

POVERTY ERADICATION, LAND DEVELOPMENT AND FOREST RESOURCE UTILISATION AMONG THE ORANG ASLI IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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Abstract: This paper examines the implementation of land schemes on poverty eradication and forest resource utilisation by the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. One case study in Bukit Serok Regroupment Scheme in Pahang showed that when commercial land development program took place, Orang Asli responding to this new form of agricultural development have benefited in many ways, enjoying the basic facilities (road, school, clinic, water and electricity supply) and experiencing better living standards. In the meantime, agricultural modernization and development has reduced the degree of forest dependence in sustaining their daily livelihood. Another case study in Air Banun Regroupment Scheme in Perak indicated a different situation. As the land issue regarding the regroupment scheme is yet to be resolved by the federal and state governments, commercial agricultural development is lukewarm. Faced with a lack of regular source of income from commercial agriculture, the regrouped Orang Asli have little choice but to continue depending on non-timber forest products (NTFP) for livelihood. NTFP dependence does not provide the desired regular yield and source of income. Consequently, their living standard leaves much to be desired. These two case studies showed that to achieve the national goal of poverty eradication among the Orang Asli and to conserve the biodiversity in the forests, commercial agricultural land development is essential for the regrouped population. The development of oil palm and rubber provides a new form of employment and a more regular source of income for Orang Asli. On the other hand, without proper agricultural development program, the Orang Asli would continue to depend on the forest resources to sustain their livelihood thus adding pressure to the sustainability of non-timber forest resources. While their ties with the forest remains, they are also trapped in the vicious circle of poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, Forest resource, Orang Asli

INTRODUCTION

The Issues

Poverty eradication among the Malaysian population is an important goal in the nation's development process. In 1970, 49% of the total 1.6 million households in Peninsular Malaysia lived below the poverty line [2]. With the implementation of New Economic Policy (1970-1990) under the First Outline Perspective Plan (OPP1), the government has bravely outlined poverty eradication and restructuring society as the goals in national development. After this era, the National Development Policy (NDP) was implemented under the Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2) during the 1991-2000 period. The NDP continued with the process of eradication poverty and restructuring society [5]. Consequently, the incidence of poverty decreased to 7.5% among the total 4.7 million households in Malaysia in 1999 [7]. For the rural areas in Malaysia, the incidence of poverty reduced from 59% in 1970 [4] to 14.9% in 1993 [6].

Even though poverty eradication among the general Malaysian population is successful, more concerted efforts are needed to alleviate the situation of poverty among the forest-dependent Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and the natives in East Malaysia (comprising Sabah and Sarawak). In Malaysia, the Orang Asli and the natives are known for their dependence on the forest and its resources to sustain their daily livelihood. This dependence is practised through hill padi cultivation, vegetable farming, hunting, gathering and fishing. The forest ecosystem provides in varying degree the necessary resources ranging from food, building materials to medicines. The further the village from the urban centres, the higher is the degree of forest dependence. Due to their relatively remote location from modern opportunities, the Orang Asli and natives are generally poorer compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Consequently, the Orang Asli community has been identified as one of the poorest groups in Malaysia [3,7]. In 1999, the incidence of poverty and hardcore poverty among the Orang Asli was

50.9% and 15.4% respectively compared to that of the national figures of 7.5% and 1.4% respectively [7].

This paper examines the impacts of land development projects on the socio-economic livelihood and forest resource utilisation of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Two case studies are presented to facilitate discussion.

