

# **QUALITY OF LIFE OF RURAL NATIVE COMMUNITY: AN UNDERSTANDING USING PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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## **Abstract**

The ineffectiveness of a development program in increasing the quality of life of an indigenous community is often linked to the attitude of the planners who fail to understand the needs and life aspirations of the target group as well as the realities of their social world. Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand the world-view of the Bidayuh community about the quality of life. This research has drawn on the phenomenological approach utilising abductive logic based on idealist ontology and constructionist epistemology. This study was conducted in the Serian District, Sarawak which is one of the four districts under the administration of Samarahan Division. The size of the sample for this study was achieved through the continuous support of measurement or the criteria on theoretical saturation. Data in this study was collected using the technique of in-depth interview and informal group discussion. The themes of capability, participation and empowerment are the themes that became the main choice of the suburban Bidayuh community. However, the themes of residence, income, money and savings, employment, infrastructure and public services, customary land and land grant and accessibility to agricultural produce market are the themes that became the main choice of the rural Bidayuh community. The findings also showed that even though the position of the categories of quality of life-based on world-view between the respondents who live in the suburban and rural areas differ, the respondents' interpretation of each theme contained in those categories are almost similar. Suggestions for further action are addressed to the development agencies, development planners and policy makers so as to give more emphasis on the bottom-up approach in designing or planning any community development programmes.

*Keywords: native community, phenomenological approach, quality of life*

## Introduction

Previous research clearly shows that the ineffectiveness of a development programme to improve the quality of life of the rural community is often associated with the attitude of the planners who fail to understand the life's needs and aspirations of the target group as well as the world realities of their social lives (Shamsul, 1977; Katzner, 1979; Fishers, 1998; Horowitz, 1998; Sen, 1999; Van Wicklin, 2001). In addition, the objectives of a development plan typically highlight two things. First, the planners are also the economists or those who have received training in the field of economics, and second is the tendency toward the approach to Rostow Theory, that is the changes from the traditional to modernisation, which is characteristically unilinear without taking into consideration its suitability to a community particularly from the socio-cultural aspect and acceptance toward modernism (Myrdal, 1970; Shamsul, 1977; Sanjaya, Etsuo, Masamine, & Susumu, 2005). The main focus of development programmes is the economic development plan that only prioritises economic growth and social changes as a measure of successful developments (Shamsul, 1977; Sen, 1993). This situation further led to the development programmes that are planned by the government to improve the quality of life of the community which often experiencing failures (Ngidang & Abdul, 1999; Ngidang, 2002). As the result, the rural community has been portrayed by Western orientalis as a community that has cultural values of laziness, hard to change, not highly ambitious, submissive to fate, and has traditional characteristics that are considered an impediment to the development (Grijpstra, 1971; Abdul Rashid, 1990; Walker, 1998; Minos, 2000; Madeline, 2004). However, this depiction in actuality can be disputed.

Research by economists, anthropologists, social psychologists and sociologists regarding the concept of quality of life often uses different orientations and concepts (Novel, Bustami and Salfarina, 2010). Sociological and anthropological studies focused on developmental construct methodology based on conflict and balance oriented models to look at the concept of the quality of life, while economic studies emphasised economic growth and social change based on Rostow's construct methodology, *Stages of Economic Growth*. Social psychology studies placed emphasis on the cognitive and emotional aspects to discuss the concept of the quality of life by using the *free will* environment which is an environment where social actors are determined to be free from poverty. This paper seeks to understand the meaning of the quality of life of the rural Bidayuh<sup>1</sup> community based on ontological interpretation where the social actors define their realities under the social environment and practical barriers faced by them in their daily lives.

## **Description of Study Area**

This study was conducted in the district of Serian, which comprises of 261 *kampungs* or villages. Serian District is under the administration of Samarahan Division and administered by a Resident after Samarahan was officially designated as a Division on 1st January 1987 (Department of Statistics, Sarawak, 2004). Each district is administered by a District Officer. Meanwhile, Sub-Districts are governed by the Administrative Officer (Pejabat Residen Samarahan, 2009; Unit Pentadbiran, Jabatan Ketua Menteri, 2010) Serian District is located about 64 kilometres south of Kuching City and has several sub-districts within it, one of it is the sub-district Tebedu which is the Main Gateway (*International Border Crossing*) for Malaysia/Indonesia (in Sarawak) (Department of Statistics, Sarawak, 2004). The District of Serian covers an area of 2,040 sq km consisting of 13 zones with a total population of 80,061, of which 40,085 (50.06%) are males, and 39,976 (49.9%) are females (Department of Statistics, Sarawak, 2004). Out of this, only six zones are the Bidayuh areas, namely Tebedu, Ampungan, Amo, Tebakang, Kedup and Bukar. The study area for this research covers two zones or sub-districts, which are Tebedu and Kedup where the poverty programme was carried out.

