

Communities at the Edge: Pulau Banggi in Transition

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INTRODUCTION

Pulau Banggi is one of the many hundreds of islands located off the coasts of the State of Sabah, Malaysia. Islands in Sabah are famed for their unique ecosystem, home to diverse range of communities and cultures which largely depend upon the environment to meet the needs of their livelihood. Until quite recently, Pulau Banggi is not too well known to Malaysians, let alone its geographical position, or even its social, demographic and economic characteristics. The island's existence has always been taken for granted. For most, it is just another one of the islands on the nation's map, yet it is the largest island in Malaysia, larger than Singapore, surrounded by 51 other islands, but inevitably lagging behind in many aspects of development such as infrastructures, basic facilities and amenities, communication and networks, education, retails, economic and job opportunities.

The population of Pulau Banggi is predominated by indigenous minorities of the Ubian, Suluk, Dusun Bonggi, Bajau, Balabak dan Kagayan ethnic groups widely scattered in small settlements over the islands. Pulau Banggi's geographical distance from the mainland Kudat has been one of the major physical barriers. This has over the decades, impacted on direct interventions from the center of development. In addition, the unfavorable soil to farm and rear stocks, lack of water and proper irrigation system, widely scattered population on the island, the unstable wind and seas condition further impede efforts by the government to bring change to the communities here. The state of the island's development poses several debates. From the point of view which propagate

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traditionalism and sustainability of the ecosystem, (in particular the NGOs) the lack of overzealous development intervention is perceived as good and favorable in order to avoid the penetration of larger cash economy which subsequently will destroy the ecosystem and traditional way of life of the island communities. On the other hand especially from the developmentalist's policy (the State), persistent poverty and marginalization of the island communities posit moral and political debate of the island's development which if not integrated into the mainstream of nation's development, this will reflect an inconsistency of the national development policy and plan to achieve the country's status to an industrialised nation by 2020.

I PULAU BANGGI : A BRIEF PROFILE AND DEVELOPMENT

1 General Portrait

Pulau Banggi is the largest of the big clusters of islands¹⁾ and largely populated as compared to the other islands. 73% of the marine communities are concentrated on this island. Based on the Population Census, 2000, the island recorded 16,000 people with an annual growth of 4.4% as compared to 1.6% of the national population growth.

In 2005, the profiles of villages compiled by village headmen estimated a decrease of the population figures to 12,539 people. The decline of population figure is partly due to the out-migration experienced during the last five years especially to mainland cities such as Kota Kinabalu, Kudat, Tawau and Sandakan and even to Peninsula Malaysia where youth preferred to leave the island in search of better education, job opportunities and other urban-related factors such as urban amenities, higher-paid jobs, networking, connection to information communication technologies (ICT) and urban leisure.

In addition to this, the island is also predominated by fisherfolks from the neighboring islands of the Philippines which is estimated at 17% [Fisher 2000]. These fisherfolks are transient seafarers and tend to leave Pulau Banggi and the surrounding islands when fishing-related activities here are completed. The seasonal nature of the economic activities influences the tendency of the foreign fisherfolks to return and fish


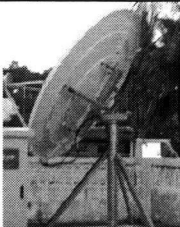

1) The clusters of islands surrounding Pulau Banggi – which has 51 islands, Pulau Balambangan has three islands and Pulau Malawali, seven islands. These clusters of islands are within the Tun Mustapha Marine Park.

within the clusters of islands because of the geographical proximity between Sabah and the Southern Philippines. In addition, other factors also command such transiencies, such as the common cultural and socio-lingual values shared by these fisherfolks who believed they are of the same indigenous group, the Suluk, Ubian and Sama. Territorial boundaries that demarcate fishing grounds between the two countries have never been a problem to these marine communities until after colonialization set in by the end of the nineteenth century in Northern Borneo.

2 Electricity, Health and Education.

Concentration of population in Pulau Banggi is at Pekan Karakit, the main administrative and commercial center of the island. Pekan (which means small town) Karakit plays a role as the ‘capital’ of the Banggi Island. The pattern of settlement on this island is obviously scattered, haphazardly built by the coasts.

