

RURAL RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND GOVERNANCE IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Poverty alleviation has continuously become one of the main concerns of the socio-economic policy worldwide. This crucial phenomenon is bounded on necessity toward monetary and comprehends by social, economic, political, and physiological aspects. In Malaysia, although the New Economic Policy in 1971 has succeeded in reducing the country's poverty incident, poverty's pocket continues to exist with high incidences of poverty among specific ethnic groups and localities. For instance, rural poverty among the Iban community in Sarawak has occurred since Malaysian independence. Therefore, this paper examines the rural residents' perceptions of the State's role in poverty alleviation in Sarawak using a qualitative approach. Findings revealed that although the government has various programs to alleviate poverty, the social assistance related to poverty was not efficiently distributed in Sarawak's rural areas. This study also revealed that a lack of social infrastructures, such as road accessibility, has significantly influenced social assistance's efficiency distribution in rural areas.

Keywords: Rural poverty, poverty alleviation, governance, Iban community, Sarawak.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to Poverty

The World Bank (2016a) defined extreme poverty as the people who are living about USD 1.90 per day. The poverty measurement is based on the monetary value of a person's consumption. According to the United Nations (UN), in 2015, 736 million people lived below the poverty line of USD 1.90 per day, and around 10 percent of the world population lived in extreme poverty. Most of the people who live below the poverty line belong to two regions, which are sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Hence, the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Goals (SDGs) to alleviate poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality, and strengthen the economic growth (UN, 2015). In terms of rural poverty, the (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2017, as cited in Ishak & Osman, 1996) has proposed four basic ways to end rural poverty such as investing in agriculture and rural areas, offering more and decent jobs in rural areas for the young people, emphasizing the social protection to address the needs of the most vulnerable and implement multi-sectoral policies to eradicate poverty.

Despite the emergence of urbanization today, almost 46 percent of the global population lives in rural areas, and 54 percent of the world's population resides in urban areas (UN, 2019). Currently, around 90 percent of the world's rural population is concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, and the largest population of rural are concentrate in India (857 million) and China (635 million) (UN, 2019). The study by Castenada et al. (2018), using World Bank data, acknowledged that almost 80 percent of the extreme poor lives in rural areas. The rural community usually depends on agricultural livelihoods through access to forests, fisheries, water, and land and their incomes are highly dependent on agriculture activity either from wage employment or work on their farms (Hurst et al., 2007).

Similarly, in Malaysia, most poor households are living in rural areas (Ismail et al., 2020; Ravallion, 2020). Although Malaysia has successfully transformed the status from a low-income country to a middle-income country since Independence Day in 1957, poverty pockets, especially in rural areas, still exist in the country. Most of the rural households in Malaysia, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, are highly dependent on primary sectors of agriculture, forestry, and fishery. These sectors did not contribute much to the gross domestic product (GDP) growth (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2010). According to Shireen (1998), there are three main elements of poverty alleviating strategy in Malaysia. First, increase efficiency and productivity by improving the agriculture sector and financial assistance to increase the poor's income. Second, to encourage the poor to move from low productivity to higher productivity sectors, such as from agricultural to industrial sectors. Third, the strategy also to aim the quality of life of the poor by improving social services like housing, health education, and public utilities. Sulochana and Sagarana (2015) explained that Malaysia's poverty alleviation efforts commonly emphasized education's importance, benefits of saving, infrastructural development, and good health. Ungku Aziz, one of the early pioneers of poverty studies in Malaysia, has introduced the "Sarong" index to understand the country's poverty incidents (Aziz, 1964).

