

News Focus: Do they know what we want?

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While many claim to champion the "plight" of the Penans, not many have bothered to find out what actually bothers them. LONG LELLANG (Ulu Baram, Miri): They have often been portrayed as victims of development. Various quarters, including environmentalists from places they have never heard of, claim to champion their interests and yet, no one truly knows what they want.

The simple needs and hopes of the Penan remain deep within their hearts just as they themselves remain deep within the jungles of Borneo.

The Penan of Ulu Baram, for instance, have given up their nomadic lifestyle in the hope of securing a brighter future for their children especially through the pursuit of education.

Yes, they still hunt but they have also ventured into rice and vegetable farming, apart from producing rattan handicraft.

The clearest example, perhaps, of how far they have travelled along the road of progress is the Penan village of Long Main — 90 minutes by foot from Long Lellang — which has 24-hour electricity supply generated free of charge from a mini-hydro dam built by the government.

Long Main is a model village in more ways than one. Not only is it spotlessly clean but the village elders are fully aware of the benefit of education and the need for their people to progress beyond the thick rainforests which surround them.

Eleven of Long Main's future leaders are in Sekolah Kebangsaan Long Lellang while another eight are in secondary schools in Bario, Marudi and Miri.

"Why should we remain backward when the whole world is moving ahead? There are people who want us to remain nomadic and maintain the primitive way of life.

"We love this forests more than the so-called activists but we also need to chart our children's future.

"There is much to be done in terms of awareness and convincing the community of the fruits of development," said Seluma Jalong, a 32-year-old mother of three.

"The Penan must be engaged constructively and not dismissed as 'not so intelligent' people. I think even the boulders could be moved if you are persistent."



The Penan children of Long Jaik have problems going to school because they do not have identity cards and birth certificates.
— Pictures by Muhd Yusuf Abu Bakar

The community development volunteer at the Chief Minister's Office is among the enlightened Penans who are rallying others in the community to embrace the benefits of development.

She lives in Long Main and regularly travels on foot to the six other Penan settlements of Long Kepang, Long Benalih, Pengaran Kelian, Pengaran Iman, Long Sabai and Ba'Keramu.

Despite having to tend to the needs of her family and being paid a nominal sum, Seluma finds time to teach the villagers about cash crop farming and handicraft skills, which she learnt from attending various government training programmes.

"What we need is a road linking us to the outside world. It would be good even if the road reaches Long Lellang as it is only a short walk from here.

"At present we have to walk for about nine hours across a few hills and rivers to the nearest timber track."

It is not just the long journey which the Penan are complaining about but also the exorbitant prices of essential items like fuel, sugar and cooking oil.

"Can you imagine that a bag of cement costs us almost RM200?" she said.

"We need to increase the height of the dam's wall but to buy a bag of cement would deprive us of food for two months."

The high price of cement though is not a major concern at the other six Penan villages and the sole Kelabit community in Long Lellang — they have no mini-hydro dam.

Development has yet to reach them and they are forced to rely on generators for power supply.

Here, it is the high price of fuel that is a constant worry, especially at SK Long Lellang which has 118 pupils and at a hostel that is home to 106 Penan pupils.

"The children cannot study at night because even candles are very expensive by the time they reach Long Lellang," village head Amat Aran said.

The 71-year-old Kelabit elder said the problem started about two years ago when the timber track linking Long Lellang to the outside world was abandoned after the concessionaire had finished extracting timber from the nearby area.

Following landslides and collapsed bridges, the Kelabit and Penan people were forced to rely on the Rural Air Services flight from Miri and Marudi.

The MAS-run Twin Otter aircraft used to land in the five-year-old Long Lellang airport three times a week but since Fly Asian Xpress took over, the flight frequency has been reduced to twice weekly.

"Since then, we have been having countless problems getting supplies of essential food items. We badly need a road but there are certain quarters among the Penan community who are against the proposed road project," said Amat at his longhouse.

"They claim it will ruin the environment, but how are we to live by just looking at the trees and having nothing to eat.

"Times have changed and I believe we have to change accordingly or risk being left behind.

"How are we to get our fuel supply when even the aircraft won't carry them? The FAX people have even refused to transport cooking oil. How can cooking oil be considered a 'dangerous liquid'?"

