

## Participative Villager Empowerment for Socio-Economic Development

SULAIMAN M. YASSIN and AHMAD FUAD MUHAMMAD

Universiti Pertanian Malaysia

43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

**Keywords:** Empowerment, sustainable, participation, village community development

### ABSTRAK

Pendekatan-pendekatan pembangunan yang membolehkan penyertaan masyarakat miskin luar bandar telah lama diteliti, diuji dan diselidiki. Di Malaysia, pendekatan ini telah diuji di dalam empat buah kampung dalam mana penekanan adalah dibuat ke atas pemberian kuasa kepada komuniti-komuniti kampung itu dengan kemahiran-kemahiran sosial dan teknikal. Suatu kaedah berdamping telah digunakan oleh agen-agen pembangunan serta menggalakkan masyarakat kampung untuk membuat keputusan sendiri akan arah-aliran pembangunan mereka. Di dalam kampung-kampung tersebut, aktiviti-aktiviti sosio-ekonomi yang berjaya termasuklah aktiviti pendidikan, pertanian dan penternakan. Keputusan-keputusan positif menunjukkan bahawa masyarakat miskin boleh diberikan kuasa untuk membangunkan idea-idea mereka melalui pembangunan sumber tenaga manusia dan pendekatan penyertaan. Dengan kaedah yang sama, aktiviti projek telah menjadi lebih mampan.

### ABSTRACT

Development approaches that allows for greater participation of the rural poor and that are sustainable in nature have long been examined, tested and further researched. In Malaysia, such a project approach has been tested in four villages with a focus on empowering village communities with social and technical skills. A consultative stance is adopted by the development agents who encouraged the villagers to decide on their own courses of action. In the project villages, socio-economic activities ranging from educational to agricultural and livestock components were successful. The positive results indicated that the poor can be empowered to develop their own ideas through human resource development and participatory approach. Project activities initiated in this manner were found to more sustainable.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the search for sustainable development efforts to solve the problems of the rural poor has become a national concern. Approaches that could be sustainable in terms of the ecological, social, cultural and economic contexts loom highest in terms of priority considerations in the formulation, identification and selection processes in programme development. Once found, these approaches have to be tested, demonstrated and later adopted on a wider scale.

In Malaysia, a project focussing on model village development has been started by Universiti Pertanian Malaysia with seed money funding of US\$5000.00 from the Centre for Integrated Rural Development in Asia Pacific (CIRDAP), a regional non-governmental organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Four villages were selected:

Kampung Bukit Changgang and Kampung Sungai Buah in Selangor and Kampung Batu 9 and Kampong Jijan in Negeri Sembilan. Similar projects have been started in other CIRBAP Member Countries which have yet to be documented.

The long-term objective of the project is to assist national action in Malaysia through the selected poor communities for the purpose of refining integrated rural development strategies by incorporating the community organizing techniques, community problem-solving with the use of participatory research and planning system, and implementation of projects that will improve the socio-economic conditions of the villages.

Specifically the project aims to investigate participatory development approaches in terms of their usefulness, the factors influencing its

success and to document the learning experiences for others who wish to replicate the project.

This paper presents the participative village development approach and techniques used in the project in the four villages during 1991 and 1992. The preliminary findings of the mechanisms and outcomes of the project are discussed.

### THE PROJECT RATIONALE

There is an increasing awareness that pursuit of purely economic goals may not necessarily improve the quality of life in the rural areas. Comprehensive Integrated Rural Development (IRD) policies could be devised for the balanced social and economic development of these areas.

There are certain global trends that must be reflected in any IRD programme relevant to the problems currently experienced. For instance, the contents of IRD should, among other things, include environmental concerns such as pollution in all forms, denudation of forests, degradation of traditional values and over-emphasis on materialism, concentration of power, deteriorating law and other situations, etc. There is a need to pursue a development model that is supportive of the needs of the present and future generations.

The IRD programmes must also provide for education and training of the villagers, organizing work so that the people can learn to work together and resolve local issues and conflicts by themselves, and enable them to solve their basic socio-economic needs. Training and education programmes are needed to develop human resources and promote democratic rights and privileges. Training would improve their capabilities/capacities for problem solving, grasping opportunities, and dealing with threats. Training also facilitates the needed changes in communities through cooperative effort.

