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DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN BATANG AI, SARAWAK: PERCEPTION OF A RESETTLED IBAN COMMUNITY**Ahmad Mahdzan Ayob and Noran Fauziah Yaakub****INTRODUCTION**

The Batang Ai Resettlement Scheme in Lubok Antu District of Sarawak was established in order to resettle families affected by the construction of the hydroelectric dam across the Batang Ai at Wong Irup. This hydroelectric project, which had stirred much interest among planners and environmentalists alike, produced an artificial lake with a surface area of about 8,500 ha (roughly 33 square miles) with a water level of more than 60 metres above the original river level. It forced about 26 longhouses to be moved out of the reservoir area to the Batang Ai Resettlement Scheme (BARS) in Lubok Antu.

The affected people are Iban longhouse dwellers whose ancestors have been living in the area for generations and whose livelihood depends on shifting cultivation of hill padi and pepper. The majority of the Iban inhabitants of the area had expressed their opposition to the proposed hydroelectric project, as they thought they would lose everything they own— land, houses, crops, burial grounds, etc. However, they would consider resettlement if they were adequately compensated.

DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN BATANG AI, SARAWAK: PERCEPTION OF A RESETTLED IBAN COMMUNITY

by

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and

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INTRODUCTION¹

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The compensations were eventually paid with varying quanta; these, however, did not satisfy every resident. Besides compensation in cash, each family was also given 11 acres of land consisting of 5 acres of rubber, 3 acres cocoa (to be developed as scheme crops), 2 acres hill padi and one acre garden lot (off-scheme activities). This mixed cropping pattern was justified by the project planners on the ground that it provided "a more varied and interesting way of life, as well as making better use of the individual members of a family's work team" (Batang Ai Hydroelectric Project Report, n.d.). Entrusted to develop the scheme was the Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA), a State-level agency formed in 1976 to develop Native Customary Rights (NCR) land in Sarawak.

Once resettled,² each family was provided with a dwelling unit (*bilek*) in a longhouse built by the Housing Development Commission; these houses were sold to the settlers through a loan scheme which used part of the compensation money received by the settlers as a deposit.

Even though the land scheme planners realised that oil palm would have been the more profitable crop for the new scheme, it had been excluded because it was believed that SALCRA had already planted large areas of oil palm in the District. Although SALCRA's mill at Lemanak which went into operation in 1982 would have sufficient capacity to absorb additional production from the resettlement site, it was thought that the scheme would fail because the settlers were just not used to the regimentation in an oil palm estate. Thus, the continuous supervision and discipline required for both the establishment and maintenance of oil palm were considered a "potential burden" to the resettled families, "a fiercely independent group at the best of times." The authorities anticipated that the "inevitable disruption of production schedules would seriously undermine the scheme's chances of success." (Batang Ai Hydroelectric Project Report, n.d.).

The present study is an attempt to ascertain the settlers' perception about their new neighbourhood compared to their old abode in what is now the site of the Batang Ai reservoir.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

Perception is the process whereby people become aware of others and the world around them, mainly through the sense of sight, hearing etc. In the course of their daily lives individuals form perceptions of people and events which they encounter (Bryans and Cronin, 1984, pg. 80). While perception differs among individuals, it is basically the process of interpreting reality.

The interest in this study is on how the Batang Ai Resettlement Scheme (BARS) participants perceive their new neighbourhood compared to their original dwelling in what is now the submerged areas of Wong Irup. In short, this paper is concerned with how a group of people affected by a major development project view the quality of life before and after being resettled to a new area.

Since many factors make up the quality of life, we are dealing with a multi-dimensional construct. In this study, we use 22 items to gauge the settlers' perception of change in the quality of life. Among the factors that we consider will contribute significantly to quality of life are income and employment, which give these rural 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.