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SEVEN COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES IN MALAYSIA

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Chapter 2

BORDER SAFETY: KAMPUNG MONGKOS TEBEDU SERIAN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

This case study was conducted in Kampung Mongkos, a village located within the Serian parliamentary constituency and close to the border between Malaysia and Indonesia. The proximity of this village to this international border renders it an area prone to activities contrary to both international and domestic laws. During the site visit and interview session, the researcher acquired information on security vulnerabilities, which the Malaysian government needs to address. Among these vulnerabilities is the issue of smuggling involving both humans and merchandises. Despite the fact that Kampong Mongkos is the closest village to the border, the security post of the Customs, Immigration, and Quarantine (CIQ) of Malaysia is located not in this village, but in a village approximately seven kilometres from the border. Therefore, this study emphasises on the importance of raising the level of security along the Malaysia-Indonesia border, particularly with regards to Kampong Mongkos.

INTRODUCTION

Border security is a critical issue as it plays a central role in promoting the safety and economic development of a country. The term 'border' is defined as a predetermined line of demarcation indicating the boundaries of power between two countries, even though no specific definition has been reached (Antoszek, 2018). Borders are anticipated to prevent the illegal flow of people, goods, and weapons as well as provide protection against terrorist threats and other security risks (Atger, 2008). The measures employed by governments to regulate border security include border patrols and surveillance as well as the use technology in the form of drones and biometric systems (Martins & Jumbert, 2022). These measures serve to curb illegal crossings and smuggling activities as well as facilitate the detection and interception of individuals or groups that pose a threat to national security.

As Malaysia is a country with several land and maritime borders, ensuring the safety and security of areas in the vicinity of these borders is the main concern of the Malaysian authorities (Darmayani, 2021). To that end, other than the implementation of measures; such as border patrols, surveillance, and the employment of technological techniques, including biometric systems; the Malaysian government has also established strong relationships with neighbouring countries to coordinate border safety efforts and prevent the illegal flow of people, goods, and weaponries. According to Anuar and Raharjo (2022), Malaysia has also implemented several immigration policies

to regulate the flow of people across its borders, including policies associated to asylum seekers and refugees as well as policies aimed at curbing human trafficking and smuggling activities. However, as in many other countries, Malaysia needs to establish a balance between border safety and the economic and social repercussions stemming from border regulations. Additionally, the impact of border regulations on international trade and inter-country relationships need to be taken into consideration.

The Malaysian state of Sarawak has the most extensive border in the country. In terms of issues related to Sarawak's state security, border security is the issue most frequently highlighted by the mass media. Sarawak shares borders with the Malaysian state of Sabah and the Indonesian territory of Kalimantan. According to Dunan and Adnan (2012), social and cultural differences as well as border issues represent the catalysts for political disagreements between Malaysia and Indonesia. The porous Sarawak-Kalimantan border is associated with an alarming number of criminal operations. Over the years, local police have received reports regarding illegal crossings, drug trafficking operations, kidnappings, auto thefts, smuggling, and the infiltration of illegal immigrants. Despite persistent efforts on the part of the Sarawak government to enhance the level of border security, including the setting up of five new guard posts in 2018, the problems remain largely unresolved.

The West Kalimantan border region, for instance, has long been the source of intense trepidation for the

authorities in Kalimantan. Eilenberg (2012) reported that the population living along the border region, particularly the remote border region of Kapuas Hulu, in West Kalimantan, Indonesia are often viewed as a menacing and potentially subversive community for whom various illegal practices are part and parcel of daily life. Over many years, Indonesian job-seekers have illegally traversed the porous border to gain entry into Sarawak, Malaysia.

Other than the carrying out of border patrols and surveillance (Anuar and Raharjo, 2022), the Malaysian government has also cooperated with neighbouring countries to coordinate border security efforts aimed at curbing the illegal cross border movement of people, goods, and weaponries. In their efforts to promote border security, the Sarawak government needs to consider the economic and social impact of border regulations on international trade activities and inter-country relationships. Also, it is essential that the Sarawak government establish a balance between border security and the rights of individuals, including asylum seekers and refugees hoping to take refuge in the state. The establishment of a proper balance between border security and the rights of foreign individuals seeking refuge will serve to ensure the safety and economic stability of the people of Sarawak.

