Traditional youth associations as agents of social change

A case study of youth and adult partnership in a Malaysian fishing village

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Despite boasting over 8,000 registered youth clubs and associations, formal youth organisations in Malaysia are not often recognised for their role in addressing issues of social justice and inequality in underserved communities. A recent exception is the Youth and Sports Association of Gaya Island (BESUGA). This paper explores the unique story of BESUGA and its transformation from a traditional youth development organisation to an agent of social action and community development working on behalf of the underserved fishing villages on Gaya Island, Sabah. Of particular interest is how BESUGA created its own, culturally-relevant approach to youth–adult partnership that successfully brought together three generations of island residents to engage in recreation, sports, instruction and social action. BESUGA's efforts culminated in the successful organisation of diverse stakeholders to bring electricity and fresh water infrastructures to the island, empowering both the youth and community at large. Implications of BESUGA's innovative strategy are discussed with respect to generational theories of youth and community development and to broadening conceptualisations of youth–adult partnership.

When implemented in a quality manner, organised youth programs (youth organisations, youth associations, afterschool programs) promote a diverse array of social and academic benefits for youth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1992). Within a framework of civil society development, youth programs have become prominent players in many developing countries. Through their roles as providers of non-formal education, recreation and civic engagement opportunities, organised youth programs have the potential to address the developmental needs of the large youth populations that most developing countries boast. In addition to helping young people thrive in the present, these opportunities help to nurture future leadership and human capital, which are deemed essential to the future success of development efforts (Magnuson & Baizerman 2007; Ginwright & James 2002; Krauss et al. 2014; USAID 2012).

Researchers and policymakers in Malaysia are increasingly recognising the role of youth organisations in fostering community development, particularly when young people take on meaningful roles in decision-making alongside supportive, caring adults (Magnuson & Baizerman 2007; Nga & King 2006). A growing body of research has recently pointed to youth–adult partnership as a strategy for achieving youth civic development outcomes such as youth empowerment and connectedness to community (Krauss et al. 2014; Zeldin et al. 2015a; Zeldin et al. 2015b). To date, however, most of this work is limited to quantitative studies exploring associations with youth development outcomes. There remains a dearth of qualitative case-study work exploring how exemplary youth organisations in Malaysia work in the context of their communities. Few, if any, attempts have been made to understand how youth–adult partnership can be used as a strategy by youth organisations to transcend their traditional roles as youth program providers to become agents of community action and social change. The current study addresses this gap by presenting the work of one such innovative organisation based in Gaya Island, Sabah, East Malaysia.

Youth–adult partnership: Benefits to youth and communities

Effective intergenerational relations have typically centred on sharing knowledge, cultural norms and traditions as well as reciprocal care, support and

exchange of resources (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) 2015). Youth–adult partnership works along these lines with a youth voice in decision-making being a central component of the practice, while concurrently, the importance of forming caring relationships with adults who recognise the value in helping youth exercise their voice is foregrounded (Serido, Borden & Perkins 2011; Zeldin, Christens & Powers 2013). When these two components are present, youth and adults collaborate as intergenerational partners, with interactions grounded in the principles of reciprocity, co-learning and shared control (Camino 2005). It is this unique constellation of role, activity and values that has led analysts to assert that youth–adult partnership is an essential ingredient for community interventions and a core experience for civic development and engagement (Zeldin, Christens & Powers 2013).

Of relevance to the present study, existing research indicates that youth–adult partnership may be particularly important to youth from economically or resource-poor areas (Torres-Fleming, Valdes & Pillai 2010). Community-based youth organisations in marginalised communities can provide young people with critical social capital consisting of intergenerational ties that cultivate expectations and opportunities for youth to engage in community change activities (Ginwright 2007). In these settings, the emphasis of youth–adult interactions can shift from a focus on young people's marginality to a focus on the achievement of a common goal for a shared outcome (Blanchet-Cohen, et al. 2012). Young people appreciate being viewed as competent persons and treated "matter-of-factly" with high expectations by adults, and, consequently, they often thrive developmentally (Camino 2000; Halpern 2005). A recent cross-national study by Zeldin et al. (2015a) showed that youth–adult partnership operating within the context of organised youth programs predicted youth civic development across income groups from three different countries.

