them depend on human perceptions, attitudes and behavior, which are in turn linked to human values, preferences and beliefs about the world. Issues such as the role of NGOs, communication as well as participatory approach are among key elements in analyzing the relationship between all these aspects.

### 4.1 Penang and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Understanding the conceptual definition of NGOs prior to studying their functions can assist us in comprehending their functions. The definition of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can vary depending on the nature of their functions with such a wide range of definitions in turn affecting the outcomes and objectives of these NGOs. This concept of NGOs was defined by the European Commission (1997) as “extremely diverse, heterogeneous and populated by organizations with hugely varied goals, structure and motivations.” It is therefore not easy to find a unique definition for the term “non-governmental organization,” as it cannot be based on a particular legal definition given the wide variations in laws relating to NGO activities, according to which an NGO may have for instance, the legal status of a charity, non-profit association or a foundation.

One of the most important factors which make NGOs suitable candidates for addressing social and environmental issues is their independency from the government sector. Michael (2002) argues this concept as:

“independent development actors existing apart from governments and corporations, operating on a non-profit or not-for-profit basis with an emphasis on volunteerism, and pursuing a mandate of providing development services, undertaking communal development work or advocating development issues.”

This broad definition of NGOs provides a unique sense of flexibility for these organizations in terms of typology and scope of work and services. The types of issues covered by NGOs also vary from social and political problems to economic and environmental challenges; these criteria enable NGOs to play an active role in addressing various issues. With regard to this research, the role of NGOs in the area of environmental challenges is the primary focus area.

Currently, environmental awareness is on the rise amongst stakeholders, individuals and communities within the Asian and Pacific regions. This surge in knowledge and awareness has been mainly the result of campaigns and education programs run by major public interest groups concerned with the environment. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the international, regional and national levels, as well as groups concerned with the empowerment of marginalized sections of society such as women, indigenous peoples, youth groups, and other community based organizations. Such organizations have worked to foster grassroots based approaches for the protection and preservation of the region’s environment.

In the aftermath of the 1969 race riots in Malaysia, local activists looked outside political parties for alternative ways to address social and economic issues. One outcome of the race riots was the establishment of the multi-racial NGO “Consumer Association of Penang” (CAP), which was headed by S. M. Mohamed Idris. Prior to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (1972), CAP had already started holding seminars and workshops on environmental issues (MENGO, 2008). In 1977, seeing the need for an organization focused solely on the environment and environmental issues, CAP established Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM). SAM’s initial mission was to combat worsening environmental deterioration triggered by the country’s rapid development. Over time, SAM eventually developed into Malaysia’s leading environmental NGO. In 1983 SAM joined Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), thus expanding its focus beyond Penang and Malaysia’s boundaries.

Most contemporary Malaysian NGOs are very much involved in raising awareness among Malaysians on appreciating the earth and committing to environmental protection. As Ramakrishna (2002) argues,



“NGOs play important roles in the country’s path towards sustainable development and pushing the environmental agenda forward.” However, pushing the environmental agenda cannot succeed without constructive cooperation between NGOs and the government. In a workshop set by DANCED in 2001, a survey was conducted among NGOs to examine if the government recognizes and appreciates the role of NGOs in civil and environmental activities. Ultimately, results concluded that there was no clear agreement over the issue, reflecting the view that many NGOs found the government’s response usually positive in relation to environmental education and awareness-raising activities. However, it was widely felt that NGOs’ role in relation to advocacy activities and policy formulation efforts, is less appreciated.

The physical features of Penang and its natural bounties provide an environment the residents want to protect. The multi-cultural, well-educated population has the capacity to form NGOs and to lead campaigns challenging several decisions made by the government. Over the next three decades Penang continued to add environmental NGOs; these groups developed as local citizens became aware of international environmental concerns and of problems existing in their own areas. In the 1980s, four NGOs were established: the Pesticide Action Network, Asia & the Pacific (PANAP), Third World Network (TWN), and Penang Heritage Trust (PHT). Additional NGOs and groups formed in the 1990s include the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI), Water Watch Penang (WWP), and the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA). Even today, environmental groups continue to form. In 2006, Friends of Sungai Juru, focused on protecting the Juru River, was formed. Religious groups, most notably the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merit Society, also took on environmental issues.

The above discussions illustrate the significant role of Penang’s NGOs in confronting different challenges especially those concerning the environment.

#### *Hypotheses:*

- Penang NGOs play an important role in the environmental crisis through their independent pool of expertise and experience.
- NGOs can influence decision makers by adopting relevant strategies.

## 4.2 Communication Strategies and NGOs

Communication is one of the few crucial tools needed by human beings to survive and run the complex systems of social life – especially because communication is essential for collaborative effort among different sectors of society. Effective collaboration can ultimately lead any society or organization toward a wider audience, more social power and more knowledge and experience. As discussed by Science for Environment Policy (2009), “Communication plays a central role in shaping our understanding of the natural world and the role of humans therein. Such understandings, in turn, influence the way we act and our support for, or opposition to, specific policies.” Communication is therefore one of the most effective tools in successfully addressing environmental issues.

That being said, the definitions and functions of communication can vary from a case to case basis. Generally however, the main functions of communication can be categorized as a) to inform and b) to persuade. These two umbrella terms can be operationalized in different capacities through various strategies. Nieto (1998) describes information as a concept which “is giving news about something, whether it is an opinion, a fact, a judgment or an idea.” At the same time, persuasion is defined by Hornsby (1994) as “someone performing an act (roughly, that of affecting someone’s beliefs or desires) using some form of communication.” An effective combination of these two elements will therefore ensure an effective communication strategy. According to OECD (1999), “a planned and strategic use of communication processes and media products can support effective policy making, public participation and project implementation geared towards environmental sustainability.”

As environmental NGOs have grown to become a very important part of environmental issues, effective usage of communication tools and strategies by NGOs can ensure the efficiency of processes involved in facing environmental challenges. As Hovland (2005) argues, “environmental NGOs usually

communicate evidence information and knowledge in order to inform or influence policy, to achieve their own stated development objectives, or simply to make their own knowledge accessible and understandable to a wider audience.”

A clearer message and a more comprehensive communication strategy by NGOs would therefore support the process of helping their audience understand their objectives. This means building an agenda for concern using diffuse channels over the long term, not just narrow policy-lobbying within the NGOs network. The globalization of the media provides an opportunity for NGOs (especially those dealing with the environment) to achieve international outreach for their messages provided they are able to find the right mechanisms needed to draw public attention.

The ability to communicate is essential to the success of any undertaking and an important factor in the achievement of specific objectives. In this regard, the status of communications should change. If organizations want to demonstrate their difference and influence decision-making processes, it is important for them to learn how to integrate communications from various levels e.g. top to bottom internally, externally and across all their activities. According to the RM Knowledge Translation Toolkit (2008), “instead of supporting the production of random products tied to specific outputs, organizations need to see communications as a vehicle that is not only helpful or required but essential to achieving core goals.” This concept has been well understood and adopted by environmental NGOs around the world including those located in Penang.

One of the most important communication strategies taken up by environmental NGOs is the use of media for advocacy. Media advocacy uses a participatory approach that emphasizes the need for communities to gain control and power to transform their environments and to overcome challenges – especially environmental challenges. It gives the media an essential role in raising issues that need to be discussed and placing pressure on decision-makers. As Glanz and Rimer (1995) explain on the importance of media advocacy, “It is assumed that the media largely shape public debate and, consequently, political and social interventions.”

Communication cannot happen in a vacuum; it must be planned, developed, and constructed accordingly. The first phase in this process is to outline a communication strategy. An appropriate communication strategy allows the NGO to practice enhanced control over its work and to frame issues in perspectives other than research. As the OECD (1999) argue, “Strategic planning reflects the beneficiaries’ identified problems and needs and the way information, education, training and communication will be used in solving such problems or meeting the needs.”