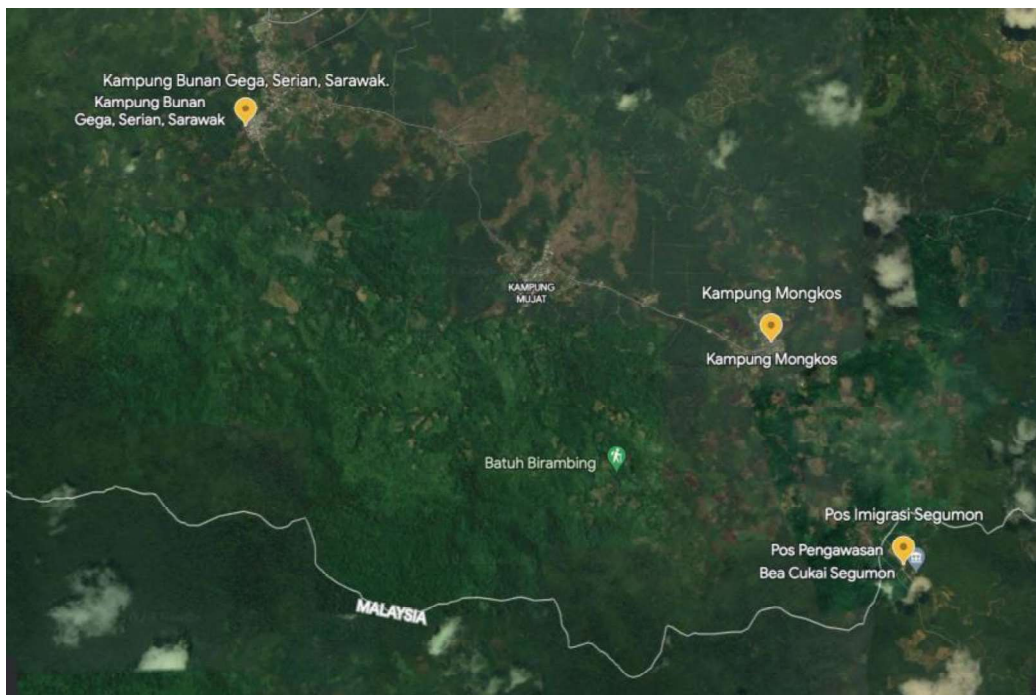
International borders can also turn out to be a location, where individuals from both sides of the border are encouraged or even invited to participate in activities that could be classified as either legal or illicit, depending on the laws and regulations of the two countries in question, and the

social acceptance of the communities in question (Fadahunsi & Rosa, 2002; Johnson & Post, 1996; Kyle & Koslowski, 2012).

On August 24, 1970, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia introduced the Border Trade Agreement (BTA), which established several guiding principles regarding cross-border trade, cross-border activities, and the nature as well as value of goods and products (Agusriyanti, 2020). As reported by Anuar and Raharjo (2022), the maximum transaction value for the two border communities is likewise restricted by the BTA to not more than 600 Malaysian ringgit per transaction.

STUDY AREA: KAMPUNG MONGKOS, SERIAN

Figure 11 Map of Kampung Mongkos and its proximity to the Malaysia-Indonesia border.



Source: Google Earth (16 August 2012). Google Maxar Technologies CNES/Airbus

This case study focuses on concerns at the border region of Sarawak and Kalimantan (Malaysia-Indonesia), specifically Kampung Mongkos in Tebedu, Serian. Kampung Mongkos is located about 14 kilometres to the northwest of Serian town, close to the border separating Sarawak and Kalimantan. More than 200 families live in this village, making up a population of 1200, with the Bidayuh community representing the majority. In Kampung Mongkos, the main economic activity is agriculture and the crops cultivated include rice, pepper, and local fruits. Several villagers have also ventured into the cultivation of oil palm. The well-known homestay programme offered by the villagers provides visitors with the opportunity to experience Bidayuh cuisine and culture while accommodated in a traditional Bidayuh longhouse built in 1959.

Local guides from the village are available for visitors interested in a 2.5-kilometre hike to Pos Segumon on the Indonesian border. The nearest Indonesian village to Kampung Mongkos is Desa Segumon and these two villages share close ties in terms of family, ethnicity, language, and culture. The close relationship among the inhabitants of these villages, stemming from blood and social ties, has facilitated easy cross border travels for community events via existing roads (Abdullah et al., 2016). However, easy cross border travels also provide criminal elements with the opportunity to conduct illicit activities, such as smuggling and human trafficking.

The non-existence of a Customs, Immigration, and Quarantine (CIQ) security post in Kampung Mongkos is

conspicuous, taking into consideration the fact that this village is closest to the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. This is the first point of arrival for those travelling from Indonesia to Malaysia, prior to their arrival at the nearest CIQ checkpoint at Kampung Bunan Gega, which is approximately eight kilometres from Kampung Mongkos.