Comparing the incidence of poverty throughout the Nation, in 2016, Sabah state recorded the highest income poverty rates, which are 2.9 percent, followed by Sarawak (0.6 percent), Kelantan

(0.4 percent), and Terengganu (0.4 percent). Sabah and Sarawak's highest poverty rate is attributed to several factors, such as lack of infrastructure, foreigners' presence, and inaccessibility to the interior (Ragayah, 2002). Zooming into Sarawak region, the incident of absolute poverty in Sarawak improved from 11.95 percent in 2016 to 9.0 percent in 2019 (DOSM, 2020a). In general, the incident of poverty in Sarawak has recorded a downtrends from 47.8 percent in 1979 to 21.0 percent in 1999. The declining trends of poverty incidents in Sarawak continue until 2016. For instance, poverty incident recorded at 5.3 percent in 2009, 2.4 percent in 2012, 0.9 percent in 2014, and 0.6 percent in 2016. However, after the revision of Poverty Line Index (PLI) in 2019, the incident of poverty in Sarawak increased to 9.0 percent. Recently, Iramani and Lufti (2021) and Zulher and Ratnasih (2021) mentioned that poverty in Sarawak is highly associated with inadequate access to social amenities including healthcare, nutrition, housing, water supply, and sanitation. Moreover, the remote location of the certain district and lack of socio-economic opportunities are associated with the incident of poverty in rural Sarawak. Therefore, most of the rural community faced a huge challenges to escape from the vicious cycle of the poverty. Although previous scholars examined poverty issues in Malaysia from various perspectives such as monetary perspectives (Anand, 1977; Sulochana & Sagar, 2015), elements for the Poverty Line Index (Ragayah, 2007) and the relationship between economic growth and poverty (Dullah et al., 2012) less research examine the effectiveness of poverty alleviation program from the perspectives of the rural community. Although the incidence of poverty in Sarawak is considered as significantly declining, the rural poverty incidents is remained higher compared to the poverty in urban areas (Fathin, 2019). Therefore, this paper will examine the rural residents' perceptions on the poverty alleviation programs implemented by the state in Kapit, Sarawak.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Rural Poverty in the Global context*

The rural poor are always related and highly dependent on the low-productivity agriculture sector, fishing and forestry, and small-scale industries and services. Mahmood (2000) classify the rural poor into two groups, namely cultivators (small landowners, sharecropping tenants and owner-cum-tenants) and non-cultivators (laborers/employees, village artisans and pastoralists/herders). The small landowners and holders tend to migrate to another place to work and provide their services to others when they cannot cultivate their land. In this situation, it worsens for the landless individual, and landlessness is a significant factor of rural poverty. Dixon (1990) also support the fact that landlessness is one of the characteristics of rural poor that include lack of education, large families, low income, small land ownership, malnutrition, ill-health, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, irregular incomes, weak bargaining positions, isolation owing to poor communication and indebtedness. Therefore, rural communities, including rural women, rural youth, smallholder farmers, indigenous populations, and rural landless laborers, are among those most likely to be left behind (Suttie, 2019). Also, the slowdown of economic growth significantly affecting the poorest countries.

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019) reported that 40 percent of the sub-Saharan Africa population is still living in extreme poverty and significantly increasing and higher than two decades ago. These countries include Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Ethiopia. For Latin America and the Caribbean regions, the weak economic

performance since 2014 has been related to a deterioration in social conditions in many countries. Due to the decline of economic performance, income poverty has been rising in Latin America regions. Rural populations, indigenous groups, children, and adolescents, still as women, are disproportionately littered with poverty. In Yaman, the dire of macroeconomic and humanitarian situations leads to a worsening poverty situation. The country's severely damaged food supply capacity is the primary driver of the humanitarian situation (UN, 2019). The global organization Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that individuals who need assistance to survive have increased from 22.2 million in 2018 to 24.4 million in 2019.

In East Asia regions, the economies have achieved tremendous progress in reducing extreme poverty over the past few decades. South Asia poverty has also declined across the regions, affected by the strong economic process and relative macroeconomic stability. However, many segments of society are still being left, especially from rural and agricultural populations. According to Thang and Amir (2011), three main issues affect rural poverty in Southeast Asia, such as globalization, biotechnology, and environmental degradation. Globalization has both positive and negative impacts on rural poverty and development. Trade, privatization, and market forces concept in globalization persistently changing the old concepts, practices, and systems of rural development in developing countries. Sharmin and Rahyan (2011) found that globalization led to the increasing income gap in Bangladesh and forced the poor people to remain in the labor class as they could not invest in agriculture.