DISCUSSIONS

Selected Characteristics of Orang Asli

1. The population of the Orang Asli has increased over the years, from 43,890 (1960) to 54,033 (1969) to 83,453 (1990) to 92,529 (1994) to about 132,873 (2002). This total comprised less than 1% of the total national population of 23.2 millions in 2000 [8].
2. The Orang Asli is a heterogeneous community living in various parts of Peninsular Malaysia. The heterogeneous community consists of three main groups, 3% Negrito, 54% Senoi and 43% Proto-Malays. These main groups are divided into 18 sub-groups living in various parts of the peninsula. They are Kintak, Kensiu, Jahai, Mendriq, Bateq, Lanoh, Temiar, Semai, Che' Wong, Jahut, Semaq Beri, Mahmeri, Temuan, Semelai, Jakun, Orang Kanak, Orang Seletar, and Orang Kuala/Laut.
3. The government categorized the Orang Asli villages into three types: easily accessed villages, forest-fringed villages and remote villages. About 35% of the 774 Orang Asli villages were considered remote, 49% forest-fringed and 16% easily accessed [13].
4. Traditionally the Orang Asli community is closely linked with the forest, this dependence has gradually dwindled in importance, especially for villages experiencing development activities. While some remote villagers are heavily dependent on NTFP, others have engaged in commercial agriculture and wage-earning activities as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Main economic activities of Orang Asli

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY	ORANG ASLI
Semi-nomadic (i.e. move from place to place in the forest in search of food and non-timber forest produce for sale)	Jahai & Lanoh
Permanent agriculture (rubber, oil palm, cocoa & fruit trees)	Temuan, Jakun, Semai
Swiddening, hunting and gathering, trading durian, petai and rattan	40% of Semai, Temiar, Che' Wong, Jahut, Semelai, Semaq Beri
Coastal fishing	Orang Laut, Orang Seletar, Mah Meri

Source: Nicholas [14, 15] cited in Lim [13] and field data.

Government Land Development for the Orang Asli

The Malaysian government's efforts to uplift living standard among the Orang Asli community could be observed from various land development programmes implemented over the years. These efforts are in line with the New Economic Policy and National Development Policy of eradicating poverty and restructuring society. In particular, the government adopted a policy in 1961 to integrate Orang Asli with the wider Malaysian society [1, 12] under the administration of Department of Orang Asli Affairs

(JHEOA). Programs implemented to uplift the living standard of the Orang Asli community involve *in-situ* development, regroupment scheme and settlement in Felda (Federal Land Development Authority) scheme.

Development of Orang Asli community through regroupment is based on the Felda model. Felda was set up in 1956 to assist the various government departments in solving the problem of rural landlessness and poverty. Forest areas were opened up and released by the Forestry Department for land development schemes. The land schemes are transformed into settlements, rubber and oil palm plantations. In these schemes, the rural poor and the landless are able to own land and enjoy the social and community benefits.

Regroupment schemes are development schemes established within or in the vicinity of the traditional Orang Asli villages. The regroupment project, which began in the late 1970s, involves the grouping of scattered Orang Asli settlements located near the main range of Peninsular Malaysia into nearby areas selected by JHEOA [11]. By 1996, a total of 17 regroupment areas were established benefiting 3,006 households in an area covering 32,954 ha [13]. In these areas, crops such as rubber, oil palm, fruit trees and vegetables have been planted and totalled 4,979 ha by 1996. Various facilities (such as houses, clinic, school, JHEOA administration centre, playground, Muslim prayer place and agricultural land) are provided at the regroupment schemes.

The establishment of the regroupment scheme is regarded as an important means to eradicate poverty among the Orang Asli. Very frequently, the Orang Asli is relocated to new sites when development projects are implemented. All regroupment sites within the Titiwangsa Region (Main Range) of Peninsular Malaysia are selected solely by the JHEOA. The philosophy of regroupment is "Security via Development" [9]. Most of the regroupment sites have an average allocation of between RM 10 to 12 million. According to the Town and Country Planning Department [11], JHEOA has adopted certain criteria in site selection and these include:

- a) The presence of an administrative post
- b) The locations of the resettling settlements
- c) The existence of line of communication, either in the form of tracks or rivers
- d) The agreement of the respective state government to release the site

These criteria do not include most of the important physical determinants of site of development, thus resulting in various problems faced during the planning stage [11].

Impacts of Regroupment Schemes: Two Stories

The issues of poverty eradication, land development scheme and forest resource utilization may be observed from two case studies, name the Bukit Serok Regroupment Scheme in the state of Pahang and Air Banun Regroupment Scheme in the state of Perak. The former was established under the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1980-1985) while the latter under the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990).

