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# Development and Environmental Injustice in Malaysia: A Story of Indigenous Resistance in Sarawak

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# Development and Environmental Injustice in Malaysia: A Story of Indigenous Resistance in Sarawak

## **Cover Page Footnote**

May TAY graduated from Yale-NUS College in 2017 with a degree in environmental studies. As an outdoors lover and environmentalist, May is passionate about closing material loops and advocating for corporate responsibility, and has actively campaigned for such causes in Singapore and the United States. In her studies at Yale-NUS and Yale, May was profoundly inspired by courses on environmental injustices and ecological economics, and spent her senior year examining the sharing economy as a possible pathway to sustainability. After graduation, she plans to pursue work related to sustainable value chains.

## **Development and Environmental Injustice in Malaysia: A Story of Indigenous Resistance in Sarawak**

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**Abstract:** In 2008, the Federal Government of Malaysia announced an initiative to build 20,000 megawatts of mega dams along a 320km corridor in Sarawak. Named the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE), the scheme would create one of five regional development corridors throughout Malaysia, and was part of the government's strategy to make the state of Sarawak 'developed' by 2020 through industrialization and renewable energy development (Recoda). Of the mega dams planned for construction by 2020, three have been completed, with construction for the others underway and the construction process frequently delayed by resistance from local indigenous communities. Indigenous tribe members who perceived their communities as being shortchanged and deceived by the government put up various forms of resistance to the projects. This paper looks into indigenous resistance against the Baram and Bakun mega dam projects as a means of exploring the broader nature of historical indigenous resistance to development projects in Sarawak, Malaysia. I argue that the indigenous people's resistance to development projects in Sarawak, contrary to their portrayal as being anti-development and backwards, represents frustrated attempts to fight egregious forms of distribution, recognition and procedural environmental injustices. Indigenous tribes struggle amidst a challenging climate of political pressure to become 'developed' according to an authority-defined discourse of development, and under adverse terms of inclusion in the Malaysian government's rural development strategy.

In 2008, the Federal Government of Malaysia announced an initiative to build 20,000 MW of mega dams along a 320km corridor in Sarawak (Sovacool & Bulan 113). Named the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE), the scheme would create one of five regional development corridors throughout Malaysia, and was part of the government's strategy to make the state of Sarawak 'developed' by 2020 through industrialization and renewable energy development (Recoda). Of the mega dams planned for construction by 2020, 3 have been completed, with construction for the others underway, and the construction process frequently delayed by resistance from local indigenous communities along river belt. Indigenous tribe members who perceived their communities as being short changed and deceived by the government put up various forms of resistance to the projects. This paper looks into the issues

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surrounding indigenous resistance against the Baram and Bakun mega dam projects as a means of exploring the nature of historical indigenous resistance to development projects in Sarawak, Malaysia. I argue that indigenous resistance to development projects in Sarawak, contrary to their portrayal as being anti-development and backwards, represents frustrated attempts to fight egregious forms of distribution, recognition and procedural environmental injustices. These indigenous tribes struggle amidst a challenging climate of political pressure to become ‘developed’ according to a domineering authority-defined discourse of development, and under adverse terms of inclusion in the Malaysian government’s rural development strategy.

Lauded as the “biggest and most important development plan that has ever been undertaken by the Sarawak government” by Sarawak State Secretary Datuk Amar Wilson Baya Dandot (“RECODA”), the multi-hundred billion dollar Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) plan aims to transform Sarawak into a ‘developed’ state by 2020 (Recoda). To achieve this goal, the government outlined the development of ten priority sectors: aluminum, glass, steel, oil-based industries, palm oil, fishing & agriculture, livestock, timber-based industries, marine and tourism (Recoda). While Sarawak’s current energy output stands at 1,182MW (Wong), the SCORE plan is expected to expand Sarawak’s economy fivefold and double its population. In order to meet future energy needs of up to 8,000MW, hydropower was seen as a suitable and clean solution (Wong). Of the 12 mega dams planned for construction by 2020 along Sarawak’s river belt, 3 have been completed in Batang Ai, Murun and Bakun.