Rural women are equal partners in development. The status of women in the Asian-Pacific countries inhibits this partnership. Enhancing the status of women by improving female education and health, and changing their antiquated attitudes would also be the aim of the model villages.

Increase in agricultural and industrial production by harnessing modern technology would sustain all-round development of villages. Institutional arrangements will be made for the con-

struction and maintenance of physical infrastructure, provision of inputs like seed, fertilizer, pesticides/weedicides, implements and machinery, water and credit facilities. The credit-worthiness of villagers would be enhanced by providing community collaterals.

Agricultural development alone would be able to support the increasing population of villages. It is imperative to plan and develop small industries in the model villages to provide employment and offer other profitable opportunities for men and women as well.

A model village is developed when the villagers become aware of their situation and begin to believe in their capacity to change the situation for the better. Since they realize that they cannot solve their problems individually, they have to think and work together. Their problems range from inadequate income, low level of education, health and sanitation support, inadequate infrastructural facilities (roads, water, and electricity), lack of opportunities for their children, low farm production etc. The problems have to be prioritized, linked with other people and resource pools. In due time, villagers will learn from their experiences and be able to gradually solve their problems. The net effect is a "learning-by-doing" community that is continually changing not only physically but more importantly, in their moral, social, cultural and approach to life. They will begin to rely on their collective thinking and strive to solve common problems and share in the benefits derived from various programmes. They will be well-organized and prepared to face the challenges affecting the community. They will make it possible to continue education based on their experiences and educational needs.

These villages will develop in time; and in the project the villages participating may be operating at different stages. One village may still be in the unorganized stage characterized by people who are individualistic; another may already be organized with its own vision and a set of good leaders, who have a clear set of integrated activities aimed at improving the community; while another village may already be at the stage of being a sustainable village where the community can manage its own problems. These stages of the Model Village is illustrated in Figure 1.

The project is concerned with the ways and means of achieving this kind of village. First, it

prescribes a thorough consultative evaluation of the resources and capabilities of the community and the people. Then it initiates the development of the people by introducing the community organizing components, discusses with the community problem assessment planning and project implementation, assists the villages in solving their various other problems by making them realize the need to view the problems

from within and from without. The project constantly evaluates situations and reflects on experiences so that the community can learn on its own. In all these steps the entire community is involved through its own organization and leadership. The lessons and insights from this study are documented systematically so that the experiences can be shared with other villages. Through organizing, training, and seed money or capital

