

## Alternative Development and the Role of Commercial Handicraft Production in Sarawak, Malaysia

MADLINE BERMA

### ABSTRAK

*Kertas ini bertujuan membincang peranan pengeluaran kraftangan secara komersil dalam menangani masalah akibat peningkatan kemiskinan, kemusnahan alam sekitar dan pengasingan kebudayaan di Sarawak, Malaysia. Analisis adalah berasaskan kajiselidik yang dilakukan antara tahun 1993 sehingga 1996, ke atas 200 tukang kraftangan daripada sebelas buah rumah panjang di Bahagian Kapit, Sarawak. Satu daripada penemuan utama kajian ini ialah keupayaan pengeluaran kraftangan secara komersil sebagai elemen penting untuk membangunkan industri berskel kecil secara in-situ. Umumnya, pengeluaran kraftangan adalah mesra alam, berintensifkan buruh dan menggunakan sumber tempatan (seperti kemahiran, institusi, bahan mentah). Dalam usaha pemerintah mempertingkatkan pembangunan pelancongan serta kekayaan warisan budaya masyarakat Iban, maka perluasan aktiviti pengeluaran kraftangan secara komersil adalah satu laluan pembangunan 'alternatif' bagi Sarawak.*

### ABSTRACT

*The objective of this paper is to discuss the role of commercial handicraft production in solving some of the rural problems which have resulted from increasing poverty, environmental degradation and cultural alienation in Sarawak, Malaysia. The analysis is based on an in-depth study conducted between 1993 to 1996 of 200 Iban craftpersons from eleven rumah panjang (longhouses) in Kapit Division, Sarawak. One of the major findings of this study is that rural Iban involvement in handicraft production could become an important element for a future process of small-scale industrialisation in-situ. Handicraft production is generally environmentally-friendly, labour-intensive, and most importantly it uses local resources (such as skills, institutions, and raw materials). With Sarawak's growing emphasis on tourism development and the rich cultural heritage of the Iban, the expansion of commercial handicraft production provides an 'alternative' development path for the state.*

## SARAWAK'S ECONOMY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia. Entering the new decade in Sarawak, a series of "new" challenges to the economy is becoming apparent. Among the main challenges are growing crises in the rural sector as a result of population increase, environmental degradation and economic inequality between ethnic groups, regions and sectors. One of the most important development challenges confronting Sarawak today is that of rural poverty. According to the latest available data, the incidence of poverty in Sarawak in 1997 was 10 percent while that of Malaysia was 6.8 percent (Malaysia 1998: Table 3-2). In 1997 the incidence of rural and urban poverty was 10.9 percent and 2.1 percent respectively. Some of the main causes of rural poverty in Sarawak are low productivity, lack of off-farm employment opportunities, and increase in unemployment, increasing rural-urban migration, as well as lack of productive assets and problems of inaccessibility. The central problems faced by planners in Sarawak are to eradicate poverty and provide productive employment and income-generating opportunities to the rural communities, of which the majority are the Iban.

The size of Sarawak's, modern industrial and urban sectors is small and use relatively capital-intensive techniques, suggesting that the potential for labour absorption in these sectors is limited. The concentration of industry in urban areas, has inevitably resulted in an exodus of the rural population to the towns and the impoverishment and weakening of rural communities. The problem is further compounded by the inability of the agricultural sector to absorb all additions to the rural labour force and the low yield and declining prices of certain primary cash crops. All these have important implications for the rural communities, particularly the Iban<sup>2</sup> because the majority of them reside in the rural areas, rely on agriculture for their livelihood, and also have the highest incidence of poverty in the state.

The excessive degree of concentration and the limited success of the '*trickle down effect*' as a means of development have encouraged Malaysian planners to look towards rural industrialisation and the promotion of non-agricultural activities as a means of ameliorating these problems. Since the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, rural industrialisation has been used as a vehicle for rural modernisation and social change in Malaysia. However, it has not succeeded in narrowing the gap between rural and urban areas. Rural poverty continue to persist and youths continue to migrate to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. Part of the problem lies in the failure of the government to develop rural industries, which use local human and natural resources. In Malaysia, rural industrialisation efforts have been directed more towards relocating urban industries to the rural areas (Berma 1996). Though these industries are mostly located in the rural areas, they are urban-oriented; they produce modern products that cater for the urban market. Furthermore, these industries are unable to create productive employment in the rural areas.

In this context it is natural to ask whether rural non-agricultural activities, such as commercial handicraft production, petty commerce, wage employment, transportation and construction could provide significant number of productive jobs and thus relieve the problems of rural unemployment and out-migration.

Evidence from Arnold (1993), Joseph (1987), Kitching (1982) and Parnwell (1994, 1992) show that commercial handicraft production may seem to be one of the 'solution' to Sarawak's rural economic problems. These studies show that non-agricultural activities provide the rural communities with employment and income opportunities. These studies also show that rural communities are increasingly active in non-agricultural activities and their participation is linked to greater reduction in poverty. Furthermore, handicraft production is sustainable because it tends to be small, use local resources and based on indigenous knowledge.

