

Getting The Malaysian Native Penan Community Do Business For Inclusive Development And Sustainable Livelihood

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ABSTRACT

The Penan are a minority indigenous community in Sarawak, Malaysia. Traditionally the avatars of highland tropical forests, today they are displaced, in a foreign setting, forced to pick up new trade and skills to survive the demands of national economic advancement. Forced relocation did not promise jobs, but necessity of survival forced them to submit to menial jobs at construction sites and plantations to ensure that food is available for the household. Today, a new model of social entrepreneurship is introduced to the Penan to help access their available skills and resources to encourage the development of business endeavors to ensure inclusive development and sustainable livelihood of the Penan. Interviews and field observation results analysed show that the Penan are not afraid of setting their own markers in the business arena. Further analysis of the situation show that the success of the business is reliant not just on the resilience and hard work of the Penan but also the friendly business environment.

Keywords: Native, Penan, Malaysia, Business, Inclusive Development, Sustainable Livelihood

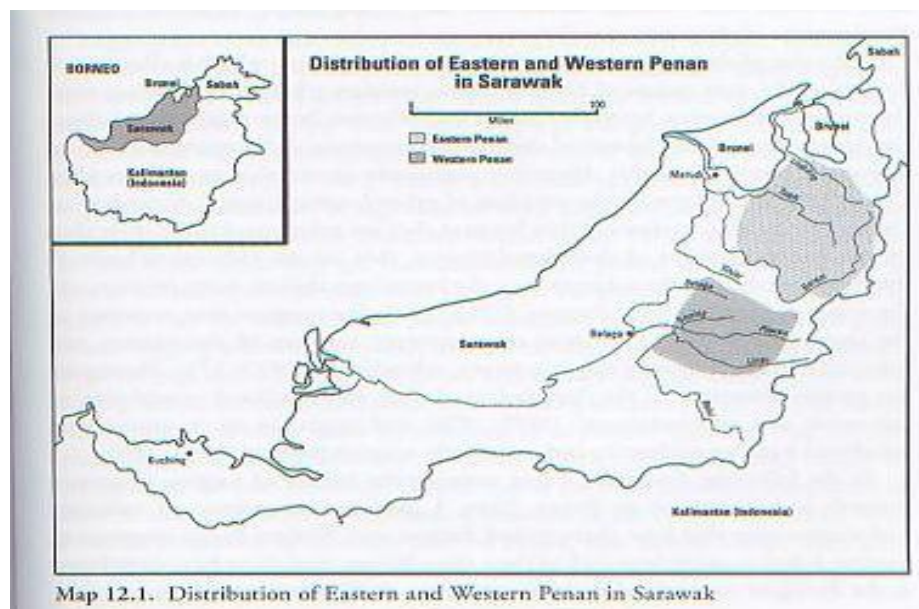
THE PENAN' NEW SETTLEMENT AWAY FROM THE HIGHLAND TROPICAL FOREST

The Penan community is indigenous to the broader Dayak group in Sarawak, Malaysia. In 2008 their population was estimated to be 16,281 people (State Planning Unit, 2008 quoted in http://www.pustaka-sarawak.com/Pustaka-Sarawak/Sarawakiana/thePenan/Main_Penan_Settlements.html). In Miri Division alone, there are about 68.51 % of total Penan residing along upstream areas of Tutoh and Magoh in the Baram District, while the others are found in Bintulu, Limbang and Belaga (Miri Resident Office, 2008). This is shown in Figure 1. The most recent census conducted in 2010 combines the Penan community with other sub-indigenous Dayak community of Orang Ulu.



Source: http://www.pustaka-sarawak.com/Pustaka-Sarawak/Sarawakiana/thePenan/Main_Penan_Settlements.html

