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# The Environments of the Poor in Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific



Edited by

Aris Ananta • Armin Bauer • Myo Thant



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Asian Development Bank



Asian Development Bank Institute



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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## MAKING A LIVING IN THE FACE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE A Case in an Indigenous Community in Sarawak, Malaysia

Wong Swee Kiong and Ling How Kee

Malaysia is divided into thirteen states and three federal territories. Sarawak, located on the island of Borneo, is the largest state in Malaysia. It covers 124,450 square kilometres. Sarawak is richly endowed with natural resources, especially liquefied natural gas, petroleum, and rainforest. Its economy has historically been dominated by the primary sectors (agriculture, forestry, mining, and quarrying), mostly agriculture. But in line with the federal government's policy of economic growth through industrialization, the state government began promoting secondary and tertiary sectors in the 1970s (Kasim 1990). Sarawak was transformed from a poor backwater to a vibrant and industrializing state. By international standards, the level of poverty in Sarawak is now quite low. In 2009, 5.3 per cent (27,100 households) in Sarawak were found living in poverty and 1.0 per

cent in extreme poverty. The national incidence of extreme poverty were 3.8 per cent (EPU 2013). The incidence of poverty

Parts of the transformative process, such as hydroelectric dam, commercial agriculture, and logging, have not only caused a dwindling of the natural resources but also of what remains. The primary economy has been as a source of income for the state. Timber and its timber-based products have contributed substantial earnings to Sarawak. In 2009, 9 per cent (RM7.9 billion) of the state's export commodities in Sarawak though timber export earnings of timber products increased by a marginal increase to RM7.9 billion. The Industry Development Corporation of Sarawak is a source of raw material for the residents of the interior (for rattan baskets and a source of wild boar and wild honey) and hunter-gatherers and indigenous swidden farmers. Settled cash-crop peasants, plantations, and agro-industries (Wong 1992 cited in King 1993). The state and petrochemical industries and agro-industries such as oil-palm, replaced the small-scale agriculture such as rubber, cocoa, and pepper.

In this chapter, we look at how development changes affected the lives of people who have a close relationship with the environment, particularly the indigenous community based on fieldwork we carried out in an indigenous community experienced changes as a result of development. We were interested in the changes affected their ways of making a living. The views of the affected people, particularly the indigenous, that aims to let the voices of the local people be heard (2000a; Narayan et al. 2000b). By interviewing the people, we are able to gain insights into the ways of making a living and changes. We chose two villages<sup>3</sup> near the border (one of three administrative districts).



cent in extreme poverty. The national overall incidence of poverty and extreme poverty were 3.8 per cent and 0.7 per cent, respectively (EPU 2013). The incidence of poverty is higher in the rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

Parts of the transformative process, such as the Bakun hydroelectric dam, commercial agriculture, and logging, have required clearing parts of the rainforest (Ichikawa 2007). Development projects not only caused a dwindling of the rainforest,<sup>2</sup> but also the degrading of what remains. The primary economic value of Sarawak's rainforest has been as a source of income for the state through the exports of timber and its timber-based products. Timber industries have brought substantial earnings to Sarawak. In 2008, timber products constituted 9 per cent (RM7.9 billion) of the total export earnings of the major commodities in Sarawak though there was a slight drop in the total export earnings of timber products to RM6,698,067 in 2009, followed by a marginal increase to RM7,354,341 in 2010 (Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation 2011). The rainforest is a source of raw material for the residents of many of the rural communities of the interior (for rattan baskets and mats, and wooden furniture), and a source of wild boar and wild vegetables for food. Nomadic hunter-gatherers and indigenous swidden cultivators gradually became settled cash-crop peasants, plantation labourers, and urban workers (Wong 1992 cited in King 1993). But the introduction of wood-based and petrochemical industries and large-scale plantation cultivation, such as oil-palm, replaced the small-holding cultivation of cash crops such as rubber, cocoa, and pepper.