According to the International Development Research Centre (2009), “A communication strategy removes doubt, emphasizes planning, and involves all the project participants in raising the visibility of the plan.” Defining the communication strategy is a task that is best carried out as a group. In addition to pooling expertise, the group approach has an even more important advantage of building on interactions between participants. Even a small-scale communication strategy will facilitate an organization’s initiatives.

Once the communication strategy has been defined and communicated, it must be implemented. Implementation of communication strategies needs appropriate tools. For NGOs, technology enables organizational linkages, community mobilization, public information, and fund-raising in ways unimaginable in the very recent past. Communication tools such as newspapers, pamphlets, the Internet, social networks, media, etc. are among the effective tools currently available that NGOs can utilize to pursue their objectives.

It is vital to realize that implementing an effective communication strategy through appropriate communication tools can improve relations between NGOs and other stakeholders, including the governmental, public and private sectors. Additionally, it is extensively recognized that partnership, contracting and cooperation between NGOs, government, and other sectors have been growing. According to Fisher (1998), “These relationships can provide NGOs with greater influence on the way governments work, increased scale and impact.”

### *Hypotheses:*

- Development of communication strategies by NGOs has increased the participation of different sectors of society in the process of attending to environmental challenges.

## 4.3 Participatory Approach

As Chansinga (2003) indicates, “In the wake of democratization most developing countries have had to reorient their characteristically top-down development strategies to embrace a participatory approach philosophy”. The top-down approach of persuasion models generally assumes that the knowledge of governments and agencies was correct, and that civil society and its organizations such as NGOs either did not know or had incorrect beliefs. Since the nature of NGOs’ is bottom-up by nature, the participatory approach in itself is not new to NGOs. However, the strategies designed by NGOs for their participatory approaches may vary in different conditions.

In all the activities of Penang’s major environmental NGOs, participatory processes were/are at the centre of attention. According to Holland (1998), “Participatory approach is an umbrella term for a set of new approaches that stress the importance of taking local people’s perspectives into account and giving them a greater say in planning, managing and implementing the process of confronting crisis.” This approach opens the process to include those most directly affected and grants the intended beneficiaries the chance to speak out about local impacts.

In other words, as Flower (2004) argues, “The days of working in isolation and separation are ending” and today’s trend is toward improved partnership between NGOs, governments, and the public and private sectors.” This trend obviously helps NGOs develop core competencies, gain advantage of different expertise, and influence policy actors.

At the same time, Bryson (2008) identifies three antecedent conditions that make collaborations more likely: a powerful convener, agreement among the collaborators on the problem definition, and the existence of prior relationships and existing networks. The conditions in Penang characterize an ideal environment for forming collaborations. Many of these NGOs have worked together on different projects and are rooted in Penang’s civil society. The main aim of such collaborations was explained by Yashiro (2005), “As actors work together they may exchange information, experiences, and skills.” Penang’s situation clearly demonstrates this concept. It is also important to realize that appropriate and effective communication is a vital factor to ensure successful and efficient collaborative processes.

Simultaneously, in terms of Penang’s environmental NGOs, there are a few other elements which need to be paid attention to. According to Child and Faulkner (1998), “Two key characteristics which affect how partners work together are strategic fit and cultural fit.” This is where communication can play a vital role to ease certain situations. According to Hovland (2005), “Communication is crucial in development work – whether in the form of dissemination, guidelines, prescriptions, recommendations, advocacy, promotion, persuasion, education, conversation, roundtables, consultations, dialogue, counseling or entertainment.” For this purpose, the “Save the Penang Hill Campaign” to save the forests of Penang Hill against new building developments is an excellent example. In the Penang Hill Campaign, the resources used were facilitation skills to engage diverse NGOs, media and international contacts in order to publicize efforts and maintain interest in the campaign; simultaneously, political and analytical skills were also cultivated in order to develop an alternate plan. Ultimately, the Penang Hill Campaign also succeeded in bringing together citizens from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This is especially important in areas where racial and religious issues are a constant source of concern – such as in diverse Penang.

The majority of Malaysian environmental NGOs firmly believe in the power of information, as recognition of problems and sharing of information are initial steps toward progress. According to Ramakrishna (2002),

“Malaysian environmental NGOs’ main aim is to challenge and change perceptions, promoting awareness of current environmental problems and new development strategies, amongst the gen-

eral public. This aim is pursued through the distribution of leaflets, newsletters and other news updates, talks, workshops and the mass media (television, radio and newspapers)."

At the same time, one of the most important usages of communication by NGOs is to influence decision makers. According to Gais and Walker (1992), "Various communication tactics are open to environmental NGOs to access centers of influence and decision making." The operationalization of communication and its strategies can vary depending on their sources. However, for this research, the operational definition is based on the findings of Rusli and Lee (1999) about the ways Malaysian environmental NGOs communicate i.e. "conducting research and presenting its result, using the media, grassroots lobbying, entering into coalitions and drafting legislation are common tactics used by the environmental NGOs in trying to influence decision makers and public audiences." It is clear that the role of the Internet should not be downplayed.

Wellard and Copestake (1993) state that NGOs in their capacity for technology generation and dissemination, "[...] are involved in identification of research priorities, evaluation of new technologies, advantage in innovation and experimentation using participatory methods, closer links with rural communities with a more intimate understanding of needs at this level." Undoubtedly, the strategies and methods adopted to communicate with various sectors of society played a vital role in the success of the campaign. In other words, it is important for upcoming environmental challenges.

As the new millennium dawned, another dimension came about as the relationship between NGOs and the government shifted from one that was previously antagonistic to one that is more cooperative in nature. Friends of Sungai Juru started working closely with local Parliament Members and the Residents Association (Rukun Tetangga) on the conservation of the river and environmental education activities. In 1997 the Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) brought NGOs, government officials, and business representatives together in a series of round tables to provide input into the state's strategic development plan. Three years later Penang's Local Government Consultative Forum established the Penang Environment Working Group (PEWOG), which includes representatives from NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector.

#### *Hypotheses:*

- Participatory approach is an essential aspect of NGO functions, with the adoption of appropriate related strategies and methods playing a central role in the success and failure of their activities.

## 5. Methodology

The research will be conducted based on information collected from:

1. Case Studies
2. In-depth interviews

in order to determine how environmental NGOs perceive the concept of communication with regard to their target audience.

To this end, the definition of case studies for the purpose of this study is that of Yin (1984) i.e. “An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” The case studies will be chosen from different time periods in order to enable a comparative study between the ways and methods of communication used by environmental NGOs at different time periods.

The research will analyze two environmentally related case studies in which NGOs have played important roles. Based on the research hypothesis, it is assumed that with the development of communication tools and strategies, the participation rate of NGO audience with regard to environmental-related processes has increased. To examine this issue, two significant environmental-related events in which Penang’s NGOs played an important role will be chosen namely the “Save Penang Hill Campaign 1990” and “No to PGCC 2009.” These events will include a timeline to facilitate the process of assessing the communication tools and strategies used in these cases. In other words, these cases will be selected from different time periods in order to provide a more comprehensive scenario on the role of communication strategies in the success of environmental-related challenges.

A series of in-depth interviews will be conducted with key players in both initiatives namely Prof. Anwar Fazal (veteran social activist), Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, and Mr. Ahmad Chik. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the information collected from the interviews will be analyzed qualitatively. The primary notion is to examine how useful or effective communication strategies were with regard to increasing the participation of the target audience.

The capability to communicate is vital to the accomplishment of any environmental-related campaign and a key factor in the achievement of its objectives. Being in the age of information and knowledge, the key to accessing and harnessing information and knowledge lies in the ability to communicate. This strategy is meant to ensure effective participation of all stakeholders in addressing the causes of specific environmental problems through the sharing of information on possible initiatives, resource allocation, implementation and monitoring.

As defined by the World Bank (2001), “The Ultimate Goal of Communication is to facilitate a change in behavior and to achieve Management Objectives.” This has been a very important part of NGO activities in relation to the means of communication. Understandably, environmental NGOs – where environmental crises play major roles, feel a crucial need for effective communication.

