

# **eCommerce and Tourism: Leveraging on University-Community Collaboration for Socio-economic Development of Indigenous Communities in Sarawak**

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## **Abstract**

*With many Indigenous people living in remote communities, opportunities for traditional face-to-face commerce are extremely limited. Even in urban centres, the cost of setting up bricks-and-mortar shop-fronts limits business prospects for many indigenous people, despite the high demand and high prices customers are prepared to pay for their art, crafts and cultural tourism services. As a consequence, many indigenous communities of Sarawak have in the past been subject to massive exploitation by non-indigenous middlemen, who have paid the crafts person little for their work and then enjoyed huge profits themselves.*

*The Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovations (ISITI) has been working together with the Penan community in Long Lamai since 2009 to set up infrastructure and telecommunications in their rural village. Identifying the problems such as rural-urban migration and the need to improve the social economic status of Penans in Long Lamai, ISITI obtained grants to develop an eCommerce eco-system for the community. The website serves as an online platform to promote their homestay and to sell Penan handicrafts to the outside of Long Lamai. However during the two years of the project, other issues have transpired due to new aspects, which had to be taken account. In this paper, we are sharing experience, challenges and lesson learned of our long term partnership project with the local communities of Sarawak. The research findings will help researchers to better understand the structure of economic activities in indigenous communities and then use this understanding for designing better solutions for addressing social and economic problems in indigenous communities.*

**Keywords: eCommerce, Long Lamai, Penans, Handicraft, Socio-economic Development**

## **1. Introduction**

Rural areas in the world have been facing serious social problems stemming from the diminishing proportion of the young generation and a decrease in total population (Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2016). These problems are attributable to the active work force moving to urban areas leaving behind the old population performing agricultural activities. Rural life can no longer be sustainable without an injection of innovative ideas and giving the local rural people something to live for. These local people are, in general, not fully aware of the hidden values available in the remote areas such as the beautiful and intact nature, natural healthy dietary habits, slow life style, and traditional skills and raw materials. The real problems, commonly identified, are lack of recognition on these valuable intangible assets in remote rural areas, besides the diminishing economic activities (Suzuki, 2005).

People in rural areas began to sense the above stated problems. However most of them had not initiated any concrete counter measures when the national government began to enact the revitalisation and promotional policy against the marginalization and outflow of population from rural areas. In response some of the villagers and external supporters began to take their own initiatives to fight against this marginalization process. One of the ideas commonly put forward was to activate the movement of appreciating traditional life style, skills, and values among rural communities. Those who took decisive action were not necessarily villagers, but external people such as non-residential university researchers,