Meanwhile, in sub-Saharan regions, it is reported that 60 percent of the population lives in rural areas, especially the OIC member states in sub-Saharan Africa regions (Fosu, 2015). Heyer (1998) argued that rural poverty is an endemic problem in sub-Saharan Africa, with the region faring very severely on most common poverty indicators. The factors of poverty among the rural population in sub-Saharan Africa are lack of access to essential social services, insufficient infrastructure, low agricultural productivity, uneven income distributions, and poor governance (Fosu, 2015). Besides, Africa's health condition also is the worst in the world due to the AIDS pandemic, resurgence of malaria, and lack of an effective public health system (Sachs et al., 2004). Most sub-Saharan Africa countries are being stuck in a poverty trap that contributes to poorer income growth and remains mired in debt. World Bank (2016b) reported that the share of Africa poor populations declining from 56 percent in 1990 to 43 percent in 2012. However, rural areas remain much poorer, although the urban-rural gap has reduced. Using Multidimensional Poverty Indicators, Alkire and Housseini (2014) found no significant difference between urban and rural areas in terms of poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa. The rural poor in sub-Saharan Africa usually facing deprivations in electricity, water, and flooring; meanwhile, the urban poor exposed to deprivations in child mortality, malnutrition, and school attendance (de Milliano & Playgo, 2018).

Latin American regions also faced increasing poverty rates since the 1970s. Extensive poverty and deep social inequality are the main characteristics of Latin America since the colonial period. The government's social safety nets programs most likely do not attack poverty causes (Attanasio & Szekely, 2001). Some Latin American countries have also implemented poverty programs that emphasize human capital through education and health—however, such programs only short-term relief due to inadequate institutionalized to stand over the long term. The factors of rural poverty in Latin America are due to the economic growth combined with the relative immobility of the rural population (Loopez & Valdes, 2000). Janvry and Sadoulet (2000) state that rural poverty in Latin America is anti-cyclical with aggregate economic growth and less sensitive to aggregate

income growth. Nevertheless, in some coastal areas of Latin America, the rural populations have rapidly developed their economies by diversification of manufacturing and tourism sectors that significantly impact poverty, hunger, and reduced spatial disparities (Rodriguez-Pose & Hardy, 2015). According to World Bank (2020), Latin America is currently facing few challenges, such as the shrinking of the economy, the worst immigration crisis, and exposure to natural disasters affecting the region's socio-economic status.

2.2. Policies, Strategies, and Plans of Poverty Alleviation in Malaysia

Since the independent day in 1957, Malaya experienced a high poverty incidence, especially among the Bumiputera in rural areas. The government has introduced the First-Malaya Five-Year Plan (1MP) (1956-1960) to reduce rural poverty, reducing the gap between rural and urban society, and improving economic activity through land development. The 1MP also aimed to improve health services and facilities, education, communications, and infrastructure development. During this period, land development and settlement, namely the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) and Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) established to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural communities and poor households (Halimah & Maniam, 2010). However, the 1MP was not sufficient because the major emphasis was on the urban sector compared to the rural sector (Sulochana & Murali, 2010). Therefore, the Second Malaya Plan (2MP) (1961-1965) was introduced to formulate rural development policy and its implementation. For instance, the National Rural Development Council was established to monitor rural development progress during this period.

The racial riots that occurred in May of 1969 have urged in some political changes, which led to the formulation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP aimed to create national unity by poverty eradication and to restructure society so that there is no racial identity based on the economy. Although the poverty rate was declined from 49.3 percent to 29.2 percent in 1980, the poverty rate among Malays is much higher at 64.8 percent compared with the Chinese (26 percent) and India (39.2 percent). Hence, the first attempt to define the poverty line or poverty incidence was made during the Third Malaysia Plan (3MP) (1976-1980). During this period, poverty measurements were based on the minimum necessities such as food, clothing, housing, consumer durable goods, and transport services. Malaysian government in 1987 decided that the poverty line income for a household of five was RM350 (USD 84) per month. The poverty issue reappears as a central issue in the 3MP and Fourth Malaysia Plan. During these plans, poverty eradication programs have identified the target groups to improve the poor's socio-economic status (Sulochana & Murali, 2010).

