

The Impact of Livelihood Asset Accumulation on the Well-being and Psychology of Iban Rural Households in Sarawak

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Abstract

Despite still engaging in subsistence agriculture, the Iban in Pantu are increasingly embracing commercial and non-agricultural pursuits. The accumulation of various assets is crucial for the livelihood and well-being of the Iban community in Pantu. The assets encompass resources and capabilities that households can leverage to enhance their livelihood strategies. This study investigates the determinants of well-being among rural households in Pantu District Sri Aman, Sarawak, by exploring the accessibility to livelihood assets. The study specifically investigated the correlation between livelihood strategies and the accessibility of human, financial, social, capital, and natural assets. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the wellbeing and livelihood assets of households and communities, this study used a mixed methods approach that combined structured and in-depth interviews. The qualitative method involved conducting in-depth interviews with two community chiefs (*penghulus*) and 12 village heads (*tuai rumah*). A quantitative methodology was utilised in the study, consisting of a structured interview schedule. The collection of data involved the use of disproportionate purposive sampling to reach out to 220 heads of household (*bilik* family) living in 12 longhouses. The study found that the well-being of the local community is positively affected by the availability of social and natural resources. Available schemes, subsidies, and training provided through vertical and horizontal social integrations have helped the Iban community maintain their livelihood. Notwithstanding the depletion of natural resources in Pantu owing to development, natural capital retains its importance to the community. This study provides insights into asset accumulation strategies and the potential for improving Iban livelihoods in rural Pantu through the discovery of the significance of social and natural assets. Policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers working on sustainable rural development and poverty reduction can gain valuable insights from this study.

Keywords: Assets, Household, Iban Community, Livelihood, Rural, Sarawak

Introduction

The Ministry of Rural Development in Sarawak has introduced a range of initiatives and programs aimed at improving the quality of life of the community living in rural areas (Tuah et al., 2022). These include the Rural Electricity Supply Program (BELB), Village Road Lighting Program (LJK), and Rural Water Supply Program (BALB). Additionally, the Rural Transformation Programme (RTP) is committed to boosting rural economies by promoting the development of agro-products and services, as well as connecting rural businesses to urban and global markets. Despite the swift economic growth of Sarawak and the state's continuous endeavors towards rural development, several obstacles persist, hindering the advancement of asset accumulation and overall welfare of rural communities. Significant restrictions still impede the accumulation of social, financial, natural resources, capital, and human assets in rural communities. For example, there are insufficient investment in rural infrastructure, including transportation networks and market facilities, limits market access and opportunities for income generation (Tedong et al., 2022; Tuah et al., 2022; Yap et al., 2020). Additionally, Horn et al. (2021) state that several villages in Sarawak are located in remote areas with inadequate road infrastructure, requiring the utilisation of logging roads.

Rural household livelihood strategies must be adapted based on their accumulated assets to handle risks and shocks; households with more assets have greater options (Walle & Nayak, 2022). Correspondingly, it produces disparities between the community and the household, as diverse categories of assets yield different consequences on their means of livelihood. Scholars have conducted numerous studies on the significance of livelihood asset accumulation for rural welfare, such as Nurul et al. (2023) highlights the crucial role of social capital in the livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities. They suggest that social factors could serve as an alternative solution to poverty reduction. Additionally, according to Ibrahim et al. (2018), human assets were found to be the most crucial contributor to livelihood among vulnerable groups on the east coast of Malaysia when compared to other assets. Despite extensive research on livelihood assets, there's still a gap in research