

# SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD OF PEATLAND DWELLERS IN THE MUKAH WATERSHED, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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## SUMMARY

A large area of peatland in Sarawak occurs in Mukah Division. Although, considered unsuitable for the cultivation of certain crops, peatlands have been used by the local communities for subsistence agriculture and sago cultivation for generations. When the Land Custody Development Authority (LCDA) allocated 30,000 hectares of land for sago cultivation in the Mukah watershed, opportunities to improve and sustain the livelihood of the communities were eagerly projected. Has this strategy improved and sustained the livelihood of the communities living in the Mukah watershed? Prior to this, what strategy options have they been adapting to sustain their livelihood? A socioeconomic survey was conducted on a sample of 300 respondents from seven selected villages in the Mukah watershed. The socioeconomic profile and the present socioeconomic activities, as well as the socio-cultural aspects related to these activities were examined. The study also provided some strategies and recommendations on how to further develop and sustain the livelihood of the local communities in order to prevent further deterioration of peatland in the Mukah watershed.

**KEYWORDS:** local communities, socioeconomic conditions, livelihood strategy options, tropical peatland

## INTRODUCTION

Peatland is widespread in Sarawak, Malaysia occupying approximately 13.0 percent or 1.7 million hectares of the total land area (Othman et. al, 1996). Mukah Division, which covers an area of 6,997.6 square kilometres, is largely made up of low-lying peatland. Peat has been considered a problem soil because early attempts by some small holders to cultivate it for subsistence agriculture activities often failed, and farms were abandoned (Lim *et al.*, n. d.). Peat has good water holding capacity, however, and is able to hold large amounts of nutrients, which make it suitable for crop growth (Kanapathy, 1975). These favourable properties of peat have opened up opportunities for large-scale cultivation of crops, especially sago and oil palm in Mukah.

Acknowledging that sago has been Mukah's niche agricultural-based product, the Land Custody Development Authority (LCDA) allocated 30,000 hectares of peatland for sago cultivation in the Mukah watershed. From 1987 to 1994, LCDA has used approximately 8,000 hectares of deep peat in Mukah Division for sago (Kueh, n. d), by establishing a number of sago plantations (the Mukah, Dalat and Sebakong Plantations). LCDA's Crop Research and Application Unit (CRAUN) has also been conducting downstream research to determine the potential of sago for the pharmaceutical, food, chemical, and cosmetics industries.

Has this strategy of large scale sago plantation improved and sustained the livelihood of the communities living in the Mukah watershed? Prior to this, what strategy options have they been adapting to sustain their livelihood? This study attempt to answer these questions by examining the socioeconomic profile and the present socioeconomic activities of the communities, as well as the socio-cultural aspects related to these activities.