### **The Bakun Dam**

Since it was first proposed in the 1980s, the Bakun Dam was envisioned as an ambitious and integral enabler of Sarawak’s economic transformation. At 207 meters high, with a crest length of 750 meters and base width of 560 meters, the concrete-faced dam of up to 2400 MW in installed capacity is one of the biggest rockfall dams ever constructed, and currently stands as Asia’s second largest dam (Oh, Chua, and Goh 1035-1037; Lee, Viswanathan, and Ali 65). Plans like this to exploit the hydroelectric potential of Sarawak’s rivers were part of Wawasan 2020, or Vision 2020, which was the master development plan for a fully industrialized Malaysia conceived in 1991 by its then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (Economic Planning Unit). The master plan involved multiple large-scale and capital-intensive projects, and initiatives for big dams such as the Bakun Dam figured centrally (Sovacool and Bulan 125).

However, faced with concerted campaigns by local indigenous communities and social justice groups in Malaysia, the government called off plans for construction in 1990, although it later managed to revive the project in September 1993. The project was re-emphasized as a solution to increasing energy needs in Peninsular Malaysia, where in the words of the Prime Minister: “Bakun will not only provide the cheapest source of energy but also serve as a catalyst to the country’s industrialization program” (Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun). Due to multiple delays over the years, the project was completed only in 2011 at a steep cost of RM 7.3 billion (US\$2.28 billion) from an initial RM 4 billion (US\$1.25 billion) (Oh, Chua, and Goh 1037). By then, the Bakun Dam project was seen as a part of promising progress on the SCORE plan proposed in 2008, which among many goals sought to fully exploit Sarawak’s potential as a major source of renewable energy from hydroelectric power dams (Sibon).

Major ecological and social sacrifices had to be made to construct the massive Bakun Dam, resulting in strong local and international opposition to the Bakun Dam. In all, 70,000 ha of virgin rainforests and prime farmlands along nearby river belts were flooded (Raman 41), while 23,000 ha of virgin tropical rainforests were cut down (Oh, Chua and Goh 1040). About 10,000 people, comprising indigenous communities from the Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Ukit and Penan tribes, were forced to relocate from their traditional homes to Sungei Asap under a government resettlement program (Raman 41). Opposition mainly took the form of non-violent blockades to access roads and a Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun, comprising more than 40 Malaysian NGOs and other international organizations, and the opposition political party Democratic Action Party (DAP), which together called for the scrapping of the project on grounds of threats to the economy, ecology and livelihood of indigenous people (Osman 982). In response to protests and blockades from those in opposition, the government used hard-handed measures to punish opponents to the Bakun Dam, through arrests, censorship and nationalist discourse that cast indigenous opposition as anti-development (Osman 985-986) or brainwashed by malicious 'western' agendas to sabotage development in Malaysia. In the case of the latter, the Prime Minister once lambasted foreign NGOs supporting the anti-Bakun Dam movement saying, "They want us to be deprived of every development which could uplift our standards of living. They want us to be no different from animals which are good for their research and study" (qtd. in Bocking 16).

### **The Baram Dam**

The Baram Dam is another major hydroelectric power dam planned for development along the Sarawak river belt as part of the SCORE plan. Even though the Baram Dam is smaller than the Bakun Dam, its completion will see the flooding of 41,180 ha of rainforest and displacement 20,000 indigenous people from 26 villages along the Baram river, mostly from the Kenyah, Kayan and Penan tribes (Gan).

Opposition against the Baram Dam is particularly strong, organized and well-connected. The SAVE Rivers Network was formed in February 2012 after a meeting of 150 indigenous representatives to share their experiences as affected victims of the Baram Dam plans and issue a joint statement demanding immediate cessation of all dam projects along the Sarawak river belt and public discussion on future large scale development projects (International Rivers). Blockades were first set up on the 23rd of October in 2013 to stop construction of access roads to the proposed dam site (The Borneo Post Online). Subsequently, communities comprising representatives from different indigenous tribes began managing two blockade sites, one at mouth of the access road near Long Lama, and another closer to the dam site (The Borneo Post Online). These blockades eventually became permanent observatories from which local communities could monitor construction progress and host interested local and international allies. When I visited the blockade sites in January 2016, I was told that the Long Lama blockade I saw was the thirteenth version; it had previously been torn down twelve times by representatives from the construction company and government-sponsored thugs, under occasionally violent circumstances (Kayan Protestors at Long Lama).

