

## The World-View of Penan Community on Quality of Life

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### Abstract

The issues of poverty among the Penan communities are often associated with the development policies and government policies that are too forward thinking and living experience that goes beyond the Penan community understands on quality of life. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to examine the concept of quality of life based on the Penan community's construction. By exploring their own worldview on life, daily life activities, and social environment, their relationship with the environment and culture and belief system will be elucidated using an abductive research strategy. This is because social reality is seen as a social construction by actors. The study population comprised of the Penan communities living in Long Urun Resettlement in Belaga District, Sarawak. Purposive sampling technique was used in this study. A total of 50 household heads were interviewed using in-depth interview. Focus group discussions were conducted with the Belaga District Officer, Belaga District Health Officer, Belaga District Education Officer, Primary School Teachers, community leaders and religious leaders of the Penan community. The results showed the accessibility of facilities and infrastructure are the themes that resonate as prominent features for the community, followed by the theme of community, resources and environment, physical and psychological well-being, family relationships, participation, and capability in order to understand the meaning of quality of live from the Penan community world-view. In short, the objective indicators of quality of life still remains a key feature compared with subjective indicators or non-material aspects of life.

**Keywords:** Penan community, quality of life, Malaysian development, abductive research strategy

### 1. Introduction

Although there are many studies done on the Penan community, but to this day there are no studies that have specifically attempted to understand the quality of life of the Penan from the Penan's world-view. This situation has resulted in a lack of understanding and knowledge about the needs and aspirations of this community and often they are marginalized in the development process. The continued marginalization of the needs, skills, perceptions and aspirations of this community has led to a situation where most of the development programs planned by the government to improve the quality of life of this community have often failed and the response from the community was dismal. As a result, this community was later described by some Western orientalist and planners as are lazy, hard to change, do not have high ambitions, surrender to fate and have the traditional values and characteristics which are considered as obstacles to development (Novel et al. 2011; Agrawal, 1995; Ahuvia, 2001). At the same time, some of the country's development policies that are formulated and implemented now appears to represent the voice of the majority or the mainstream view rather than the groups that are in need or belonging to a particular social class only (Minos, 2000; Madeline, 2004). Whereas, in reality, the marginal communities do not share the same characteristics as the mainstream ones in terms of culture, religion, economic background and social problems they are facing (Madeline, 2004; Novel et al.

2011). This has resulted in the question of the suitability of development policy for different social classes that has been severely contested. Some of these policies does not appear to reflect the specific local situation, in particular problems faced by rural communities and minority groups alike. In addition, suitability of development policies appears to meet the demands and needs of the metropolitan community or the investors' interest in driving the rural economic sector (Narayan et al. 2000). Notwithstanding the reasons given, the main cause leading to this problem should be studied in a holistic and comprehensive manner so that they can provide adequate space and justice and without prejudice to any party. One of key question is to see whether the development plan implemented by the government and agencies responsible is in line with the needs and aspirations of the world view of Penan community itself. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to understand the concept of quality of life which is constructed from Penan community world-view. This is a theoretical gap that will be explored in this study. This study will use an interpretative approach using abductive research strategy to understand the quality of life of the Penan community.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Description of the Penan Community and the Settlement Area

