TRANSFORMATION OF BILIK- FAMILY LABOUR AMONG SELECTED IBAN LONGHOUSE COMMUNITIES IN SARATOK DISTRICT, SARAWAK

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TRANSFORMATION OF BILIK—FAMILY LABOUR AMONG SELECTED IBAN LONGHOUSE COMMUNITIES IN SARATOK DISTRICT, SARAWAK

A graduation thesis submitted
by
NGADAN SILLA DATU

To
The Faculty of Social Sciences
In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master Degree in Environmental Management (Development Planning), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Kota Samarahan
SARAWAK

2011
Abstract

This study examines how family labour operating at a local level being transformed by the dynamics of globalisation and market expansion into the rural areas. It covers important aspects of transition pertaining to a traditional bilik-family labour in Iban longhouse in pursuit of monetised economy. The study is very relevant for understanding changes on how the traditional bilik-family allocates and distributes labour to both and non-farm economic sectors in response to market economy and state interventions.

Field investigation for this study was conducted for three weeks, commencing on 21st February 2011 and ended up on 14th March 2011. It involved face-to-face interviews with selected respondents and key-informants from nine longhouses located in middle Krian in Saratok District. The interviews were focused on three groups of respondents, namely, the heads of household or tuai bilik, a group of women who had actively engaged in selling vegetables and jungle produce at Saratok wet market, and several highly skilled construction workers currently engaged in building subcontracting works.

The findings of this study present some important empirical findings that show the Iban bilik-families in the study area are no longer relying on subsistence activities for living. They now engage in a multiplicity of livelihood activities dispersed in both rural and urban areas. The non-farm activities which include waged and salaried employment and participation in the informal economy now account for 63% and 44% of the total workforce and incomes of the study population respectively.

The transformation of livelihood activities from subsistence to market-oriented production has been closely associated with state policies, with the introduction of cash crops by Brooke's and subsequently British colonial administrations in the early parts of the 1990s to the development of plantation agriculture advocated by the present state government. The cumulative impacts of growing participation in waged labour jobs brought about by the plantation sector and greater access to employment opportunities in the formal economic sector have contributed significantly to livelihood diversifications of the longhouse community covered by the present study. This transition of family labour and livelihood activities and how they are linked to globalisation and state interventions are consistent with the theories and literatures discussed in chapter 2.
Acknowledgement

So many people assisted me in making this study a success and I am grateful for their contributions. I am extremely appreciative of the 96 households and the tuai rumah from nine longhouses covered by this study who had given me valuable insights into their livelihoods. I also wish to thank the community leaders Penghulu Garan Chinggut and Cr. Anyum Kinyih and teachers at SK. Ng. Drau and SK. Babang for providing in-depth information on the socio-economic profile of the people in the study area.

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CHAPTER 1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction
The smallholding sector that provides employment up to 50% of the rural population in Sarawak has undergone a rapid structural change during the last twenty five years. This market-driven agrarian transformation involving a shift from subsistence production to a market economy has much to do with changing domestic and external economic processes. In contrast with their traditional livelihood, the commercialisation of rural economies not only has reduced the prevalence of subsistence agriculture, but also has driven rural people to take up wage employment or engage in non-farm activities as their main or alternative source of household income. As their old-age mixed subsistence and cash cropping farming system can no longer support a sustainable livelihood, greater number of smallholder households' members are being induced to work in formal economic sectors such as construction, logging, and plantation, manufacturing and service industries. Also, greater productivity per man in agriculture resulting from the use of modern inputs has made it possible to release family farm labour for non-agricultural employment.