Table 2: Impacts of two Orang Asli regroupment schemes, 2004

	BUKIT SEROK	AIR BANUN
Reason for regroupment	Poverty eradication	To make way for Temengor dam construction
Population involved	141 households	216 households or 778 Jahai and Temiar people
Willingness to regroup	92% willing to move while 8% persuaded by the government	Persuaded by government
Agriculture development	Oil palm cultivation (646 ha)	Limited agriculture
Availability of wage employment	In the nearby areas	Limited
Degree of success	High	Limited
Dependence on forest	Low	High
Importance of NTFP harvesting	Not important	Important
Current major NTFP harvested	-	Gaharu, fish
Current poverty status	Low incidence	High incidence

The case study in Bukit Serok Regroupment Scheme showed that when commercial land development program took place, Orang Asli responding to this new form of agricultural development have benefited in many ways. The participants enjoy the basic facilities (road, school, clinic, water and electricity supply) and experience better living standards. The changes experienced include the followings.

- a) The development of oil palm plantation for the Orang Asli has generated a more regular income than the traditional agricultural activities. The oil palm plantation now provides monthly income as it is harvested twice a month.
- b) The average monthly household income was higher while incidence of poverty was lower. A study in 1992 showed that the average monthly household income was RM530 in this village compared to RM139 in Kg. Musuh, a remote subsistence village in Perak. The incidence of poverty in Bukit Serok was 68% in 1992 compared to 100% in Musuh [13].
- c) The regrouped Orang Asli are more confident and less dependent when interacting with members of society at large. In the meantime, agricultural modernization and development has reduced the degree of forest dependence.
- d) The participants in Bukit Serok depend less on the traditional non-timber forest goods and services in sustaining their daily livelihood. Of the average monthly household income of RM530 in 1992, income from forest sources (firewood, wild meat and fish and others) comprised only 8%. On the other hand, in Musuh, forest goods accounted for 84% of the average monthly household income in 1992.
- e) The scheme showed a high degree of success. About 97% have adapted to new livelihood. 88% did not want to return to their original homes [13].
- f) The villagers now abandoned hill padi farming, which was once very important in the past. The regrouped villagers felt that it is now better to generate income from other sources in the surrounding areas than planting hill padi.
- g) While their living standard is uplifted, their ties with the forest are reduced. There is also a gradual loss of important traditional knowledge (i.e. knowledge, innovations and practices) on forest goods such as fruits, vegetables, natural dyes, aromatic scents and medicines.

The case of the Air Banun Regroupment Scheme shows a different story. Its development is regarded less successful. Some households continue to cultivate hill padi and vegetable for subsistence needs. A few planted rubber to generate cash income. To meet household needs, some members revert to their former life of fishing, hunting and gathering for subsistence and cash needs. Some households moved away in search for new economic opportunities. Even though the regrouped villagers enjoy the basic facilities, their socio-economic livelihood leaves much to be desired as indicated by the following features.

- a) The Orang Asli at Air Banun was in a way "persuaded" to be resettled to make way for the construction of the Temengor dam, hence the degree of success is low.
- b) In Air Banun Regroupment Scheme, the hilly location was not suitable for the development of commercial agricultural crops. Generally, the regroupment is located in a high area, between 255 meter and 690 meters [10]. In total, of the 1,584 ha of land released by the Perak State Forestry Department, only 651 ha (41%) is categorized as area suitable for development, i.e. less than 20⁰ in slope.
- c) NTFP resources are dwindling. Before regroupment, most of the area was covered with forest. During the early years of regroupment in early 1980s, logging was taking place where a total of 809 ha were logged. Tender for logging in the other areas was being processed. This is in line with the practice where the Forestry Department gives a clearance certificate for the release of an area after completion of logging [11]. This also means that there will be limited NTFP available for the villagers after logging.