In Malaysia's modernization era, the Fifth Malaysia Plan (5MP) (1971-1990) was introduced and mentioned explicitly about programs related to rural development and poverty alleviation. During this period, both government and the private sector plays a vital role in alleviating poverty. For instance, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) was established by non-government organizations (NGOs) that provide loans with no interest to hardcore poor households. The government also introduced the social housing project program to improve poor households' living standards, especially those staying in urban areas.

Special attention to improving rural community productivity and income was introduced in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (6MP) (1990-1995). Integrated Agricultural Development Program (IADP)

was introduced to provide support facilities for the agriculture sector, such as drainage and irrigation systems, flood control, farm roads, and agricultural support services to particular areas. In the Seventh Malaysia Plan (7MP) (1996-2000), the rural development programs were introduced to improve the rural economy by modernizing and commercializing agricultural activities and developing small-scale rural industries. Under 7MP, the infrastructure and amenities in rural areas such as roads, transportation, communication link, piped water, electricity, medical and education facilities were improved.

Eight Malaysia Plan (8MP) (2000-2005) witnessed the increasing standard of living in rural and urban areas due to surging economic growth. However, the development gaps between states and rural-urban widened considerably (Sulochana & Murali, 2010). Hence, the government is pursuing several programs to improve the quality of infrastructure and services in rural areas. The programs are including, anti-poverty programs, rural entrepreneurship programs, human and institutional development, education, health, land development, and utility improvement.

All the programs to empower rural infrastructure in the 8MP were pursued in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) (2006-2010) through the human capital development program by providing capital and management aid to train the hardcore poor with technical skills such as automation, tailoring, culinary, and others. 9MP also stressed building more infrastructure and facilities such as roads, schools, electricity, and piped water to rural areas in Sabah and Sarawak. The Tenth Malaysia Plan (10MP) (2011-2015) also focuses on improving the income and quality of life of the bottom-40 households in Malaysia. The government emphasizes the marginalized people living in rural areas, especially the longhouses community in Sabah and Sarawak. 10MP encourages women's participation in entrepreneurial activities and increases coverage of infrastructure, utilities, electricity, and water supply, especially in Sabah and Sarawak rural areas, and decreases the digital gap (Mohd Zin & John, 2015). Until today, there are several programs still ongoing in order to eradicate poverty in rural areas. However, a study conducted by Sharifah and Khoo (2016) has revealed that there are some of the rural communities in their sample did not receive enough aid and assistance from the KKLW programs. The programs needed further improvement in order to eradicate poverty in efficient ways.

2.3. *Theorizing Poverty in Sarawak*

Although Sarawak is the biggest state in Malaysia, it has a very low population density than the other Southeast Asian economies and has always been largely rural until today (Welyne, 2002; Regina, 2016). The development process in Sarawak is quite challenging due to historical background and geography disadvantage as it is surrounded by mountains (Soda, 2000). Despite its large area, Sarawak has a population of only 2.8 million (DOSM, 2020c). The overall population density for Sarawak was calculated at 23 persons per square kilometre in 2019 (DOSM, 2020c). Sarawak population is diverse, comprising many races and ethnic groups. The Bumiputera constituted approximately 75.7 percent of the total population in Sarawak, followed by the Chinese with 23.7 percent (DOSM, 2020c). Indians constitutes 0.3 percent and finally 6.4 percent are Non-Malaysian. The largest native group is the Iban while Malay comes in second. The Bidayuh holds the third largest native population and the Melanau fall in the fourth place. The other remaining native population consists collectively of the subethnic group of the Orang Ulu ethnic.