Youth participation and youth–adult partnership: A rising global phenomenon?

Worldwide, youth programs are increasingly being recognised for their potential in fostering youth–adult partnership in the service of youth civic development and the revitalisation of civil society (Zeldin et al. 2015a). At their

best, community organisations provide free spaces where young people can imagine possibilities, debate options and take on responsible roles, all the while enhancing connections between themselves and adults. The focus of youth organisations on experiential and place-based education complements traditional pedagogies of formal schooling. A comprehensive review of community-based youth organisations concluded that their developmental potential stems from young people having "a hand in designing and implementing" their programs and from caring adults who encourage youth to "express their voices toward the achievement of common goals" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1992, p.12).

Youth–adult partnership resonates with generational approaches to understanding contemporary youth. Adults have traditionally formed relationships with youth for the purpose of protecting, counselling and instructing young people (Hine 1999; Hollingshead 1949). Over the past 20 years, however, with the integration of youth and community development perspectives into youth programming, the rationale for establishing strong intergenerational relationships has broadened. Analysts now focus on relationships as a foundation from which young people can be active agents in their own development, the development of others and the development of community (Zeldin et al. 2005). The international community is beginning to recognise the current youth population as "an undervalued asset" (World Bank 2007) and as a "demographic opportunity" to tap into young people's potential to be agents for positive change and development for their communities (USAID 2012). These sentiments align with more recent generational studies showing that "Gen Y" youth tend to be relationship-focused, rely on technology for a variety of tasks, and expect to take on meaningful roles (Myers & Sadaghiani 2010). This has further intensified global interest in intergenerational collaboration as a strategy for youth and community development.

When organisations promote youth–adult partnership, there is a growing recognition that young people become influential agents for community development. This has led, in part, to a global emphasis on youth participation in decision-making and collective leadership (Adams & Oshima 2014;

Kasumagic 2008; USAID 2012). In developed nations, this occurs in diverse settings: state and local government, community coalitions, schools, after-school programs and issue-based advocacy groups. In these countries, young people take on age-appropriate decision-making roles in program governance, planning and design. They can also take on roles in key program functions such as training, communications, organising, research and evaluation (Camino & Zeldin 2002; Christens & Dolan 2011; Mitra 2009; Libby et al. 2005).

The current study

Malaysian youth associations often receive recognition for their efforts in providing valuable programs and services. Historically, they played important roles in the politically turbulent 1970s, when they were at the forefront of efforts protesting against poverty and inequality (Nga 2009). Since then, however, few have portrayed Malaysian youth organisations in a community action role. Do such organisations exist? If so, what are their strategies to bring about change? How do they interact and engage with communities and adults to carry out their work?

In this study, we draw on youth–adult partnership as a theoretical lens and approach to youth and community development to present the story of the Gaya Island Youth and Sports Association (BESUGA). BESUGA became an agent of social change through an inclusive approach to working across three generations of residents. We focus on BESUGA's transformation from a traditional provider of youth and sports programs to a community intermediary through the formation of culturally appropriate, youth–adult partnerships.

We highlight how this work culminated in the acquisition of electricity and fresh water infrastructures for the first time in the island's history. We conclude by discussing how BESUGA's innovative, cooperative approach to youth development and social action represents a promising approach for ongoing youth and community empowerment in Malaysia and the region.

Methods

Participants and procedures

We carried out the study following an exploratory qualitative case study design, with the goal being "to investigate distinct phenomena characterised by a lack of detailed preliminary research" (Streb 2010, p.372). In line with the study purpose, this form of case study is often applied as a preliminary step to an explanatory research design exploring a relatively new research area in which the research questions have yet to be clearly identified or formulated (2010).

We collected data intermittently over a period of 12 months through focus groups, interviews, phone conversations and emails. We made three visits to Gaya Island to undertake observations of the village, interviews with BESUGA's exco (executive committee) members, and focus groups with other organisation members and adult residents. We also reviewed documents about BESUGA and Gaya Island, including historical white papers, PowerPoint presentations made to government bodies and photographs of programs and activities. Our trips to Gaya also allowed us to meet with community leaders such as the island's school headmaster, village leaders, parents and adult village council members. We conducted follow-up data collection through phone calls and emails. Data from interviews and focus groups were a mix between Malay and English. We hired a translator from the first author's university to translate the Malay data into English. For the purpose of confidentiality, all names presented in the paper are pseudonyms.