The rapid economic development that the country is experiencing not only has allowed spatial dispersion of rural workforce out from the rural area, but to a great extent, has broken the bond of family ties due to physical distance associated with rural-urban migration and work-related activities. Generally, the diversification of livelihoods associated with transformation of rural economies has exerted a significant influence on the allocation of rural workforce, in which increasingly more smallholder farmers have shifted to non-traditional sectors, both in rural and urban areas. Although smallholding agriculture remains the mainstay of Sarawak rural economies, available data suggests that farm households have becoming
more dependent on incomes from non-farm or non-agricultural sources. A study conducted by Uli (2002) in three separate locations in Sri Aman and Betong divisions involving exclusively Iban smallholder population, found that non-farm employment contributes an overall average of 59.34% of the total household income. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Ngidang (2002a) on participants of LCDA’s coffee estates in Bau district suggests that salaried jobs in the private and public sectors contribute up to 40% of the overall households’ income, with only 8% is derived from farming. These findings are consistent with the national trend whereby more than half of the total rural household income in Malaysia was reported to have come from non-agricultural sources (Malaysia, 2001).

The participation of the Iban\(^1\) smallholders in non-farm or non-agricultural based livelihood especially paid labour jobs is considered as a relatively recent trend. The development of cash cropping which was started with planting of rubber in the early twentieth century had played major roles in facilitating the infusion of cash economy into the rural populations. By 1940 97,000 ha of land area in Sarawak was planted with rubber of which 47.5% was in ‘native’ holdings (Cramb, 2007). Under intense development of cash cropping involving production of rubber, farming among the Iban rural population was aimed at getting financial returns as opposed to for own consumption like in the old days. Cash had started to become the medium for transactions including labour inputs. In a former subsistence economy whereby livelihoods were geared primarily to meet subsistence needs, the allocation of family labour was mainly confined to unpaid tasks in family owned farms, be it production of rice for own consumption or

\(^1\) The Iban are the branch of the Dayak peoples of Borneo. Representing about 30% of Sarawak total population of 2.5 million, the Iban are the most numerous among the indigenous peoples of the state. Historically, they were well known for being an aggressive expansionist of shifting cultivators. Vast majority of the Iban now still retain their unique longhouse domicile. Each longhouse comprises of individual bilik-family – the basic unit of Iban social and economic organisation. At the community level their conducts and behaviours, and rights to natural resources surrounding them are regulated by an elaborate body of customary laws, rituals, norms and conventions known as the adat. See for examples Freeman (1970) and Cramb (1993, 61(2): 289-300).
production of primary agricultural commodities for cash income. The incidence of people hiring out their family labour to work on somebody else's farm then was very minimal, 'unless compelled to do so by food shortage' (Freeman, 1970: 238). Cash cropping was further intensified with the introduction of pepper and cocoa in the 1960s and early 1970s respectively. Many cash-desperate Iban workers especially those who lived close to rural towns or bazaars had hired out their labour to work as casual day labourers at Chinese owned farms to increase farm production.

Besides cash cropping and later plantation agriculture, in certain regions logging industry has been considered as one the main drivers encouraging the growth of monetary economy in what were previously subsistence areas. Large numbers of Iban were employed as logging workers in timber industry especially in timber rich areas such like Kapit, Baram Bintulu and Limbang divisions during the height of timber production in the 1980s\(^2\). Almost half of the jobs comprised seasonal jobs while another quarter was daily employment (Jana, 1998). For most of the workers the income they earned from logging activities was comparatively higher than the income that they obtained from farming or from working in other rural sectors. Although, the Iban participation in the timber industry was mainly limited to lowly paid jobs, which were not taken up by urban based workers, it had increased the income and purchasing power of a substantial number of Iban households whose members were working in the timber industry (Jana, 1998). In such regions earnings from logging related activities had intensified the spread of cash economy and occurrence of market-oriented production. This in turn had stimulated the growth of rural informal economy or rural self-employment enterprises as a result of increase demand for goods and services.

\(^2\) By 1984 about 60,000 Iban worked in logging related activities throughout the state (Jana, 1998).
The rest of this chapter discusses research problems related to globalisation and expansion of market economy into rural areas of Sarawak, as they continue to exert major structural changes in the livelihood of the Iban smallholder communities.