The protest movement has a website hosted by the Sarawak Report website, with active Twitter and social media presence. In May 2013, more than 300 local indigenous representatives staged a

public protest against the SCORE hydroelectric dam projects at the opening of the International Hydropower Association World Congress held in Sarawak, after a local indigenous representative was prevented from attending a pre-conference workshop (Hance). Petitions were also signed and submitted to the Sarawak government. Official responses to the Baram Dam protests bore an uncanny similarity to government responses to the anti-Bakun Dam movement; violence against blockade caretakers was not uncommon, environmental and social impact assessments were constantly mired in secrecy, and construction work undertaken in spite of local resistance.

### **Indigenous struggles as a story of environmental injustice**

In demonstrating how indigenous resistance towards the Bakun and Baram hydroelectric power dam projects is not driven by a backward or anti-development sentiment, I intend to adopt the environmental justice paradigm. The suitability of this framework is best explained by Dorceta Taylor, who in explicating the merits of the environmental justice movement and paradigm states that “human concerns and problems cannot be separated from environmental and social problems” (557). For one, environmental issues are closely related to problems associated with infrastructure development projects, especially in the case of the Bakun and Baram dams, which are large-scale physical infrastructure projects with massive ecological and social effects. In addition, seeing indigenous struggles against development projects as a fight for environmental justice also recognizes the fact that indigenous cultures and lifestyles are deeply rooted in a connection to their local environment and land.

According to Robert Figueroa, the environmental justice paradigm can be understood through three main branches of environmental justice—distributive, recognition and procedural. Distributive justice is understood in terms of the equitable balance of environmental benefits and burdens. Benefits include those from industrial development, such as jobs, educational opportunities, infrastructural improvements, increased respect, adequate compensation for harms and access to economic and natural resources (Figueroa 360). Harms could include environmental degradation, loss of access to resources and increased stigma. Recognition justice calls for the political recognition of those who are most affected, with the understanding that equitable participation determining who has the power to redistribute environmental harms and benefits is key to ensuring parity of outcome for all (Figueroa 367). Procedural justice views justice as a process, and looks into an individual or community’s right to participate and exercise agency in institutional procedures. David Schlosberg identifies procedural justice as a means of achieving both distributional equity and political recognition (84).

### **Distributive Injustice**

The construction of mega dams generally come at great ecological and environmental costs, both present and future, and these costs are largely accrued to communities in the local area. In the case of both the Bakun and Baram dams, mandatory resettlement of large numbers of indigenous people is needed. Up to 10,000 indigenous tribe members were forced to resettle in Sungei Asap in the case of the Bakun Dam, while up to 20,000 indigenous people will have to move for the Baram Dam. Being forced to move away from their ancestral homes constitutes a form of environmental harm for the communities involved.

Life did not improve or stay the same after moving to Sungei Asap either. Common grievances included sub-standard housing which the indigenous people had to pay for when they previously did not have to pay for housing, inadequate and degraded land for farming, lack of access to nearby food sources, and difficulties securing employment (Raman 41).

While Figueroa would point out that adequate compensation may be able to improve distributive injustice (360), it was found that communities that relocated to Sungei Asap, 30 kilometers inland from the dam site, did not in fact receive benefits that were promised to them. This was most prominent in terms of land compensation, where even though initial land holdings ranged from 0 to 200 ha per household, each household was awarded a uniform 1.2 ha of land (Lee, Viswanathan, and Ali 368). Most households thus experienced severely reduced ability to maintain the small farms they did before for subsistence living. They also suffered from the degraded and much less fertile land in Sungei Asap. Especially since the resettled indigenous groups were previously subsistence farmers for generations with no previous participation in the Sarawak economy (Oh, Chua, and Goh 1040), relocating to Sungei Asap posed an existential threat to indigenous people, who found it hard to harvest food that was sufficient for survival. Considering that the key focus of compensation policies is to ensure that nobody suffers welfare loss as a result of resettlement (Lee, Viswanathan, and Ali 64), the Bakun resettlement policy also failed to ensure fair compensation and distributive justice as a result.