We used a thematic analysis approach to analyse the data. Our analytic focus was guided by the main research question: How did youth–adult partnership contribute to the transformation of BESUGA from a traditional youth program provider to an agent of social and community development? Coding and categorising of data were conducted broadly in an attempt to capture the main themes of transformation, with an emphasis on describing how youth participation in leadership, decision-making and organisational development by BESUGA's members, coupled with key relationships with adults in the

community, allowed BESUGA to move beyond its traditional role as a youth sports organisation.

Background to the case

Gaya Island

Ten minutes off the coast of Sabah (East Malaysia) state's capital, Kota Kinabalu (KK), lies Gaya Island, part of the Tuanku Abdul Rahman Marine Park. Much of Gaya Island is well known among international tourists for its beautiful beaches and exquisite diving and snorkeling spots. Many tourists who visit Gaya, however, fail to realise there is more to the island than what is seen by tour boats. For along its eastern and southern shores sit 11 "floating" fishing villages comprising a substantial population of 10,000 "Bajau Laut", a Philipino ethnic group, most of whom are perceived as illegal by mainland Sabahans. The villages consist of traditional wooden homes built on pillars erected from the ocean floor. Multiple generations of family members often reside in the houses, which usually comprise only two or three rooms (Said 2011). Gaya's traditional villages are ignored by the tour companies that visit the Marine Park. Their shanty coastal houses are considered to be more of an eyesore than a tourist attraction. Mainland Sabahans often warn visitors to avoid "that part" of Gaya Island because the local residents are viewed stereotypically as illegal immigrants engaged in drug smuggling (Miller 2011).

Systematic marginalisation and neglect has left Gaya residents with few basic services and infrastructure. Water taxis provide the main source of transportation to the mainland. There is no public transportation. For decades, the villages were denied running water and electricity despite being 10 minutes from the state capital. The villagers relied on expensive potable water shipped daily from Kota Kinabalu and stored in tanks behind their houses. For electricity, they relied on expensive gasoline-powered generators. The high costs of these two utilities made it a struggle for most families on Gaya to afford their monthly living expenses.

For the youth of Gaya, geographic isolation limits their sense of connection, economic hardship confines their living conditions, and the discrimination

that comes from being presumed illegal is an ongoing source of disillusionment. Few see much of a future for themselves outside of the small-scale fishing operations of their fathers or the underpaid, unskilled work of their mothers.

Malaysian youth associations

It was within this context that BESUGA was initially founded, with the hope of imparting useful skills, knowledge and a sense of belonging to Gaya's youth. In Malaysia, youth associations are a core strategy for building youth leadership skills and competencies (Hamzah 2005; Nga & King 2006). Youth associations in Malaysia are voluntary non-government organisations directed and administered by young people between the ages of 15 to 40. (The upper age range will be reduced to 30 years beginning in 2018.) As of 2010, there were approximately three million members of youth associations in Malaysia, out of a total youth population of nearly 12 million (Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development 2011). The Youth Associations are supported by the government. They receive a small stipend for operations (the equivalent of USD1, 300 per year). Association leaders are often invited to regional trainings and workshops offered by the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

As in other parts of the world, Malaysia has yet to achieve the desired potential for youth civic engagement and empowerment. This is borne out by persistently low youth empowerment scores on national indices and growing indications that young people are increasingly disconnected from their communities (Hamzah et al. 2011; Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development 2011). These trends are of concern. Consequently, Malaysian policy looks to the youth associations as places for youth empowerment and community connectedness. The associations are places for young people to be leaders and to prepare for future roles in the civic and economic spheres of Malaysian society (Ahmad et al. 2012; Hamzah 2005; Nga 2009).

The Gaya Island Youth and Sports Association (BESUGA)

BESUGA was established in 2007. The organisation started out with 17 members and has since grown to over 400 youth. BESUGA's activities are

provided in two core programming areas referred to as "general youth development" and "sports". The youth development program focuses on education and public speaking, travel and tourism, expedition, culture, welfare and religion. In 2012, the BESUGA sports program ran over 40 programs, earning it recognition as one of the top youth associations in Sabah. The association regularly hosts sports tournaments in football, volleyball, netball, chess and others. The organisation is governed by a 15-member Executive Committee (Exco), of which members are elected each year. Seventy per cent of the members are male, with three young women sitting on the Exco.