The Penan community is part of the Dayak group in Sarawak, Brunei and Kalimantan (Sercombe, 2008:183). The Sarawak Penan population in 2010 was estimated to be 16,281 people and mostly, about 77% have permanent settlement (State Planning Unit, 2010). The remaining 20% are semi-nomadic while 3% still live as nomads. The Penan community inhabits the highlands of tropical forests which are less accessible and most of their dwellings are located between river basins. The Penan community in Sarawak can be divided into two categories: the Western and Eastern Penans (Figure 1). The Eastern Penans cover the area of Baram, Limbang and Tutoh. All three areas are the main settlement area of the Penan community in Sarawak. The total population of Penans living in the three areas is estimated at 11,155 people and covers two-thirds of the total population of the Penan community in Sarawak (Pejabat Residen Miri, 2008). The main concentration of the Penan community settlement in the vicinity of Miri Town is in the area of Tutoh and Magoh in the Baram District (Pustaka Negeri Sarawak, 2009). For the Western Penan category, their settlement areas are in the vicinity of Bintulu and Belaga Town (Pejabat Residen Miri, 2008). According to the Miri Resident Office (2008), there are 121 Penan settlements that cut across the Baram area (Eastern Penans) to Belaga (Western Penans). More than 50 percent of their settlements are resettlements sites as a result of the development of the Bakun and Murun dam construction in 1987. Approximately 12,000 residents of 15 longhouses in the Upper Balui area were ordered to move to Sg. Asap and Sg. Koyan to give way to the mega project, namely the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project. This mega Hydro-Electric Project will submerge an area of 69,640 hectares which evidently is the reservoir proper and it will have a catchment area of 1.5 million hectares.



Figure 1. Location of Belaga Town in Sarawak

The implementation of the Bakun Hydro-Electric Project and Murum Hydro-Electric Project in the Belaga District enable the district to be labeled as "The Heart of Sarawak Development". The transfer of the residents from the 15 longhouses led to the creation of a sub-district known as the Asap Sub-District on December 30, 1999 (Pejabat Daerah Belaga, 2011)

(Please refer to Figure 1 and 2).

