Seeking sustainability in the Sungai Medihit watershed

A recently completed project in the Malaysian state of Sarawak has helped Kelabit and Penan communities develop new sustainable livelihood strategies

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Long legs: Long Napir people convene a community meeting in their longhouse. *Photo: T. Yanuariadi*

The Kelabit and Penan indigenous communities dwell in the tropical forests of the Sungai Medihit watershed—an area of about 35 400 hectares—in Ulu Limbang, Sarawak, Malaysia. The Kelabit have been living in the watershed since the early 1890s, and they have been practising shifting agriculture for generations. The Penan, in contrast, formerly lived nomadic lifestyles in the deep forests of Sarawak and Brunei; the Sarawak government settled them in the Sungai Medihit watershed in 1972.

Both communities subsist in a state of poverty, obtaining their livelihoods from shifting agriculture and resources collected from the increasingly disturbed surrounding forests. The two communities face many problems: the catchment has been logged and its resources are generally neither sustainably managed nor used to their best advantage. The communities have traditional or customary rights as part of the water catchment area; although the concessions granted by government were outside the customary rights areas, the negative impacts of logging have affected the communities. The rivers have become polluted; the communities have been unable to implement cash-generating activities; and the catchment's timber resources and ecosystems are degraded and there has been a lack of innovative approaches to restoration. The communities are poor and lack secure livelihoods, and the degradation of natural resources and the environment continues.

In 2015–2018, the Sarawak Forestry Department implemented a project funded by the Asia-Pacific Network for Sustainable Forest Management and Rehabilitation (APFNet) and supervised by ITTO with the aim of promoting sustainable forest management in the Sungai Medihit watershed to enable the betterment of living conditions for indigenous communities. Importantly, the project was formulated based on the results of an ITTO pre-project[1]

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1 PPD 135/07 Rev. 7 (F): "Community-based forest management of Sungai Medihit watershed".

implemented by the Sarawak Forestry Department in collaboration with Hirosar Jaya Sdn Bhd in 2008–2009. The project's strategy involved the following four key activities:

1) informing local communities on where, and with what resources, they are able to operate cash-generating community development projects, thereby obviating the need to deplete local resources through subsistence activities;

2) formulating guidelines to enable local communities and licence holders to sustainably manage the catchment;

3) developing skills among local communities and licence holders for restoring and sustainably managing catchment resources for profit and the catchment's wellbeing; and

4) developing a tradition, process and forum for enabling stakeholders to work more closely together in catchment management and use.

I revisited the villages of the two communities, Long Napir and Kampung Bahagia, in August 2018 to carry out a terminal evaluation of the project. The aim was to establish the extent to which the project intervention had achieved its planned outputs and outcomes and to draw conclusions and recommendations for similar interventions in the future.

Winning the hearts of the communities

New development interventions are not always easily accepted in target communities. The boundaries of customary rights over forest lands are often unclear on the ground, leading to conflicts. Early on in the project, people in both the Kelabit and Penan communities feared that the Sarawak Forestry Department would take away their lands and give them to loggers, and they objected to this. After numerous dialogues between community leaders and project officers, however, it became clear to the communities that the project would help them conserve the forests and improve their livelihoods.

Shifting shelter: Temporary Penan lodging for the practise of shifting agriculture. *Photo: T. Yanuariadi*

Specifically, the objectives of the project were to:

1) improve sustainable forest management by setting rational forest management plans, applying innovative forest management techniques and establishing an effective forest management mechanism;

2) enhance the capacity of communities to implement sustainable forest management and develop livelihoods; and

3) improve living conditions by renovating community services' infrastructure.

The project conducted a baseline survey of community socioeconomic status, forest resources, biodiversity and traditional cultures. The information gained from this was used in developing community-level forest management plans, demonstration activities on sustainable forest management, and a community-based forest management platform and mechanism for the co-management of forest resources. This platform and mechanism operates as a partnership arrangement in which target communities, government agencies and other stakeholders share the responsibility and authority for decision-making over the management of forest resources. It is a collaborative arrangement to enable collective management.