Having a good communication strategy strengthens the integrity of the job done on the field and offers reliability and credibility to NGO initiatives – not only for the stakeholders involved but also to the public. Good media coverage as part of an appropriate communication strategy can boost the relationship between NGOs and beneficiaries. This will also create a trustworthy image for the NGO whereby beneficiaries will feel more secure working with that particular NGO in several different projects and events. In short, the credibility of the NGO is increased.

A very important aspect in creating an effective communication strategy is to increase the NGO’s ability to lobby with regard to environmental crises. The concept of lobbying has long been used by governments and industries; however, the need to develop lobbying strategies within the communication strategies framework with different stakeholders is vital for NGOs as this can influence policy makers and their attitudes toward NGOs to a great extent. The case studies of the “Save Penang Hill Campaign 1990” and “No to PGCC 2009” are instances where NGOs could shift policies through utilizing different communication strategies.

Strategies devised require NGOs to be senders of messages of specific problems to different stakeholders; with messages sent through different channels such as the media, government officials, policy-makers, meetings, e-mails, websites and so forth.

To guarantee that strategies are applicable and efficient, they should be designed with the host community. This is to ensure that the strategy contains the community's priorities and their aspirations. This approach also lessens the possibility of using inappropriate communication approaches, idioms, media, channels or materials as inappropriate communication strategies can result in leaving the so-called beneficiaries worse-off than they were before.

For this purpose, collected data can be analyzed in order to determine how communication strategies adopted by a particular NGO has increased public awareness on a particular environmental issue, how successful the NGO has been to place that specific issue on the agenda of the mass media, how the NGO facilitated and encouraged feedback from stakeholders and how they have built consensus among key stakeholders. At the same time, analysis to determine the amount of meaningful impact the communication had on the audience can also be carried out.

According to FAO (2007), "Communication strategies are ways of using communication techniques, methods and media to address specific issues in the most effective way." Selecting communication modes and approaches is a very crucial stage in Communication Strategy Design. To analyze the communication strategies adopted by the involved environmental NGOs in the earlier-mentioned two case studies, the following questions will be explored:

- Which channels and media were used?
- What information was considered?
- Which materials were produced?
- What target groups have been identified and focused upon?

Since participation of different stakeholders is vital to the success of any NGO activities, communication strategies should be designed and implemented to maximize this participation.

For the purpose of this research, focal problems in each case will be explained and assessed. Then the relevant communication objectives and strategies which were adopted by the involved NGOs will be defined. Later on, the role of stakeholders and the outputs of communication strategies will be examined and explored. The communication strategies adopted by relevant NGOs in these two cases can be categorized as belonging to one of the following frameworks: distribution of information, advocacy, persuasion or promotion.

Addressing the participatory nature of NGOs, this research will explore which communication strategies are most popular in a particular community, as well as which strategy appears to be more compatible, credible and effective for a particular topic and the involved stakeholders.

For this matter, the "Group Mobilization Activities Design" framework by FAO (2007) will be adopted. This framework is a way of organizing people in groups around specific issues and/or objectives. The purpose of the group mobilization mode is to strengthen the possibilities for successful action, by uniting many people with different backgrounds but similar objectives. It includes the following approaches: community mobilization, partnerships/networking, and group formation. All of these approaches attempt to organize the community, or part of it, in order to address the main problem facing the community or group more effectively.

Sometimes, for the same purpose, the community may decide to work toward a common objective with outside entities – taken on board as partners. Once an approach has been selected, it is important to ensure that everybody understands the purpose and benefits of such an effort. As of such, group size, rationale and purpose need to be carefully assessed. Depending on the situation, there might be a need to promote recruitment in the group, assist in group formation for a specific purpose or lobbying for partners in a development initiative. Whenever one of these approaches is adopted, the communication strategy must take into account and indicate the modalities and benefits of entering into the group promotion mode.

Successful communication strategies adopted by environmental NGOs can be implemented in a systematic process that includes five steps – assess, design/plan, pretest and refine, implement, and monitor/evaluate. This process, illustrated in Figure 1, creates two-way, participatory communication with the target audience and permits communicators to refine the strategy over time in response to the target audiences’ changing needs.

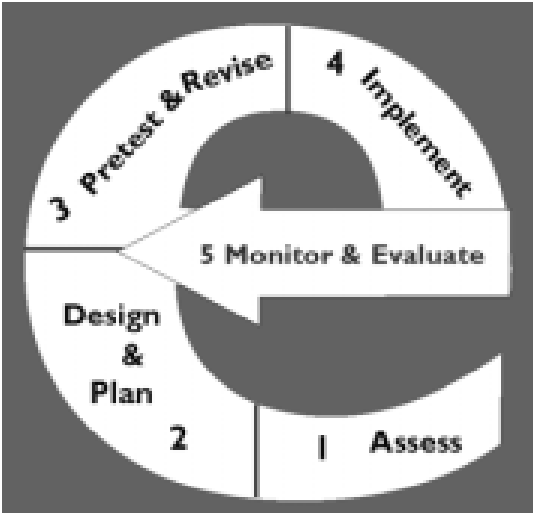


Figure 1: Implementation of Strategic Processes  
Adopted from GreenCOM (2001)

The interpretation of data is made by personal perceptions, knowledge and relevant communication theories. The importance of communication concepts for NGOs, methods of communication, lessons learned and the degree of success will be discussed and examined in this research. By analyzing these specific case studies, the public in general, and the members of the organizations in particular, it would be possible to gauge the effectiveness of these NGOs in pursuing their objectives via communication strategies.

## 6. An Overview

### 6.1 A Brief Introduction to Penang

The physical features of Penang and its natural wonders provide an environment local residents want to protect. The multi-cultural, well-educated population has a number of times displayed the capacity to form NGOs and to lead campaigns challenging several decisions made by the government. The economy has freed much of Penang's population from poverty and given them the benefits enjoyed by people in more developed nations. Understandably, most economic development comes at the cost of producing a less hospitable environment. The national state's policies favoring economic development create tension as it threatens Penang's long-term sustainability. As the federal government of Malaysia and the state government of Penang are both responsible for generating economic plans and developing environmental regulations, it is no surprise that the government is the primary target of environmental NGOs.

### 6.2 The Geography and Ecology of Penang

Penang is located in the North of Malaysia and is divided into two sections: Penang Island, an island of 293 square kilometers located in the Straits of Malacca, and Province Wellesley (known as Seberang Perai in Malay), a narrow hinterland of 760 square kilometers on the Malaysian peninsular located across a narrow channel. Penang Island is irregularly shaped, with a granite, hilly and mostly forested interior, the highest point being Western Hill (part of Penang Hill) at 830 meters above sea level. The topography of Province Wellesley is mostly flat.

Penang Island has a rich, diverse natural environment. It hosts rainforests, mangroves and extensive marine wildlife. The mangrove forests provide diverse ecosystems for astounding species of fish, snails, cockles, shrimps and crabs, reptiles (snakes and monitor lizards), migratory and local birds, insects and mammals (monkeys, wild boars and otters). In total, the island has 190 recorded species of fauna. The nest of the White-Bellied Sea Eagle can be easily observed in coastal forests with the Green (Chelonia mydas) and Olive-Ridley (Lepidochelys olivacea) turtles nesting on the western beaches. The Irrawaddy dolphins are sometime seen in coastal areas. Migratory birds are also abundant during their migration flights between October and January.

Penang's Botanical Garden was established in 1884, succeeding an earlier garden which was established in 1796. The Pantai Acheh Forest Reserve – declared Penang National Park (PNP) in 2003, is located at the north-western corner of Penang Island. Covering an area of 2562 hectares, it is the last wilderness and nature heritage in Penang. Lying far from civilization, it hosts scientific and nature studies as well as recreational activities. Its ecosystem consists mainly of tropical lowland forest with coastal features.

Penang Island's rivers have particularly suffered due to heavy urbanization. According to quality indices, water quality in the upper reaches of the island's rivers is medium to good. Water quality dwindles in the plains, due to the seepage from urban areas and discharges from the industrial and agricultural lands. In the Perai area, Juru River has been ranked as one of the most polluted rivers in Asia, which has affected the livelihood of coastal fishermen since the 1970s.