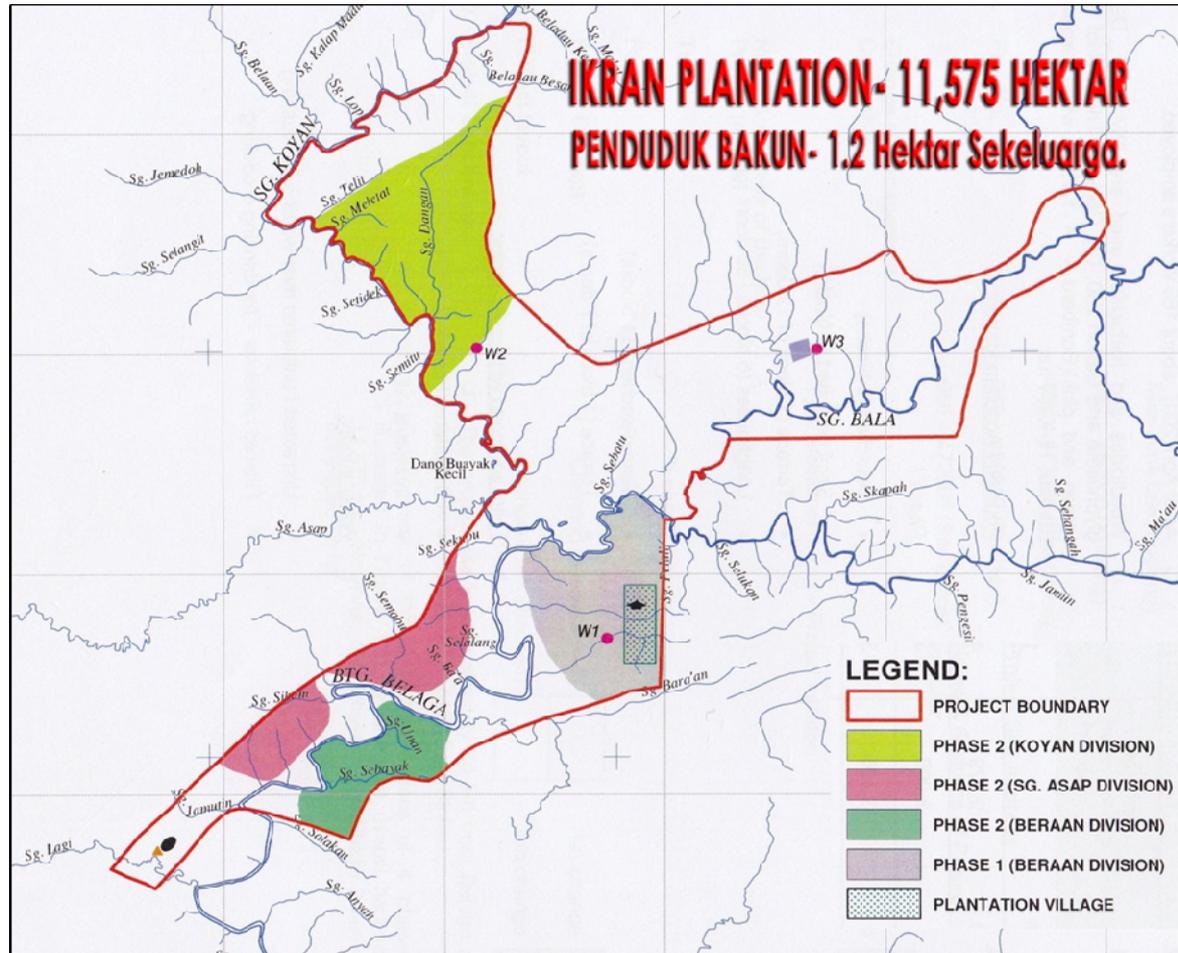


Figure 2. Resettlement location of Sungai Asap and Sungai Koyan's Penan community

Source: Pejabat Daerah Belaga, Bintulu, Sarawak

## 2.2 Research Methodology

This research uses the phenomenological approach to understand the worldview of the Penan community from their own perspective and about their group. This approach uses the idealist, existentialist and social constructionist perspective. In looking at worldview, it is not only limited to how the community members view and define themselves in the past and the present, but also about other people or outsiders, aside from their group. The worldview of the Penan community group and its changes will shape the transformation of the physical environment to a landscape that reflects the changes captured by their viewpoint. This study uses the abductive research strategy as worldview is a construction made by social actors. Therefore, the researcher must enter the world of the social actors in an effort to discover their perceptions of the worldview and the reasons accompanying and underlying these perceptions. The reality of their understanding of the worldview, the way in which they construct the realities of the world and life and their interpretation are embedded in the everyday language of the social actors, namely the language of the Penan community themselves. The primary responsibility of the researcher then is to re-describe their understanding of the worldview in a technical language, namely through scientific discussions. At the same time, the social actors will together with the researchers discuss the meaning of an action and interaction with the world and their lives.



Sungai Koyan Phase 1



Sungai Asap Phase 1

Figure 3. The resettlement area (a) Sungai Koyan Phase 1 (b) Sungai Asap Phase 1

Source: 2011 Fieldwork

This study was conducted in Belaga District, namely the Western Penan area and is a resettlement area of the Penan community. The Western Penan settlement area was selected for this study because this area is the largest resettlement area in Belaga District, consisting of Sungai Asap and Sungai Koyan resettlement area. The selected settlement locations for resettlement in Belaga District are the resettlement area of Sungai Asap Phase 1 and Phase 2 and Sungai Koyan Phase 1 and 2 (see Figure 3). A total of 50 informants were involved in this study with each settlement contributing 25 informants. Non-probability sampling technique that consists of quota sampling, purposive sampling and theoretical sampling were selected. The size of the study's sample was achieved through continuous support toward the measure or criterion of data saturation. Data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews and informal group discussions. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the informants for a period of six months, focusing on the perception of self, life and experience of the informants which were stated in their own words in terms of the way they understood the concept of participation and empowerment in community development (Neuman, 2006; Blaikie, 2000). Each interview lasted for one to two hours, depending on the situation. Interviews were transcribed and used to create categories and to index or record documents, to sort data in order to detect patterns and generate typology. Statements from informants were identified for clarity. However, the original intent and meaning was maintained. Again, after categories and sub-categories were developed, each transcription was subsequently revised several times for clarity. Interviews with all informants were carried out in the Penan language and then translated into the Malay language.