Age is a strong determinant of roles and expectations within the Association. Three informal subgroups coincide. The first consists of adolescents – those 15 to 18 years old – who make up the majority of the general membership. The second group consists of "emerging adults", or those 18 to 30 years old. The emerging adults in BESUGA play the most active leadership roles and comprise much of the Exco. This group also plays a critical bridging function between the adolescent members and the older members of the association, as well as the adults from the community. Finally, those 30 to 40 make up the smallest group in number and tend to take on more adult roles; acting, for example, in advisory and supportive capacities as organisers. This older group also plays a vital role in the association's leadership development and outreach work. Once an Exco member has completed his or her term, they become an organisational "ambassador" in their respective village and work with the adult community leaders in that village to recruit youth to join BESUGA.

BESUGA's evolution as an agent of social change: Empowerment through partnership

The majority of Malaysian youth associations focus on their primary role as providers of youth programs. In the case of Gaya Island, however, BESUGA was the main driver in bringing about essential improvements to Gaya Island's residents, specifically water and electricity. In the following section, we present analysis that describes BESUGA's evolution from a traditional youth program provider to an agent of social change, culminating in the acquisition of water and electricity infrastructures to Gaya Island. Our analysis indicates

that youth–adult partnership was salient in each of three unique phases of the process: 1) as an organiser of community stakeholders, 2) as an intermediary linking the needs of Gaya's villages to important resources outside the island, and 3) as a community educator. The section begins with a background to the organisation's youth development work, leading to its expansion into community and social action and the three phases of intergenerational work with adults.

The origins of social action: Sports programming for youth development

In 2006, following their successful hosting of a regional soccer tournament, 17 young people from Gaya Island decided to form BESUGA. The tournament was one of several hosted by the group, and it brought together 25 teams from Gaya and nearby Kota Kinabalu. Attempting to capitalise on the Gaya young people's intense interest in sports, BESUGA initially registered with the state as a sports-based association, despite its vision of becoming an education and leadership development organisation. BESUGA's founders decided to utilise sports as the main vehicle to engage Gaya's youth in island-based activities that could enhance their physical wellbeing, motivation, teamwork and leadership competencies.

As a poor community, there are few facilities on the island. Prior to BESUGA, young people had to travel to the mainland for organised activities. Well aware of these challenges, BESUGA's leaders decided to host regular competitive sports tournaments that did not require expensive equipment or facilities (e.g. soccer, netball, volleyball). To increase association membership, BESUGA counted tournament registration as a membership fee, making it easy for the young people to join the association. This approach allowed BESUGA's membership to grow with each program held.

Building on their initial success, the leaders of BESUGA began to recognise other opportunities for providing knowledge, skills and competencies to the youth of Gaya. By utilising the talents and abilities of those within the association, BESUGA began to expand its programming by offering classes and trainings in areas including sewing, cooking and English. By 2012, it was

running 30 organised activities annually in addition to community programs on environmental awareness and informational sessions on vocational/technical education with nearby colleges. These efforts and early successes helped BESUGA achieve the honour of being named the fourth best youth association of 2012 by the state Ministry of Youth and Sports. It was a significant achievement for an organisation only five years old and gave the entire island a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment.

Phase 1: Forging purpose-driven partnerships with community leaders and adult residents

Following its successful start–up period, BESUGA began to broaden its scope of work by building on the visibility and legitimacy it had gained in the eyes of adult community leaders. Various parties in the community such as school officials, parents and village leaders began to take notice of the work BESUGA was doing with the island youth. Even adult residents with no ties to the organisation began to notice that BESUGA was sparking greater cohesion among the island residents. One resident observed:

> *From the cultural perspective, for one year I lived in Kesuapan village. I noticed that with BESUGA's existence in the community, cooperation among the villagers was stronger ... Before, our culture was based on our race. We are Bajau. Bajau tend to keep to themselves. However, after BESUGA came along, there was greater cooperation among the people.*