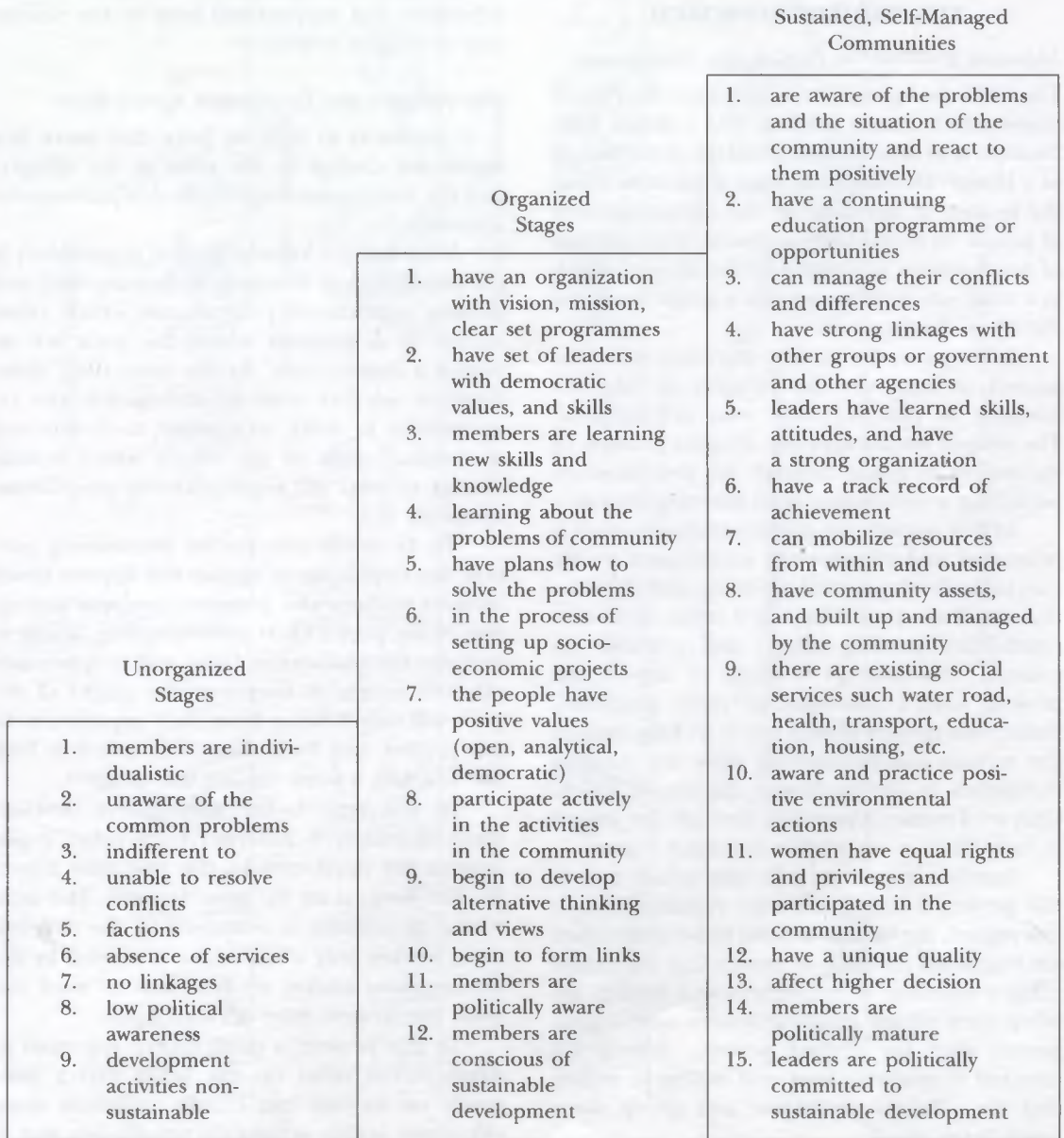


Figure 1: Development stages of the Model Village (adapted from CIRDP, 1991)

provision and other development interventions, this project envisages the development of model villages that are well-organized, educated and able to solve their social, economic, and political problems. Through this process MVRD can be said to have facilitated the formation of villages that are truly exemplary in attaining genuine development with the people earning an increased income in improved socio-economic circumstances through equal participation.

## THE PROJECT APPROACH

### *Important Principles in Participative Development*

The word *development* has its root from the French *voleper* which means to wrap, like a flower bud. *Devoleper* is to unwrap and reveal the inner beauty of a flower. Development then is taken to mean the process of unveiling or the encouragement of people to reveal their potential. This concept of development is adopted by the project, which in a small way is coherent with a *growth-from-below* theory of development.

Inherent in the project objectives is for the project to empower the villagers to take the initiative to plan for their own development. The project encourages the villagers to learn by themselves by going through the process of establishing a community level learning system.

In this respect, the participatory approach is promoted and villagers are encouraged to discuss their developmental problems and the solutions to these problems based upon their own capabilities, possible efforts and available resources. No attempt is made to impose the project team's solutions to their problems. Rather the project team's role is to help analyse the various possibilities and allow the villagers themselves to decide on the courses of action. Only seed money is provided through the project to help finance or provide necessary inputs.

Another important principle adhered to in this project is the concern for sustainability. In this regard, the various actions to be undertaken are examined carefully to ensure that the model villages continue to implement and further develop their village learning systems and organizations after the project period. Efforts are directed to examine ways and means to ensure that the villagers participate and group dynamism is sustained.