As the nearest General Operations Force (GOP) office and police station are also located in Kampung Bunan, the response to reports and complaints lodged by the villagers of Kampung Mongkos is predictably slow. The absence of a CIQ checkpoint in Mongkos-Segomon to monitor human movements hampers the performance of the Malaysian army and GOF operating in the vast thickly forested area of Serikin. Such a situation contributes towards the compromising of national security.

METHODOLOGY

This study, which was conducted during our visit to the Serian parliamentary constituency in December of 2022, entailed focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, informal discussions, and the utilisation of secondary data from reports, existing literature, and other documents. During the FGD, the issue of border security in Serian was raised by several parties, including government agencies, community leaders, and members of the Sarawak state legislative assembly. The discussion was recorded and transcribed.

Subsequently, we sought a recommendation from a member of parliament regarding a reliable participant in the key informant interview and he proposed the Kampung Mongkos village head. The approximately one hour interview, which was conducted at the home of the village head, was recorded and transcribed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Discussions on the issue of border security, particularly in the context of Kampung Mongkos, continued over lunch with participants sharing accounts of safety concerns associated to crimes such as thefts and armed robberies stemming from the illegal entry of foreigners.

During the interview with the *ketua kampung* (village head) on December 12, 2022, we learned that the border security post was shifted from Kampung Mongkos to Kampung Bunan Gega in the early 2000s. The nearest police station, clinic, and school (SMK Tebakang) to Kampung Mongkos are also located in Kampung Bunan Gega.

According to the Village Head, despite the proximity of Kampung Mongkos to the Indonesian border, the presence of Malaysian authorities is not felt in that area. Instead, Malaysian soldiers are frequently seen patrolling along the Ta Ann palm oil plantation and through the *nibong* (Malay feather palm) forest, locations which are rather far from Kampung Mongkos.

The village head confirms that many residents of Kampung Segumon and Kampung Mongkos share family ties. He also states that, while the lack of border security is evident in Kampung Mongkos, villagers traversing the border have observed Indonesian officers on patrolling duty in the vicinity. According to him, *"The Indonesians built that road and their security forces it. It is a proper road compared to the Malaysian side."* (Interview conducted on 12 December, 2022, Kampung Mongkos, Tebedu, Serian)¹.

The most pertinent issues affecting the lives of Kampung Mongkos villagers are smuggling and human trafficking activities. According to our key informant, *"Many activities that aren't right, that violate the laws of our country, have been going on since the 80s. Smuggling and so on."*² The village head also reported that smuggling activities mainly involved the movement of drugs and goods into and out of Malaysian territory.

"This kind of activity was more prolific prior to 2018. This isn't a rat trail anymore. It's become an elephant road." That

¹ Translated from: *"...orang Indon sana itu jalan dia buat ho...jalan border ni..dia bikin...pakai sidak dia punya anggota pakai jalan ronda...kat sini mana hutan semua...proper Indon ni..."*.

² Translated from *"...sekarang dari tahun 80-an banyak aktiviti tidak betul...menyalahi undang-undang negara kita...penyeludupan dan sebagainya."* (Interview conducted on *12 December 2022*, Kampung Mongkos Tebedu, Serian).

what I always tell those people [the authorities].”³ (Interview conducted on 12 December 2022, Kampung Mongkos, Tebedu, Serian).

The lack of border security in Kampung Mongkos, Serian is a longstanding problem, which has drawn the attention of high-level personnel in the Malaysian government. In December, 2009, during the 2nd Meeting of the 2nd Session of the 12th Parliament sitting and again in December 2020 in during the 3rd Meeting of the 3rd Session of the 14th Parliament sitting (Hansard Parliament), the proposal to increase border security personnel by reforming the border scouts in Sarawak was forwarded by Serian member of parliament, Dato’ Sri Richard Riot. Mambong member of parliament, Dato Dr. James Dawos, who concurred with the Serian MP, stated that *“The Serian and Mambong Parliamentary Constituencies, Dear Deputy Minister, border Kalimantan. Therefore, the issue of security at the border arises every day as robbers and thieves cross over from the other side using the numerous rat trails. They steal motorcycles, rob houses, and rob families at gun point. Firearms have now come in through these illegal routes.”⁴ to emphasise on the dire need for increased border security in Serian.*