In this chapter, we look at how changes to the rainforest have affected the lives of people who have a close relationship with the natural environment, particularly the indigenous communities. This chapter is based on fieldwork we carried out in an effort to understand how an indigenous community experienced the changes in their environment as a result of development. We were particularly interested in how the changes affected their ways of making a living. In this essay we present the views of the affected people, adding to the body of knowledge that aims to let the voices of the local people be heard (Narayan et al. 2000a; Narayan et al. 2000b). By interviewing many of them, we were able to gain insights into the way the community experienced the changes. We chose two villages<sup>3</sup> near the forest in the district of Lundu (one of three administrative districts within the boundary of the division



of Kuching). Logging had been going on in the vicinity of the two villages since the early 1970s. The Gunung Gading National Park, which bordered the logging concession area then, is famous for the world's largest flowering plant, the *Rafflesia*, which was once under threat from logging. Further, oil palm plantations were introduced into the region in 1990 and 2003. The villages are accessible by roads in the Lundu/Sematan area in the Kuching division. Access to the Lundu Bazaar from the city of Kuching (the administrative capital of Sarawak) was made easier with the construction of the bridge across *Batang Kayan* (Kayan River) in July 2005. The road from Kuching city to the Lundu district has also been straightened and sealed. What used to be a four-hour trip now takes slightly over an hour. Our villages, as well as others in the areas, are home to the Dayak-Selako or Bidayuh-Selako community, a sub-group of Sarawak's Bidayuh ethnic group. According to anthropologist Awang Hasmadi (1992), the ancestors of the Selako once lived along the Salakau River in West Kalimantan, before migrating to Lundu, which was then part of the Brunei Sultanate. The Selako people used to traverse the mountain range that divides Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) and Sarawak (Malaysian Borneo) to farm both sides of the border until 1875, when the Brooke administration persuaded them to settle at their present location.

At the time of our fieldwork, the two villages have 274 households and 1,687 people between them (Lundu District Office 2011). All households live in individual houses, except for 20, which are grouped in a traditional longhouse in one of the villages. Prior to the 1970s, the villagers were subsistence farmers who also collected forest products, either to eat, to use to make rattan mats and baskets and build houses. Although in recent years many of the villagers, particularly the younger ones, are engaged in wage employment, the latest employment statistics show that 40.51 per cent from one village and 46.17 per cent from the other are self-employed farmers (Lundu District Office 2011). This condition indicates that land and forest resources are still important sources of livelihood for the villages.

Fifty-eight respondents were selected from the two villages using purposive sampling, which selected respondents from both sexes and various ages, educational levels, and occupations. However, there was also some convenience sampling, as the researchers were dependent on who was available and willing to be interviewed. Twenty-seven males

and thirty-one females from different villages were selected for face-to-face interviews. Most of the twenty were able to confirm that the changes in the two villages have become more pronounced. This may not be a good representation of the entire community, but it provided a valuable understanding of the community undergoing change. Besides the headmen of the villages, informants, namely the headmen of the villages, were also interviewed. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore about livelihood and the use of forest products for development project.<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked about (wild animals, fish, plants, nuts, and other forest products) building material) and the monetary value of the forest sale. Respondents were asked about how they had changed their environment, and how they had changed aspects of their lives and that of the community.

## FINDINGS

Several logging companies were said to be operating in the area. During the fieldwork, respondents reported that they were not aware of any logging companies whether the companies had been issued with licenses. They said that villagers protested against the logging activities by setting up blockades. There were fights between the villagers and the logging workers. A sixty-two-year-old man said that during a fight some of the villagers were injured and the logging station for six days.

A list of forest resources was obtained from the respondents. They were then asked to compare the current availability of these resources with their earlier availability. A respondent said that a *receding* was described, even though the Gunung Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary are in the area. A special species that is still available is the *Jering* tree,<sup>5</sup> which could be found in the area.

In general, the respondents from the two villages said that changes in the environment due to logging had affected the ways of making a living. For instance,