Another important concern is for the social empowerment to lead to economic growth of the villagers themselves. This means that the

project envisages that the villagers would overcome their own problems and appreciate that they, as a group, can work out viable possibilities using their own ideas and resources. Social empowerment would strengthen their resolve and *esprit de corps* whilst economic empowerment would enhance their belief in their own efforts.

Wherever and whenever possible, the project activities complement those of the other governmental agencies functioning in the villages. Their cooperation is sought and other agencies' contributions and support will help in the realization of project activities.

### *The Villager's and Development Agent's Roles*

It is pertinent to indicate here that there is a significant change in the roles of the villagers and the development agents in this participative approach.

It is common knowledge that dependency is the psychological antithesis to development and poverty eradication programmes which often incline to a situation where the poor are assigned a passive role. At the same time, development workers tend to monopolize the responsibility to think, to sponsor, to decide and to conduct most of the efforts which initiate change to meet the expectations of programme sponsors.

To be really effective in overcoming poverty, the development agency will require development workers who possess a concrete perception of the poor. Their understanding, ability to perceive the human condition and to appreciate effective means to overcome the plight of the poor will only develop from daily experience. In this project, our Field Associates spend at least two full-days a week visiting the villagers.

In this regard, the participative development approach is different from other major approaches developed in the past (see Figure 2). The focus is on the poor farmers. The technocrat or scientist is consulted by the development worker only when advice is needed by the development worker on how best to work out what the farmers have decided upon.

In this project, a participative approach to development relies on the belief that a poor family on its own can handle problems more effectively, is able to help the neighbours, and in return receives help from them. The development worker is expected to hold discussions frequently with the poor families to understand