- d) There is a lack of permanent sources of income for the regrouped Orang Asli. In the 1979, immediately after regroupment, to provide food sources and generate cash income, the JHEOA initiated an agro-forestry project (such as fruit orchard, oil palm and rubber) in the villages. A total of 117 ha of land were developed for these purposes. The project was contracted for land clearing, undergrowth cutting and seed supplying [9]. This agro-forestry project in general did not succeed. Another agricultural project on 25 ha of land initiated by JHEOA near Kampong Semelor in 1993 is successful. The rubber-planting project, costing RM20,000 in 1993, was ready for tapping in 2001. A total of 15 households (about 15% of the total 97 households in the Air Banun Regroupment Scheme) now derive cash income from selling rubber scrap. In general, for the Air Banun Regroupment Scheme as a whole, commercial agriculture development to generate income is lukewarm as the state and federal governments do not resolve the land issue yet. Hence, commercial agricultural project could not be implemented by other government agencies.
- e) Faced with a lack of regular source of income from commercial agriculture, the regrouped Orang Asli have little choice but to continue depending on NTFP for livelihood. In the 1990s, they depended much on rattan harvesting to generate cash income. In recent years, the focus is on gaharu (*Aquilaria malaccensis*) harvesting and fishing. Gaharu harvesting does not provide a regular source of income as the resource is depleting in the nearby area. Fishing also does not provide the desired regular yield.
- f) To provide food sources, some villagers continue to cultivate hill padi and vegetable in the surrounding areas. From 2002 till 2004, hill padi farming in Kg. Sg. Raba, a village within Air Banun Regroupment Scheme, stopped as wild elephants and wild boars destroyed agricultural crops.
- g) When economic opportunities are lacking, some villagers move away from the regroupment scheme. In 2003, of the 75 household heads with migration history in Air Banun, 10 (13%) from Kg. Sungai Banun in Air Banun Regroupment Scheme shifted temporary to Perak Integrated Timber Complex concession area (about 40 km away), either as PITC workers, contract workers or squatters opening up new land for cultivation.
- h) The general consequence is the community continues to remain in poverty. In the meantime, some continue to depend on the depleting NTFP for cash and subsistence needs.

CONCLUSION

These two case studies showed that to achieve the national goal of poverty eradication among the Orang Asli and to conserve the biodiversity in the forests, commercial agricultural land development is essential for the regrouped population. It is obvious that when commercial agriculture is developed for the regrouped Orang Asli, oil palm provides a new form of employment and a more regular source of income for them as indicated by the residents in Bukit Serok Regroupment Scheme. Hence, the regrouped residents do not find the needs to continue harvesting NTFP regularly to sustain their socio-economic livelihood. Their dependence on NTFP to meet their cash and subsistence needs is reduced, although not abandoned totally. The consequence is less pressure imposed on the natural forests in the nearby areas.

On the other hand, without proper commercial agricultural development program, the regrouped Orang Asli would continue to depend on the forest resources to sustain their livelihood as shown by the case of Orang Asli in Air Banun Regroupment Scheme. Since there are limited alternative opportunities, the villagers would continue harvesting NTFP and hence adding pressure to the non-timber forest resources in the nearby areas. NTFP harvesting not only threatens species survival but also does not provide a regular source of cash income as the resources are depleting. In the mean time, while the Orang Asli's ties with the forest remains, they are also trapped in the vicious circle of poverty.

The over all implication is that to eradicate poverty among the forest dependent community and to reduce pressure on forest species, alternative economic opportunities must be created. These may take the form of commercial agricultural development and or projects based on NTFP domestication. In the Malaysian situation, socio-economic programme such as land development and educational attainment

is given priority while the Orang Asli are allowed to continue harvesting NTFP to meet their subsistence needs. When the Orang Asli's socio-economic living standard is uplifted, there will be lesser dependence on the nearby forests to sustain their livelihood. This would help to protect and conserve the natural forest resources in the nearby areas. In the meantime, social advancement will be achieved at the cost of social and cultural values. A new identity is being created for those regrouped Orang Asli population.

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