### 6.3 Governance of Environmental Issues in Malaysia: Environmental Agencies

At the federal level, the jurisdiction of environmental administration falls under the responsibility of the Department of Environment (DOE) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.



DOE is responsible for the National Policy on Environment. At present, DOE has 1568 staff members working in 15 State Offices and 26 Branch Offices and the Department's main role is to prevent, control and abate pollution through the enforcement of the EQA 1974 and its 34 subsidiary legislation. Its tasks include pollution control and prevention, sustainable development through conservation of resources, integration of environmental factors in development planning, promotion of environmental education and awareness, public participation, inter-agency and federal-state cooperation, and bilateral, regional and international cooperation.

Other central government agencies with administrative responsibilities in specific areas of environmental protection include the Department of Forestry in the Ministry of Primary Industries (forest conservation), the Department of Wildlife and National Parks in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (wildlife protection), and the Marine Department in the Ministry of Transport (marine pollution). State governments have authority over matters relating to land use planning, agriculture, forestry, fishery and water resources, but the federal government has authority in regard to environmental affairs. Additionally, the collection, treatment and disposal of municipal waste also come under the administration of the local government.

Division of powers and roles among the various layers of government in relation to environmental protection and management makes the implementation of integrated planning a real challenge. Often, this institutional weakness is cited as a hindrance to adopting an integrated approach to environmental management and enforcement of laws related to the environment.

## 7. The case study of “Save Penang Hill Campaign”

By the end of the 1980s, Penang environmental NGOs were already more established and professional in nature. They had a better understanding of environmental issues and had established a large network to work on issues concerning local, crossed state and national boundaries. The social and economic conditions of Malaysia had also greatly improved. The population as a whole was better educated and the country was moving toward double digit economic growth. In 1991, the Prime Minister introduced Vision 2020 with the goal that Malaysia should attain developed nation status by 2020.

Spurred by foreign and domestic investments the economy was transformed; it experienced broad diversification and sustained rapid growth. In six of the eight years between 1988 to 1996, Malaysia experienced over 8 percent growth in GDP. Manufacturing grew from 13.9% of the GDP in 1970 to 30% in 1999. Agriculture and mining (which together had accounted for 42.7% of GDP in 1970), had dropped to 9.3% and 7.3% respectively by 1999 (Paul Blustein, 2001).

As part of its economic policies, the government encouraged mega development projects throughout the country. Just prior to the start of this period, Penang Island’s economic development was enhanced by the building of the 65-storey Kompleks Tunku Abdul Rahman (KOMTAR) Tower, which opened in 1986, and the opening of the Penang Bridge in 1985. The Penang Bridge (the third longest bridge in the world), links Penang Island to mainland Asia. The Penang Hill case, discussed here, is an example of the type of megaproject the government was encouraging. Another project which was initiated at approximately the same time as the Penang Hill proposal was Putrajaya, which is a 4931 hector site developed to house Malaysia’s administrative offices.

Four characteristics describe the overall structure of the Save Penang Hill Campaign. Firstly, NGOs were more proactive and challenged the government’s proposal as soon as it was made public. Second, they formed a formal coalition which brought together diverse participants. Third, they modified their strategies and relied more on the media and less on demonstrations. Fourth, they presented a strong alternative impact assessment. Fifth, government officials met with NGO representatives.

Penang Hill is the main hill range of Penang Island and a major tourist attraction. The hill which is located within a forested catchment, reaches a height of 2722 feet (830 meters), providing residents and tourists alike a respite from the island’s hot climate. A historical mono-line railway transports visitors from the bottom of the hill to its peak, atop which visitors can enjoy a panoramic view of Penang Island. Developers have long eyed Penang Hill with its combination of a cool climate, a historic monorail, forested areas, and panoramic view.

In September 1990, the Penang State government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a private developer to initiate the Penang Hill Development Plan. The developers would be permitted to build hotels, entertainment centers and shopping complexes in an area of approximately 900 hectares stretching along the whole length of Penang Hill. A major portion of the Penang Hill Development Plan included legally protected areas with the proposed development area including the habitats of priceless unique species of flora and fauna. It goes without saying that the plan would have destroyed the natural beauty of the hill. In signing the MoU the state government had failed to consult with the public and once the plan was announced it was immediately met with public outrage. A coalition of NGOs and activists formed to lead the campaign against the plan. This coalition named itself the Friends of Penang Hill (FPH). SAM and CAP were joined by 13 other NGOs, including the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) and Aliran, an organization of human rights activists.

FPH led the wave of protests that followed the announcement of the plan. The coalition organized a massive campaign throughout the island to pressure the local government to consider the environmental impact of the development plan. FPH organized a petition campaign, which received 40,000 signatures. Aided by local researchers, FPH analyzed the developer’s proposal. The FPH study provided a comprehensive study on the value of Penang Hill and presented an alternate development plan which considered the environmental and social impact of developing Penang Hill. This campaign resulted in

a rare off-the-record meeting between the representatives of FPH and the State Executive Council. Two Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports had been submitted by the developer, however, after the public debate and strong campaign against the plan, they were rejected by the Department of Environment. In September 1992 the state government dropped the plan. Two factors seemed to directly lead to the plan's abandonment: the rejection of the EIA reports and a change in the state government's leadership. The new Chief Minister, Dr. Koh Tsu Koon, was a member of CAP and MNS.

There are two key features to this case. First, the FPH were successful in completely stopping the project. To date, Penang Hill remains unspoiled and undeveloped. In retrospect, halting the large state-backed development project was nothing short of a miracle and a big success for environmental NGOs. The importance of the campaign can be inferred by the publicity it received from mainstream Western media such as the Australian Financial Review and the Los Angeles Times. Success however, might not have been achieved if the project was located in other parts of Malaysia, where NGOs have in general failed to secure significant changes in government policy (Harding, 1998). The second point to note, is that NGOs formed a coalition with each other, as opposed to simply sharing information and coordinating activities. Additionally, the following four factors may have been pivotal to the coalition's success.

First, the NGOs were better organized, more professional, proactive, and diverse. They were able to build on the experiences of CAP, SAM, and other NGOs in trying to influence policy. FPH mobilized a diverse group of local NGOs who were themselves diverse in respect to their backgrounds, missions, and membership. This diversity helped the campaign to effectively reach a wider range of Penang's residents. The support of the media – especially newspapers, played a vital role in the campaign's success. Additionally, the FPH provided a platform for different parts of society to meet and get together with a common objective – saving Penang Hill.

Second, the campaign was initiated before any destruction or pollution occurred, which may have enabled the government to back down at a lesser cost. Although there were demonstrations, the NGOs relied more on media support. Thirdly, the alternative development plan was detailed and thorough. The plan relied heavily on local expertise as well as cited facts and arguments contributed by local NGOs resulting in persuasive analyses and arguments. It was therefore impossible for local authorities to write off the alternative plan as the work of outsiders who were unfamiliar with Penang's culture and practices. Fourth, the government may have been more willing to meet with the NGOs because they were now more powerful. CAP, SAM, and MNS are all over twenty years old and had established reputations and contacts. The FPH had generated widespread public support and international interest, which in combination with newspaper coverage and a detailed report by the NGOs, made them harder to ignore.

## 7.1 Communication Strategies, Tools and Challenges

### 7.1.1 Organizational Structure

One of the most important issues in adopting and implementing communication strategies is to have a concrete organizational and professional structure. In the Save the Penang Hill Campaign, the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) played an important role in hosting the secretariat of the campaign responsible for reaching out to the public. Additionally, CAP has an extensive network of different stakeholders which was used by the campaign. CAP also has people trained on communication skills and strategies who were helpful in running the campaign.