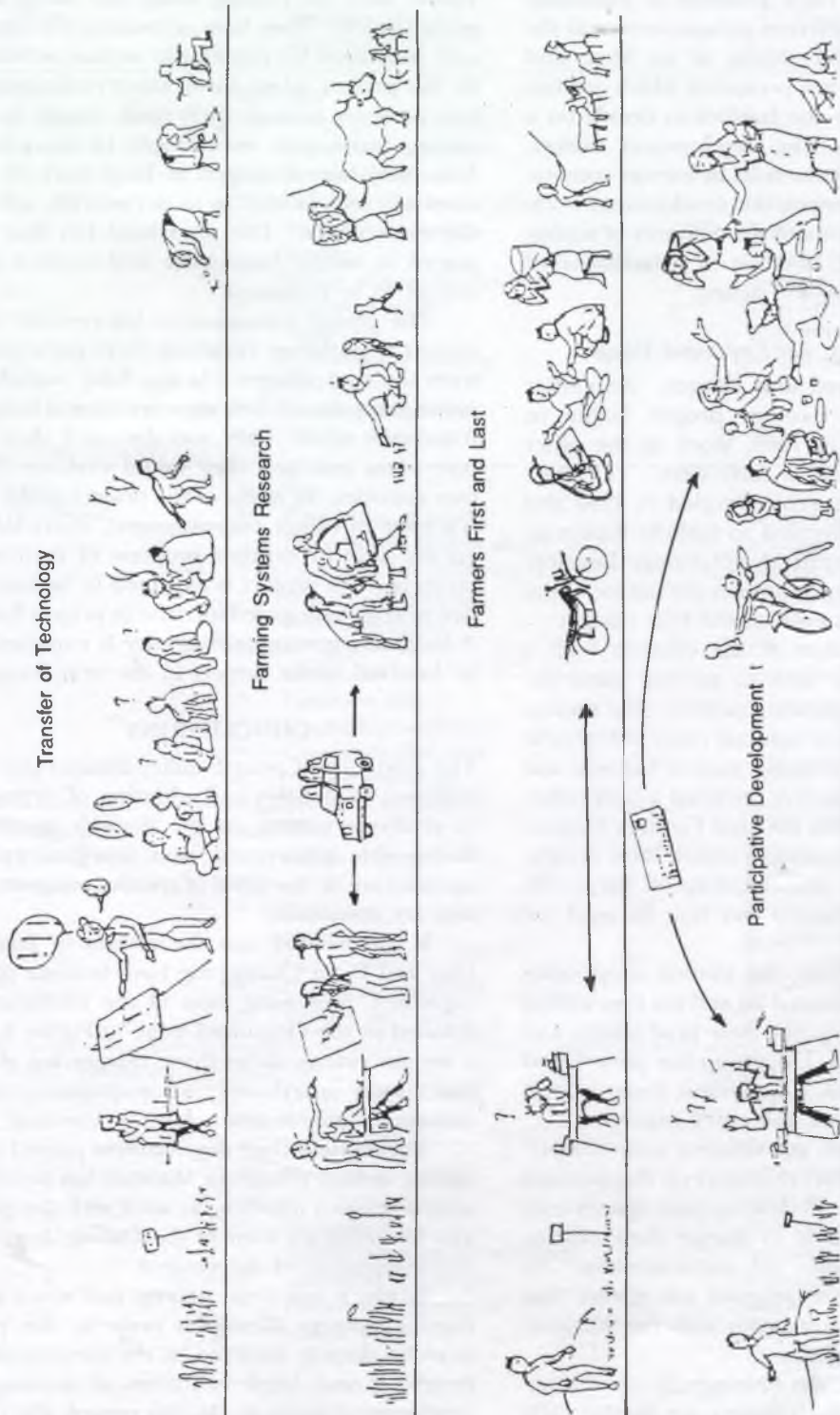


Figure 2. The Basic Differences Between TOT, FST and PD

their problems. Each problem is examined thoroughly from different perspectives until the development worker thinks of an idea; and several hypotheses are presented which are further discussed with the families to decide on a course of action. The development worker, therefore, must possess skills in human communication. In this project, the development worker's attitude is not one of the deliverer of sophisticated technology, but that of a facilitator of community learning and action.

#### *The Project Outcomes: The Empowered Villages*

The project involved four villages. An earlier Basic Needs and Ecology project began in Kampung Batu 9 in 1988. Work in the other three villages started in early 1991. The Basic Needs and Ecology project ended in 1990 and the project team decided to include Kampung Batu 9 in the current Model Village Development Project. Figure 3 outlines the nature of the project activities in each of the four villages.

In Kampung Batu 9, the villagers built a ferro-cement water tank to provide water for their group guava planting project. The success of the group project induced other villagers to venture into cash cropping, such as bananas and aquaculture. The project provided a cash collateral of RM3,500.00 to the local Farmers' Organization to enable farmers to obtain farm credits. The farmers have since paid-up all the credit taken and the collateral can now be used for other activities.

In Kampung Jijan, the women cooperative members are a dedicated lot and are ever willing to learn how to enhance their productivity and find better markets. The group has persevered in the face of stiff competition from a local manufacturer of soya and chilly sauces.

In Sungai Buah, the villagers were "forced" to adopt a rabbit rearing project on the assumed promise that the local development agency concerned would be able to market their rabbits. However, this venture did not materialise. In fact, this project strengthened our resolve that project activities must begin with the villagers' interest and capabilities.

In Kampung Bukit Changgang, a youth settlement scheme, the villagers are in the early forties and have young children. The women group won the award for most progressive farm women group for the State of Selangor in 1992.

Twelve men are rearing about 400 sheep as a group activity. They have accumulated a significant trust fund for community welfare activities. In this project, when there was a realization of how to better manage their stock, simple inventorying techniques were taught to the group. Now, they have managed to keep track of the ewes and kids as well as to periodically sell off the extra males. The pre-school kits that are placed in twenty homes are well-received and are yet to be evaluated.

The project management has recently conducted a workshop involving forty participants from the four villages. At the 3-day workshop, participants shared their experiences and learned from each other. They also discussed their future plans and how they would evaluate their own activities. In terms of the project goals, this is a stage of village empowerment, where villagers are able to monitor progress of their own projects. The project is expected to be intensified with an anticipated increase in project funds. A local non-government agency is expected to be involved in the project in the near future.

## CONCLUSIONS

The existence of poor families dictates the formulation of policies and adoption of strategies to eradicate poverty in the decades to come. Responsible government and non-government agencies are in dire need of creative programmes that are sustainable.

