

# RURAL SARAWAK EYES MORE FUNDS FROM PUTRAJAYA TO BRING IT UP TO PAR

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Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh (left) was reported as saying that the federal allocation in Budget 2017 announced last Friday was below the state's expectations. — Picture by Sulok Tawie

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 23 — Sarawak Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh hopes the federal government can inject more funds to lift the rural communities who form the bulk of the hornbill state.

The Sunday edition of *The Borneo Post* reported Wong saying the federal allocation in Budget 2017 announced last Friday was below the state's expectations.

“We are indeed looking forward to receiving more allocations from federal, taking into consideration the economic status of Sarawak which is way behind our counterparts in Peninsular Malaysia.

“In addition, we are also looking for more allocations to upgrade many rural schools that are in dilapidated constitution, as well as clinics to serve our rural communities,” he was quoted saying.

Wong highlighted that Putrajaya had allocated RM1.4 billion next year for four university hospitals, but Universiti Malaysia Sarawak was not included in the list of teaching hospitals despite the many years of anticipation by the state.

He listed however allocations specifically for Sarawak such as street lamps for rural villages, the building of Batang Lupar Bridge, the reconstruction of 30 destitute schools through the Industrial Building System, the setting up of a new Rural Transformation Centre and infrastructure development for the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy.

In a separate report, the same newspaper cited Wong saying Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem will table a rural-friendly budget for Sarawak at the state assembly next month, where the bulk of funds will be set aside to develop its interior.

Lo Khere Chiang, Batu Kawah assemblyman was also reported saying he hoped the state will get a bigger allocation from the federal government to improve its rural infrastructure such as roads, street lightings and drainage systems.

According to *The Borneo Post*, he had said Sarawak had fallen behind other states in Peninsular Malaysia in terms of rural infrastructure and had urged for both Sabah and Sarawak to be given more funds for such development.

Last August, Malaysia's chief statistician Datuk Dr Abdul Rahman Hasan said the poverty rate in Sarawak had fallen to 0.9 per cent in 2014 from 56.5 per cent 40 years ago.

According to data in the Khazanah Research Institute's (KRI) "The State of Households II" report released this August, Kelantan, Perak, Sarawak and Sabah are states which had the highest percentage of households earning below RM2,000 at 31.4 per cent, 21.3 per cent, 19.3 per cent and 18.7 per cent respectively.

The report also said there were still pockets of poverty, despite the country's overall poverty rate had fallen from 1.7 per cent in 2012 to 0.6 per cent in 2014 and the hardcore poverty rate reduced by around 400 households from 0.2 per cent (2012) to 0.06 per cent (2014).

The KRI report cited the 11th Malaysia Plan, where the poverty rate for Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia was at 34 per cent, while the Bumiputera community in Sabah and Sarawak had a poverty rate of 20.2 per cent and 7.3 per cent respectively.

Sarawak has long been considered a key vote bank for the Barisan Nasional along with its Borneo neighbour Sabah. An overwhelming number of Sarawakians voted in the coalition at the last state election in May, giving it 72 out of 82 state seats.