In the case of the Bakun and Baram dam projects, future local environmental degradation must be considered too. It is known that the construction of mega dams will alter the hydrology of rivers and quality of water downstream, which will affect thousands of people living downstream of the dam sites (Oh, Chua, and Goh 1040). In addition, given plans to create aluminum smelters downstream that could be powered by the energy infrastructure projects in Sarawak, it is clear that the river belt indigenous communities will further suffer from pollution caused by aluminum smelting in the future (Oh, Chua, and Goh 1040). Yet, such considerations for future losses were conspicuously absent from compensation procedures or interactions between officials, corporate representatives and indigenous leaders.

### **Participatory Justice**

The problems with compensation procedures for the Bakun project extend beyond parity of result, and are speaks to other forms of inequitable processes at play common to both the Baram and Bakun projects. Both projects were plagued by a consistent lack of discussion with indigenous communities on development plans in the local area, secrecy, censorship and general lack of recognition of indigenous people and their historical ways of life in the Sarawak river belts. The lack of participatory justice is implicit from the historical practice of indigenous communities using non-violent blockades to interrupt access to key roads, which were used not to put up aggressive resistance, but to negotiate for participation in development decisions in Sarawak. During a blockade against logging companies given permits to log on land that local indigenous communities regarded as native to them, a villager said, “If we don’t blockade, who is going to listen to us? That’s why I blockade.” (Osman 979)

Indigenous voices in opposition are frequently ignored and extinguished to make smooth passage for authority-driven development projects. Leaders of indigenous communities protesting the Bakun Dam had their passports confiscated to prevent them from traveling overseas to speak out against the project, while lawyers from the Peninsular who were acting for the affected indigenous communities were denied access to Sarawak (Colchester 39). Even after organizing a large longboat protest against the Baram Dam at the Baram river, and collecting more than 7,000 signatures for a petition, the opposition party The People's Justice Party was ignored and denied audience with the government-appointed regional chief of Sarawak (Gan). Not only is there a clear lack of free, prior and informed consent for development projects in Sarawak, opposing choices are often not heard at all by those in power.

While companies taking on construction projects are required by Malaysian law to include public participation in environmental impact assessments, that did not happen in this case. For the Bakun project, indigenous communities were provided minimal information about the Bakun Dam project and denied access to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) after it was completed (Colchester 39). With the Baram Dam project, members of the Kayan tribe, one of the affected indigenous tribes, spoke of having to fill out EIA forms worded in English in spite of not knowing the language, and being forced to fill in fields in pencil while signing in pen (Kayan Protestors at Long Lama). Participatory processes, even when existent, are deeply corrupted and flawed.

Figuroa points to a respect for a group's environmental identity and heritage as part of participatory justice (371). To recognize the Sarawak river belt indigenous communities' deep connection to their land for their daily lives and cultural integrity would have been to begin to recognize their different attitudes towards development, which I will cover later in a discussion of the dominant Sarawak model of development.

## **Procedural Justice**

The concept of procedural justice is to view justice as a process, recognizing importance of procedural justice as a key enabler of or hindrance to distributive and recognition justice (Schlosberg 84). The Bakun and Baram dam projects were rife with violations of indigenous land rights and laws governing EIA participation.

While federal law in Malaysia recognizes the full traditional land rights customs of the Sarawak indigenous people, also known as Native Customary Rights (NCR), these rights are often not recognized to their full extents and frequently overridden without consultation (Raman 39). In the case of indigenous tribe members setting up blockades at access roads leading to the Bakun and Baram dam sites, they did so to protect land that they considered native to them and which the government had unlawfully given away in logging or development permits to corporations. In particular, two land rights issues bear pernicious effects upon indigenous people in Sarawak: official attempts to undermine native land rights, and the judiciary's failure to recognize evidence that the indigenous people use to prove ownership of land.