In 2019, mean household monthly income in Sarawak was RM5,959 while median household monthly income was at RM 4,544 (DOSM, 2020b). This makes Sarawak as one of the few states with a low mean and median household monthly income in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the median household income shows an annual average increase of 2.9 percent from the year 2016. The Socio-economic Report for Sarawak State 2019 indicates that the imbalance in the distribution of household income in Sarawak is widening with a slight increase of Gini coefficient value from 0.386 in 2016 to 0.387 (DOSM, 2020b). The Department of Statistics Malaysia indicates that the median and mean income for urban areas in Sarawak is significantly higher than rural areas with RM5,789 and RM7,243 for urban median and mean income respectively and RM3,195 and RM4,218 for rural median and mean income in 2019. As of 2019, it is estimated that 40.5 percent of Sarawak's population still live in rural areas (Ministry of Rural Development (KPLB), 2019) making it the second state after Sabah with the most rural population among all the other states in Malaysia. The Ministry of Rural Development's Basic Data 2019, by taking the statistics in 2016, provides that the incidence of poverty in rural areas of Sarawak was reported to be at 1.1 percent as compared to the urban area at only 0.3 percent (KPLB, 2019). This makes rural-urban income disparity in Sarawak still an important issue as there are still significant number of rural households in Sarawak.

Zooming into Iban community, most of them are still living in rural areas are highly depending on subsistence economy and agriculture. The remoteness of their settlement is obstacles for the development and government aids to reach them well. Thus, this community has the highest poverty level if compared to other races (Madeline et al., 2006) as Solarin (2021) mentioned that the failure to secure steady income and employment is a major aspect of poverty associated with vulnerable groups in Sarawak. In terms of accessibility, improved accessibility increase level of accessibility to urban markets, reduce dependency on agriculture as main source and diversify the source of income for rural community. Regina (2017) highlighted that in rural Sarawak, although increased accessibility to market is associated with better standard of living, it may create greater inequality at household and individual levels. This is due to the fact that rural communities are of different gender composition, education attainment and socioeconomic status. Her study supports the notion that it is wrong to assume that economic growth attributable to infrastructure development will consequently lead to a reduction in inequality (Bajar & Rajeev, 2015). Hence, there is a need to have a comprehensive social welfare assistant to the rural communities not only focusing on the physical aspects but also the social aspects.

Poverty among Iban people and also other rural community in Sarawak has been occurring for couple of decades ago as most of them involved in the conventional agricultural and logging sector as their main income sources. In general, Iban communities are still live in the longhouse or known as "Rumah Panjai" which generally placed up to 20-30 families. As the river is the primary access to the mainland and nearby town, most of the longhouses are built along the riverbank. Thus, the boat is the main transportation and communication system in rural areas of Sarawak. Masron et al. (2013) explained that the rural community often neglected in the development process as they have limited access to social services, economic activities and basic infrastructures such as proper house, treated water, electricity supply, school, clinic, access road and nutritious food. In the worst-case scenario, their settlements are difficult to reach by the government aids, especially medical services and food supply. Hence, they are lagging behind to have a better quality of life as achieved by other races. The FAO (1980, as cited in Ishak & Osman, 1996) study outlined six factors as the major causes of rural poverty in Sarawak. They are an increase in population size, progressive

depletion in soil fertility, damage to crops due to pest's diseases, birds and animals, damage to crops due to floods and droughts, temporary and permanent absence from farming households of many of the younger men who gain paid employment elsewhere and difficulty of travel and transportation over large areas. According to the report, these factors contribute to low productivity and hence low income. More recently Kwok et al. (2017) and Idris and Siwar (2015) found the multidimensional factors such as an active community participation in development process and promoting non-farm traditional activities can improve the poverty incidents in rural areas in Sarawak.