As previously mentioned, Save Penang Hill Campaign gave birth to the Friends of Penang Hill (FPH) which became the anchor and monitoring platform for any proposed activity to be conducted at Penang Hill. Consisting of a number of NGOs such as CAP, SAM, Aliran and MNS together with USM and a large number of individuals, there are approximately 20 different organizations forming FPH. (Ahmad Chik)

### 7.1.2 The Role of Mainstream and Alternative Media

At the time of the Save Penang Hill Campaign, the media was still a relatively weak establishment in comparison to the developers wishing to develop Penang Hill. This allowed the developer company to restrict the campaign from accessing mainstream media at many different occasions. This is the moment when the alternative media started to involve themselves with the campaign process. As an example of this, *Utusan Konsumer* – CAP's fortnightly paper, played an important role in disseminating the campaign's news among the public as an alternative printed media. *Utusan Konsumer* is published in a few different languages and played a vital role in facilitating communication between campaign organizers and the general public.

On the other hand, the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) used its magazine and large network of members and publications to assist in the campaign. Conventional methods of communication such as producing t-shirts, posters, banners and public talks were among the communication tools used by the campaign in order to inform the public on its objectives. Parallel to this, a letter-writing campaign was also held to inform the authorities on the negative views of Penangites toward the Penang Hill development plan. In all, there were more than 3000 letters written to the Department of Environment (DoE). According to Ahmad Chik, the chairperson for Friends of Penang Hill, DoE officials confessed that they had never come across such a phenomenon. Sending Penang Hill postcards to DoE was another means of communication employed by the public to get officials to stop development plans.

From the early stages of the Save Penang Hill Campaign, mainstream press opted to disengage themselves from the issue and did not cover any campaign-related news for a long time. Interestingly however, foreign press were quite interested in the issue; one of which was the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* was an English language Asian news magazine that was first published in 1946. Unfortunately, it printed its final issue in December 2009. The Hong Kong-based business magazine was originally published weekly and covered a wide variety of topics including politics, business, economics, technology, social and cultural issues throughout Asia, with a specific focus on Southeast Asia and Greater China. It presented views and opinions emphasizing local perspectives in an attempt to improve existing conditions in Asia; subsequently, several articles on the Save Penang Hill Campaign were published in this prestigious weekly magazine at the time.

Following this successful experience with the foreign media and as part of the campaign's communication strategy, contact with the foreign media was given due attention by those in the core of the campaign. Realizing the sensitivity of the Malaysian government in the manner Malaysia is depicted in the International press, the strategy of engaging the foreign press was chosen by the campaign. As Mohd. Azizuddin (2006) discusses, "Malaysian leaders care about Malaysia's image abroad and in turn argue that the press should not engage in continuous, caustic attacks on the institutions of the state, because Malaysia has a fragile political structure and cannot withstand endless scrutiny of their faults." Therefore, campaigns that garner more international attention tend to be taken more seriously by the Malaysian government. The attention brought about by the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and several other international newspapers brought positive impact to the Save Penang Hill Campaign. A number of British and Canadian newspapers were also informed about the Save Penang Hill Campaign and they proceeded to published a few articles on the matter.

Eventually, this strategy helped bring about international awareness on the Save Penang Hill Campaign. The communication strategy of the campaign was to synonymize the development of Penang Hill as the destruction of a tropical forest. This was taken seriously by the international media and elicited the sympathies of many people around the world. As Ahmad Chik explains, connecting local concern for Penang Hill with the international media created enough pressure on the Malaysian government to respond more responsibly toward the demands of the campaign.

In comparison to local political issues, local environmental issues tend to have a better chance at being discussed and developed in the international media. Therefore, in the absence of proper local coverage for the Save Penang Hill Campaign, the organizers of the campaign decided to turn to the international media. The logical move to protect nature (in this case a tropical forest) made the Save Penang Hill Campaign case an attractive one for the international media, argues Prof. Anwar Fazal.

### 7.1.3 Political Communication Strategies

The entire Save Penang Hill Campaign took approximately eight months. Several communication strategies and tools were used by the campaign to transmit its message to the public and the government officials in order to halt the development plan. According to Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, one of the main communication strategies used by the Save Penang Hill Campaign was to contact opposition parties and figures. Adopting this communication strategy was important, as at that time elections were close and therefore opposition parties and figures were more tempted to voice up in support of Save Penang Hill Campaign's objectives.

That being said, political opposition parties were not totally in line with the campaign's ideas and goals, and it took some time for campaigners to convince opposition leaders on the importance of the issue. Persuading these leaders was therefore one of the primary agendas in the campaign's communication strategies. Initially, only some of them reacted positively to the idea while many were skeptical about the whole campaign. However, utilizing different tools and strategies (such as lobbying and explaining the importance of Penang Hill to Penangites and convincing them that this agenda would assist them in winning over more voters in the upcoming election) resulted in the campaign garnering strong support from opposition groups. As Martinez (2002) argues, "the style of communication should be conditioned by the contents of the communication, i. e. how it is done should be on what information is being transmitted, to whom and why."

### 7.1.4 Communicating with the Public

Apart from the above strategies, another main communication objective by campaigners was "rebel-rousing." This can be defined as the process of deliberately provoking people in order to achieve a certain goal. This was especially necessary given the urgency of the case and the need to attract more people to support the campaign. This method however, was only used in the early parts of the campaign. Throughout the campaign, the organizers came to the realization that the "rebel-rousing" strategy was not well-developed enough to achieve the main goal of the campaign.

As it is a highly iconic place for Penangites and for a large number of Malaysians, any negative impact on Penang Hill would have been given a great amount of attention by the public. Many Penangites care deeply about this place and saving it was an issue that was of interest to a large majority of Penang's population. The iconic status the Hill had among many different sectors of society made it possible for the campaign to elicit the sympathy and support of the public. As Ahmad Chik explains, even hawker operators who are often too engrossed in profit-making to care about environmental issues, were responding positively to this campaign – especially when there were droves of people wearing the Save Penang Hill Campaign t-shirt at the markets. The public sympathy for the campaign enabled an inclusive situation and made it easier for the campaign to move ahead. As Allen (2004) argues, "Environmental related activities place an emphasis on inclusivity. Any truly sustainable solution for environmental issues must necessarily include all stakeholders, including all life forms."

Printed communication tools were also taken into consideration. For this purpose, a number of reports were produced by experts who were a part of the campaign in order to introduce an attentive alternate development plan for Penang Hill. This was to avoid any confusion or misconception about the intention of the Save Penang Hill Campaign in acting against the proposed development plan. This also ensured that the campaign was not accused of merely being critical of the project with no concrete reason. As Khor (1991) argues, "The printed reports were produced to create the awareness that Save Penang Hill Campaign is not against development however, it recognizes an attentive way of development." This idea was then offered to the public and the local government as an alternative to the proposed plan. By utilizing printed materials, the Save Penang Hill Campaign could project a more responsible, constructive and positive image of itself for the public and its supporters. In addition to this, the main communication strategy of the campaign was set to transfer the message indicating "why

*the development of Penang Hill in this manner is inappropriate.*” The reports were made for all stakeholders involved including the government, the public and international partners.

Due to the limited communication tools of the time, one of the most important means of communication used by the Save Penang Hill Campaign was Public Talks. According to the Institute for Public Dialogue (2010), “The main motive for social groups to engage in public talks is recognition of the growing importance of public opinion in solving issues.” These public talks were the most effective ways of communicating with the masses and transferring the agendas of the campaign to them. Attempts were made to make the talks as inclusive as possible in order to help the public gain a fairer and better understanding of Penang Hill’s development status. This method was adopted due to the participatory nature of NGOs such as CAP, MNS and SAM who were directly involved in the campaign. Participants of these talks were free to voice up their points of view on the Penang Hill development plan and share their ideas with the core organizers of the campaign.

Public talks can be considered the back bone of the communications strategy and the primary tool used by the campaign. These talks were some of the limited opportunities available to the campaigners to make a direct appeal to the public to save Penang Hill. Additionally, they can be considered as interesting platforms to merge public participation and communication strategies and tools. According to Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, the talks covered a wide range of formations with speakers invited from different parts of Malaysia and even internationally to present their views on the Penang Hill development plans. At the same time, these public talks acted as a podium for the public to voice up their opinions on the development plan. It should be mentioned here that in the absence of the Internet and mobile phones, the process of organizing these talks were made even more difficult.

