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Gender Perspectives on Food Security in Sarawak, Malaysia: A Case Study of the Outcomes of Migration on Agriculture

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Abstract

This study departs from a case study of an Iban village, Munggu Sawa in Sarawak, Malaysia. It seeks to uncover the outcomes of agriculture and migration as livelihood strategies in relation to food security, and how these outcomes are influenced by gender. The study was conducted during twelve days interdisciplinary research and mixed social sciences and natural sciences research methods were employed. Our study shows that migration is adopted as a livelihood strategy by children from every household in Munggu Sawa (MS), and that this is case for both men and women. Nonetheless the reasons for adopting this strategy are different for men and women; men predominantly migrate for work whilst women migrate primarily for relationships. Outward-migration and the subsequent decrease of young workforce is resulting in tendencies towards de-agrarianisation and thus behaviour that is described in literature as being symptomatic of the erosion of agricultural practices. Thus, the role of agriculture is assessed, however in this case, agriculture is still essential for achieving food security as it provides both subsistence and cash income. Remittances are also significant to the livelihoods of several households. Another impact of migration is that elderly, and predominantly female villagers have been left behind in MS. These women are coping with their vulnerable position through using their family networks in order to receive remittances. However, their distribution is unequal. Lastly, crops are managed by both men and women, although the recently introduced oil palm may influence this, as its cultivation is male dominated and that female weaving practices represent an unrealised potential for income provision, due to limited market access.

Keywords: Adat, agriculture, coping-strategies, food security, Iban, livelihoods, rural-urban migration, Sarawak