

Past Meets Future: A Trans-Border Forum for a Sustainable Future of the Highlands of Borneo¹

Cristina Eghenter

WWF-Indonesia

and

Jayl Langub

Institute of East Asian Studies

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

In the Heart of Borneo, the highlands at the border between Malaysia and Indonesia, indigenous peoples have come together to establish a cultural forum of the peoples of the highlands of Borneo, Forum Masyarakat Adat Borneo (FORMADAT), a trans-boundary, grass-root initiative to create and maintain a network of communication and information to help steer development in the highlands in ways that are sustainable and suitable to the needs and aspirations of local people in both Malaysia and Indonesia. The highlands comprise the Upper Padas area in Sabah; Bario, often known as the Kelabit highlands, Ba Kelalan and Long Semado in Sarawak; and the Krayan area in East Kalimantan. The highlands include among the largest surviving intact forested and traditionally farmed catchment area on the island of Borneo. They are also home to rich assemblage of megalithic monuments witness of a history of long settlement in the area. The main ethnic groups inhabiting the area are the Lun Dayeh, Kelabit, Lun Bawang, and Sa'ban. They comprise approximately 15,000 people. Culturally and linguistically, the groups are closely related, speakers of the Apad Wat language. At the first workshop held in Ba Kelalan on 19 September 2003, participants discussed the possibility of establishing a forum to forge stronger links amongst communities on both sides of the border on strategies of common interest beneficial to all parties. The FORMADAT vision outlines the essence of its mandate to foster historical, cultural and family bonds across the international border, and strengthen traditional ways in order to shape and build together a sustainable future for their ancestral land in the highlands of Borneo.

The history of FORMADAT

On 19 September 2003, a Workshop on Sustainable Agricultural Development in the highlands of Borneo was held in Ba Kelalan, Sarawak. The workshop, organized and sponsored by the Sarawak Development Institute, brought together representatives of the highland communities of Long Pasia, Long Semado, Ba' Kelalan, Bario, and Krayan as well as government representatives from Sarawak and East Kalimantan, experts and researchers on issues pertaining to sustainable farming. All participants came with similar aspiration: to search for way to intensify economic development of the area without compromising the quality of the social and natural environments.

At the same workshop, participants discussed the possibility of establishing a forum to forge stronger links amongst communities on both sides of the border on strategies of common interest beneficial to all parties. The idea came from the late Dr Judson Sakai Tagal, a minister in the State government of Sarawak, and also an exceptional individual from the highlands. Foremost on his mind was what had happened in Kundasang, Sabah, where the

¹ A revised version of this article was published in the *Borneo Research Bulletin*, 2008 vol. 39 pages 286-294.