The main themes of these talks were not only reports on the status of the campaign but to inform the public on the Hill itself. The talks relayed to the public the value of Penang Hill as a forest, a rich biodiversity spot, one of the few rare untouched jungles in Penang, and the consequences of the proposed development plan on the Hill. The public were warned about the potential negative effects of development on the hill such as floods and landslides not to mention wide-scale deforestation. They were also informed on ways they could participate in the conservation of Penang Hill.

The talks were streamlined into two main categories – public and targeted audiences. The public talks were open to all regardless of background. Simultaneously, according to Prof. Anwar Fazal, a series of more specific talks were provided for target groups. The target groups varied from lawyers to the residents of Penang Hill area. As the Save Penang Hill Campaign was initiated by middle class Penangites (who also formed most of the campaigns’ main actors), its medium of communication was English. For this purpose, it is important to realize the vital role of the middle class in society’s civic activities. According to Lowry (2008), “From the early 1980s, popular support for various civic groups such as women’s groups, consumer advocacy groups, and environmental activities grew with the emergence of a middle class.” These middle-class members were also those who were actively involved in the campaign and voiced up their opinions, wrote letters and participated in activities conducted by the Save Penang Hill Campaign.

In addition to the public talks, other means of communication were also utilized in this campaign including posters, pamphlets, t-shirts and car stickers. These tools were more inclusive in nature as they were produced in the different major languages of Malaysia. This played a very important role in raising awareness among the different sectors of society while reaching those who were unable to attend the public talks.

Transparency in the Save Penang Hill Campaign was one of the most important agendas of the campaign. According to Brin (1998),

“Transparency in organizations is delimited by ethics and the value of truth. Transparency also must be analyzed as the impact of an organization associated or affiliated with its stakeholders. These impacts need to find out whether the organization’s activities are consistent with regard to society’s interests, whether they are ethical and whether these activities are institutionalized.”

For this matter, utilizing alternative media and means of communication was considered vital, with many reports and minutes of meetings printed and distributed among the public to keep them aware on what was happening in the campaign and at what stage the campaign was at. A core group of about ten

people was formed to organize and manage the campaign and its communications with governmental and public sectors. According to Ahmad Chik, this core group was hosted by CAP and was strongly supported by the Friends of Penang Hill.

Inclusivity was another essential factor for the existence of the campaign as more people needed to be involved in order to increase the campaign's effectiveness. Subsequently, public talks played an important role as a platform in communicating with the public and other stakeholders; however, the usage of this communication tool was not entirely easy. There were always difficulties in obtaining legal police permits to hold public talks and special police forces and agents were always present in these sessions. According to Prof. Anwar Fazal, many participants – especially those who were proactive, were photographed by the police and later questioned on different occasions.

## 7.2 The Audiences' Feedback

An important issue that was noted throughout the campaign was the feedback of Penang Hill's residents on the new development plan. In the early stages, a great number of the residents had a positive view toward the development plan (Ahmad Chik) with many who were running small businesses in the Penang Hill area assuming that the development would bring more costumers to their businesses. It lay with the organizers of the Save Penang Hill Campaign to inform them on the negative aspects of the development by utilizing different communication tools and strategies. The main focus of the Save Penang Hill Campaign communication strategy for this purpose was to persuade the residents to reject the proposed development plan by distributing informative pamphlets, reports, case studies and more effectively public and personal talks.

The usage of these communication strategies and tools were successful as the residents and the owners of small businesses started to question the proposed development plan. As the result of the persuasive communication strategy adopted by the campaign, the shopkeepers worried about the future of their small businesses in the presence of mega shopping and service complexes as proposed in the development plans. This concept is explained by Virchez (2004) as, "The most serious economic effects include retails closure as the traditional retailers fail to compete, with the consequent loss of jobs including the employment of the owners themselves and reduced number of employees." To voice up these worries, they signed a petition asking for more transparency in the process of Penang Hill's development and also called for the plan to be dropped.

## 7.3 Challenges

In parallel with the communication activities of the Save Penang Hill Campaign, the developer also initiated massive communication efforts in favor of the development. For this reason, shortly after the Save Penang Hill Campaign was started, the developer circulated a large amount of financial donations to different charity organizations in Penang which were given massive coverage by the mainstream media especially the printed press such as the Star and the New Straits Times. However, as Prof. Anwar Fazal, explains, the communication strategy adopted by the developer to gain popularity and to create a clean image of itself and the development plan acted as a double-edged sword. While the charity organizations did indeed used the money, the public were annoyed by this strategy which viewed them as objects that can be bought. Later developments in the Penang Hill scenario were to prove that this communication strategy did not work in the developer's favor.

Additionally, the developer of Penang Hill also utilized other communication strategies and tools to overcome the anti-development campaign. A team of public relation experts were employed to assist the developer in running its own campaign against the Save Penang Hill Campaign with the initial stage of the strategy including coverage on the financial donations of the developer to charity centers in Penang.

Concurrently, with the support of the mainstream media, a hearing session was designed by the developer to offer its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the Penang Hill development project. The public, NGOs and the campaign's activists were also invited. However, the EIA was made so poorly

that it was easily challenged by the public and NGOs and was finally rejected by the authorities. Both the communication strategies utilized by the developer to create a better image of itself failed and gave the Save Penang Hill Campaign an upper hand in the matter.

On the other hand, financial barriers created additional obstacles to the campaign's communication process. As Radovanova (1999) argues, "Availability of financial resources and availability of information about financial resources are among the main important factors for the successful development of NGOs' activities." Due to this, the access of the campaign to a number of communication tools such as printing pamphlets, posters, banners, etc. was limited. Although the campaign did indeed receive funding from CAP, due to its limited financial resources, some communication tools could not be fully utilized. Nevertheless, the use of printed means of communication such as books and reports were fully sponsored by CAP. At the same time, MNS was also funding the campaign although the financial support they offered was far less than CAP. Additionally, MNS was helpful in providing the intellectual components to be used by the communication tools. Ultimately, the combination of CAP's networks and funding (participatory approach) and the intellectual inputs of MNS created a conducive environment for the campaign to proceed. Since MNS shared close ties with Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) at that time, it was able to contribute significantly in terms of the expertise needed for the campaign.

The Save Penang Hill Campaign did its best to utilize all its communication capacities to pursue its goal of halting the proposed Penang Hill development plan – which included the use of visual media as a communication tool. However, due to limited financial and technical resources, the utilization of visual media was not extensively explored by the campaign; however, with the help of USM, a short documentary movie was made about Penang Hill and the campaign to save it. Although the documentary was made by an amateur team and thus was not exceptional, it was screened in many of the public talks organized by the Save Penang Hill Campaign. According to Few (2006), "Effective visual communication is achieved by displaying information in a way that enables people to clearly see an accurate representation of your message and understand what they see." To this end, the main purpose of producing this movie was to use the power of motion pictures to achieve the campaign's objectives.

The concept of language as an important mean of communication plays a very vital role in Malaysia and Penang's multiethnic society. According to Ahmad Chik, although the Save Penang Hill Campaign attempted to be as inclusive as possible in their means of communication, response to non-English public talks were rather poor. A couple of Chinese public talks were organized by the Save Penang Hill Campaign, however the turnout was quite disappointing.

Language is much more than simply a means of verbal communication – it is an entity which involves interpersonal communication, language within the individual and language and society. Realizing this, language was made a central aspect of the Save Penang Hill Campaign; and as Penang is a Chinese dominated state, there was understandably much effort to use Chinese languages as a tool to reach Penang's Chinese population. However, most of these efforts failed. The only public talks and publications that were popular among the public were those in English. Although the spirit of the campaign was widely spread among many of Penang's citizens regardless of race, social class and language, not all of them made an effort to participate and play active roles in the campaign processes.