BESUGA's successful implementation of its sports and education programs led to a working relationship with the secondary school's headmaster, who took notice of the association's ability to connect with the island's problematic youth. Subsequently, the headmaster invited BESUGA to engage parents of problematic students in the hope of convincing them to keep their kids in school. Many parents on Gaya expect their teenage children to drop out of school to provide financial support for the families. BESUGA's youth leaders responded by starting an outreach program that entailed visiting the homes of parents of truant youth to educate them on the benefits of staying in school. The positive response from the parents to BESUGA's efforts led to an invitation from the school's headmaster for the association to provide regular

motivational programs for the students in the school. By using themselves as role models, BESUGA's youth leaders spoke to the students about the importance of getting an education and subsequent career possibilities. Through these efforts, BESUGA forged new relationships of trust and partnership with parents and school officials.

With its growing influence and reputation, BESUGA began facing a new challenge – that of trying to serve a large youth population spread across 11 independent villages. In rural Malaysian culture, the role of the village head (also known as ketua kampong) is particularly significant, and it is vital to get his permission to conduct any activity in his respective village. Garnering the village head's support essentially ensures the subsequent support of the village residents. Culturally, village heads retain significant status in the eyes of their residents who put their trust in the head to manage village affairs. Realising this, BESUGA's leaders made an extra effort to include the village heads in the planning and running of the programs. In most cases, their efforts at garnering support were successful. The association president, Syafiq, recalled BESUGA's special working relationship with one village head:

> *We help him (village head) from the procedural aspects of the water and electricity projects. He is very proud because there are still a group of young people who are concerned about what is happening in the village.*

With the principal and the village heads, BESUGA was able to gain endorsements, approvals and opportunities that are often denied to other Malaysian youth associations and which often derail efforts. The challenge of avoiding tokenism, or excessive adult influence on programs, was also an ongoing concern to BESUGA. The association wanted the work to be youth-led, but at the same time, it wanted full community participation. Therefore, BESUGA intentionally sought to create roles for adult residents. Most of the adult support for BESUGA ultimately came in the form of verbal support and labour. For example, one Exco member explained how the adult residents helped the association meet its need for a stage to conduct its cultural programs:

> *We have a lot of programs but don't have a stage. Every time we have a program, we have to set up a makeshift stage. The people involved in doing*

this are mostly the older people. Every time, they will build a new stage for us, and help us lift the timber. They don't ask for money. They are volunteers; they help with everything. It is a big sacrifice by the older people for BESUGA.

The BESUGA youth leaders recognise the sacrifice and support of the adults in the community and the partnership that the two groups have. As economically poor fishermen with little formal education, many of the adult residents help in relatively simple ways that are proportionate with their resources and abilities. This often takes the form of physical labour as illustrated in the above quote. In another example, adult residents offered their time and money to take the lead on building a volleyball court in their village knowing that volleyball is a popular activity among BESUGA youth. In short, BESUGA's building of relationships with the school officials, village heads, parents and other adult residents effectively established a working partnership with BESUGA. This proved to be a critical strategy that later paid huge dividends in the subsequent effort to bring water and electricity to the villages.

Phase 2: Organising to bring water and electricity to Gaya Island residents

Despite years of neglect, the residents of Gaya Island remained ardent supporters of the ruling government. On several different occasions, they had unsuccessfully tried to capitalise on this support by lobbying their representatives at both the federal and state levels to address their need for running water and electricity. Despite repeatedly being turned down, incremental changes began to take place. Local projects were funded, most notably a school and a police station. Then, in 2008, the political context changed. For the first time in Malaysia's history, the ruling government experienced a near-defeat in the country's general election. Popularly called the "political tsunami of 2008", the upheaval gave the residents and community leaders the courage to make unprecedented demands of their political leaders. In Sabah, the politicians knew that they had to change the way they governed. The support of community groups and their ardent patrons could no longer be taken for granted.