## **Research Design**

A phenomenological approach was used in this study. This is because the phenomenological approach suggests that, understanding the reality of life of the social actors should be from the subjective experience of the social actors that includes their views, conscience, and the attitude toward their world and themselves and not influenced by the modernization process taking place in their social environment (Blaikie, 2000; Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1976). Consequently, social researchers should make interpretations of the observed reality since the social actors and social researchers are bound to each other when making interpretations. The in-depth interviews with all the informants had been conducted in Bidayuh language. Respondents in this study were identified using non-probability sampling, with a combination of judgmental or purposive sampling, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling. The data had reached saturation after 30 interviews. Data saturation is referred to as a point where the information one gets from the interviews becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interview process was a learning process. Thus, the topic discussed developed as the interviews progressed. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct a second round of interviews particularly with those who were interviewed in the early stages. The number of second-round interviews was determined based on the point when theoretical saturation was reached. A total of 50 respondents took part in this study.

## **Data Collection and Timing**

Data were gathered using in-depth interviews within the period of four months. The in-depth interviews in this study involved conversations between two parties namely between the researcher and the respondents with one specific aim which is to understand the quality of life from the view of the Bidayuh community. These interviews between the researcher and the respondents focused on quality of life, daily life, their perception of life and the Bidayuh's understanding of the quality of life-based on their experiences. Most of the interviews conducted took two to three hours, and there were also some interviews which took longer time. All the interviews were transcribed and formatted for inclusion into the Nvivo database and were used to create categories for data indexing. Second stage interviews were also conducted with the purpose of testing intensively the categories that had been identified during the early stages of the interviews. In addition, it was also aimed at reviewing the validity of the categories that were produced in the interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

There are five chains of activity that were carried out by the researcher during the data analysis process. They are as following: i) interviews that were recorded with each respondent will be copied and translated into transcript format; ii) before these transcripts are written or produced, the researcher will listen to the interviews that have been recorded at least twice to ensure no interviews have been omitted or neglected; iii) as soon as the transcription process is completed, each transcript or text will later be reviewed or given reconsideration and rearranged to reflect a brief description of the Bidayuh community's quality of life; iv) the data are later saved in files using different names; v) a few jargons in Bidayuh language used by the Bidayuh community in their daily lives when making descriptions or narratives about the quality of life are maintained in original words, and finally vi) the next step that is considered crucial in this study is managing the data through the categorisation process. In the process, the researcher will develop a matrix table as a way to tabulate the results into a style or way that is more structured and organised. By using themes derived from the continuous comparative analysis, the researcher next tabulates specific excerpts based on the line numbers that appear in the scripts.

## **Result and Discussion**

The rural Bidayuh community's interpretation of quality of life predominantly put across issues about basic needs and accessibility to infrastructure facilities in their environment. This matter is parallel with comments given by a few

scholars such as Azahan (2007), Anuwar (2002), Abdul Kadir (2010) and Abdul Rahman (2005) who mentioned that the view of rural communities about quality of life is often influenced by self-readiness, rural development support system, rural environment, infrastructure, and accessibility to the environment that is provided in the rural area. Accordingly, the meaning of quality of life that is stated by the respondents in this study is not only a measure of the existing environment but also assesses the aspects of their self-readiness and accessibility to the environment provided by the rural surroundings. Table 1 shows the ranking of the 23 themes that have been interpreted by the rural Bidayuh community as their view about the quality of life. Based on the table, the themes of residence or house, income, money and savings, employment, infrastructure and public services, customary land and land grant and accessibility to agricultural produce market are the themes that have become the main choices of the rural Bidayuh community.

