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“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Winds of Change: Livelihoods of an Iban Community in Transition

THOMAS VETTER, OLIVER CUPIT, HUGO FRANCISCO CHAVEZ AYALA, VICTORIA MUNKAGER,
MATILDE LUND FRANDBSEN, PHILIPP SCHLIEPER, IDA WELDINGH PEDERSEN

University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Science, Denmark

Abstract

As the Malaysian economy becomes increasingly globalised, and interventionist policies of agricultural modernisation are pursued, rural communities are changing. Many livelihoods which were traditionally farm-based are shifting towards a state of mixed rural-urban strategies. In this case study, a number of trends and shocks were examined in order to assess the resilience of rural Malaysian communities against crisis.

The study was conducted in an Iban longhouse community in South-West Sarawak, Malaysia. An interdisciplinary approach to data collection was employed, incorporating both social and natural science methods. Multiple shocks and trends were found to affect assets in the village, acting as drivers of livelihood decisions. To these belong mobility, land tenure, government incentives, fluctuations in cash-crop markets, logging and environmental degradation.

The identified shocks and trends were not found to pose a major threat to the current livelihood strategies due to the abundance of relatively diversified livelihood portfolios and a general shift towards wage labour. The households most vulnerable were those involved in cash-crop farming and a lack in stable sources of income. Food security in the village is high, due to the maintenance of subsistence lowland rice cultivation by the majority of households. Culture and tradition play a key role in continuing traditional farming systems, despite some signs indicating that a lack of labour, as a result of migration, has influenced the abandonment of hill rice cultivation. Logging and environmental degradation have affected natural assets, but decreasing reliance on these assets means that livelihoods have not been significantly affected.

Although land tenure currently remains under Native Customary Rights law, the community's recent application for land titles provides a positive outlook for future land security and even opportunities to diversify livelihoods through re-engaging in agriculture (re-agrarianisation). However, the benefits of the titling process will vary greatly among households. At present, increasing mobility and the continuing process of de-agrarianisation are most prevalent in providing resilience, by reducing vulnerability to environmental degradation and dependence on cash-crop markets. Flexibility of livelihood portfolios increases resilience by allowing for new livelihood opportunities to be capitalised upon.

Keywords: Cash crops, de-agrarianisation, diversification, Malaysia, mobility