Majority of the people depend largely on the seas for their livelihood and sustenance. Pekan Karakit has simple infrastructures such as surfaced and feeder roads, boat and ferry jetties, electricity run by generator from 6 pm until 12 midnight. Several villages are provided with public street lamp generated by solar energy. However, at the time of the field study most of the street lamps are underutilized due to lack of maintenance. Most homes has limited amenities and not supplied with electricity, thus it is common to find people using candles or kerosene lamps. Wood is commonly used for cooking as kerosene is expensive and difficult to obtain from Karakit which will usually include relatively high transportation fees. Woods from mangrove trees are the favorable choice used for domestic fuel and usually these are collected by men from the swamp areas, while women and children will cut them into pieces and dried the woods before using them.

		
<p>Image 1 Sea ambulance at Karakit</p>	<p>Image 2 Communication network at Karakit</p>	<p>Image 3 Main source of water at a remote village</p>

Social facilities were recently up-graded and increased, such as hospital, schools, clinics, government administrative blocks, police center and mosque. Although there is no district hospital located in the Banggi Island, a government health center is located at Pekan Karakit and small health posts are set up at remote areas. During the period of the study in 2006-2007, the health center at Pekan Karakit is headed by hospital attendant, attached with 22 staff, mainland ambulance and sea ambulance. Meanwhile, the small health post is headed by family health worker and local obstetrician (or locally known as *bidan*). Patients with critical case are usually arranged to be moved to the mainland hospital, at the Kudat district hospital.

There is only one public secondary school and five public primary schools. The teacher-student ratio at the secondary school is 1:20, which is higher than the national standard. The quality of basic facilities, mainly at primary schools can be considered as relatively lower than the schools in mainland. Pre-education school is provided by KEMAS or an acronym for Kemajuan Masyarakat, (Community Development Agency) at several villages on this island. Private-owned fixed line telephones and public telephone boots are scarce. However, cellular communication networks of various range from Telekom, Celcom, Maxis except DiGi are now being gradually set up. These network servers provide convenience to local people and also outsiders from the mainland who come to work here. Prior to this, telecommunication, in particular cellular network is negligible. Subsequently this island will experience an upsurge of cellular handphone users except for residents of remote areas where cellular network connection is still a problem.

3 Drinking Water and Sanitation

The island faces acute water problem due to the harsh weather and still lack the facilities to clean water supply from the catchment area. As a temporary measure, the government provides household water containers (PVC tank) to store gravity-pumped water and harvest rain water at shops, houses and government offices. However, residents of remote areas still had to rely a lot on water from underground wells and rivers for drinking and washings. For most of the villagers living far from Karakit town they will have to improvise their own water supply by digging wells and collecting water from the rain. Almost all households have inadequate toilet facilities and there are no specific areas or septic tanks for solid waste disposals. In most houses at coastal areas, the toilet facilities rely on sea outfall system for sewage disposal.

II ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND ECONOMY

The largest ethnic groups of this island are the Ubian and Dusun Bonggi followed by the minority groups, Kagayan, Suluk, Bajau and Balabak. 85% of the population is Islam, 10% animism and 5% Christian. Generally, the diverse ethnic group on this island are still very conservative and traditional in their way of life and worldview. Strong beliefs in spirits of the sea and the forest, most of the people on this island claim that *“the sea and the forest are our life, our food and our happiness... this should be protected and guarded, if the sea and the forest die, our spirit will die too and so will our people, our children and our grandchildren...”* (as said by a Dusun Bonggi peasant).

Traditionally, resources use and management were intertwined with religious beliefs, which sanctioned or restrained people’s behavior in deciding when and which resources are to be exploited and for specific purposes ranging from household to community needs. Table 1 shows the breakdown of ethnicity, religion, occupation and the population profile of the communities on Pulau Banggi.

