

Operation Bebatok Resettlement Scheme

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Key words: community development, resettlement: RASCOM: Sarawak: Iban.

Introduction

The main objective of this research was to conduct a baseline socioeconomic study of the Operation Bebatok resettlers. The study sought to establish their socioeconomic background in order to see how these resettlers have fared socioeconomically after being in the scheme for about 30 years. Second, the research sought to identify some of the major issues and problems facing the resettlers. And third, the research also sought to study their general perception about several issues especially on what they think about their future in the scheme in view of the plan for RASCOM, the main patron agency, to disband.

Materials and Methods

The research has been carried out using a combination of complimentary research methods such as participant-observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, questionnaire survey and personal experience, knowledge and information. A team of three individuals that represent these wide spectrum of information, knowledge and skill were therefore complimentary. I have been researching the Iban community since 1985. Dr. Zahid Emby has been dealing with the development of minority Orang Asli and estate-type development, while Stephen Sekai was member of the first batch of government officers dealing with Operation Bebatok in Sarawak.

Results and Discussion

First, the Operation Bebatok Resettlement Scheme is in many ways a longhouse settlement. Nevertheless, it differs from the latter in that in a resettlement such as Operation Bebatok, several longhouse communities are grouped together. This "larger" group makes longhouse-type resettlement more prone to stress and pressure not only on the people's relations with

each others, but also on local resources such as arable land, jungle produce and river supplements.

Second, there is general evidence of poverty, whether relative or absolute. Indicators of poverty were not clearly seen from income level alone as the majority of the resettlers were jobless or self-employed. For those who have no work of permanent nature and therefore could not generate consistent income of some form, poverty was reflected in many facets of their lives-e.g. basic home furnishings that urbanites have nowadays taken for granted. Even the individual portion of the poor's longhouse reflects the state of poverty which outsiders sometimes are fond of calling simplicity.

Third, there is little livelihood. Earlier plans of generating a self-sufficient resettlement scheme that are capable of sustaining life has basically failed. The resettlement now looked deserted as many youthful members migrate to urban areas and other places in search of employment and a better life for themselves. In most cases, longhouses in these resettlements are manned by womenfolk, some children and other older and less able bodies. Family members only returned once in a while during major festivals such as Gawai, Christmas and New Year.

Fourth, despite these appalling conditions and a lack of better future prospect, resettlers who remained in the resettlement still pin their hopes for a better future on the government's ability to help regenerate life at the resettlement. This high hope was placed even as RASCOM, the main sponsoring agency of the Operation Bebatok, was about to be disbanded at the initiation of this study. The resettlers had hoped that RASCOM would not have been disbanded and withdrawn from their area, but as they realised the futility of their protest, they are hopeful that the government would come up with other

alternatives to help lift their standard of living.

Lastly, majority of the settlers seem to realize the importance of education as the route to providing a better prospect for the future of their children and their children's children. In this respect, they were placing a high hope that the government would do something about not only upgrading basic school facilities in their resettlement but also be able to send more experienced and better qualified staff.

Conclusions

After about thirty years of experimentation with various programmes that have been launched in Operation Bebatok Resettlement, many important lessons have been learned that can help government and government agencies rethink about how best to handle similar development whether in existing resettlement schemes or in new ones that are being planned.

Benefits from the study

The benefit of this study is on policy implication. It was clear that for development programmes to be successful, they must be weighed from various angles. First, the needs and wishes of the resettlers must be taken seriously before introducing any type of development. Second, these needs and wishes must also be weighed against their abilities. Finally, both factors must also be weighed against practicality. If surplus can be produced, can it be reasonably marketed in good time knowing that infrastructure is lacking between the resettlement and major urban centers?

Literature cited in the text

None.