Realising that the time was ripe for action, the leaders of BESUGA, motivated by their own growing popularity and string of recent successes, decided to take the lead in lobbying their representatives. Again, using a collaborative approach, BESUGA enlisted the support of influential members from the Kota Kinabalu area to help in the lobbying efforts. These included academic leaders from nearby University of Malaysia-Sabah (UMS), representatives from Kota Kinabalu City Hall, and those from the state electric company, among others. BESUGA then called for a program inviting the different parties and local politicians to attend. Syafiq explains:

> *We set up a program and invited the village heads, the YB (local political representative), the Kota Kinabalu City Hall (DBKK) and the school leaders in addition to all the local community members. During the program we asked the leader (i.e. YB) why electricity and water supply is not provided here. We gave our opinion and together put pressure on him (the YB).*

After listening to the different viewpoints from community, academic and business leaders, the government finally agreed to provide electricity and running water to the island. This was a major victory for Gaya's residents as well as BESUGA. It also marked an important step in the organisation's evolution, that of becoming an intermediary agent capable of linking the Gaya community with outside resources. According to our participants, the association's advocacy efforts had a transformational effect on the adults in the community. The efforts resulted in more positive perceptions of Gaya's youth in general, as well as a stronger desire for the adults to contribute their own time and energy. One of the adult residents commented:

> *A meeting was held to bring electricity to Gaya; I still remember young people and adults sitting together. We have no problem with it, we are always willing to see what problems they face (BESUGA) and we are always ready to give them help.*

While many of the adults in the community became more inclined to play active, supportive roles in BESUGA's programs, others began to see young people in a different light. Syafiq elaborated:

The youth are now going into Kampong Lok Kurai and Kampong Lok Baru. They go in with Mr Muslim (older Exco member). So the people there see something different, because the ones managing the electricity installation project are the young people. The contractor is named Amin. As a young person he is helping the village to get their electricity supply ... So, it's like that – the community's perception on Gaya Island is anchored to the youth.

Phase 3: Educating the community

After the agreement by the state government to provide running water and electricity to Gaya, BESUGA, with the support of community leaders, took the lead in coordinating the transition effort. As a youth association, it was not prepared for this role. The association knew little about what it would take to make the transition to a more sophisticated infrastructure. The young leaders of BESUGA soon realised that first and foremost, community education was needed to help the villagers understand what having electricity meant. For most residents, it was the first time in their lives that they had centralised power in their homes and there was much to learn. To meet this need, BESUGA created a special Exco position for Zulaikah, a 21-year-old female leader who volunteered to head the electrification transition project. One of her first tasks was to make sure that the residents understood what was required of them during the transition process. For this, she had to go door-to-door in every village building relationships with the residents in order to answer their questions and allay their concerns. She said:

First, there is a form that I made for them about how many lights and how many socket plugs that they want to use for the house. And then I give them a reasonable price. The price is from the contractor. I had to negotiate with the contractor for a cheaper price, so now the villagers get the cheapest prices! If it was more expensive they probably would not be able to afford it. The second issue, in terms of the meter application, they cannot understand. So, the villagers will ask, "What is the procedure? What about the meter? How about the wiring?" What I tell them is that we

do the wiring first and then after the wiring is in we will proceed with the meter. That's my way to help them understand.

Much of Zulaikah's community education work aimed to change false perceptions, which proved challenging. For example, many of the villagers thought that once the electricity was installed, it would be free every month. Others did not realise that they had to pay extra depending on the number of lights and sockets they wanted installed. When told what these would cost, many accused BESUGA and the contractors of trying to make money off them:

> *Most of the residents didn't understand anything about electricity management, at least in the beginning. Some of them thought that it was free, whereas before they had to pay for the gasoline generator, and others thought that somebody wanted to run a business with it. I need to tell them how it works, get their cooperation and give them the consent form in order to have it installed.*

Through helping the residents understand what was required to properly manage their new resource, Zulaikah became a well-known figure among the adults in the Gaya community. They trusted her, relied on her, and went to her for assistance when they wanted answers about their new resource. Moreover, many island youth who did not know BESUGA before the project became aware of the organisation through Zulaikah's work. The establishment of strong community relationships by BESUGA was important during the transition period to new electricity and water supplies:

> *It really changed their (the community's) perception towards young people, especially BESUGA, since we come inside the villages. We sent one or two persons to promote the electricity project and in nine months, electricity has reached about 400 houses* (Syafiq).