1 Income and Employment

Fishing is the main occupation of the Ubian, Kagayan and Suluk. Meanwhile the Dusun Bonggi, Bajau and Balabak concentrate on farming, husbandry, living in the remote parts of the island. Both fishing and farming are done at subsistence level, partially for household consumption and the rest for the market. Poverty is inevitably impeding social mobility within the household. Sources from the Office of the Small District Banggi

Table 1 Population Components by Ethnicity in Pulau Banggi, 2005

Ethnicity	Religion	Occupation	Population Size	No. of Households	Average Household
Ubian	Muslim	Fishing	6,821 (54.4%)	1,063	6.4
Dusun Bonggi	Animism & Christian	Farming & fishing	2,507 (20%)	424	5.9
Kagayan	Muslim	Fishing	646 (5.1%)	105	6.1
Suluk	Muslim	Fishing	718 (5.7%)	118	6.1
Bajau	Muslim	Fishing & farming	741 (5.9%)	143	5.2
Balabak	Muslim	Fishing & farming	1,106 (8.8%)	122	9.1
Total			12,539 (100%)	1,975	10.9

Source: Yearly Report of Small District Office, Pulau Banggi, Kudat, 2005-2006

indicated that the low economic growth of the island contribute to underdevelopment of the island. For the past four decades, development projects are very limited because of the physical and structural factors. Pulau Banggi is poorly linked to the mainland (Kudat) and communications is equally poor.

The population size of Pulau Banggi as recorded in the Small District statistics of this island in 2005-2006 was 12,539 people (see Table 1). Out of this population, 85.79% (or 10,752 people) are categorized within the economic bracket of being poor and hard core poor. Data from the Small District of Banggi also revealed that the percentage of poor people earning less than RM (Ringgit Malaysia) 600 per month is very high, i.e. 85.7%. An average monthly income of a household is estimated RM360. (See Table 2) Among farmers, 73.5% of them are in hard core poor bracket whilst fisherfolk was recorded at 14.7%. The relatively high cost of living on this island is mainly due to the transportation factors. This further burdened the lives of the poor. For example, the price of rice is 11 times higher than that in mainland Kudat, and the price of sugar is 23% higher as well.

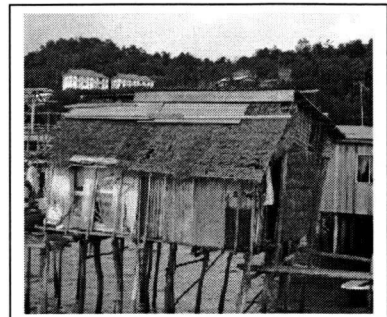






Image 4
A house of the hardcore-poor at Karakit

The obvious price differences of essential goods impacted the consumption pattern of the communities on this island. Inevitably many still depend largely on domestic crops such as tapioca, banana and sweet potatoes to substitute rice. Reliance on marine produces as their source of income and also as their source of household food consumption are closely intertwined. To the local communities, going to the sea means two important things: to earn some cash and to bring home food for the cooking pots. There are many cases among fishermen who were not able to return with good catch that

Table 2 Poverty and Occupation in Pulau Banggi, 2005

Category of Poverty	No. of Poor and Hard Core Poor	Percentage	Fishermen		Farmers	
			No	%	No	%
Poor (RM351-600) *	7,508	69.8	6,758	85.3	750	26.5
Hard Core Poor (RM150-350)	3,244	30.2	1,161	14.7	2,083	73.5
Total	10,752	100	7,919	100	2,833	100

* Note: Gross monthly income

	
<p>Image 5 Micro retail shop at remote area</p>	<p>Image 6 Traditional and small scale fishing method</p>
	
<p>Image 7 Trawlers port at Kudat</p>	<p>Image 8 Small scale aquaculture farms</p>

can be sold. When this happened, the meager catch will be consumed by the family, thus the earning of the day is affected. Such a cycle is common among the fishermen, who mostly owned small boats that are powered by small engines and some only paddle by oars on the fringes of the sea to make their catches along the shore.

According to the hard core poor registration in 2006, a total of 250 heads of household were recorded and 72.2% of these (193 heads of household) are below the age of 65. 26.4% (51 heads of household) are categorized above 65 years old while 6 of the hard core poor heads of household are physically disabled.

Poverty and hardship are so common on the island that this is culturally accepted in the local community. Such a belief is closely related to the physical condition and remoteness of the villages which are scattered sparsely along the coasts of the whole island. The poverty-related culture which is pervasive on this island, also known as a subculture of poverty as propagated by Oscar Lewis [1959] is characterized by material deprivation, school drop outs, lack of hope for mobility and fatalism. The phenomenon is aggravated by the unavailability of communications and transportation linkages. If

change does not take place in the near future, social involution which is largely noticed among the community will further deteriorate the quality of life of the people here.