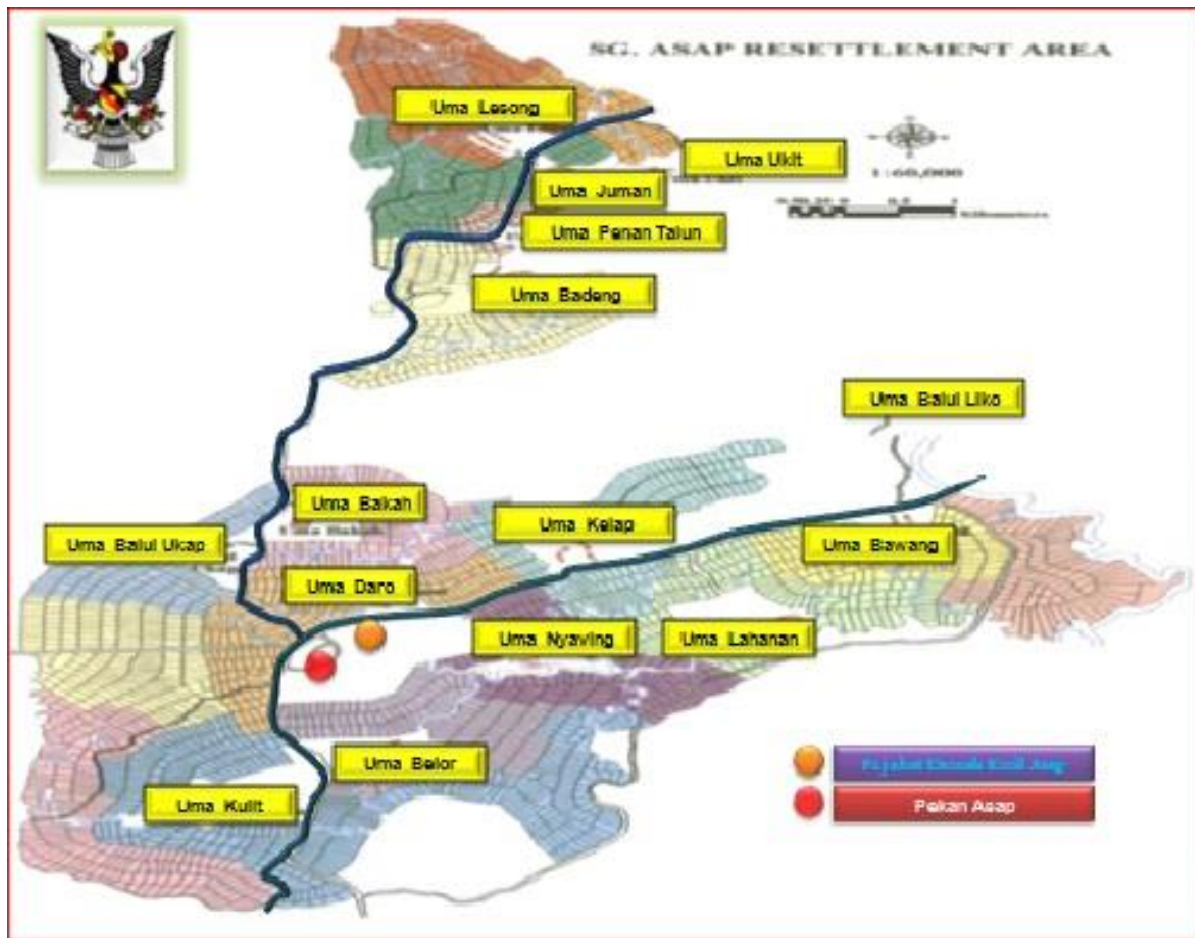
FIGURE 1: Location of Belaga Town from Bintulu Airport on the Map



Map 12.1. Distribution of Eastern and Western Penan in Sarawak

Source: http://www.pustaka-sarawak.com/Pustaka-Sarawak/Sarawakiana/thePenan/Main_Penan_Settlements.html

FIGURE 2: Distribution of Eastern and Western Penan in Sarawak



Source:

http://www.belagado.sarawak.gov.my/modules/web/pages.php?mod=webpage&sub=page&id=65&menu_id=0&sub_id=72