Interpretive approach and abductive research strategy were selected to be adopted for this study. This is because the interpretive approach and abductive research strategy look at social reality as socially constructed by the social actors (Blaikie, 2000). Therefore, in this study the researchers need to understand or grasp socially the world that has been interpreted in the effort to understand the social actors' worldview. Arising from this, scientific knowledge must be obtained from the knowledge, experience, interpretation, action and reaction of the social actors in the world of the social actors themselves. According to the abductive research strategy, when researchers enter the world of the social actors' life to grasp the social actors' knowledge, the social reality has indeed been constructed jointly by the researchers and the social actors through a series of dialogues or narrations (Blaikie, 2000). Thus, using this methodology, the themes and categories of the Penan community's worldview according to their own views will be explored and understood by the researchers.

However, the use of logic employed by the researchers to create or construct the worldview categories of the Penan community should be in line with the logic that has been used by the social actors to create the typifications in their daily lives. In order to further explain this matter, the logic and the process of the social actors' construct formation and worldview by the social actors and social scientists were obtained as a result of the researchers' review of the principles and theoretical view contained in the three major traditions of ideal-type

formation. The first tradition is by Weber who mentioned that the ideal-type is an invention of social scientists (Blaikie, 1993). The second tradition is based on the theoretical arguments and ideas of Schutz. Next, the third tradition is based on the arguments and opinions obtained from Winch, Giddens, Rex and Douglas, who argued that social scientists should start with daily typification, but can use the technical concepts that is already in existence to help them in constructing the ideal-type (Blaikie, 2000). In this study, data will be collected using in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews in this study involve conversation between two parties that is between the researchers and informants with one specific purpose, namely to understand the quality of life from the worldview of the Penan community. The interviews between the researchers and respondents focuses on the Penan's worldview, daily life, perception of life as well as the understanding of the Penan's about the world and life based on their own words.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The profile of Penans in the study area shows that almost 65 percent of the heads of household have never been to school. Only 20 per cent of them have secondary level of education. The remaining lot have only secured primary level of educations. The mean age of informants in this study was 44.7 years and a standard deviation value is 12.1 years old. More than half of the heads of household in the study worked as a farmer. This study also found that more than 70 percent of the informants in this study are also engage second or side income as a farm worker or laborer in logging and construction sector. Majority of the informants in this study were reported to be Christians. While the mean value for the number of households (not including informants) was recorded at 6.2 and the standard deviation value stood at 2.1 persons. In terms of accessibility to basic amenities, almost most of the basic amenities like clean water, paved roads, 24-hour electricity, fixed line telephone services, mobile telephone coverage and street lights are limited or in scarcity in this area. The study also found that the location of primary schools and health clinics are within less than 3 kilometers from their house. However, the location of secondary schools are very far from their house. Therefore majority of the respondents in this study chose to place their children in a student dormitory while a smaller segment commute daily from home to school.

This study found that the overall quality of life theme of preferred by the respondents in this study can be divided into 11 main themes. The themes are: 1) the accessibility of facilities and infrastructure; 2) permanent land ownership or land grants; 3) employment; 4) income, savings; 5) health; 6) education; 7) security; 8) food and clean water; 9) children, family relations, friends; 10) support from the government in terms of financial assistance, agriculture, poultry, services and technical; and lastly 11) religion, culture, language and customs. All these themes are actually in line with human needs theory proposed by Doyal and Gough (1991). The theory of human needs by Doyal and Gough (1991) outlines the accessibility to facilities and infrastructure and land as a central theme in the life of rural communities followed by home security, health and economic security. Nevertheless these findings are quite different from the results obtained by Higgs (2007) in his reaserach on rural communities of South Africa. This is because Higgs in his research found that the quality of life of South Africa have concluded that the physical or psychological needs is a major requirement in their lives. Instead, Ryan and Deci (2001) noted that sufficient support from the government in terms of financial assistance, agriculture, poultry, technical services and land need to be relooked in order to understand the concept of quality of life of rural native community. For example land was considered by respondents in this study as a symbol of pride, heart and bloodline in their lives. Significant understanding of the difference between the Penan community in Sarawak and other communities about the quality of life clearly shows that modernity and modernization process to some extent have influenced the understanding of the quality of life of the Penan community. The concept of quality of life is no longer measured subjectively but also involves being objective indicators. This is in line with commentaries provided by Stoecker (2003) and Shortall (2004) which states that people will try to change the concept of quality of life depending on the question of the role played by them, where, when and how. Accordingly, the concept of quality of life remains a subjective value and rely on social change in a society (Kedem-Friedrich and Al-Atawneh, 2004).