Discussion

This study of a voluntary youth association demonstrates three processes through which youth chose to partner with adults and, in so doing, brought about positive change to Gaya Island. The first partnership-building process

revolved around adult support for the design and implementation of new sports and educational programs on Gaya. BESUGA could have gone at this alone, in line with Malaysian youth policy. Instead, BESUGA reached out to adult residents, including the highly politicised and territorial village heads. This strategy did not just gain the endorsement of key community leaders. Reaching out to these elders made the village heads champions of BESUGA, leading to stronger working relations. This strengthened the sense of community cohesion and ownership for youth programming and for the next generation of young people.

Second, after establishing strong relations with parents, school officials and adult residents on the island, BESUGA established key partnerships with university officials, business leaders and government officials in nearby Kota Kinabalu. This opened up greater opportunities for leveraging key resources. The networks it established on the mainland also brought needed attention to the plight of the people on Gaya, which ultimately resulted in policy change and social action. This further strengthened its youth development programs along with its reputation among Gaya's adult residents.

Over time, the youth-initiated partnerships took on a more instructional role. After leading the effort to obtain electricity and water, the association took the lead on overseeing the transition process, actively teaching the community about these new resources. The youth were humble in their approach, given that implementation of these new infrastructures challenged traditional ways of living. By all accounts, the young people's manner of teaching has been effective, deepening their existing relationships with adults, and raising the level of esteem to which the young people are held in the community.

In sum, BESUGA extended and broadened its role beyond that of program provider to that of community organiser, intermediary organisation and community educator. All of these roles were critical to BESUGA's success in bringing about social change on Gaya Island. In all of these capacities, youth initiated the necessary changes, and they did so by forming partnerships with a variety of adults.

Generational theory and youth–adult partnership

Social generational theory claims that each generation can be viewed as unique, as a group of people responding to specific historical times, social forces and technological advances. This is indeed true. At the same time, it is also true that some core principles and dynamics of development are largely generalisable over time. The first is the notion of a "generation gap". There will always be friction and tension among generations. In large part, this is due to the nature of youth. Young people are always going to be products of society at the same time as being agents of societal change. On a daily basis, young people, parents and other community residents are constantly responding to this paradoxical societal construction of youth. A second generalisable feature of development is that all people, younger and older, thrive under conditions of collaboration far better than under conditions of exclusion. Sustainable communities depend on scaffolding and leveraging through which younger residents take on increasing power and influence, while at the same time, learning the tricks of the policy- and program-making trade from older community leaders who have had some success at it. The practice of youth–adult partnership, to us, is important to study and understand, specifically because it brings these tensions to the fore.

The practice of youth–adult partnership is grounded in the perspectives of social justice, youth development and community development (see Camino 2000; Camino & Zeldin 2002; Zeldin et al. 2013). From a social justice perspective, youth–adult partnership builds from the central imperative of representation. The practice, by definition, has youth at the centre of group decision-making, not the periphery. From the perspective of positive youth development, youth–adult partnership recognises that society has an obligation to help young people thrive in the present, while concurrently preparing them for the past. Young people require a full range of developmental opportunities and supports. From the perspective of community development, youth–adult partnership fundamentally recognises that everybody is needed and everybody needs a role in the building of healthy and just communities. Exclusion on the basis of age – younger or older – does not have a place. The challenge is to create and nurture meaningful roles for

young people and for adults. All community participants should have choices in how they wish to participate, consistent with their own particular interests and skills.

There is no doubt that youth–adult partnership is hard to achieve. Cultural, structural and interpersonal barriers and power disparities have been well documented (Camino 2005). But when quality implementation is achieved, youth benefit greatly, and, further, they become well positioned to contribute substantially to community and organisational wellbeing (Zeldin et al. 2015a). Both young people and their communities meet their personal and collective needs for agency, empowerment and connectedness. The Gaya Island experience vividly demonstrates that youth–adult partnership is a practice that is compatible with vulnerable communities under severe political and economic stress. It shows that youth voice and leadership in decision-making can take on great power and influence even in situations – common across the globe – where there is a cultural and structural push for hierarchical deference to middle-aged adults. The Gaya Island experience also demonstrates the influence of relationships. Societies need not constrain themselves to youth–youth relationships or to adult–adult relationships. Youth–adult relationships need not be authoritative and a source of disconnectedness. This study demonstrates that when there is a common cause, and when younger and older residents choose to build from each other's strengths, productive partnership can result.