Official attempts to undermine native land rights manifest in a variety of ways. For one, the zoning of State Land on land that is in fact left to fallow by indigenous communities takes away



land from these communities (Cooke 532), and creates opportunities for the government to award permits to parcels of this land to developers. Historically, this happened with timber companies, and continues to happen, only to the disadvantage of indigenous communities, many of which rely on subsistence farming and shifting cultivation for survival. The trend of the government taking away land from indigenous communities extends back to the mid-1995, when the Sarawak government began promoting the New Concept of Native Customary Land Development, which was an initiative for indigenous people to lease out their native customary lands to private oil palm plantation developers for 60 to 90 years, with the likely result of indigenous groups losing their lands altogether (Choy 983). To make matters worse, in the case of the Bakun dam, it was found that state planners in Sarawak had changed the land code while the Bakun project was ongoing to limit indigenous people's claims to their native lands and access to grievance mechanisms (Sovacool and Bulan 4852).

Malaysia also has a restrictive land code that does not recognize the methods that indigenous communities use to establish their claim on native customary land (Sovacool and Bulan 4851). According to Mike Bujang, secretary of Save Rivers, a non-profit organization comprising indigenous leaders who have been central in protesting the Baram dam and other megadam plans in Sarawak, indigenous tribes are required to provide proof that they have been consistently cultivating a piece of land in order to claim it. The result is that claims to land previously cultivated and left to fallow as part of a tradition of shifting agriculture are not recognized (Bujang and Ngau). Additionally, indigenous tribes like the Penan that maintain trees on a piece of land as a source of food instead of felling trees to cultivate the land were unable to make successful claims on land they had been living on for 500 years (Sovacool and Bulan 4851).

For aspects of the judiciary process that cater to indigenous communities, indigenous representatives often fought and failed to exercise their native land rights. This is most evident in challenges to perceived corrupted EIA processes. Baram dam opponents claimed that even though several EIAs were done for the project, they were completed after construction work had already begun, and were not released to the public, leading to the perception that the reports were commissioned to rubber stamp the project (Sovacool and Bulan 4852, Bocking 16). Others questioned the legitimacy of parts of the EIAs that underestimated hydrological data and predictions (Bocking 16). When representatives from affected communities of the Bakun dam filed a lawsuit against the construction company and the Malaysian government for not including public participation in 1996, the Malaysian High Court ruled in favor of the indigenous communities, declaring that the Bakun Dam was invalid because it did not comply with federal law requiring public participation in environmental impact assessments (Lee, Viswanathan, and Ali 66). Subsequently in 1997, the construction company and Malaysian government raised the issue to the Court of Appeal, which overturned the High Court's decision and exempted the Bakun project from compliance with the federal Environmental Quality Act (Lee, Viswanathan, and Ali 66). Indigenous communities effectively had their rights to native customary land extinguished in the name of development.

The Bakun and Baram dam projects were part of national economic development plans that explicitly seek to include the Sarawak indigenous communities. In the case of Vision 202, the former chief minister of Sarawak said, "We believe the Bakun project is the best opportunity to help the Orang Ulu (people of the interior) of Belaga. We want to bring the people into the

progress that will culminate with Vision 2020” (qt. in Choy 52.) Yet, why do indigenous communities in Sarawak continue to have such a contentious relationship with development?

I argue that the forms of environmental injustices faced by the indigenous people of the Sarawak river belt are a result of a particular narrative of industrial development that is not only unaligned with the interests of the indigenous communities, but also includes them in economic development under highly disadvantageous terms, at times to the point of threatening the very integrity of indigenous cultures themselves.

### **Authority-dictated development**

From forced resettlement to top down censorship, indigenous communities’ interactions with development are revealing of an authority dictated development model in Sarawak. The rural development initiative within the Wasawan 2020 master plan set out to transform rural and subsistence agriculture into industrialized and productive agriculture that emphasized better harvests, greater market integration and capitalization of technology (qt. in Doolittle 101). The objective of SCORE is also described in similar terms, to “stimulate global and domestic investment in traditionally rural areas to create balanced development throughout the country” (Recoda). Implicit in these seemingly benign government plans to integrate rural and indigenous communities into the national economy is what Doolittle describes as the “production of knowledge about the target population (rural subsistence agriculturalists)” as a means of justifying and deriving legitimacy for authority-dictated development (101). Such ‘knowledge’ portrays subsistence agriculture communities as environmentally destructive, backward, unproductive, undisciplined and in need of guidance, which the government prescribes as modernization and industrialization in the form of energy-intensive industries in Sarawak, with little to no consultation with these rural communities. Instead, what is relied upon to make decisions regarding economic development appears to be economic costs and benefits, which undermine the severity of non-economic losses to indigenous communities. The Bakun dam EIA, for instance, acknowledged “residual impacts such as those associated with population resettlement, wildlife displacement as well as permanent losses of some natural habitat, vegetation and landscape”, but justified the “losses ... [with] the direct gains of renewable, efficient and less polluting source of energy and by the indirect gains of the spin-offs and multiplier opportunities of down- stream development” (qt. in Choy 958).