This is because the process of modernization and modernity has resulted in the society moving incrementally from a simple social system to a complex social system and the evolution of militant or military society to industrial society (Pieterse, 2000; Ritzer, 2000). Thus, the increase in the size of the community has led to differences in the social structure and function (Ritzer, 2000). Human progress from a lower level to a higher level and social advancement from a domestic and traditional institutions to the modern social institutions in an increasingly industrial society have changed the quality of life (Higgs, 2007). In addition, the changes in society which includes six pairs of patterns of action in terms of environmental variables, cultural system, social system, personality system, the behavior of organisms and the physical environment influence wholistically one's understanding of the role of quality of life (Ritzer, 2000). At the same time, the spillover and multiplier effect of economic growth will improve the social mobility, modernization of the rural sector, the expansion of education, diversify and

expand the social structure of the middle class that are necessary for a modern capitalist society. This situation will further broaden the concept of quality of life and make it more multi-dimensional. These findings commensurate with the comments made by Triandis (1995) and Ahuvia (2001) about the process of modernization. Modernization process is encompassed in a group changes from life-world to another life where the feature of individualism prevails. This resulted in the changing of the individual who wants to be themselves and consequently have their own sets of criteria of what quality of life means.

Previous studies have also shown that there is a difference in understanding the quality of life of individuals exposed to modernity with individuals who are less exposed to the process of modernization and industrialization (Diener and Lucas, 2000; Veenhoven, 1999). Accordingly, other scholars like Ben-David (1993) and Lithwick (2000) have concluded that the shift from traditional to modern, collective attitude to individualistic attitudes, changes in community support for modern achievement orientation are factors that attention should be paid attention in understanding the quality of life of the human person. Studies done by the Dinero (1997) to modern Bedouin women in Israel for example has supported this opinion. Dinero in his research found that the concept of quality of life of Bedouin women living in the city are totally different as compared with the women who live in the rural areas. In addition, a study conducted by the Kedem-Friedrich and Al-Atawneh (2004:338) for women who live in the Negev, Israel, was also found to show that the process of modernization has resulted in the view of the quality of life of women has changed. They have put lifestyle and appearances as the most important in understanding the quality of life compared with physical health.

#### 4. Conclusion

The world-view of Penan community on quality of life are totally different with the what the State views in its Quality of Life Index. This is because the concept of quality of life highlighted by the Penan in this study is based on the multi-dimensional nature of wants and needs. Conventional requirements include goal that is naturally set by humans in order to prevent themselves from danger. Meanwhile, they will also refer to the individual goals of the non-economic nature and are embedded in the culture, social values and norms. The world-view of Penan community about quality of life in this study is not just based on the sheer desire and is not limited in terms of material or physical needs, but also involves other requirements such as the subjective nature of cognition, sociology and psychology. In addition, it is closely related to the inability or incapacity of the individuals within the community, and the inter-related social and economic indicators of the environment. Lavers (2008), in his study in two rural areas in Ethiopia have also found that the Ethiopian community's quality of life indicators are not only limited in terms of human needs but also all other aspects of the will of the individual goals. These findings also coincide with the views of Sen (2002) in stating that the sense of belonging is the best step to help identify indicators of the quality of life of an individual or community members. This is because they have the freedom to think and make choices about their lives without being restricted by outside observers (Shackman, Liu and Wang, 2005).

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