**Table 1: Arrangement of the Ranking of Quality of Life Themes of the Rural Bidayuh Community According to Main Choices**

No	Interpretation of quality of life themes of the Bidayuh community in the rural areas	The total of respondents who made a choice on the themes (n=50)
1	Residence/House	50
2	Income, money and savings	50
3	Employment	50
4	Infrastructure and public services	50
5	Customary land and land grant	50
6	Accessibility to agricultural produce market	49
7	Spiritual, religious practice and moral being	47
8	Health	47
9	Education	46
10	Children	45
11	Family relationship	45
12	Relationship with community members, neighbours and friends	45
13	Welfare support	45
14	Security	40
15	Hope and aspirations	30
16	Absence of debt	25
17	Local administration and government	20
18	Food	15
19	Material to go through life	15
20	Good appearance	15
21	Participation	10
22	Potential	8
23	Empowerment	5

All these themes on quality of life of the rural Bidayuh community's view can be broken into seven main categories as presented in Figure 1 namely: i) security and stability; ii) community, resources and environment; iii) physical and psychological well-being; iv) family relationship; v) participation; vi) potential; and vi) empowerment. These seven categories were determined by

two main factors which are importance and enjoyment of life. These categories are interconnected with each other. Therefore, the findings of this research is a bit different from the results of previous local studies carried out by Madeline (2004), Gusni (2003), Gusni and Kasim (2006), Abdul Malek (1996), Asnarulkhadi (1996) and Mohd. Yusof (1990) who concluded that aspects of income and assets are the main measure of quality of life and social stratification of the indigenous communities in the rural areas. This is because the meaning of quality of life that is understood by the rural Bidayuh community is more representative of their view and involves aspects such as residence, income, infrastructure, land, accessibility, health, education, family relationship as well as the relationship between the community members. As noted by Azahan (2007), the meaning of quality of life is not the measure of the existing environment, but also evaluates aspects of self-readiness of the rural community and accessibility to the environment provided in the rural areas and also the view of the community about the quality of life. Meanwhile, Higgs (2006) in his study on the perception of quality of life of the South African community in the rural areas found that aspects of physical or psychological needs are the main needs of the rural community. The same opinion is expressed by Easterlin (2001) who concluded that aspects of income and financial situation, as well as physical and psychological needs, are the key indicators of the rural community's quality of life in several developing countries. In the meantime, Diener and Lucas (2000), Ravallion (2001) and Milanovic (2002) in their studies found that communities who live in the rural areas are more inclined to choose objective well-being such as material aspects and basic facilities as the main indicator in determining their quality of life.

The findings obtained by Katiman and Abd. Hamid (1996) on the development of the poorest people in Kuala Terengganu are quite consistent with the results of this study. This is because the results of their study found that even though there exists a rapid process of development in the rural areas such as land development through the opening of oil palm plantations and construction of factories, but quality of life indicators such as residence, income, employment, land, education, security, food, infrastructure and public services, relationship with community members and local administration and the government remains as the main choice. Research conducted by Narayan and colleagues (2000) in the voice of the poor involving twenty-three countries comprising of countries in the Middle East, South East Asia, West Asia, Latin America, East Europe and the Caribbean particularly in the rural areas is also consistent with this research. Their research findings found that the view and perception of the rural communities in those countries about the quality of life are more inclined to indicators that are associated with material well-being such as food security, assets and employment and give less emphasis on issues which are subjective in nature such as freedom of speech, freedom to have access to education and skills, freedom of movement, principles of justice,

integrity and human rights. This is because a shortage of food supply, shortage of resources namely land for the purpose of agriculture and financial problems to meet the needs of the family members have been identified as the major problem that continuously haunts their quality of life.