FIGURE 3: Sg Asap Resettlement Area

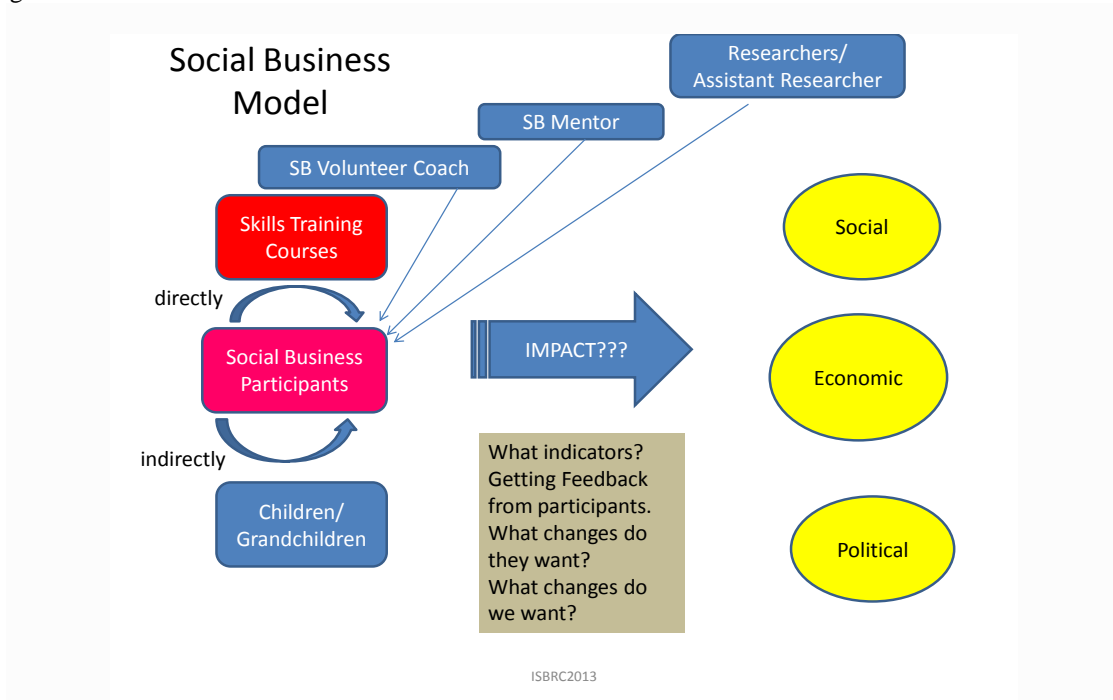
The current predicament of indigenous communities in Sarawak include the introduction of Malay language as a medium of instruction and official language compared to English and the traditionally practiced Iban language; the high level of school dropouts “some 80 per cent of the 26,000 students leaving primary schools and 40,000 leaving secondary schools prematurely between 1992 and 1997 were Dayaks”, indiscriminate conversion of indigenous lands into palm oil plantation and logging by private companies (<http://www.minorityrights.org/4540/malaysia/indigenous-peoples-and-ethnic-minorities-in-sarawak.html>). Corry (2013) laments and sympathises that the predicament of the tribal/indigenous communities have not fared well over the centuries across the globe – in India, South America, New Zealand, Australia, Africa and Canada. Their situation is at the crossroads when on one side it is a human rights issue and on the other side is political argument for land acquisition for economic development.

The Penan community is not different from this situation. In 1987, due to the national development, the Bakun and Murun Dam construction for the Hydro-Electric Project meant submerging an area of 69,640 hectares and relocation of more than 12,000 residents of 15 longhouses in the Upper Balui area to Sg. Asap and Sg. Koyan to give way to the mega project, namely the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project.

Rousseau (1990) claims that the Penan maintained relationship with the Kayan and Kenyah agriculturalists to trade the wild meat and forest produce gained from hunting and gathering practices. This is also maintained by Ichikawa (2011) who observed that the Penan exchanged wild produce for salt cigarettes and clothes with the Kayans and Kenyahs.

METHODOLOGY

Objective of the research was to help provide Penan community an opportunity to increase income through traditional activities. The social entrepreneurship model developed by Doris Padmini Selvaratnam, et.al. (2013) is used to help develop the business skills of the Penan community at Sg. Asap of the Belaga District. The model emphasizes the importance of having a coach and mentor to guide the Penan strife in their business endeavor.



Source: Doris Padmini Selvaratnam, et.al. (2013)

DIAGRAM 1: The New Social Business Model

The New Social Business Model (NSBM) shown in Diagram 1 is adapted from Prof. Yunus’ Grameen Bank Model in Bangladesh and also the Amanh Ikhtiar Model by Prof. David Gibbons dan Prof. Madya Sukor Kasim in Malaysia. The NSBM developed by Doris Padmini Selvaratnam, et.al. (2013), emphasizes the importance taking holistic approach for community development. Working with various stakeholders from the government agencies, private sector, community champions and successful entrepreneurs to be coach and mentors to the aspiring entrepreneurs, meanwhile children and relatives are given motivation and basic business and communication skills to help in the new business. The researchers identified one member from each household to participate in this research. They were grouped into 4 groups. The Penan were given talks on the importance of working together in a team, helping each other and also capitalizing on their existing skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First Phase

In the first phase during the period of 24-26th March 2014, various informal talks were held with the Penan elders and the children. This was aimed at fostering a good rapport with the Penan community. Besides that using the Assessment Based Approach, basic demographic information and socioeconomic data about the community was obtained. There were 20 *bilik* (room), which is also used to refer to the number of households in the community. As noted by Ichikawa (2011) some households have many members. This is also evident in the Sg. Asap Penan community. Some households have 20 members. Although several adults in the household work, they will contribute to the welfare of their household only. The community is generally happy with the basic healthcare provided by the Sg. Asap

District Health Clinic (*Klinik Kesehatan Daerah Sg. Asap*). The clinic's medical staff visits all the longhouses in the Sg. Asap District and also has a sub-clinic at Sg. Koyan for the purpose of serving the natives in this area.