1.2 The Problem

The changing macroeconomic conditions associated with the process of globalisation puts enormous pressure on the part of state of Sarawak to achieve economic growth with a noble objective of linking the rural populations and the mainstream economy. In quest to meet the growing global demand for palm Sarawak state government has over the last 30 years taken drastic moves to change the state’s development land policies with specific objective to transform agricultural production from the former mixed subsistence and smallholder farming to plantation agriculture with overwhelming focus large-scale oil palm development.

The structural changes associated with the forces of globalisation and commercialisation of agricultural production have put intense pressure on rural populations who are majority small farmers. Large areas of agricultural land previously used for shifting cultivation and planted with principal cash crops (rubber, pepper, cocoa) have been converted into oil palm plantations or estates. Shifting cultivation involving hill rice production which has been the practice of the great majority of indigenous peoples in Sarawak is blamed for being the main cause of the prevailing environmental and land degradations in the state, and has been discouraged by the government. The roles of smallholder agriculture involving production of traditional export crops notably rubber, pepper and cocoa have been down played by the government resulting in substantial reduction in state’s assistance to farmers. Rising in the cost of living and increasingly commercialised patterns of household consumption have led to high incidence of
outward migration of the rural labour force into urban centres, especially among school leavers, to search for better-paid jobs in other economic sectors. The exodus of young and more able populations out from the rural areas will put further constrain over future initiatives to expand smallholding agriculture which is known to be highly labour intensive.

Since the 1980s, Sarawak’s agricultural production has become increasingly dualistic. The smallholder sector involving cash cropping of traditional export crops notably, rubber, pepper and cocoa has stagnated and given less attention by the government. Total areas planted with oil palm had increased from 23,000 ha in 1980 to 55,000 ha in 1990, and 330,000 ha in 2000. Thus, over a period of 20 years until 2000 the total area cultivated with oil palm had increased by a massive rate of about 230%. Conversely, over the same period the total area planted with rubber was reduced by about 12% (from 192,000 ha in 1980 to 169,000 ha in 2000). Table 1 presents comparison in terms of total annual production between the three major export commodities (palm oil, rubber, pepper) for 25 year period from 1980 to 2005.

Table 1: Sarawak’s production of principal agricultural commodities (1980-2005) in ‘000 tons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Palm Oil</th>
<th>Rubber</th>
<th>Pepper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,336</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Source: Yearbook of Statistics, Sarawak, Malaysia, various issues, from 1980 – 2000
4 Source: Yearbook of Statistics, Sarawak, Malaysia, various issues from 1980 - 2006
According to Sutlive (1989: 41), the cumulative impacts of market economy resulting from globalisation have been very apparent in 'Iban residence patterns, occupations, roles, and relations'. Along with globalisation, there have been growing concerns among certain sections that rapid urbanisation and the on-going process of 'depeasantisation' associated the commercialisation of rural economies will detach the Iban from the means of production and drive them out from their resource-based livelihoods. More worrisome is that, majority of the Iban are still lacking the necessary means to participate in market economy, let alone to compete with other more advanced communities in the modern economic sector.

The role of agriculture in Malaysia is well stated in the Third Perspective Plan (OPP3) covering the period 2001 to 2010, which stresses special emphasis on the need to increase industrial crops, food production as well as contribution from new activities (Malaysia, 2001). Under the OPP3, agricultural development will be guided by the Third National Agricultural Policy (NAP), covering 1998-2010, which focuses on market driven product-based and agro-forestry approaches to improve productivity and global competitiveness. The current approach is intended to bring about further transformation of the agricultural sector, maximise income through optimal utilisation of resources and encourage greater private sector participation in the development of the agricultural sector. In line with the objective to modernise the rural sector, the state government's agricultural and land development policies over the last 25 years have been geared towards commercialisation of the state agricultural sector through greater participation of the private sector. Such policy stemmed from the realisation that; (1) subsistence and smallholding agriculture that had been widely practised by the natives was economically not viable, as it failed to generate good or stable flow of income to farm households, and (2) the Iban are lacking the necessary expertise and financial resources needed to turn their huge land holdings held under native customary rights (NCR) into a sustainable source of incomes. As a result, the private sector now plays increasingly important role, especially in the plantation
sub-sector in promoting and spearheading commercial agriculture in Sarawak (Ngidang, 2002b).