## 8. Penang Global City Centre (PGCC) Campaign

The Penang Global City Centre (PGCC) was a proposed project to be located at Penang Turf Club on Penang Island, Malaysia. According to the official website of PGCC (2008), the developers who proposed PGCC hoped to use 50,000 square meters (538,196 square feet) divided between two five-star hotels, a 75,000 square meter (807,294 square feet) Penang performing arts center, a 400,000 square meter (4,305,565 square feet) retail complex, 25,000 square meters (269,098 square feet) divided between two office towers, 70,000 square meters (753,474 square feet) of residential properties, a 100,000 square meter (1,076,392 square feet) world-class convention center, a 1500 square meter (16,146 square feet) observatory tower, 190,000 square meters (2,045,142 square feet) of parking space, monorail transportation, and a public arena. The PGCC, with an estimated gross development value (GDV) of RM25 billion, was to be sited on a 104 ha plot where the Penang Turf Club currently stands. [2]. Abad Naluri bought the land for RM488mil in 2002.

However, the plan faced massive opposition from Penang's citizens. A huge number of NGOs and individuals started to question this plan and its repercussions on the island's environment. A large number of organizations and individuals got together under the PGCC Campaign to pressure both the local and federal governments to stop the plan. These organizations included the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Penang Heritage Trust (PHT), Aliran, Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram), Citizens for Public Transport (Cepat), Jesselton Heights Residents Association, Residents Association of Jesselton, Tanjung Bungah Residents Association, Badan Warisan Malaysia and Friends of the Penang Botanic Gardens. These organizations and individuals summarized their demands as;

- There should be no development until a Local Plan is in place for the Penang Turf Club site.
- In addition, the State Government should expedite Local Plans for the whole of Penang, prior to further developments to ensure proper and effective planning.
- The Local Plans should be done transparently with full public participation.
- Detailed EIA including a traffic report and flood risk assessment done by competent and independent consultants are required for any development in the present and future Turf Club area once the local plans are finalized.

To achieve the above demands, several communication strategies and tools were used by the campaign to stop the project. Some of them will be discussed in further details in the next sections.

### 8.1 Communication Strategies, Tools and Challenges

#### 8.1.1 The Role of the Internet

To a great extent, the communication strategies and tools used in the PGCC campaign were similar to those of the Save Penang Hill Campaign. T-shirts were made, stickers, posters and pamphlets were distributed and public talks were held. However, what differentiates the PGCC campaign from the Save Penang Hill Campaign is the utilization of the Internet. The Internet revolutionized the communication strategies and facilitated the mobilization of events, news and expertise. The use of electronic communications by environmental NGOs in developed countries is not an especially new concept. As Epstein (1994) argues,

“Environmental NGOs have a history of using electronic telecommunication. When rainforest activist Chico Mendes was killed deep in an Amazon jungle in 1988, those with him could not get the news out by telephone or fax, but they did link up to a peace group in the US by computer network. Within hours the Brazilian Government was receiving telegrams from around the world demanding justice.”

However, the Internet made it easier for environmental movements around the world to have fairer access and to be heard.

The Internet provides an amazing opportunity to present information that traditional media normally might not cover. The Internet is also a good forum for campaigns which are not considered "newsworthy" by the traditional media. In the PGCC scenario, political power was involved in denying the PGCC campaign access to mainstream media and for that reason, utilization of Internet-based media was crucial for the campaign's success. Keys (2000) argues that, "Traditional paper based media is stagnant and expensive to update. The Internet allows us to show the story as it develops." For this reason, the PGCC campaign placed a large emphasis on the Internet instead of alternative print media.

With regard to PGCC's campaign, the Internet was used in a number of capacities to inform people, raise awareness, organize talks, pressure the local and federal governments, etc. At the same time, the free nature of the Internet created other challenges ahead of the PGCC campaign. Due to the unfiltered nature of the Internet, many rumors as well as false news and information about the PGCC campaign littered cyber space. According to Ahmad Chik, although the PGCC campaign organizers tried their best to manage information and news responsibly, in many instances the rumors were uncontrollable. Rumors such as familial ties between former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the developer of PGCC were among some of the rumors that the authorities were unable to verify. The PGCC campaign did not have a particular website or blog to reflect the ideas and points-of-view of the core organizers. However, opportunity was given to all campaign supporters to voice up her/his opinion on the issue through the Internet. Additionally, the websites of CAP, MNS and Penang Watch offered fair coverage of the PGCC campaign and acted as semiofficial platforms for the PGCC campaign to be heard in cyber space.

### 8.1.2 Highlights

The acknowledgement of Penang's Chief Minister on the level of public concern as well as his decision to announce his concern on the eve of the general election underlined the critical importance of the project's issues which were exposed by the PGCC campaign. These issues include traffic congestion, social impacts, environmental degradation and pollution, but most of all, the project – and the way it was promoted – highlighted the weakness of the local planning process which ignored the need for full public consultation. The PGCC campaign made its position clear, namely that a mere scaling-down of the project was insufficient; there had to be a moratorium on all such large-scale projects until a local plan was drafted and made available for public scrutiny as required by law.

The focal communication point of the PGCC campaign was the "traffic difficulties" that the plan's implementation would create; subsequently, media and communication tools were highly invested in this matter as the core direction of the campaign's communication strategy. With regard to target audiences, there were talks for communities located in the vicinity of PGCC regardless of race, age or social status however they proved unsuccessful. Nonetheless, public talks still remained popular among Penang's citizens.

With regard to networking and public relations, Prof. Anwar Fazal commented that two networks cooperated in the PGCC campaign. The first was the core circle of activists who were directly involved in organizing the campaign – including those who were entrusted by members to carry on negotiations and lobbies with different stakeholders; and the outer circle which consisted of the public who participating in public talks and other campaign activities.

## 8.2 The Role of Mainstream and Alternative Media

The PGCC campaign case was quite similar to the Save Penang Hill Campaign as regards mainstream media coverage. The developer of PGCC worked closely with a group of public relation experts whom were mostly ex-journalists. According to Ahmad Chik, their expertise and connections with the mainstream media provided the opportunity for them to overshadow the PGCC campaign in the mainstream media.

In the early stages, some key members of the PGCC campaign were interviewed by the mainstream press; interestingly however, their ideas were twisted by the media before being relayed to the public. Consequently, some of PGCC's key actors (who naturally were against the development) were portrayed as supporters of the plan instead. Such unethical twists occurred on a few occasions in English newspapers namely the Star and New Straits Times. As Kanda Kumar, the Chairperson of the Malaysian Nature Society (Penang Branch) explains, his interview was completely twisted by the popular newspaper, the Star. While he strongly opposed the PGCC development plan, his printed interview portrayed a supportive image of him to the public. He also mentioned that his attempts in requesting the Star to republish the actual interview failed with the Star denying that it had acted unethically. Although a number of press conferences were initially conducted by the organizers of the PGCC campaign, the core committee of the campaign decided to restrict its communications with the mainstream media and to use alternative forms of media such as blogs, websites and other social networks including Facebook and Tweeter following several unethical "information-twisting" occurrences by mainstream media. A major advantage of the digital world is that it brings campaign groups much closer to their supporters, while gearing up participation in conventional activism and fundraising. In addition to sending electronic communications to decision-makers, activists can now develop their own campaigning identities through the creation of blogs, videos and mapping data. As membership of young activists increase, no campaign group can afford to function without a presence on either Facebook, YouTube or Twitter – especially as today's youth organize their lives through popular social networking websites.

Interestingly, in stark contrast to the English and Malay media, the Chinese printed media showed more interest in covering the PGCC campaign, which was a great help in introducing the campaign to Chinese-dominant Penang. Ahmad Chik suggests that this might have been due to the interest that Chinese newspapers generally grant to local (Penang's) affairs and issues. Unlike English and Malay newspapers, Chinese newspapers usually place a higher emphasis on everyday local issues and events. Kwong Wah Yit Poh and Sin Chew Jit Poh were among some of these supportive Chinese newspapers.