The community headman is known as the *Ketua Rumah*. He is the middleman between the outside world and the community members. If there are any development programmes or even financial assistance for the community, then it will be channeled through the headman. Most often, the headman will be the place to make their grouses and also their aspirations. He also takes the responsibility of making sure the community members have their daily food ration. He even takes the initiative to source for jobs and secure work in the plantation or construction sector.

Minggu laments that the people are not happy here as jobs are scarce. This is also reflected by the community members. According to Minggu, the working age group members are not easily persuaded to join employment if the location is far and with fixed working hours. Intan says that the school is relatively far, 30 to 40 minutes' walk away from their longhouse. To pursue secondary education, the children will have to travel 2 hours or stay in the hostel. This is not favoured by the community. Discussion with the working group (Pictures 1-4), it was found that the men go away for two to three weeks in a stretch to cut wood in the logging areas around Baram District. Those who remain at the longhouse, seek menial jobs nearby, mainly cutting grass or at the construction sites. The Penan are not happy with their income, but they also complain that it is difficult to learn new skills like cultivating cash crops for example coffee, pepper, rubber or palm oil or rearing fish or raising cattle. These initiatives have been done by the state government and also several non-governmental organisations but to no avail. It is almost 20 years since they were relocated from the highlands. Gone are their traditional ways of life as the jungles are far. The nearby small hunting ground does not provide much. Occasional wild boar or a deer is caught. The river is polluted and is too shallow for a dip much more a catch!

The Penan said they still make traditional musical instrument *sape* (similar to guitar), electrical *sape*, hand weave baskets, mats and also thread beads. These items are made for personal use only and are sold only if there is demand or request from the occasional visitor who chances upon their longhouse. They view these skills as not important. Reality spoke another thing altogether. Kuching, Sarawak is host to the traditional musical fiesta known as The Rainforest Festival that gathers thousands of people the world over. Furthermore, people are increasingly seeking for traditional items like baskets, mats, traditional wear, headgear and hunting tools as memorabilia, souvenir or revival of tradition.

This first phase proved to be very informative. The mean income of the Penan was less than USD100 per month and inadequate to provide for their family's basic needs. Lack of public transport in the Sg Asap District makes mobility very difficult. The Penan face challenge in sending their children to school regularly or to send their produce to the local market to be sold. This influences the high dropout rate in schools and also the potential to secure a good job in the future becomes dim. Some of the Penan children have serious medical problems related to bowel movement, urinary tract and vision problem. This was detected by the Sg Asap District Health Clinic officers, but the Penan lament that to seek expert advice and to do further medical tests they have to Travel to Bintulu which is too far and very costly for them.



PICTURE 1: Informal gathering with the Penan



PICTURE 2: Basic Medical Check by Sg Asap District Health Clinic Officers



PICTURE 3: Gathering information through group discussions



PICTURE 4: Basket weaving (left) and musical instrument *sape* (right)

Based on the information gathered, it is imperative that jobs are made available near their living quarters. The Penan should begin doing business their way and be informed about the need to make records of their income and expenditure for business purposes. If the Penan at Uma Penan Talun, Sg. Asap also follow Penan in other settlements, it is likely that they will eventually all leave the longhouse and migrate to other towns to seek paid employment (Ichikawa, 2011). Access to education has to be more readily available for the Penan kids. If distance is a challenge maybe motivation and incentives should be used to excite the students to seek formal education while being enriched by informal education.

Second Phase

The second phase was during 14-16th August 2014. Activities were organized for the school children, while the adults were given skills enhancement in doing traditional threading of beads. It was only a matter of minutes before the Penan recalled their inner skills and doing their own designs. In just two days, they managed to assemble 200 key chains of traditional designs. They were introduced to the importance of maintaining a standard size to ensure optimum useage of thread and beads. Only quality thread and beads were used as these have the potential to fetch a higher market price.

The Penan were also introduced to the concepts of sourcing for raw materials (beads, thread, key ring head), marketing the product and also the importance of keeping record of their purchases, expenses and sales. To motivate them, the first batch of their produce was purchased by the researchers. Refer to Pictures 5. The money was immediately used to pay for their wages and also a turnover in the next business cycle.