The state government had been targeting to develop a total of one million hectares of oil palm all over Sarawak by the year 2010. Besides, their potential contribution to the state's growth domestic product (GDP), the plantation sector is intended to raise the standard of living of the rural population, generate alternative income sources and local employment opportunities, and ultimately narrow economic disparities between rural and urban areas. The development of a massive area of land holdings held under customary laws would inevitable face some objections from landowners, who may not fully understand or agree with the economic rationale and benefits from large-scale commercial oil palm developments. In Sarawak, as in most other developing economies, the term 'globalisation' is often equated with 'progress' or 'modernisation', that requires drastic changes to the mode of production. The change in mode of production from mixed subsistence and cash cropping farming into modern, commercial agriculture is seen as a prerequisite to participate in the global economy that ultimately lead to higher incomes and upward change in the overall standard of living. Failure or unwillingness on the part of smallholder farmers to take part in modern mode of production would result in them being 'excluded' from the mainstream development, and risk themselves continue to be trapped in poverty and backwardness.

Despite being refuted as land 'rich', many Dayak smallholder households are still living in poverty. The high incidence of poverty among the Dayak has often been perceived as a direct consequence of their overwhelming dependency on agricultural incomes, and their unwillingness to participate in market-oriented production. As such, rural communities, especially the Dayak, have been urged to discard any belief, ideology or traditional practice that prevents or hinders them
from participating smoothly in the modern sector. Central to this argumentation, is the need for the Dayak to have a paradigm shift in the way they perceive and utilise their resources: land and labour. This argument suggests that Dayak communities who make up majority of smallholder farmers must shift away from low-return traditional farming systems and embark on high-value commercial farming. Owners of NCR land who lack the necessary resources are encouraged to surrender their 'idle' land to be developed by the private sector having the necessary expertise and financial resources to turn such land into a sustainable source of income.

If we are to understand how far globalisation has been responsible for the ongoing process of rural transformation, it is necessary to explain why certain people or households react differently to the market economy. With regard to the state-initiated commercial oil palm projects which have been the main focus of the present land development policies in Sarawak, the reactions can be mixed, ranging from very 'positive', 'slow to accept' and 'persistent rejection'. The complex interplay between farming systems, market economy, and rural society means there is a need to reconsider the view of the homogenising effects often associated with globalisation for something that is more contingent. The importance of this argumentation is that, the way globalisation has impacted rural population varies significantly across spaces, societies, households and individuals, depending on the relationships with the means of production and reproduction and their access to resources. Such differentiation explains the variation in people perceptions and response to various rural development projects that have been implemented by the government. For instance, households who own large tracts of land but lack family labour and financial resources may opt to surrender their land to the land development agencies for oil palm cultivation, if they foresee the potential economic benefits. Conversely, those who do not have much land may not be interested, as the only available land may have been planted with crops that constitute the primary source of income for the household.
Despite rapid growth in waged employment associated with plantation jobs and rural-urban migration, smallholding agriculture sector continues to play major roles in providing employment to a significant proportion of the rural population. This study has been intended to investigate, how in the light of a rapid transformation of rural economies brought about by the development of large-scale commercial agriculture have impacted upon the pattern of family labour allocation among the smallholder Iban households. Many of the households are participants of SALCRA’s oil palm estates. Their involvement in various livelihood options which are dispersed over wide spatial locations may have tremendous impacts on gender relations and division of labour both at the community and household levels.