The impacts of project interventions—especially on increasing the capacity of the communities to carry out productive activities—were assessed through discussions with local communities and government agencies and on visits to project sites.

The training programme for community members involved a training needs assessment; the formulation of a training programme; the development of training guidelines and training action plans; the carrying out of training sessions; and documentation and evaluation. The training helped improve skills and techniques in alternative livelihood activities.

Alternative livelihoods

The alternative-livelihood activities in which community members were trained included poultry-raising and *tagang* fish farming, which also help address the hunting threat to wildlife; vegetable-growing to tackle the short supply of vegetables; and homestay ecotourism. The project also helped complete some local infrastructure, including the gravelling of 7 km of road from Camp Kilo 0 to Long Napir, the construction of 1.5 km of road to old Long Napir, the building of a school guesthouse, and the installation of alternative solar energy facilities. The road construction by the project increased accessibility by land to the villages. Nevertheless, the constructed roads, and the connected logging roads to the villages, require upgrading to ensure their accessibility in the heavy rainy season.

As a result of these activities, the target communities have been exposed to new ways of increasing household incomes. Each participating household learned—first-hand—new skills to increase livelihoods, and interviews with community members indicated that their incomes have increased, thereby reducing their direct dependence on forest resources. Households that did not participate directly gained inspiration from seeing their neighbours succeed with the new methods.

Handicraft-making was not included in the project; nevertheless, the marketing of handicrafts made using plastics increased with the road development carried out under the project, which improved access to Kampung Bahagia. When I visited this village in 2017, villagers were using rattan as the main materials for their handicrafts, but plastics are now being used because of the dwindling supply of rattan. The craftspeople in Kampung Bahagia lack experience, market information, and adequate tools and skills, among other problems, in developing their enterprises, and this could be one of the focuses of a subsequent phase of the project.

Carry bags: Members of the Long Napir community sit with some of their handicrafts. *Photo: T. Yanuariadi*

New path: A section of newly constructed road to the isolated villages of Long Napir. *Photo: T. Yanuariadi*

Overall post-project situation

The prevailing situation after project completion can be summarized as follows:

- The villagers' income has increased due to the introduction of alternative livelihood activities, especially vegetable-growing and handicrafts.

- The access of villagers to markets for their products has increased with the construction of roading to connect them with the main road.

- A participatory community forest management mechanism is in place. On receiving formal approval from the forestry authority, the mechanism will help the communities to consolidate their efforts to increase income generation using their local forests.

- *Tagang* fish farming has great potential for income generation. The Sarawak Agriculture Department has taken on this activity in its village development programme.

Lessons learned

The evaluation unearthed the following lessons from project implementation:

- Stakeholders were involved in identifying the problems to be addressed by the project during the development of the pre-project in 2008–2009 and the full project proposal. This was important for developing the sense of ownership necessary for smooth implementation and for overcoming initial suspicion about the project.

- The pre-project had undertaken a robust problem analysis, which was essential for ensuring a sound and relevant project design.

- The project encountered certain obstacles in its first year of implementation. One of these was a lack of coordination between the project manager, the Sarawak Forestry Department and the supervisory body (ITTO). However, collaboration between the Sarawak Forestry Department, ITTO and APFNet led to corrective actions that enabled smooth implementation thereafter. An able new project management team was put in place, consisting of officers from the Sarawak Forest Department and supportive partners, especially village administrations and consultants, backed by an active project steering committee.

- An important problem facing the project was the accessibility of target villages, especially in rainy seasons, when the heavily damaged road network hampered regular visits. Although the road building greatly increased access, all-weather roads would have assisted project efficiency and its effectiveness in achieving its objectives.

- Trust-building between project teams and communities is crucial for success. This requires effective communication, which, in turn, requires that project team members and consultants speak the local languages (this was the case in this project). Before a project starts, there is a need to convey its aims, scope, activities and potential benefits (and costs) to target communities in order to avoid misunderstandings and false expectations.