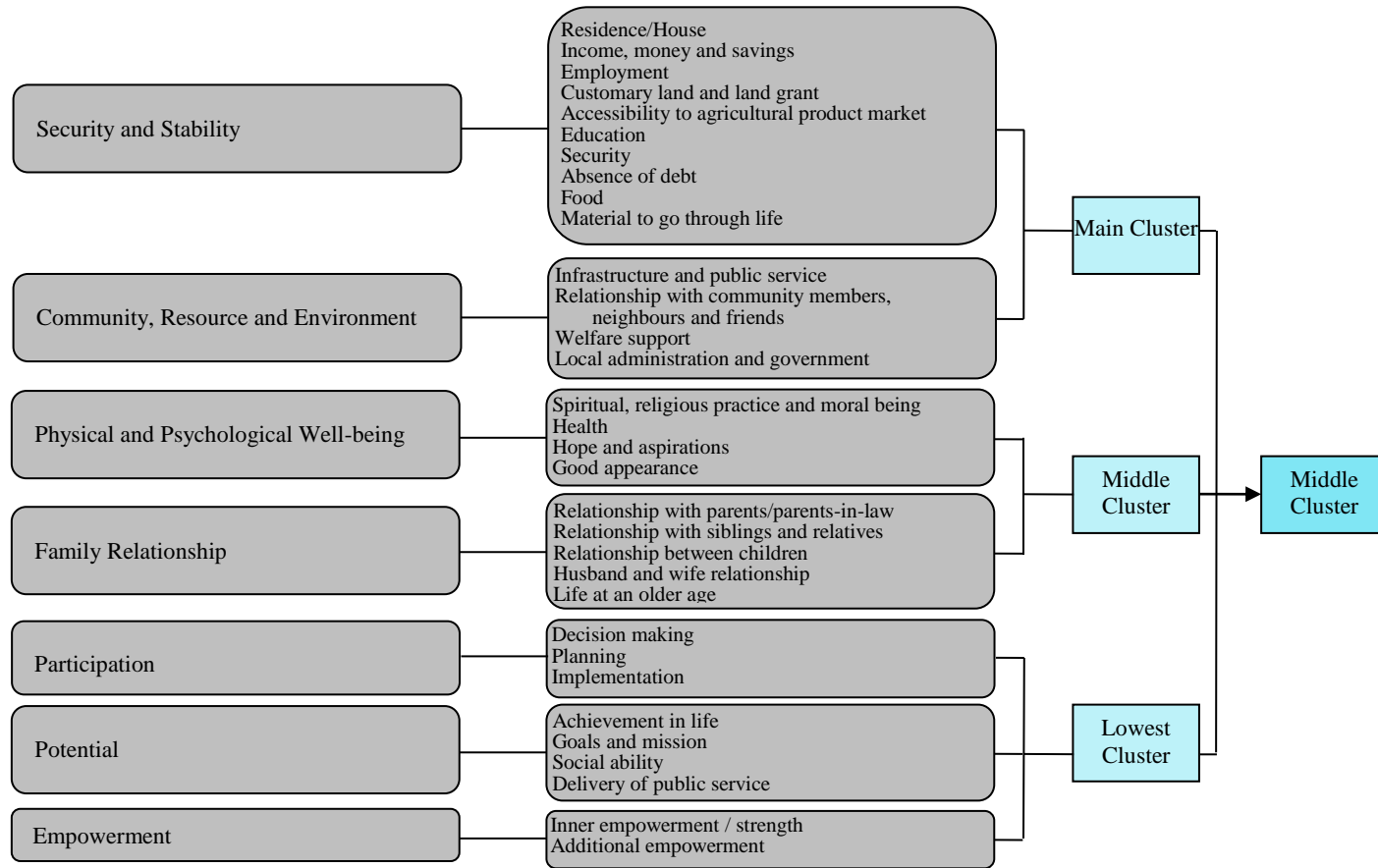
This situation clearly shows that economic development through the process of modernisation is not the only condition sufficient to reduce poverty or improve the quality of life of the rural community. This is because economic development through the process of dualism is not necessarily able to reflect the existence of equitable resource distribution between the urban and rural areas, freedom from oppression, exploitation or even equal participation in the economic and political aspects (Esteva, 1985; Rahimah, 1989; Zell, 2007). Giddens in his theory of structuration states that this situation emerges because of the existence of conflict between the social practice that is understood from two different angles which are from the angle of the view of the social actors (microstructure) and the angle of the view of the social institution (macrostructure) (Giddens, 1984). Meanwhile, important aspects in measuring development like development for whom, the purpose of the community development, the form and content of community development, the method and strategy of community development are often disregarded or left behind. The interests of investors, financiers and view of the policy makers in the macro level structure are the ones prioritised.

### **Conclusion and Implication**

There are 23 types of themes and seven categories of interpretations of the rural Bidayuh community about the quality of life. Regarding the ranking of the themes, residence, income, money and savings, employment, infrastructure and public services, customary land and land grants and accessibility to agricultural produce market are the themes that are the main choice of the rural Bidayuh community. This situation clearly shows that the view of the rural Bidayuh community about quality of life is constructed based on the nature of their social world life such as the world of common sense, the world of everyday life, the world of daily work and common realities that have been embedded for so long in their daily lives. In other words, the view of the Bidayuh community about the quality of life in this study does not only depend on will alone, and is not only limited concerning material or physical needs but also involves other needs that are subjective in nature such as cognitive, sociological and psychological. Also, it is closely related to helplessness or inability as well as links economic indicators with the social and environmental aspects. The implication of this research is that policy makers should give priority to the bottom-up approach in the implementation of the development programme that is by taking into consideration the needs of the local community, the local culture and knowledge system itself. Future

research should focus on the relationship between the views of the quality of life that is conceptualised by the policy makers with the world-view of the quality of life constructed in the structure of the local community level.





**Figure 1: Ranking of the Categories and Themes of Quality of Life of the View of the Bidayuh Community Living in the Rural Area**

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