Pressing needs for cash, including the need to pay for children’s educational expenses and poverty are among major factors that have forced many native land owners to sell their landholdings in SALCRA’s oil palm estates. Large areas of land which had been issued with title documents have been sold to well-off groups, resulting in accumulation and concentration of land in the hand of a relatively few individuals. Farmers who have sold their land eventually will face land scarcity that limits expansion of future farming activities, and participation in agricultural production, once the land is surrendered back to them upon expiry of the land development agreement\(^5\). Meanwhile, high growth rate of population has pushed further pressure to open up more land to create more jobs in the rural areas, especially for certain sections of the population who lack education to secure better-paid jobs in the formal urban sector.

\(^5\) Under current arrangement SALCRA will develop the land holdings for a period of 25 years i.e. covering a single production cycle of the oil palm.
Urbanisation, sectoral diversification and industrialisation of national economies represent major components of the economic development process that have enormous influence over rural livelihoods. While there have been some major shifts in the national economy (e.g. from agricultural based to manufacturing), agricultural-based livelihoods are still dominant in most rural areas throughout the state. Non-farm economy has not gained much ground in the rural area. According to the World Bank Statistics, in Malaysia, the share of employment in manufacturing sector has increased from 15.6% in 1980 to 27.1% in 1997. Over the same period agricultural employment had dropped from 38.7% to 17% (Rasiah, et. al., 2002). Despite the overall decline in national agricultural employment, about 30% of people in Sarawak are still depending on agriculture as their main employment and source of income (Department of Statistics, 2002).

1.3 Research Questions

Three important questions that have been asked severally in relation to globalisation and agrarian transition:

a) how do the dynamics of the monetised economy associated with globalisation impact upon the livelihood of smallholder farmers who are predominantly engaged in mixed subsistence and cash cropping?;

b) at the community level, how do the rural populations cope with the declining role of subsistence and smallholder agriculture, and increasing importance of market-oriented production brought about by commercialisation of agriculture?; and

c) how are these structural changes represented in the characteristic and allocation of family labour as smallholder households continue to diversify their livelihoods in order to maximise the benefits and/or minimise the adverse impact of globalisation?
1.4 Objective of Study

The general objective of the present study is to examine how family labour is being transformed, distributed and allocated to both farm and on-farm economies among the selected Iban longhouse communities in Saratok District\(^6\), Sarawak.

Specifically, the study will attempt to achieve the following objectives:

a) to determine the relationship between diversification of livelihoods and the characteristics of family labour, level of participation in both farm- and non-farm economies;

b) to examine gender relations and empowerment associated with transformation of bilik-family labour; and

c) to assess the degree of bonding between members of bilik-family associated with diversification of livelihoods.

1.5 Significant of Study

The present study covers important aspects of transition pertaining to a traditional bilik-family labour in Iban longhouse in pursuit of monetised economy. The topic is very relevant for understanding changes how bilik-family allocate and distribute labour to both farm and off-farm economic activities in response to market economy and state intervention. It is hoped that this study can provide in-depth knowledge on the underlying factors that determine the Iban smallholder households' participation in various economic activities that are present in the rural areas. Such knowledge is useful in formulating policies and practices pertaining to rural human resource development in Sarawak.

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\(^6\) Covering an area of about 1,600 square kilometers, Saratok district has a population of 45,000 comprises the Ibans (51%), Malays (40%), Chinese (7%) and Melanau minorities. It is one of the two administrative districts under Betong division.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction
This chapter deals with the theoretical framework and relevant literature on the concept of livelihood diversification and transformation of rural workforce. It is divided into six main sections, namely; globalisation and agrarian transition, labour allocation in the Iban subsistence economy, participation of the Iban in waged and salaried employment, rural-urban migrations, the informal sector; and livelihood diversification.