Madeline (2001) found that the pocket of poverty still exists among the Bumiputera in Sarawak although poverty is relatively declining (Nair & Sagarin, 2015; Mohd Zin & John, 2015). This happens because most ethnic minorities are typically deemed self-employed in primary and low-income sectors (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013). Kiky and Junaenah (2015) argued that internal, external, and forced factors were the leading causes of poverty in Sarawak. Disability of receiving assistance from a government agency will displace the low-income community from socio-economic changes. UNDP (2013) report also found that the main factors of poverty among the Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak are the head of household's education, gender, ethnicity, women-headed households, and income inequality. Meanwhile, according to Ngidang (1995), inequality or uneven distribution is due to the political conflicts and structural rigidities imposed by prevailing socio-economic and political systems. Madeline et al. (2006) also explained the causes of poverty in rural areas and argued that remoteness, lack of off-farm work, environmental degradation, absence of grassroots leadership, low education, and information deficit are the main determinants of poverty.

The government had implemented several policies and plans in order to eradicate poverty in Sarawak. One of the strategies is through the establishment of land development. Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA) was established by the state government to develop in situ agricultural lands. The establishment of SALCRA forms a joint venture between SALCRA and native farmers in which the participating households obtained their ownership (Sanggin & Mersat, 2013). One of the main objectives of SALCRA was to bring socio-economic development to rural areas. Unfortunately, SALCRA projects are somewhat limited and not enough to meet the rural population's growing demands (Shari & Rani, 1996; Sanggin & Mersat, 2013). On the other hand, another current scheme to alleviate poverty is the People's Welfare Development Scheme administered by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development to reduce rural poverty, especially for indigenous and Bumiputera in Sarawak. Among the components of the SPKR program are Income Improvement Program (PPP), Skills and Career Training Program (PLKK), Home Assistance Program (PBR), Education Excellence Program (CPP), Human Development Program (PPMI), Local Community Development Program (PPMS), The Balanced Food Supplement Program (PTMS), Child Care Centre (TASKA) and Amanah Saham Bumiputera (ASB). Ministry of Rural Development also established infrastructure programs to improve the facilities in rural areas. There are four programs focus on infrastructure development, including the Rural Road Program, Rural Water Supply Program, Rural Electricity Supply Program, and Village Road Program. In 2015, all of those programs had received a large amount of government funding to improve and develop the facilities and infrastructure in rural areas. In addition, this program is consistent with the ministry vision to expand the coverage of basic infrastructure up to cover 100 percent of the villages in Peninsular Malaysia and 80 percent of the villages in Sabah and Sarawak.

For instance DOSM (2020b) reported that households in Sarawak with electricity supply has recorded an increase of 0.2 percentage points from 99.6 percent in 2016 to 99.8 percent in 2019.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative method, this research will examine the rural community perceptions towards the role of the state in alleviating the poverty incidents in East Malaysia of Sarawak. We interviewed 35 respondents of rural residents living in Kapit Division of Sarawak. Respondents recruited through a snowball sampling method and interviews were conducted in person. We interviewed 23 male and 12 female. All of the respondents lived in the community, though the length of time varied from a few years to their entire lives. Their occupation varied from working in lodging company to involve with traditional agricultural sectors. With reference to how this sample fits with an overall profile of rural community in Kapit, we selected our respondents based on the certain criteria such as length of stay in the rural community, nature of their occupations and status in the households.

Although we interviewed only 35 respondents, the data was very rich and saturated due to the respondents' personal experiences living in rural areas. It is important to note that there is no specific number to select the participant in a qualitative research as the total number of respondents will be determined by the saturation of data (see for example, Creswell, 2007). To assess respondents' daily life struggle, we took a case study approach by analyzing five longhouses (namely, Makut, Peraran, Tengadak, Bangkit and Musah) in Song Sarawak. Field visits to several longhouses enabled us to document and describe respondents' daily life in rural areas. During in-depth interviews with respondents, we encouraged them to talk freely and avoid leading questions. The interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes and conducted in the Iban language and translated into English. The outputs were transcribed and grouped thematically. We conducted a thematic analysis to identify salient themes in the coverage. Following discourse analysis strategies, we identified sample text excerpts to illustrate key findings. We summarize some of the study findings and use quotations to illustrate how rural residents talked about poverty alleviation in Sarawak.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Rural Residents' Perceptions