### **Adverse Incorporation**

Further, the very nature of the development forced onto the Sarawak indigenous communities, as large-scale physical infrastructure development projects, invites indigenous incorporation into the national development narrative on very unequal terms. The key insight is that disadvantage and poverty do not flow just from exclusion, but from inclusion on disadvantageous terms, an idea that Hickey and du Toit explicate in their study of adverse inclusion and social exclusion in relation to chronic poverty. Especially in the case of the Bakun and Baram dams, where indigenous communities are forced to integrate more deeply into the market economy, injustices are borne from relational disadvantage rather than absolute marginalization (Hickey and Du Toit 6). To facilitate the construction of the Bakun and Baram dam projects, local indigenous communities are first forced to relocate from their traditional lands and bear the burden of

adverse environmental effects from construction, from interim boom and bust towns of migrant labor to pollution from construction work and altered river patterns that affect intra-village commutes. Additionally, the lack of fair compensation and participation in development planning from the beginning, have led the newly relocated communities starting out on their journey to 'full economic development' on very disadvantaged terms. Indeed, indigenous tribe members who relocated to Sungei Asap found themselves unable to find jobs (Jehom 153), and Baram dam opponents in the Kayan tribe frequently referenced the poorer life quality of Sungei Asap residents as a reason for resisting the development of the Baram dam for fear of being worse off than before (Kayan Protestors at Long Lama).

More worrisome are signs that the plans for development in Sarawak are corrosive to the indigenous communities affected, through land-based development that challenges the way indigenous tribes maintain and reproduce their collective sense of identity in close relation to their physical environment, and the imposition of an industrialized, disciplined order that to which members of indigenous tribes cannot adapt.

In the case of the former, the Sarawak indigenous tribes conceive of land in very different terms from just in economically efficient terms. For the Penans, the forests represent their source of food, shelter and cultural identity, and they do not consider cultivation or development necessary, given that they consider the forest as providing sufficient resources for survival (Selvadurai et al. 76). Other tribes have been found to manage land differently from that advocated by the state, such as by dividing land use across purposes of community or cultural spaces, farming, game hunting, fallowing, cultivation and water catchments (Choy 54). The trait of embracing land for both use and non-use values, including considering land as intrinsically valuable instead of in monetary terms is common to the indigenous tribes in Sarawak (Choy 54). Having their land taken away without acknowledging the importance of indigenous communities' environmental heritage thus demonstrates an egregious violation of recognition justice in the Malaysian government's rural development plan. In particular, the importance of ancestral land to indigenous communities results in existential challenges in the case of resettlement, even if conducted under fair terms with adequate compensation.

A closer look at the worse livelihoods of those resettled from the Bakun dam project reflects the difficulty that indigenous communities face in trying to fully adapt to the demands of life in a market economy. Successful integration into the market economy requires the adaptation of skills, information and familiarity with notions of education and economic transactions that abrupt or disadvantageous displacement does not facilitate. The development of the Bakun Dam was found to have brought limited tangible benefits to the majority of indigenous communities that resettled in Sungei Asap (Choy 63), and many are stuck in unemployment or low-paying plantation jobs (Jehom 103). Unfortunately, many Sarawakian indigenous communities have historically failed to adapt to a life in a full-fledged market economy. Semi-nomadic Penans who were forced to resettle in the late 1900s due to timber and oil palm plantation developments encountered difficulties in seeking employment. Penans were perceived by plantation staff as lazy and unskilled who were "not interested to work in plantation environment because they consider it too hot and tough" (Selvadurai et al. 74). Penan children, who were used to joining their parents on hunts or fruit gathering trips, could not get used to being separated from their parents for long periods of time and fell behind in educational performance (Selvadurai et al. 75). Those who

adapt are not freed from costs either. Community spirit in indigenous groups suffers amidst the stresses of coping with resettlement. It is observed in Sungei Asap that indigenous groups that used to welcome guests with 'ngajat' (a traditional dance) no longer do so, an outcome that a villager ascribes to "everyone [being] too busy looking for money in order to survive" (Choy 61).

