

# **THE CONDITION AND CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE IN THE OIL PALM PLANTATIONS OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sarawak is facing the problem of labour shortage in its oil palm plantations. It is difficult to recruit Malaysians to work in the plantations and, therefore, hiring foreign workers has become one of the solutions. Since the number of Indonesian workers and children is increasing, the Indonesian Government has requested to set up Community Learning Centre (CLC) in plantations for the Indonesian children in Sarawak. This article aims to explore the existence of CLC and the challenges faced by its teachers. A qualitative study has been employed, and data was collected using face-to-face interviews and interviews via telephone and text messages. The face-to-face interviews were conducted before and after the Movement Control Order was implemented in Sarawak. The first 16 CLCs were set up in 2016, and the number increased to 63 in 2020. CLC uses the Indonesian teaching syllabus, and the subjects are taught by Indonesian teachers (*Guru Pamong* and *Guru Bina*). Up to June 2020, there were 114 Indonesian CLC teachers in the state. The constraints of the CLC in Sarawak include limited classrooms, low motivation of the students, and lack of teaching and learning equipment which affects the effectiveness of teaching and learning. On the bright side, the CLC has given an opportunity to the Indonesian children in oil palm plantations in Sarawak to have primary education. After graduating from CLC, they can continue their studies in a secondary school in Indonesia since the teaching syllabus in CLC is similar to the one used in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Community learning centre, Indonesian workers, Oil palm plantation, Indonesian children

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*Received: 13 November 2020*

*Accepted: 27 September 2021*

<https://doi.org/10.33736/ijbs.4328.2021>

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia palm oil industry plays a significant role in Malaysia's economy (Potter, 2015). Between 2011 and 2018, the average annual contribution of palm oil in Malaysia's GDP is RM39.49 billion

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(Hirschmann, 2020). In general, the Malaysian oil palm planted area has increased by 0.66 per cent between 2017 and 2018, with a total of 5.85 million hectares in 2018 (Sundram, 2019). In line with the trend, the total planted area in Sarawak has almost doubled between 2009 and 2017, with a total planted area of 1.55 million hectares in 2017 (Malaysian Palm Oil Board, 2018).

Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia, with an area of 124,450 km<sup>2</sup> and a total population of 2.8 million in 2019, the fourth largest state in terms of population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). However, Sarawak is having a problem recruiting locals to work in oil palm plantations. The Malaysian Palm Oil Board affirms this issue, and due to labour shortage, the oil palm industry in Sarawak is losing RM1 billion annually due to uncollected fresh fruit bunches (FFBs) (SOPPOA, 2017; Masiron, 2018). Thus, hiring foreign workers is one of the solutions to solve the problem of labour shortages.

Due to the proximity between Malaysia and Indonesia, the majority of the workers in the oil palm plantations in Sarawak are Indonesians (Raghu, 2014; Hall, 2011). As reported by the United Nations (2019), among the six regions in the world (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern America, and Oceania), about 90 per cent of Indonesian migrants are in the Asian region. Among the Southeast Asian countries in 2019, 88.35 per cent of the Indonesian migrants were in Malaysia.

As a result of being heavily dependent on Indonesian workers, the number of Indonesian children in Sarawak has also increased over the years. Yu (2016) reports that as many as 30,000 Indonesian children are excluded from formal education in Sabah and Sarawak. As agreed by Lisa (2021), undocumented children are denied access to education in government schools in Malaysia.

The Indonesian Government tries to look after the welfare of their people in the host countries (Farida et al., 2019). Due to the high dependency on Indonesian workers, the Indonesian Government realises that they have the token to demand better services for their migrant workers. One of those demands is a school, or Community Learning Centre (CLC), for the children living in the plantations.

Upon mutual agreement between the Indonesian Government and the Sarawak State Government, CLCs are allowed to be set up by the plantation companies to provide primary education to the Indonesian children. However, studies which explore and explain the condition of CLCs in Sarawak, namely the commitment of the plantation companies in the provision of CLCs, the students, the teachers, and the challenges of teaching in the CLCs, are very limited and not widely available. Thus, this article seeks to explore the conditions under which an oil palm plantation has to set up a Community Learning Centre (CLC) in Sarawak, examine who are the CLC teachers and analyse the issues and challenges of CLC from the perspective of the teachers.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sarawak is located in the North West region of Borneo Island. It became part of Malaysia in 1963 and is the largest state of Malaysia with an area of 124,450 km<sup>2</sup> and a total population of 2.81 million in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Within Sarawak, there are 12 administrative divisions and 31 districts (Table 1).