³ Translated from: *“...aktiviti aktiviti seperti ini tahun 2018...sebelum itulah memang hebat...itu yang saya selalu ada dialog dengan orang itu...bukan jalan tikus lagi...jalan gajah...”*

⁴ Translated from: *“Kawasan Parlimen Serian dan kawasan Parlimen Mambong Yang Berhormat Timbalan Menteri, adalah bersempadan dengan Kalimantan. Oleh itu, isu keselamatan di sempadan timbul setiap hari kerana perompak-perompak, pencuri-pencuri menyeberang*

Deputy Minister of agricultural modernisation and regional development, *Yang Berhormat* (YB) Martin Ben, who is also the state assemblyman for N22 Kedup mentioned that cross-border activities, particularly those involving illegal immigrants, increased following the closure of the national border due to the Covid-19 pandemic (*"Pos Kawalan Sempadan Perlu Dibina Di Kampung Mongkos."*, 2022). During his visit to Kampung Mongkos in March, 2022, he proposed that the Malaysian National Security Council grant its approval for the construction of a border security post in the village.

According to our key informant, *"Human trafficking activities have recently increased. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, they are still coming in."* (Interview conducted on 12 December 2022, Kampung Mongkos, Tebedu, Serian).⁵

The illegal delivery of foreign labour from Indonesia to Malaysia is orchestrated by parties from both sides of the Indonesian-Malaysian border. In terms of smuggling activities, upon illegal entry, Indonesian smugglers are received by their Malaysian contacts at pre-arranged locations within the Malaysian border. As for human

dari sebelah sana melalui jalan-jalan tikus yang sekian hari sekian banyak. Mencuri motosikal, merompak rumah-rumah, merompak keluarga dengan menggunakan senjata api. Senjata api sekarang sudah masuk melalui jalan-jalan tikus."

⁵ Translated from: *"...pemerdagangan orang baru baru ini memang hebat...walaupun Covid masih ada masih masuk..."*

trafficking, exorbitant fees are imposed on the men, women, and children victims of this criminal act.

The complaints lodged by villagers regarding smuggling activities appear to have fallen on deaf ears, leading to the assumption that there are those in authority working hand-in-hand with smuggling syndicates for personal gain. In a study conducted by Dahari *et al.* (2019), it was reported that the lack of integrity and susceptibility to bribery among officers at border checkpoints are the major contributing factors towards cross-border smuggling activities.

Despite the occasional arrest of certain high-profile smugglers, dissatisfied villagers decided to take matters into their own hands through the construction of one-step barricades. Following the interview, the village head led us to the gate the villagers had built to deter illegal entry from the Indonesian side of the border. He also showed us the signage put up by villagers denying entry into the Malaysian side of the border during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns.

A previous barricade constructed through the sponsorship of YB Martin Ben was demolished by smugglers, leaving the villagers with little choice but to erect a barricade of their own at their own expense. Costing 1500 *Malaysian ringgit*, the construction of the barricade together with consistent monitoring and patrols conducted by the villagers have served to significantly reduce the occurrence of smuggling and human trafficking activities. The barricade,

which is made of iron, is cemented to the ground and fortified with chains as well as a heavy-duty lock.

Figure 12 The barricade between Kampung Mongkos and the road that leads to the border



In addition to smuggling and human trafficking activities, the villagers also have to contend with vehicle thefts, particularly motorbikes, and robberies at their homes. In one of these incidents, a thief was fatally shot by a villager, emphasizing the fact that the lack of security at the border jeopardises the lives of the local population.

"There was a theft here just the other day. The villagers couldn't take it anymore. So, they shot the robber dead. He was from the other side. He'd robbed house all the way to Kampung Bunan. He broke into a teacher's house, stole a gun, and ran

*away. Then he stole the motorcycle of one of this village's (Kampung Mongkos) villagers. The villagers managed to catch him and shot him."*⁶ (Interview conducted on 12 December 2022, Kampung Mongkos, Tebedu, Serian).

Other than the problems arising from illegal border crossings, the villagers also have to contend with the transmission of diseases from foreigners to the local population. In a health screening session conducted a day prior to the interview, 29 to 30 villagers were diagnosed with tuberculosis. The village head claimed that *"The officials from the Serian health department came here to screen for tuberculosis. There was one case of tuberculosis in the longhouse. There is a lot of mixing [between locals and foreigners]."*⁷

⁶ Translated from: *"...kecurian...itu hari ada..kecurian sini...sampai orang kampung sudah tidak tahan lagi...tembak dia..mati... orang seberanglah...sampai dia merompak sampai Kampung Bunan sana ho...masuk rumah CiKampungu...ambil senapang...lari ho...dia curi motosikal org kampung sinilah...Kampung Mongkos..dapat tangkap...orang kampung tembak..."*

⁷ Translated from: *"...pejabat bahagian eh kesihatan bahagian Serian datang sini buat saringan...TB ada kes satu..TB di longhouse sana...yelah klo banyak campur..."* (among locals & foreigners).