It can be said that the villages of Batu 9, Jijan and Bukit Changgang have become more organized, possessing most of the attributes as detailed in the Organized stage in Figure 1. To a certain extent, these three villages are showing some attributes of sustained, self-managed communities.

The model village development project conducted in four villages in Malaysia has provided several insights into how to work with the poor. The following are some of the findings from the implementation of the project:

Firstly, it has been proven that when conducting poverty alleviation projects, the poor must be directly involved in the identification, designing and implementation of sustainable development projects. In this regard, the roles of the poor and the development worker have to change to encourage a participative and empowering mechanism in village development.

Village	Activities (A) and Project Inputs (I)	Preliminary outcomes
1. Natu 9 (6 men 4 women)	<b>Activities</b> * Group guava growing * Collective aquaculture * Group rice growing * Individual banana planting * Local village market <b>Inputs:</b> * Village committee meetings * Extension visits * Study trip * Ferro-cement training * Water-pump * Credit guarantee * Villager workshop	* Improved group relations * Personal skills and mitigation * Industriousness * Strong linkages with other government agencies * Improved leadership * Positive concern for environment
2. Jijan (9 women)	<b>Activities</b> * Production of snacks (banana and tapioca chips) * Production of chilly sauce * Women cooperative development <b>inputs:</b> * Study visit * Extension visits * Leadership workshop * Committee meetings * Villager workshop	* Active women group activities * Improved leadership in cooperative * Members learning new knowledge and skills
3. Sungai Buah (8 men, 4 women)	<b>Activities</b> * Rabbit rearing <b>Inputs:</b> * Subsodies from development agency * Extension visits * Committee meetings * Villager workshop	* Learning from project failure * Cautious, but determined group
4. Bukit Changgang (29 men, 20 women)	<b>Activities</b> * Group sheep rearing * Women handicraft * Village library * Pre-school learning <b>Inputs</b> * Extension visits * Simplified stock inventorying * Committee meetings * Pre-school learning kit * Villager workshop	Improved group * Improved group relations * Strong linkages with other development agencies * Can manage conflicts * Improved leadership * Possess community assets * Have a track record of achievements * Improved pre-school vigour * Have unique quality

Figure 3. Project characteristics and outcomes in four villages

Secondly, it has been found that local development approaches that promote sustainable growth-from-below strategies must be "home-grown". They must be situationally relevant, non-threatening and put the beneficiaries in control. Responsible control of their developmental efforts, after all, can lead to a responsible approach to sustainable agriculture.

Thirdly, the project has provided reasonable support for the idea that when the poor are socially empowered, they could be capacitated to examine their own situations and suggest their own ideas of how best to overcome their own conditions.

Fourthly, the foregoing further lends support to an inherent principle in the project that a human-resource development type of inputs is crucial in unleashing individual desires and cementing positive group relations.

Fifthly, the project has exhibited that when poor families are expected to be fully involved, project sustainability is a priority, and when flexibility of resources allocation is crucial, the participative approach used in this project has been successful.

Sixthly, development of the poor is very much a social process. The more the development worker is trained in human communication or adult education, the better prepared is

he or she to strike a helping and respectful relationship with the poor.

Lastly, the project has illustrated that there is virtue and justification for development workers to be socially competent and to possess a willingness to be closely associated with poor families to encourage villager action. This is because sustainable development is dependent on the changes and desires in individuals which are encouraged through open communication; this ultimately enhances individual freedom which culminates in group action to improve themselves.

#### REFERENCES

- CHAMBERS, R. and B.P. GHILDYAL. 1985. *Agricultural Research for Resource-Poor Farmers: The Farmer First and Last Model*. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.
- CIRDAP. 1991. *Model Village in Rural Development: A Sustainable Growth Strategy in Asia*. Dhaka: CIRDAP.
- SULAIMAN M. YASSIN. 1992. *Komunikasi untuk pembasmian kemiskinan: keperluan mengubah pendekatan Pasca Sidang Seminar Penyelidikan Komunikasi*. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Bangi.

(Received 22 January 1992)