As described by Aliran, mainstream media is largely influenced by powerful political and corporate interests and actively blacks out any news that places the Penang Global City Centre project (officialiated by the Prime Minister) in a negative light. On Saturday, 15 September 2007, six of Penang's main NGOs came together to issue a joint statement against the development of the PGCC. The press conference was packed and well received by members of the media and the public. There was even an "ntv7" (local private television station) cameraman present to video-record the entire proceeding. However, only the Chinese daily Sin Chew carried a center-page report with miniature model photographs of the project – with all 37 skyscrapers (almost all of them above 40 stories) shown while Malay newspaper Utusan Malaysia carried only a small report about NGOs objecting to the project. Similarly, the main English-language dailies were also silent about dissenting views on the PGCC.

### 8.3 Political Communication Strategies

Understandably and from a communications strategy point of view, the local government of Penang closely followed the news by Chinese newspapers given the socio-ethnic composition of Penang as a Chinese majority state; as a result, Chinese media have a greater impact on the government's decision-making process. Therefore, the coverage and support by Chinese newspapers in Penang helped the PGCC campaign to attract the attention of the local government and also (to a great extent) pressured them into cooperating with the campaign.

The PGCC case reveals an interesting struggle between three parties i.e. the public, the local government and the federal government. Mr. Koh Tsu Koon (then Chief Minister of Penang) was himself a part of CAP in the 70's when he was a fresh graduate from Princeton University. Coming from a background of working closely with Penang's NGOs, he was in a difficult situation during the PGCC case. As Ahmad Chik argues, Koh was trapped between the pressure from the federal government to run the PGCC plan and also from the public (through different strategies and tools of communication) to drop the development plan. Although in principle he was personally supportive of the PGCC campaign, the pressure from the federal government was extremely strong. Subsequently, he kept delaying

the implementation of the PGCC plan and attempted to find a way to reconcile all stakeholders involved. However, according to Prof. Anwar Fazal, the delays were nonetheless interpreted by some activists as a means for his party to secure a victory in the upcoming elections.

In another attempt to gain support from political groups through conventional communication strategies, in an open letter to the Barisan Nasional election candidates, the PGCC campaign expressed dismay and disappointment that all its attempts to engage and initiate dialogues with Barisan Nasional's election candidates were rejected. In this open letter, the campaign voiced up its concerns over several issues, such as the proposed development for the Turf Club, chaotic and ad hoc development, the lack of local plans, and the rapidly deteriorating traffic. As soon as the election date was announced, the campaign wrote to all the political parties outlining its position on the above topics, and asked them if they would be willing to endorse its position. This was followed by several phone calls and test messages, but with the exception of the DAP, no other party or party members even acknowledged the letter. Concurrently, in order to engage the political parties to communicate with stakeholders, the campaign wrote another open letter to all candidates asking them to participate in a public debate on these topics to be organized by the campaign. This too was followed-up with telephone calls and text messages however, similar to their earlier efforts, the campaign did not even receive an acknowledgement from any party but DAP.

The campaign was hoping to combine the communication strategies of writing open letters and conducting public talks to encourage political parties to take more responsible steps toward addressing the PGCC issue. However, poor responses from the parties (with the exception of DAP) closed the doors on a potentially constructive collaboration between the campaign and political parties.

## 8.4 Challenges

The Save Penang Hill Campaign and PGCC share similarities in a number of ways – including the actors involved and the socio-political climate of Penang. However, unlike the Penang Hill scenario, the people who would have been directly affected by the PGCC development did not actively involve themselves in opposing the development. Apart from a few proactive individuals, the majority of those who live in the PGCC neighborhood were non-reactive to the development plans. Although the middle class played the lead role in the Penang Hill campaign, the middle class neighborhoods around the proposed PGCC development area remained silent. Even if they may have been sympathetic with the anti-PGCC campaign, they did not actively participate in the campaign against PGCC. According to Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, one of the reasons brought up to justify this behavior was that they did not want to be seen as trouble makers or rebels against the plans of the federal government given the potential repercussions.

Regardless of this however, the overall turnout of people opposing the PGCC plan was still significant. The public could still recall the success of the Save Penang Hill Campaign and that encouraged some of them to stand up and participate more actively in the campaign against PGCC. A major goal in communicating with the public with regard to PGCC was to remind them of the success of the Save Penang Hill Campaign. The iconic value of this earlier success was therefore used continuously to encourage people to participate in the PGCC campaign.

One of the most formidable challenges facing the anti-PGCC campaign was the black-out by the mainstream media. As mentioned earlier, the mainstream media played the role of silent viewer for both campaigns – this was not altogether unexpected, given the control of the mainstream media by proxy by the federal government.

Another important factor to be considered in studying the Save Penang Hill and PGCC Campaigns is the different dynamics between the two case studies. The Save Penang Hill Campaign was a national campaign due to the iconic position of Penang Hill not only for the denizens of Penang but also for a majority of Malaysians. On the other hand, the PGCC and the turf club it was to take over were mostly local concerns, and although the federal government was a major player in the PGCC event, Malaysians in general were not and the PGCC campaign was not able to attain the national involvement that the Save Penang Hill Campaign enjoyed.

## 9. Conclusion

To reiterate, both the Save Penang Hill and PGCC Campaigns share many similarities in terms of planning and the implementation of communication strategies and tools. Interestingly, the main actors (both in terms of organization and individual) for both campaigns were approximately the same. Organizations such as CAP or MNS who were key players in the Save Penang Hill Campaign played an important leading role in the PGCC campaign as well; with individuals such as Ahmad Chik, Prof. Anwar Fazal and Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong who were leaders for the Save Penang Hill Campaign nearly 20 years ago, playing the same roles in the more recent PGCC campaign. Apart from these veterans, new individuals such as James Lockhead also played a strong role in the PGCC Campaign. This illustrates the rooted tradition of having established NGOs and leaders in Penang due to the history of environmental NGO advocacy, the NGOs' links to national and international environmental NGOs, and their commitment to adopt new strategies to protect Penang's natural resources and its quality of life.

Similarly, the communication strategies used in both campaigns were quite analogous. The utilization of public talks, open letters and petition-signing proved to be effective and successful means of communication among campaign stakeholders. This therefore bears testament to the powerhouse effect of combining communication strategies and participatory approaches to tackle certain issues. The audiences of both events were also approximately the same – being made up of mostly middle class Penangites. Unfortunately however, this also highlights the bitter reality that civic consciousness in Penang on socio-environmental issues has yet to exceed the social boundaries of the middle class even after 20 years had passed since the Save Penang Hill Campaign.

With regard to media coverage, both campaigns were also similarly ostracized and boycotted by the mainstream media, although the situation can be described as being slightly better with regard to the PGCC campaign as evidenced by the coverage given by a few Chinese newspapers. However, other forms of media remained silent in both cases. For this matter, the role of alternative media was therefore of much importance with organizational newspaper and magazines, pamphlets and posters playing important roles in the success of both campaigns.

Again, the biggest factor that sets the PGCC campaign apart from the Save Penang Hill Campaign was the use of the Internet which revolutionized the conventional methods of communication used in the Save Penang Hill Campaign. Blogs, websites and social networks proved extremely important, with the PGCC campaign obtaining public opinion on the PGCC development plan through the use of different cyber utilities. Ultimately, the alternative electronic media succeeded in generating massive pressure on the government to drop the development plan. As it was the tool of choice for several key players in the campaign, the Internet was utilized in many different capacities including to inform, raise awareness, organize talks, and pressure local and federal governments, among others.

In conclusion, it is imperative that the strategy of using the appropriate communication tools at the right time is not disregarded. In both cases, the general election was close to the time frame of the campaigns and thus communication with the different political parties during that crucial period was one of the most important success factors for both campaigns. Especially so given that election time is the period when politicians are typically more concerned about social events and demands; both campaigns could therefore utilize the opportunity of communicating and lobbying with different political parties in order to pursue their agendas. In short, the success of both campaigns in attaining their goals to halt the development plans proves the effectiveness of the communication strategies adopted by them.

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