This section examines Iban communities' cases in Sarawak's Kapit division in East Malaysia and the strategies implemented to improve their living conditions. Despite state government efforts that promote poverty alleviation program, participants in this study described the poverty is growing and worsening every year. Somewhat sceptical remarks from a rural resident confirmed that the government promoted poverty alleviation through "political agenda" and undermined its effectiveness. One interviewed explained, *"lots of promises were made during the State General Election to improve living conditions in our areas... but until today minimal implementation has been done"*. Interview data revealed complex compromises that the government made because those interviewed agreed that the government did not comprehensively solve the issue on the ground but instead rely on a pre-determined approach of formula to reduce the poverty incidence. One explained:

"During elections, new water tanks will be rolled out and distributed to the rural areas' longhouses. Nevertheless, instead of distributing water tanks, wouldn't it be better to allocate funding to provide regular water supply into the houses in these areas? Access to a clean and regular water supply in rural areas has been a long-term problem in Sarawak. I think the government did not take action seriously in helping us".

Throughout the interviews, participants strongly expressed their frustration towards the role of the state in assisting rural communities. Our analysis revealed that efforts to reduce poverty in rural areas become a "political-games" for politicians. Although the government has good intentions to boost Sarawak's development, it is challenging to execute the agenda due to political conflicts and structural rigidities due to socio-economic and political systems (Ngidang, 1995). One commented that the government program or effort in reducing poverty appears to be a short-term measure without considering the local community's real need. For instance, providing infrastructures such as roads, houses, or other necessities infrastructure are extremely useful to political parties or elected government to maintain their power in the State or overall country as one mentioned:

"When it comes to state general election season, the government will start promising to develop our area...All these promises are to attract our attention so that we can vote for them... We just want improvement in terms of basic infrastructures such as road connectivity and access to electricity in our area, but until today, no significant changes have been made... After all, we still struggle in our daily life..."

Government assistance programs were particularly important in keeping rural communities out of poverty. However, there was a general sense among the rural residents that the government did not distribute social assistance equitably and fairly. All of the respondents interviewed raised issues on the process and procedure in implementing the poverty assistant and programs in rural areas as one strongly mentioned, *"I am very poor, but my application was rejected by them just because I have children whom they (government) think will give monthly allowances to me"*. Our document analysis also revealed that although the government has introduced various programs and assistants to alleviate poverty, the implementation proved difficult in rural areas. For instance, there is a weakness in the distribution of government assistant as many of the Iban communities in rural areas do not receive assistance although they feel entitled to such assistance.

"I believe that the government's social assistance has not reached the actual target as more poor people did not get the assistance... Although some poor people get help from the government, the assistance is not enough. I do not know how the government process the applications for the social assistance programs but some of the applications were rejected even though the applicants felt they were entitled to the assistance".

Rural residents interviewed generally want to see a good road connection between their longhouse and another area. Our data also revealed that the absence of paved roads in their villages forced them to spend a high cost for water transportation (by a river) to move to one place to another. Road connectivity has become an essential goal for rural residents: road means greater economic opportunities for them. However, fieldwork data revealed that there is no road system in our study areas as the areas only connected by a river. Majority of participants interviewed explained the difficulty in terms of accessibility to the nearby town. One resident expressed his frustration:

"The government has promised to build roads from the nearby town to our longhouse... The promise has been made for the past 20 years, but the road is still not ready and still under construction... I think the construction of roads has been happening for the past years, but the construction is still ongoing... We cannot commercialize our agricultures products because we highly depending on the river as our main transportation system... you imagine from my area to Song (small town) it will take me 3 to 4 hours by boat".

