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QUALITY OF LIFE: POST-PROJECT PERCEPTION OF DAYAK COMMUNITIES IN THREE SALCRA LAND SCHEMES

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

A major goal of rural development is to raise quality of life (QOL) in rural areas. Part of the success of this effort has to be viewed from the perspectives of the "target groups" themselves because, according to a famous axiom in welfare economics attributed to 19th Century Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto, the individual is the best judge of his own well-being. He should know better whether his QOL has indeed improved after joining a development project.

The Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA) is a State agency responsible for rehabilitating Native Customary Rights (NCR) land in Sarawak, at the owner's request, in order to alleviate poverty by creating employment opportunities to the landowners and increasing their income levels (SALCRA, 1976). This is done by getting the landowners to formally agree to allow the agency develop the land and establish commercial crops like oil palm, cocoa and rubber. Once the schemes start to bear fruits, participants are required to make repayment to the agency for all development expenditure incurred. Needless to say, SALCRA will build all the necessary infrastructure including roads, terracing, staff quarters, etc., and then manage the scheme like an estate. In the schemes the landowners are either employed as daily-paid or contract workers. Naturally, not all landowners can be employed in the scheme. Many of them supplement their income by planting cash crops like pepper and cocoa; for food, they continue to plant hill padi under shifting cultivation.

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Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to characterize three such land schemes and determine the nature of the relationship between scheme participants' perception of the QOL in the schemes and certain socio-economic variables of the respondents.

Theoretical Framework

Perception is the process whereby humans become aware of their environment, mainly through the sense of sight, hearing, etc. Individuals always form perceptions of people, objects and events which they encounter in the course of their daily lives (Bryans and Cronin, 1984). Although people differ in their perception, it is basically the process of interpreting reality. The interest in this study is to determine how the three schemes are placed relative to each other along the perception continuum, and to ascertain what factors are correlated with the level of perception of the QOL of SALCRA scheme participants.

Quality of life is a multi-dimensional construct embracing economic and non-economic elements, including income and employment, which give people the purchasing power to acquire material things in life; access to that income; good health; opportunity to obtain education; social, occupational and geographical mobility; access to information; and ease of communication (Ayob, 1990). Other indicators of QOL that have been used by sociologists include level of education achieved, literacy rate and environmental quality (Hess, Markson and Stein, 1982). However these are tangible elements, easily measurable; the present interest, however, is in how people *perceive* their socioeconomic conditions which contribute towards QOL. Nevertheless, the tangible elements mentioned earlier may be used as explanatory variables in understanding perception of QOL.

To an agricultural community such as SALCRA scheme participants, access to additional income is possible through off-scheme (unregimented) agriculture, since these folks have the additional land to farm in their own time. Agriculture requires various kinds of inputs and support services: material as well as institutional. Access to these inputs, both physical and institutional, is vital to the scheme participants who want to improve their income. Therefore access to agricultural inputs is considered as a component of the QOL of a farming community. In this study, four dimensions of QOL are used, namely, income and employment, social services, agricultural input delivery and communication.

Research Procedures

The three schemes chosen for study are the Kampong Taeë Cocoa Scheme in Serian District of Samarahan Division, the Lemanak Oil Palm Scheme and the Batang Ai Resettlement Schemes, both in Lubok Antu District, Sri Aman Division. In terms of access, Kampong Taeë is less than an hour away from the capital city of Kuching, whereas Lubok Antu District is nearly five hours away by road from Kuching. At least 1½ hours of the journey is on gravel road. Lubok Antu town is very close to the Indonesian border; it is almost on the same longitude as Sibu town.

A stratified (scheme-based) random sample of 631 participants in the three land schemes provided the data for the study. The sample was distributed in the following manner: Kampong Taeë 147; Lemanak 193; and Batang Ai 291. The socioeconomic survey was conducted by the authors and their associates in November-December 1989. Iban-speaking or Bidayuh-speaking Universiti Pertanian Malaysia students were employed as enumerators, depending on the ethnic composition of the scheme studied.

The research tries to gauge participants' perception of the four dimensions of the QOL in their community by posing 32 statements along these dimensions and asking them to respond by "agreeing" or "disagreeing" with these statements.

Two types of statements were posed – positive statements (e.g. "SALCRA has opened up job opportunities") and negative ones (e.g. "Since joining the scheme my income has decreased.") Agreeing with a positive statement is equivalent to disagreeing with a negative statement; they both imply positive perception of an object. Similarly, the reverse is also true, i.e., agreeing with a negative statement is equivalent to disagreeing with a positive statement, both implying