

## **SOCIO-SPATIAL INEQUALITIES IN SARAWAK: THE ROLE OF SARAWAK CORRIDOR OF RENEWABLE ENERGY (SCORE)**

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**ABSTRACT:** The failure of the colonial government to develop the economic sector for this state was due to the adoption of a biased development approach. The biased approach focused on the potential of existing urban areas, and on economic growth oriented rather than distributed growth. Various economic development projects had been implemented since Sarawak became part of Malaysia. As the biggest state in the country with multi-ethnic population, Sarawak definitely needs more strategic development approach and attention from the central government. The Ninth Malaysia Plan has shown that spatial inequality in Sarawak has widened and needs attention. The launching of Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) marked the shift to the new approach of development in improving the spatial inequality in Sarawak through regional development strategy. This paper discusses the spatial inequality in Sarawak and explore the potential role of SCORE in regional development.

*Keywords:* inequality, corridor development, regional development, economic growth, spatial inequality

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sarawak was colonised by Brooke regime, and has faced socio-spatial inequalities in the development of space, similar to what Peninsular Malaysia experienced after British colonisation. The differences of population settlement and development inequality in Sarawak are due to the historical factors where the colonial had developed the most profitable areas such as Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri. Bintulu and Miri divisions are abounded with natural resources such as oil and gas while Kuching is important for business and administration activities. Meanwhile, Sibul was developed by the colonial to produce rubber raw materials for international export during the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, and was then continued by timber industry. The Sarawak government estimated that 3,200 kilometres square of the land was not suitable for agriculture; it is peat soil, sandy and extremely acidic (Lee, 1970).

The livelihood of the rural people such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Malay and Melanau were often not profitable and it included swamp and wet land rice cultivation, sago and coconut growing and fisheries activities. Farming activity is commonly a small-scale, low-yielding and low value system whereby majority of the farmers were involved in subsistence production and shifting cultivation of rice (King and Jawan, 1992). Apart from low income and low productivity, rural development in Sarawak also faces other challenges related to land tenure systems and administration approach by the colonial regimes. The Brooke development policy has lead to negative impacts to development in Sarawak, that includes spatial and development inequality. The land development policy introduced also led to the increased poverty rates among farmers in Sarawak (King and Jawan, 1992) especially among Bumiputera minorities (Berma, 2001; Ngidang 2002; Jawan, 2000; Nair, 2000). At the same time, the colonial dualisme development approach (Foo, 1990) also contributed to the spatial inequality among rural and urban peoples (Jomo and Kin Woon, 1987). In the end, the gaps of income distribution in Sarawak also increased to the highest rate especially between Malay and Bumiputra minorities. For example, the household income gap ratio between the Iban and Malay was 1:1.88; and Bidayuh and Malay 1:1.60 (Berma, 2004). This phenomenon did not only occur at ethnic level but also in the context of urban and rural (Minos, 2000; Ishak, 2000). Although the rural population in Sarawak is higher than the urban population by about 75 per cent, the former contributes less than 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Berma, 2004). The implementation of the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) and the National Development Policy (1991-2000) have been called into question as poverty rates among the Bumiputera in Sarawak are still high (Berma, 2003 and

Berma et al., 2006). It clearly shows that the spatial development inequality and poverty in the state are affecting peoples' socioeconomic status especially among the minority ethnic groups due to factors including topography, soil quality and altitude as mentioned by the previous scholars such as Jackson (1968), Lee (1970) and Hatch and Lim (1979). In terms of administration, the state of Sarawak is divided into twelve divisions which are of higher hierarchy than districts (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sarawak Administrative Divisions and Districts

| <b>DIVISION</b> | <b>DISTRICT</b>                 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Kuching         | Kuching, Bau, Lundu             |
| Kota Samarahan  | Samarahan, Simunjan, Asajaya    |
| Serian          | Serian, Tebedu                  |
| Sri Aman        | Sri Aman                        |
| Betong          | Betong, Saratok                 |
| Sarikei         | Sarikei, Pakan, Julau, Meradong |
| Kapit           | Kapit, Song, Belaga             |
| Sibu            | Sibu, Kanowit, Selangau         |
| Mukah           | Mukah, Dalat, Matu dan Daro     |
| Bintulu         | Bintulu, Tatau                  |
| Miri            | Miri, Marudi                    |
| Limbang         | Limbang, Lawas                  |

Source: Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak (2014) and Borneo Post Online (2015)