Figure 13 Signage warning against smuggling of goods, particularly animal products across the border



According to the locals, pigs are slaughtered in Malaysia and then transported to Indonesia to be sold at a more lucrative price. This activity infuriates the Bidayuh community as, during transportation by car or motorcycle, the blood dripping from the pig carcasses desecrates the land that their ancestors proclaimed sacred. Due to the cheaper price of pigs in Malaysia compared to Indonesia, Indonesian traders are willing to go through the trouble of purchasing and slaughtering pigs in Malaysia before transporting them for sale in Indonesia.

The participant also claimed that, *"In the past, the young people here didn't know what drugs were. Now they do."*⁸ Even with the threat of dire consequences, including the death penalty posed by Malaysia's drug-trafficking laws, the participant added that, *"Many are apprehended carrying drugs instead than gas barrels."*⁹ These reports are an indication that lax movement control at the border can lead to drug abuse and drug smuggling operations.

The participant suggests the implementation of round-the-clock border patrols and the setting up of a CIQ post at Kampung Mongkos, the village closest to the border area. The participant also opined that, *"In terms of safety, Mongkos is indeed very fragile. What is the most important suggestion? 24-hour security. Guarded control posts at the border, not here. Don't guard the back of the house. There used to be a PGA here, but in 2000 it was moved to Bunan."*¹⁰ The participant claimed, *"I have told the Minister many times by speaking to the officer. I said, "This is like a bomb. The time bomb*

⁸ Translated from: *"...dulu budak budak sini tidak tahu apa makan dadah..pun sudah tahu makan dadah..."*

⁹ Translated from: *"...banyak kena tangkap ...bukan bawa tong gas...tapi dadah..."*

¹⁰ *dari segi keselamatan Mongkos ini memang...very fragile...apa cadangan yang paling penting...24 jam di jagalah...di kawallah...pos kawalan...patut di sempadan...bukan disini...jangan jaga belakang rumahlah...dulu memang ada PGA sini tapi apa kena tahun 2000 dia pindah pergi Bunan sana..."*

is there. It may be okay now, but over time..."¹¹. The participant also warned, "If we don't take care, in the future it will be like a time bomb. It's a crime to invade borders. It can happen at any time. How can we sleep peacefully when it can happen at any time? Day or night! Because there is no security, they can just walk right in. It shouldn't be like that. But it can happen in our country because the soldiers that are sent here are stationed somewhere else. It's the same thing with the police."¹²

For the Serian members of parliament, the lack of security at the border area is a longstanding and worrying situation. The minister of home affairs, who paid a visit to Kampung Mongkos, pledged appropriate action to rectify the situation. However, to date, the level of security at the border area remains unchanged.

The appeals by locals and members of parliament for a new security post at Kampung Mongkos, or at least at a location closer to the border, is also due to the existence of illegal entry routes, or *jalan tikus* as the locals call it, through this village. The use of these illegal routes became

¹¹ "...berkali kali saya cakap dekat Menteri ketika waktu dialog dengan petugas...saya cakap ini macam...ini time...ini macam bomb ba...time bomb is there...klo ada masa...sekarang ok la..."

¹² "...kalau kita tidak jaga lain kali macam time bomb lah...itu jenayah merentas sempadan...dia bila masa saja...tidak dapat tidur lena ba...camana..malam siang..boleh berlaku ba...kerana tiada kawalan...bebas saja masuk...itu tidak patut la berlaku...di negara kita yang ada...mana tidak...askar di hantar sini simpan tempat lain...PGA simpan tempat lain..."

particularly rampant during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the closing of legal borders to curb the spread of this disease. The village head urged the authorities to set up a permanent post in Kampung Mongkos, conduct regular inspections through roadblocks, and if possible, implement 24-hour monitoring at the border.

According to the participant, *"There are RELA troops near Kampung Bunan. RELA is posted along the border, just watching people. I reprimanded them. I asked them, "What is your role here? Just taking pictures of people going in and out every day?"*¹³

During the FGD, the *penghulu* (chieftain) and members of the group stated that the lack of security and monitoring at the border area renders the safety and well-being of the Kampung Mongkos community at risk.