2.2 Globalisation and Agrarian Transition
Under globalisation forces agricultural production in Sarawak has becoming more integrated into the world economy with growing emphasis on large-scale oil palm development. About five percent or 581,000 hectares of the total land mass in Sarawak is now planted with oil palm. Oil palm cultivation now accounts for 55% of the area under agricultural crops (Cramb, 2007). The state government was targeting a total area of one million hectares throughout Sarawak to be developed into commercial oil palm estates or plantations by the end of 2010. The conversion of such a massive area of land into commercial plantations not only will dominate the rural landscape and agricultural land use but will exert significant impacts on the existing mixed subsistence and smallholding agricultural production.

In a typical traditional economy livelihoods were derived mainly from subsistence production and were not subjected to state authorities or external market. They are only vulnerable to natural exogenous factors such as climate change, soils
degradation, and threats from pests. While subsistence production continues to exist alongside market production, the once isolated rural communities are now increasingly subjected to global economic processes. One of the salient features of globalisation is the development of 'global market' for product based on integrated international supply chains. This has led to homogenising effects on the pattern of world consumption preferences and options, shaped by the more developed markets in advanced economies. Industries in less developed countries that wish to grow through international trade have to operate within this framework of global products and internationalised supply chains. In Sarawak, the need to capture increasing global market demand of palm oil has been translated in the state agricultural and land development policies that focus on the development of commercial-scale plantation agriculture. Thus, agricultural commodities are no longer produced only to cater for local demand but ultimately to satisfy the demand in the global market.

As rural economies are increasingly integrated into the global economy, agricultural production is increasingly more vulnerable to changes in supply and demand factors dictated by global markets. The gradual removal of trade barriers has caused changes in prices of domestic agricultural commodities toward unpredictable directions. Markets for goods including agricultural commodities are constantly evolving with demand drivers increasingly dictated by international markets rather than domestic. This emphasises the need to understand the links between local or domestic markets and international markets. These requirements demand access to technical information on the rapidly evolving commodities' prices, as well as the ability to act promptly upon such information. Unfortunately, smallholder native farmers very often do not have such access to information flows, and in most cases have to make their decisions based on crude guessing or pure intuition. As a result sometimes farmers produce commodities which are not highly demanded in the market. Constant fluctuation and breakdown in prices of the main agricultural produce such as rubber, pepper and
cocoa has been identified as one the major obstacles hindering the development of smallholder sector in Sarawak (Ngidang, 1995). Indeed, the present agricultural system of mixed subsistence production and cash cropping that has been practised by smallholder farmers in Sarawak has been claimed to represent a risk-averting strategy to cope with global volatility in prices of the main agricultural commodities (Cramb, 1988).

Changes in agricultural production have been closely linked to efforts to develop and modernise rural communities. In order to progress like other groups and to enable them to contribute and benefit from the economic growth, it is imperative that the indigenous communities like the Ibans which represent the majority of smallholder farmers in Sarawak should abandon their low productivity, subsistence-oriented mode of production and start to engage in high-productivity, market-oriented production. According to this argumentation, mixed subsistence and smallholding farming system that has been practised for so long by the indigenous farmers in Sarawak restricts market expansion and capital accumulation as it does not allow for rapid adoption of technologies and divisions of labour. View from this perspective, the indigenous communities have no choice but to prepare themselves to participate in the market economy, which according to the nation-state is inevitable as rural production is increasingly integrated with the global economy.

The persistence of mixed subsistence and smallholding farming among the Iban rural communities coupled with their negative response toward government-initiated plantation agriculture have been conceived as a major hindrance to modernise rural economies. In fact poor representations of the Dayak in modern economic sectors have been attributed largely to their overwhelming involvement in the traditional sector. As a result, the rural sector is remained stagnant lacking employment opportunities, and driving many Dayak smallholder households to live under poverty and backwardness. Dayak landowners who are skeptical or