Each division is headed by a resident while district is headed by a district officer who is responsible for the district development. The formation of divisional and district offices enables Sarawak Government manage every division effectively, while considering its topographical features and scattered population distributions. Sarawak Government also establishes sub-district offices such as Beluru Small District Office, Long Lama Small District Office and Niah Small District Office to ensure that the rural communities' accessibility to socioeconomic information such as agricultural aids, subsidies and any government programmes, hence enabling rural communities to, among others, lodge complaints related to development or socioeconomics issues

## **SOCIO-SPATIAL INEQUALITIES IN SARAWAK**

Socio-spatial inequalities in poverty, health, income and education present significant economic and political challenges for the governments in many developing countries. According to Kanbur and Venables (2005) and Kanbur et al., (2006), the systematic evidence on the extent of socio-spatial inequality in developing countries is still relatively scarce. A growing body of work has documented the existence of socio-spatial inequalities in many forms in various countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America because rapid economic growth is often associated with uneven regional and urban development, policy makers are also concerned that development is likely to exacerbate rather than reduce socio-spatial inequalities. Yet, despite these concerns, there seems to be little consensus on the causes of socio-spatial inequality and how policy makers should respond to address these socio-spatial inequalities. Globally, the impact of this phenomenon to economic system and socio-spatial development in developing country become an important issue and the impacts to regional and rural development has been discussed widely (Lee, 1970 and McGee, 1995). The development inequality phenomenon in Sarawak is also associated with cultural system of the local ethnic groups, land tenure systems, topography and soil quality that is not for agricultural activities (Jackson, 1968; Hatch and Lim, 1979). King (1992) also emphasised that the issue of sparsely populated land. The government also faces torrential rain that causes flooding and soil erosion, and also some areas of land in Sarawak are less acidic.

Bumiputera's involvement in Sarawak economy especially in high profitable sectors such as business, manufacturing and construction remains a low 8.4 per cent (Berma, 2004). Although Sarawak is one of the petroleum exporters in this region, local workers only constitute 1.1 per cent of the total workforce (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2009). About 14.7 and 32.5 per cents of Sarawak population are involved in the secondary and tertiary sector respectively (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2007). The high participative rate in tertiary sector was due to the demand

from tourism and tourism-based industries in the state. In terms of settlement, the majority of Sarawakians live in rural areas and the pattern of these settlements is closely related to the type of work involved. According to Walton (1990) and Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak (2007), about 75 per cent of Sarawakians live scattered in rural areas and 25 per cent in main cities such as Kuching, Miri, Sibul and Bintulu. The majority of the rural populations are Bumiputera (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2007). In term of settlements, most of the Malays lives in Kuching and Miri divisions and work in fisheries and subsistence farming. The Melanaus are more concentrated in coastal areas of Mukah, Sibul and Bintulu and involve in the sago industry and fisheries. Meanwhile the Ibans are largely concentrated in Miri, Kuching, Sibul, Kapit, Kuching and Sri Aman; they depend on agricultural activities such as rice, rubber, coconut and palm oil cultivation as their main economic activity.

The Bidayus are also settled in Kuching and Samarahan divisions especially in Lundu, Bau, Padawan, Penrissen, Kuching and Serian (James, 2003; Rensch et al., 2006). However, there are also Bidayus residing in other divisions due to their skills to work in certain fields such as in the services and manufacturing sector (Minos, 2000). The Bidayuh's economic activity do not differ too much whereby they are also involved in cultivating low land and high land paddy and commercial agricultural activities like planting corn, palm oil, pepper, pineapple, cocoa and small scale rubber plantation (Minos, 2000). Generally, Dayak ethnic groups and other minority of Bumiputera such as Kelabit, Kayan, Kenyah, Orang Ulu, Penan, Lun Bawang settled in the highlands in rural areas. Researchers have looked at the factors such as the suitability of land for agriculture and their culture as the determining factors of the different settlement location among the ethnic groups in Sarawak. The main economic activity of this group is shifting cultivation and they practise traditional technology inherited from ancestors (Unit Perancang Negeri Sarawak, 2007). There are also the Dayaks and other minorities like Kelabit and Melanau running small-scale businesses such as opening a retail stores, food stalls, selling handicrafts, forest products and agricultural products such as fruits and vegetables (Minos, 2000). The Chinese mostly settled in urban area and are involved in large-scale business activities. Similarly, those who live in rural areas are also involved in a small-scale businesses and cultivate pepper, gambier and involved in mining and construction sector (Minos, 2000). Poverty is one of the major developmental issues in Sarawak. Minos (2000) and Ngidang (2002) refer the issue of rural poverty as greatly influenced by the government's attitude which does not give recognition to the status of Native Customary Rights land (NCR) belonging to the indigenous people in rural areas. When an area needs to be developed, residents will be asked to move out and were given no compensation at market price as practiced in the city. Dissatisfaction with the status of land ownership has resulted in decreased productivity of farmers in developing NCR land for agricultural activities like planting large scale of oil palm and pepper (Ngidang and Abdul, 1999; Minos, 2000; Ngidang, 2002). Other problems also include difficulty in obtaining loans from banks and other government financial agencies (Minos, 2000). According to Berma (2004), Abdul Rahman (2006) and Faisal (2009), the cause of poverty in rural areas was a result of behavioural factors, culture and nature of the natives who were resistant towards change, dependent on others and with conservative mindset and bashful attitude.