Our site visits in longhouses in Kapit revealed that majority—if not all – of longhouses still lacking in terms of basic facilities and amenities such as access to electricity and treated water. For instance, all of the longhouses we visited still have no access to treated water and also 24-hours electricity supply. Although the government has provided "solar energy" projects in some of the longhouses, the electric capacity is only for 12 hours per day as one mentioned, *"the government recently has provided us with solar energy... not that we didn't appreciate the efforts but the battery capacity for the solar only allow us to use it for only 12 hours"*. Consequently, rural residents in Kapit usually use alternative electric supply such as generators and kerosene lamps. One resident commented about this:

"Cost to buy fuel for the electrical generator is very expensive... if we use a generator every day, we will spend at least RM300 per month to buy the fuel. This is a huge burden for us as we don't have money to but the fuel. Personally, I am very sad about this situation... after more than 60 years of independence, we still live in this situation (no access to 24 hours electricity)".

Fieldwork also revealed that all of the longhouses we visited did not have access to treated water. They use gravity pumps and rainwater as their main sources of water supply. The clean water supply is distracted by large-scale oil palm plantations due to high chemical fertilizers and pesticide usage. One respondent expressed his frustration, *"10 years ago the water is so clean in our areas....after the palm plantations introduced in our area, our drinking water sources were very dirty... not that we reject development but the palm plantations destroyed rainforest in our areas.* Rural residents interviewed also strongly expressed their frustration towards the development in their area. Some of them explained that the government didn't plan the community properly as the majority of the strategies implemented only short term in nature. One resident explained: *"no significant changes in the area for the past 20 years... everything look the same... so our children moved out from this area to get better jobs in other areas... no job opportunities here.*

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide insight into a much-overlooked poverty alleviation problem among rural communities in East Malaysia: how poverty alleviations are perceived by the Iban community who live in rural areas. Although the government has provided various social assistance that benefitted all ethnic groups, it was not efficiently distributed. This is because of the absence of road connectivity between one area to another. We found that the rural community will spend a high cost for water transportation to attend any meeting regarding agriculture assistance from the government because of inaccessibility. Therefore, the government needs to seriously plan for more comprehensive infrastructures such as roads in rural Sarawak to improve the socioeconomics and quality of life, especially among the Iban community.

Our study also revealed that the Iban community living in rural Sarawak depends on the forests and indigenous crops for survival. The indigenous crops in Sarawak are classified into fruits and vegetables as the daily diet, medicine, and income source. Therefore, we find evidence that most of the Iban communities living in rural areas are still below the poverty line because they entirely rely on the traditional agriculture activity method. Another factor of socio-economic disadvantages among the Iban communities in Song, Sarawak, is the financial illiteracy that causes them to live in income poverty. In addition, they also lack access to institutional credit and banks, which has caused them to depend primarily on the local Chinese traders' production credit and end up in debt after paying high-interest rates (Ngidang, 1995). Most of the Iban communities also have less awareness of long-term savings and investment. Financial illiteracy and less awareness of long-term savings and investment are contributed by the low education level and cultural competency.

Although the government has good intentions to boost Sarawak's development, it is difficult to execute the agenda due to inaccessibility to the areas. Our findings revealed that the government fails to deliver some of the benefits that rural residents hoped and expected. There are a number of reasons for this: social assistance such as health and education were often distributed to rural residents whose responsible agency had limited manpower capacity to implement the programs. In some cases, the poverty alleviation measures led to inefficiency because the responsible agencies cannot verify all applications due to the remoteness of the area. Therefore, the state government should re-visit the current practice of poverty alleviation, especially in rural areas. Further research is also required to understand how poverty alleviation programs are implemented and adopted in rural areas in Sarawak.

This paper shows many causes of poverty among Sarawak's rural community, such as remoteness, highly depending on traditional agriculture sectors and ineffective social assistance distribution by the government. Although the government has introduced various programs to alleviate poverty among rural communities in Sarawak, the implementations proved challenging and required further improvement. The analysis of rural poverty among the Iban community highlights the socio-political factors that have occurred in Sarawak and contribute to the international debate on rural poverty from rural residents' perspectives. This analysis provides insights to better understand the poverty alleviation programs in other localities and rural areas of the Global South that have experienced rapid economic development.

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