Conceptualising youth–adult partnership in traditional societies

While there are many places and examples, worldwide, of youth working with adults in leadership capacities (USAID 2012), almost all of the published, academic-oriented research focuses on youth–adult partnerships in more industrialised countries such as the UK, Australia and the United States. There is very little research conducted in traditional societies and countries with developing economies. This study, through its focus on a traditional society, adds a needed perspective to contemporary, primarily western, conceptualisations of youth–adult partnership. Typically, youth–adult partnership views youth as those under 18 or 24, and adults as those 25 and older.

What we find on Gaya Island, however, is partnership among three age groups, groups that formed naturally without external intervention and that took on different roles and relationships. Looking at youth–adult partnership as comprising three generations does not simply have theoretical interest. From the perspective of community building, the three-generational model of youth–adult partnership offers a paradigm that is true to the aforementioned principal of healthy communities where "all residents are needed, and all can play a role".

In the case of BESUGA, the "emerging adult" group – those between 18 and 30 – played a crucial bridging role in fostering inter-generational connectivity between "adults" and "adolescents" in the community. Because emerging adults are closer in age to the secondary school youth than adults, it is easier for them to connect with adolescents. This helps motivate the adolescent members to be more engaged in the organisation and play meaningful roles (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2007). At the same time, because emerging adults are older and have begun to embrace adult roles in terms of post-secondary education, employment and family, they are also able to relate to and garner the respect of adult residents. This has helped to forge effective working relationships between all three groups, which is a key ingredient for bringing vital services and benefits to communities (Zeldin et al. 2005).

This differentiation of roles fits Malaysian culture. In this context, youth–adult partnership is not a dichotomous construct but one involving three generations. The emerging adults are at the centre; they provide programming to the adolescents and organise support from (and with) older adult residents and community leaders. In Malaysia, it is uncommon for adolescents to play formal leadership roles in youth organisations as the secondary school years are mainly devoted to academic pursuits for most students. These developmental and vocational expectations limit adolescents' leadership involvement. This is in contrast with western culture, where youth tend to take on leadership opportunities by the time they are in high school, and often earlier (Camino 2000; Mitra 2008).

For youth associations to be effective partners with adults in traditional societies, culture dictates deference to adult leaders (Tyson et al. 2011). As

organisational leaders, the emerging adults in BESUGA must find a balance in both sharing power with, and leading, older adults. BESUGA recognises this by requesting permission of village heads and soliciting their ongoing feedback. Similarly, BESUGA must find a proper balance in partnering with adult residents. While the adults seem comfortable with BESUGA taking the lead in change efforts, their tacit support and willingness to pitch in (build stages, construct playing fields) is vital to the work.

Study limitations

As an exploratory case study, important limitations should be noted. Our time in the field included only three visits to Gaya Island for observational fieldwork. The aim of the study was not to conduct an in-depth examination of BESUGA's work, but rather to acquire a sense of how the organisation used partnership as a strategy for success. That said, we could have spent more time observing programs, interviewing adolescent members of the association and hearing from more adult partners outside of Gaya about their experiences of working with BESUGA. Nonetheless, the case study provides an important initial understanding of youth–adult partnership across multiple generations in an under-researched setting. More work is needed to better understand the nuances of the relationships that have facilitated the success of the organisation and its efforts.

Conclusion

The lessons from BESUGA's work highlight the potential that youth associations have in bringing greater social justice to traditional, underserved communities and the key role that youth–adult partnership across generations can play as a strategy for mobilising for change. Given the social, ecological, and political challenges that face so many communities around the world, the next generation cannot wait until they are fully-fledged adults to begin the work of building a more cooperative and sustainable world (Ginwright & James 2002). In organisations like BESUGA, young leaders are not just being taught about leadership, they are also taking leadership and learning by doing – thus making their communities more accountable and effective. In response to reports of

decreasing participation in youth organisations, the BESUGA example offers initial insight into how youth organisations – particularly those in culturally traditional, marginalised communities – can become relevant again, and how youth and adults working together can respond to community needs.

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