Lian (2004) and Minos (2003) believe that the issue of poverty is due to the shortage of basic facilities in rural areas such as roads, clean water, electricity, unproductive land, high production costs, lack of accessibility to credit and market opportunities and low incomes from non-farm sources. However, Berma (2004) asserts that the level of education and low skills are the main contributors to poverty in rural areas. In Sarawak, the system of land ownership, Indigenous Land Code is an obstacle to development in the country (King and Mohd Jali, 1992) even though the system is seen as a good approach to protect land owners. The system is also linked to low agricultural productivity among farmers in Sarawak besides the land administration system available. At the moment, the number of agency staff and a number of implementing agencies in Sarawak which is equal to the number of groups in the states in Peninsular Malaysia may not be sufficient in the context of Sarawak (Minos, 2000 and Ngidang, 2002). This is due to the size of Sarawak as the largest state in Malaysia, as King and Jawan (1992) has mentioned, it is also one of the major challenges for development in Sarawak.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper utilised qualitative research method such as secondary data from government agencies, previous study and related data on development history, economic report, population census and other documents. According to Hinds et al., (1997), analysis of existing data aims to find answers to research questions that differ from the questions asked in the original research. Cnossen (1997) referred to it as one of the data analysis or information that was either gathered by someone else such as institutions, researchers, NGOs, etc. or for some other purpose than the one currently being considered, or often a combination of the two. In this study, data were gathered from previous study on Malaysia's development reports in Sarawak context, such as state economic reports, and regional development report by RECODA<sup>1</sup>. The literature review of Sarawak historical development (e.g. rural, urban and regional development issues etc.), populations and related data was gathered by previous study from local and international researchers.

## **THE ROLE OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SARAWAK - SARAWAK CORRIDOR OF RENEWABLE ENERGY (SCORE)**

As the country's previous development policies have yet to adequately address the problems of uneven development in Malaysia, the failure of this conventional development strategy has been followed by the government intervention to address this issue whereby the idea of regional development through the establishment of development corridors has been officially launched under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010). There are five Regional Development Economic Corridors consisting of the East Coast Corridor of Economic Region (ECER), Northern Corridor of Economic Region (ECER), Iskandar Malaysia, Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) and Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE). In the subjective view, the concept of regions is derived from particular purpose while objective view identified regions according to geographical and physical features (Glasson (1974). In the early 1980s, Glasson and Marshall (2007) and Dawkins (2003) define the region based on developmental approaches. The implementation of regional-based development is an attempt to reduce development imbalances between regions in the country through simulation of new growth centres based on major economic thrusts. In implementing SCORE, there are a few goals namely: to solve the problem of economic imbalances, to promote economic growth in the high chain, to strengthen institutional capacity and implementation as well as increasing the capacity for knowledge (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2009). Through SCORE, Sarawak Government estimates a project developments; and an increase in employment opportunities by 2.5 fold from 0.9 million in 2006 to 2.5 million in 2030 (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2009). SCORE is located in the central region, covering the total land area of over 320 kilometres from the coastal area of Tanjung Manis in Sarikei to Samalaju in Bintulu, inclusive of both the surrounding area as well as the interior. This large-scale and long-term developmental project is expected to cover the total area of 70,709 square kilometres, lasting until 2030, and involving a population of 607,800 people. There are 10 targeted primary industry will contribute to this corridor such as aluminium, glass, marine engineering, based Metal, petroleum-based products, wood products, aquaculture, livestock, palm oil and tourism (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak, 2014).