2 Fisheries and Aquaculture

The lack of capital and technology hinder the island's fisherfolks from venturing to deep sea fishing, a common problem among fishermen in most development countries. Subsistence harvest of fish was basically on small scale and primarily for household consumption. Fishing was conducted using mainly small boats and traditional methods with fishing line and small net. The limited demand and methods determined the amount of fish captured. The fisherfolks generally carried out fishing operations daily except monsoon season (July until January).

During monsoon season, fishing operation are limited and are carried out closer to coastal areas. Their dependence on marine source of livelihood will not be able to sustain the encroachment of large fishing trawlers owned by mainland entrepreneurs. The presence of these large boats can be seen daily near the surrounding islands. Unfortunately many of the resources that have sustained are now seriously under threat from over-fishing resulting from demand for cash and subsistence needs. The government also provides basic facilities to selected hardcore poor fishermen as shown in Table 3.

A fish farm project located at Timbang Dayang Village near Karakit town is spearheaded by the local government. The project consists of 200 unit of open-net fish farm with 200 participants. Most of them are head of the hardcore household families. Every participant will earn extra average monthly income of about RM683 during harvest time of *ephinephalus spp* fish. The life cycle of the project is 12 months. Monsoon season with high wind is a main problem for open net fish farm project.

Tourism on this island is principally focused on the marine frontier which is ideal for diving and sport fishing. For the moment, however, this is not fully explored. Banggi

Table 3 Fisheries Subsidy in Pulau Banggi, 1995 - 2005

Village	Jetty Construction Costs	Fishing equipment	Number
Singgamata Village	RM20,000.00	Fishing net	280 unit
Kg Kaligau, P Banggi	RM19,800.00	Fish Container	21 unit
Total	RM39,000.00	Total	301 unit

Source : Yearly Report of Small District Office, Pulau Banggi, Kudat, 2005-2006

Island has only one low cost tourist resort on the southern part of the island. A recent expansion of high impact government project has developed a diverse range of infrastructure required to support this potential sectors.

3 Strong Impacts of Government Projects

It is a common belief that in order to bring change government intervention is necessary through projects and development programs. After decades of underdevelopment the federal government recently gave the blessing to FELCRA Berhad the colossal responsibility to consolidate and rehabilitate idle lands (4500 hectares) with rubber cropping. Modern planting system and the use of high technology, provision of basic infrastructures and amenities such as clean water supply and electricity to villagers are involved in this project. In addition, housing schemes are provided for the poor with integrated community development and applying well-being approach. This project caters growth to the economic center of the island with multi-function mainly as center of processing and distributing products.

CONCLUSION: WHAT LIES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE COMMUNITIES?

Government intervention is deemed necessary and very much welcome by the several groups of the island communities who feel that they have been neglected for too long. However, the grouse among them is that they were not asked nor consulted with regards to participating in the decision process towards allocation of farming lots, provision of amenities and housing scheme. With minimal consultation and participation in the decision making of the major land projects, the local communities tend to perceive that the projects are merely political mileage, benefiting only a few which the community regard as having close links with those who have direct access to the projects. It is clear that the development projects may lead to social tension that may break up the communities. Another matter of concern among the communities is the presence of outsiders who are being recruited by project managers to work at the new project site as laborers, drivers, crane operators and so forth. Traders from mainland were also often seen bringing supplies for the workers. A question lingers in the mind of the communities: will they be displaced from the opportunities of development which is taking place on the island?

To the people of Pulau Banggi, the seas and reefs are regarded as their 'land', owned by the community living on the groups of islands, where they claim fishing rights. They believe they have every right to the sea thus, without invasions from outsiders. The seas are their sources of livelihood directly benefitted from the trading links begun in their forefathers' time. The infertile land, rough terrains, harsh weather and poor irrigation has made them turn to the sea, vital for their livelihood and survival. Now, with the advent of direct intervention by the government, the communities are torn between two extreme desires: their contemplation to participate in development projects to make them integrated into the main development stream, and on the other extreme, the uncertainty they will have to face in particular the emerging social conflicts arising from the high impact development project which they fear may subsequently displace them because of their inaccessibility to information on development projects, no legal land grants for the land they are living on which they believed are their ancestral heritage and the lack of capital and economic assets. As lamented by a poor fishermen on Pulau Banggi, "hopes are to be desired and dreams are the feast to our empty stomach."

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