The recent decision of the Indonesian government to move its capital to Kalimantan ought to raise alarm bells among the figures heading the Malaysian army and police force. This decision, which may lead to massive illegal crossings from both sides of the border, makes it urgent that the Sarawak-Kalimantan border be swiftly and significantly

¹³Translated from: *"...ada pasukan RELA dekat Kampung Bunan tu...border punya RELA...mana ada orang tengok saja...saya tegur dorang..apa tugas kita orang tok?"gambar tiap hari sapa (keluar masuk)..."* Kampung Bunan is located around 7.5 km from border but the CIQ was built there.

fortified. According to a newspaper article (*“Armed Forces to Beef up Border Security in Sabah, Sarawak Following Relocation of Indonesia’s Capital to Kalimantan.”*, 2022), published on 14 September 2022 in the Malay Mail, “the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) will increase the number of border posts and regiments at the locations as the relocation is expected to begin in the first quarter of 2024.” Nevertheless, due to the longstanding and escalating border issues described through this undertaking, we propose that work on the establishment of the border post in Kampung Mongkos begins as soon as possible and before the targeted year of 2024.

In efforts to address border security issues, it is necessary that stipulations in the federal list be adhered to. As such, to accelerate the process, collaboration between the state and federal governments is essential. The Sarawak state government, through their YB, expressed concern regarding the lack of urgency in the setting up of a proper and reliable CIQ in the area. The state government also requested for additional border posts for the monitoring and deterrence of illegal activities along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

State agencies are understandably concerned about the porous nature of the border and the illegal activities occurring in its vicinity. In the early 70s, there were requests for the reinstatement of border scouts to curb the illegal activities taking place at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

During the budget 2022 parliamentary debate, Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim requested the fortification of

security at the border citing the shifting of Indonesia's capital to Nusantara, East Kalimantan (The Borneo Post).

The anxiety level among Sarawakians climbed several notches at the announcement by Indonesia's President Jokowi regarding the relocation of his country's capital to East Kalimantan. With this relocation of Indonesia's capital, Sarawak's currently weak border control and inadequate border infrastructure will render the state vulnerable to massive unauthorised border crossings.

The findings derived through this study also revealed that, while Indonesians are usually accused of border-related wrongdoings, the locals may not be completely uninvolved as there are indications that some are leaders of criminal organisations operating in the border area. Indonesia is looked upon as the black market haven for transactions involving illegal items, such as drugs and stolen cars.

Although the border was closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, this did not put an end to illegal border crossings, with some wrongdoers bringing the Covid-19 virus along with them. The difficulties faced in limiting the movement of animals into Sarawak during the African swine fever outbreak is another reminder of the urgent need to tighten controls at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

CONCLUSION

For every country, border security translates into national security. The earlier invasion of the Malaysian state of Sabah

by enemy forces, which led to bloodshed and a high death toll, is a grim reminder of the need for strict border control measures. It is our expectation that, with the findings derived through this case study, government agencies tasked with ensuring national security will take the necessary steps and elevate the level of security at the border area to deter the occurrence of incidents detrimental to the inhabitants of Kampung Mongkos, in particular, and the Malaysian state of Sarawak in general.

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SDGs and Grassroots Realities: Seven Community Case Studies in Malaysia (2023), edited by Dr Teo Sue Ann, is an outcome of the APPGM-SDGs mapping process in 2022. It comprises seven in-depth community case studies which bring the readers on a journey to different localities across Malaysia.

These studies are located in seven parliamentary constituencies across Sabah, Sarawak, Perak, Selangor Kuala Lumpur and Kelantan. Five are from the rural and two from the urban locations.

The seven researchers employed the qualitative methodology in the issue mapping. Each engagement allowed the researchers to document the social, economic, and environmental issues and give insight into each of the issues, including the lived experiences of the grassroots communities in dealing with them.

The fundamental objective of these community case studies is to initiate meaningful and in-depth discussions about the highlighted issues. The issues are often longstanding, highlighted by the community in the hope that the APPGM-SDG researchers could bring the issues to “pihak atasan” (translated as higher authorities), as they said.

The theme that rings a bell in SDGs is “leaving no one behind”. However, here it is, “leaving no village or community behind”. Community intervention strategies and community development approaches are required. However, these case studies illustrate the agential actions of the community’s effort in managing the issues. They, therefore, become important stakeholders in localising the global agenda of SDGs to the grassroots level.

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