In terms of revenue, SCORE is expected to increase five growth poles of Sarawak's GDP to RM118 billion and increase per capita income to RM97,400.00 by 2030 (RECODA, 2015). SCORE is a major initiative undertaken to develop the central region of the state in line with the nation's Vision 2020. Based on the Growth Poles theory by Perroux (1955) where the attraction of activities and the concentration of growth in poles, from where the diffusion of growth is expected to occur towards the

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<sup>1</sup>The Regional Corridor Development Authority (RECODA) is the agency tasked with overseeing and managing SCORE. The Chief Minister of Sarawak is the RECODA board and RECODA has board representation from all of the relevant federal and state agencies to ensure swift decision making and traditional government procedural delays are avoided. RECODA have to promote SCORE effectively by creating and stimulating new and existing markets and to work towards achieving the ambitious investment goals set by the State (RECODA, 2015).

secondary growth poles (Perroux, 1955; Aydalot, 1965; Boudeville, 1968); Baleh, Murum, Samarakan, Long Lama, Semop, Balingian, Selangau, Bakun and Nanga Merit stand to benefit greatly from the development of the major growth nodes and from the spatial development of the SCORE region as a whole. The major objective has been the increase of the industrial product and the concentration of development in large urban centres such as Samalaju, Tanjung Manis, Baram, Mukan and Tunoh (Figure 1) which had the necessary prerequisites such as infrastructure, labour force, market and so on for the attraction and operation of large industrial complexes propulsive industries (Lasuen, 1969). Thus, the concept of “top-down” intervention prevails, which means that state intervention should be intense through the means of regional policy, so as to boost the process of concentration and diffusion of growth from the pole out to the other areas (Hadjimichalis, 1992; Christofakis, 2001). On a theoretical level, the explanation of regional disparities by Myrdal as well as the concentration and dispersion theories, as mainly expressed by Christaller (1933), Perroux (1955) and Boudeville (1968) have greatly supported the formation of the growth poles and diffusion model (Rodrigue et al., 2006). Growth poles, metropolitan centres and growth axes are the main forms of polar concentrations (Vinuela-Jimenez et al., 2010).

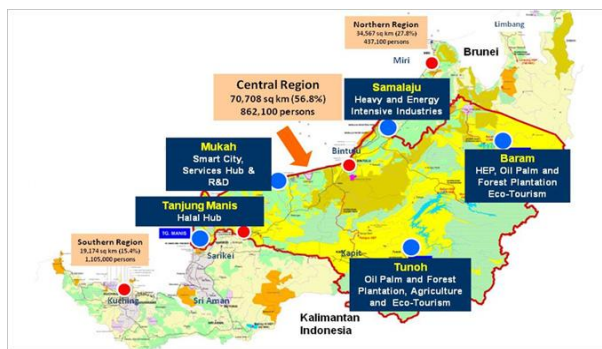


Figure 1: The Main Focus Area of SCORE Projects in Sarawak Regional Development  
Source: RECODA (2015)

In the case of SCORE, it is expected that Samalaju will develop rapidly and will bring more socioeconomic benefits to surroundings area due to its successful industrial development and abundant of natural resources, infrastructure, basic facilities being the first regional growth centre in Sarawak introduced by the federal government in 1990's (Sulehan, 1992). It is targeted to balance Sarawak population and offers more job opportunities to the local especially from less developed areas in SCORE targeted area. The concept of this regional approach is to reduce migration from city to city and between regions. SCORE development programmes should not repeat the mistakes that have been experienced by the other region in Peninsular Malaysia whereby the population is not enough to support new settlements and lead to the failure of the establishment of new town in regional development programme during that time. In addition, low wage rates in oil palm sectors also led the population to migrate to other economic sectors and thus make the settlement efforts a failure (Wong, 1989). In 2015, the government announced Baram Growth Node that consists of numerous Integrated Upland Agricultural Stations (Talip, 2015). An initial amount of RM6 million was allocated for the construction of access roads and farm roads. The selection of Baram as a new growth nodes is timely as it has resources that can be explored and it is expected to spread the effects of development goals to the less develop area. This growth can also reduce the migration of people from rural areas to urban areas such as from rural area to Miri which has been developed by oil industry and service sector that has been attracting rural and outside people over the years.

## CONCLUSION

SCORE is a government effort to address the socio-spatial and developmental inequalities in Sarawak. Low participation of local people in the highly profitable economic sectors such as petroleum, oil and gas-based industries clearly show the negative socio and economic developmental impact on local community. The government should ensure greater participation of locals i.e. the Bumiputera in the planned and structured SCORE's development socio and economic activities. The

government should disperse industrial development through rural urbanisation program, private investments and entrepreneurial development among Bumiputera. It is important to ensure that this regional developmental project brings better quality of life to the locals by sustaining the environment, culture and local economy.

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