## **Development as politics**

The extensive difficulties that indigenous communities face in trying to adapt successfully as a people further poses the question: who is development really for? Instead of being able to look forward to development that enriches them, indigenous tribe members in opposition to the Baram dam, many of whom are Christian, feel marginalized in a climate of development that appears to benefit Malay-Muslims over other groups (Kayan Protestors at Long Lama). Indeed, the kind of development planned for Sarawak appears to reflect a model of resource control and state power imposition rather than genuine concern for raising the standard of living for the subjects of development (Doolittle 121). In her studies of the politics of development in Sabah, Malaysia, Doolittle describes how rural development in Malaysia is inherently and at times intentionally political, made evident in narratives that portray the inadequacies of indigenous people to buttress the state's legitimacy for enforcing development (Doolittle 843), and context of a postcolonial bumiputera-first (meaning sons of the soil first) Malaysia that many non-Muslim bumiputera ironically do not feel included in (Shamsul 22). Bocking found that indigenous people who opposed the Bakun Dam were met with rhetorical devices with the implicit message that those affected should be willing to sacrifice for the good of Malaysia, and portrayed in the media as selfish and unpatriotic. This is unsurprising, given the multiple instances that indigenous concerns have been ignored and censored to make smooth passage for the Bakun and Baram dam projects as shown above. In answering the question of who development in Sarawak should then be for, it becomes clear that one would have to interrogate the structures that inhibit fairer inclusion of rural communities into development objectives, and others which consistently enrich the state or those with privilege at the expense of the poor.

When asked about the kind of development they want, Sarawak indigenous tribe members are firm and clear about pursuing development that supports the preservation of their cultural and environmental heritage. As an ethnic Kenyah from Long Ikang shared when asked about an alternative to the Baram Dam he opposes, "We don't need big dams. We want micro-hydro dams, [which are] more affordable and environmentally friendly." (Gan) Another villager from Long Lutin has a similar opinion: "What we need here in Baram is basic development: a clinic, a school, roads, electricity ... This is the kind of development we want. We are very firm: we will not give up our land. We rely on the land; we want the land for the generations to come." (The Sarawak Report) Unfortunately, the localized and inclusive form of development indigenous communities advocate remains far from the dominant development model the Malaysian government continues to impose on rural communities over the years.

Through an environmental justice analysis of the issues surrounding indigenous resistance against the Baram and Bakun mega dam projects, I showed that the land and infrastructure-based rural development model planned for Sarawak manifests in multiple harms to indigenous communities, best organized in terms of distribution, recognition and procedural injustices.

Indigenous groups in Sarawak resist development projects not to oppose progress, but to seek redress for their grievances and strive for more parity in development decisions and outcomes. Unfortunately, indigenous communities are attempting to negotiate against a dominant model of development imposed by the government, one which draws them into a discourse of modernization under very disadvantaged terms and which threatens the very integrity of their indigenous livelihoods.

All is not lost, however. On April 27, 2016, the Chief Minister of Sarawak announced the cancellation of plans for the Baram Dam, a clear win for the five-year-long resistance movement put up by the indigenous communities affected by the dam construction plans (Sibon). While indigenous leaders at the frontline of the Baram and Bakun dam resistance would be quick to point out the active status of plans for 10 other mega dams in Sarawak, the growing organization and resistance to development projects seen as disadvantageous by indigenous communities could contribute to the eventual formation of more equitable processes of inclusion in Malaysia. What is certain, based on the extent of injustices faced by these communities at present, is that a fairer model of development in Sarawak must begin with the official recognition and respect for indigenous people, and removal of barriers to democratic participation in discussions and processes that lead to local and regional development.

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