PICTURE 5 The traditional designed beads key rings threaded by the Penan

The children were taught to enhance their skills in mathematics and English using fun and games activities. If the children can enhance their skills, they can eventually help their parents keep records. Sports and various games were held for the children and adults to emphasise the importance of teamwork. Rewards were important in these events. It was important to emphasise to the Penan that working together they will get results, achieve goals and get rewards. More than the initial 20 adults participated in the economic activity. A total of 27 participants were actively engaged in the traditional key ring threading. In the late evenings friendly games were organized for adults and children, while in the night talks on teamwork social motivation was organized.

The Penan are keen observers and learn new techniques fast. Their handiwork is also very neat and intricate. Learning in a fun environment works very well both with the children and adult Penan. The adults do the bead threading at the *ruang tuai* (common lobby area) of the longhouse. They can be persuaded to do the bead threading or play games the whole day. Unlike the efforts to make the children to study or go to school. In fact some of the parents also feel that sending the children to school is a chore or tiresome. One person even complained that the children are not learning much in school. Work or study, it is best done during the broad daylight as the electricity blackout is common at the longhouse and when there is light, the lights are often neon dim lights that are not best for the eyes.

Third Phase

The third visit was 15-18th September 2014. A gap of one month had many implications. The 300 km distance from Bintulu airport and town was a barrier to source for the raw materials. But, the Penan knowing that their hard work is appreciated by customers decided to find a local source. The nearby Sg. Asap town has several sundry shops and retail shops. Some of these shops sell beads and thread. The price is much more expensive, but they are not deterred. They purchased these materials at a higher price and make the key rings and also headgear and chains (Picture 6) to be sold at the morning market attended by neighbouring folks and visitors to Sg. Asap.



PICTURE 6: Penan making key rings, Display of Keyrings and chains

The Penan were assisted to record their produce and also to calculate their potential earnings. In the late evenings friendly games were organized for adults and children, while in the night talks on teamwork and social motivation was organized. Refer to Pictures 7 and 8.



PICTURE 7: Learning to do simple accounts: adults; and mathematics: children



PICTURE 8: Football time in the afternoon and the sape instrument playing at night

During this phase there were several opportunities to meet up with different local stakeholders (Picture 9). They were district officers, contractors and also health officers. They explained that the Penan do not venture out of their longhouses much – to seek for jobs, education or recreation. Today the Penan also rear goat and wild boar in captivity. Refer to Picture 10. The health officers said that the Penan will seek medical attention when necessary. When visiting the longhouse, it is noticed that the officers have to go from one *bilik* (room) to another *bilik* to attend to nursing mothers and their babies. But the adults and children gathered to do the basic medical tests at the *ruai* (lobby) area.



PICTURE 9: Discussion with local stakeholders



PICTURE 10: Goat and Wild boar in captivity

LESSONS LEARNT

The Penan kids are active and enjoy games and interactive learning. While they find going to school not easy, they realise that this presents them an opportunity change their future. But sometimes the temptation to just stay at home and lazy in the longhouse is just too great, especially when the parents do not force the children to attend school. It is the *Ketua Rumah* who takes the lead responsibility in motivating them to attend school.

The adults are experts in making traditional handicrafts and baskets. These items are intricately made and are beautiful as decorative items, souvenirs or for daily use. The Penan are now aware the importance of making these items as it can be a source of income for their families. The Penan are able to produce the traditional handicrafts and baskets but they have not mastered the skills to market their produce. Selling at the morning market will only fetch a small income. They now need to expand their trade. Hence there is a need to teach them to engage with a middleman to send their produce to wider market or to sell it themselves.

CONCLUSION

The Penan are often seen as lackadaisical and idle. The findings show that the Penan are hardworking and are willing to venture into new fields. They have been taught new trade and skills in making a living in a settlement compared to their native traditional lifestyle roaming freely in the tropical jungles of Sarawak. The problem with state interventions is that the programmes are for a short timeframe and the learning period is not long enough for them to master the skills. There is no room for failing and succeeding and learning from these experiences. The Penan want to move forward.

From this case study we can conclude that the factors that contribute to Penan's drive to business is survival instinct. They have lost their hunting grounds, access to food, water, electricity, education and health requires money. Factors that impede the development of business is dependence on the *Ketua Rumah*, access to the wider market, and online business marketing skills. The Penan are aware that their livelihood depends on their skills and also the resources around them. They also realise that access to marketing their produce is equally important as this will ensure that marketing will increase sales and profit for them. This in turn will increase their stakes in better education and better jobs for the next generation. According to Kotler (2010) marketing skills are necessary to alleviate economic growth and living standards.

Continuous efforts to encourage the inclusivity of the Penan in mainstream economy will boost their independence and sustainable livelihood of their lifestyle in the long run

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is the result of Research Project FRGS-2013-002 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The fieldwork on which it is based was funded by the project.

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