Amat said the Kelabit and Penan communities would rather be self-reliant than rely on government aid.

With a proper road, he said, they would be able to venture into commercial farming and market their produce to the outside world.

"At the moment, everything is too expensive and we cannot do anything because the cost would be too high.

"I think the Penans of Long Benalih would eventually understand that we would be better off (with) a proper road."

It is understandable why Long Benalih, a four-hour walk from Long Lellang, is on Amat's mind as he ponders the future.

The Penan settlement has been in the centre of many tiffs and misunderstandings between the community and the government.

The Long Benalih folk have been setting up blockades along timber tracks leading to their area since 1993 and the loggers have been kept at bay so far.

But things may change soon.

A proposed timber track linking Long San to Long Lellang and 14 other villages is expected to cut through the area claimed by the Penan as their ancestral land.

The track has been a source of irritation with some in the government labelling the Penan in Long Benalih as a bunch of troublemakers while the Penan themselves are unhappy with the Perintah (government) who they claim is not listening to what they want.

Many of the Penan also alleged authorities favoured the logging companies.

"It is wrong to say that we are against development. We want development but it should not be at the expense of the environment.

"The water catchment areas and river source must not be destroyed in the name of bringing development to the Penan," the community's spokesperson, Dennis Bujang, 48, told a group of journalists from his stilt house in Long Benalih.

"As you can see, we are not nomadic anymore. We decided to settle down here 25 years ago because we listened to the government's call so that our children could get proper education from the school in Long Lellang.

"But we cannot simply sit and watch when the loggers want to rape this forest. It has been done in other areas."

Dennis claimed that there were attempts to hoodwink the Penan into believing that the road was necessary to transport fuel and food supplies to the rural communities but in actual fact, it was meant as a timber track.

He claimed that the folk from Long Benalih, Pengaran Iman and Pengaran Kelian were against the proposed timber track as it would destroy water catchment areas and pollute the rivers near their village.

"We have no piped water, how are we to survive if the rivers become murky and full of silt? If the road is genuinely meant to serve the needs of the Penan and Kelabit, it could be realigned.

"We know that the Kelabit community has sent a memorandum to the authorities and the Miri Resident to speed up the road project but what they are actually doing is inviting the loggers in.

"From past experiences in other areas we know that the logging companies would say one thing and do another. This is where the problem lies."

Dennis alleged that loggers often operated without any supervision by the authorities.

Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) resident manager in Miri, Dennis Long, who accompanied the Pressmen on their visit to Kelabit and Penan villages in the area, admitted that the rural villages were located within a timber concession which has been awarded to a private firm.

Dennis explained that the concession was within one of SFC's pioneer Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) project sites where loggers were required to abide by strict logging conditions set by international bodies like the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO).

"The days when loggers could roam freely are long gone. For instance, they can only cut trees of certain measurement, they cannot pollute rivers or log in water catchment areas."

The SFM guidelines place great emphasis on social and environmental impact. "We are trying to explain this to them (the villagers) but a few of them are still against it."

Miri Resident Ose Murang blamed the Penan objection on foreign non-governmental organisations.

"The people who are instigating them are staying in mansions and bungalows in New York, Switzerland and Paris but they want our people to remain on trees," said Ose at his office in Miri.

"Ulu Baram is the last remaining area in Sarawak which has yet to experience any development and it is our duty to do that.

"The majority of the people in that area want a road to link them with other development projects like schools and clinics. We cannot listen to 10 people and ignore the plight of thousands."

Ose said those pointing fingers at logging companies should realise that almost all the interior road networks which branched out from Miri were originally built by timber concessionaires and later taken over by the government.

"It would cost the government hundreds of millions to build a road from Miri to Long Lellang. Would it be economically viable to spend that amount for a single village?"

While the arguments go back and forth, the Penan are caught between the need for development and what they see as their duty to protect the environment and their heritage.

Unless someone is willing to listen to their voices and look for solutions, the Penan will remain victims.



A Penan family making their way to Long Lellang from Long Kepang, which is a four-hour walk, through the jungles of Ulu Baram



Penan children sitting around, maybe wondering how their future will shape up.