Despite the importance of the non-agricultural activities, it has not figured explicitly in Malaysia's sectorised model of economic development. This indicates that Malaysian planners are either unaware of its significance to total employment and output, or they have a misconception of its role in development. There has often been a presumption that the rural non-agricultural sector will decline as the agricultural population decreases. To early planners the sector was transitional, therefore it has limited future importance. Recent studies (Berma 1996; Ismail & Esdert 1990; Saith 1990) have shown that rural non-agricultural activities, particularly handicraft production, are important despite receiving little policy support. The rural communities, particularly the Iban of Sarawak, have long been involved in handicraft production. Many writers have discussed the significance of income from sales of handicrafts to the rural Iban communities (Abdul Kadir 1992; Caslake 1992; Kedit 1988 & 1989; Munan 1989; Zeppel 1992). Iban involvement in handicrafts production has usually been discussed as part of a broader study of their involvement in tourism-related activities. These studies have not been able to provide us with much information regarding Iban involvement in commercial handicraft production. We know little about whether it provides productive employment and income opportunities to the rural Iban. Who participates in handicraft production, the factors that encourage (or discourage) involvement, the amount of income earned, and the problems and opportunities they face in pursuing commercial handicraft production all require close exploration and analysis. Moreover, Iban involvement in commercial activities, particularly handicraft production, has not been systematically studied. As a consequence of this gap in our knowledge, this paper pursues the following objectives: (a) to explore the significance of commercial handicraft production as a form of '*alternative development*' particularly to the rural Iban, and (b) to examine the constraints and potential, faced by the Iban due to their involvement in commercial handicraft production. Hopefully, our understanding of rural involvement in the handicraft sector will improve so that the policy emphasis it deserves will gradually become clearer.

This paper proceeds by first situating the study within the broad context of the '*alternative development*' discourse. The theoretical discussion focuses on the role of commercial handicraft production as a component of alternative development to overcome Iban backwardness.

#### ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT: THEORETICAL ISSUES

The concept of alternative development (hereafter AD) is not new; it has its roots with the populist ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it was only in the 1970s that this philosophy gained quite wide exposure. This coincided with a period when realisation dawned that conventional forms of *development* were not delivering benefits widely or quickly enough to cater adequately for the needs of the poor and marginalized. Even after two decades of rapid economic transformation, and changing priorities – or growing defeatism – in the development discourse, the AD approach continues to attract both attention and adherents (Arnold 1993; Chambers 1989; Hettne 1990; Parnwell 1992 & 1994; Schumacher 1973; Stavenhagen 1986) because of its theoretical relevance in examining current problems of poverty, environmental degradation and ethnic conflict in developing countries.

Contributing to the continuing popularity of the AD approach is the growing discontent with the apparent inability of conventional development theories (particularly the modernisation and dependency paradigms) to deal with basic social and economic problems. Early development strategies, such as the industrialisation-led policies of the 1950s and 1960s, the *redistribution with growth* strategies of the 1970s and the neo-liberal approaches of the 1980s – all of which emphasised the pre-eminence of market forces – have not succeeded in alleviating rural poverty, fulfilling basic socioeconomic needs, and addressing ethnic conflicts in developing countries (Koppel & Hawkins 1994; Hettne 1990; Stavenhagen 1986).

The AD approach has taken different and sometimes diametrically opposed forms, such as the *basic needs*, ethnodevelopment, ecodevelopment and neo-populist approaches to development (Kitching 1982; Stavenhagen 1986; Hettne 1990; Hulme & Turner 1990). These approaches may vary in their specific focus, but they share a common view about the kind of strategies that should be employed in pursuing *genuine* development. This approach was based on Chambers' (1989) *ideology of reversals which starts with the priorities and conditions of rural people*. He calls for a development theory and practice that is concerned with *putting first the priorities of those who are few and peripheral*. Chambers and Conway (1992) listed three objectives that embrace the AD approach: people's capability, equity and sustainability.

The first concept of AD focuses on the need to increase the capabilities of the poor to exploit their changing environment and opportunities. Conventional

development approaches did not pay adequate attention to the realities at the local level. These approaches were often based on the planners' centre-outwards and top-down view of rural development. Infact, Chambers (1989:6) argued that these approaches "start with economics, not people; with the macro not the micro; with the view from the office not the view from the field". The alternative approach argues for the need to increase the capabilities of the poor to enable them to gain access to resources, use services and information, innovate, and explore new conditions and resources. This concept became the basis of the self-reliance strategy of development (Hettne 1990:173).

The second concept incorporated in the AD framework relates to the question of equity. This new approach argues that, in order for the poor to achieve sustainable livelihoods, it is necessary for the government to give priority to the capabilities and assets of the poor and their access to facilities, resources and markets. The government can do this through asset redistribution, securing the rights of the poor to productive resources, ensuring effective access to social and infrastructure services, and removing barriers that weaken or disempower the poor.

Increasing environmental and social sustainability is the third concept in Chambers' and Conway's (1992) alternative development paradigm. In this framework, there is not only a concern with the ability of societies to be self-sufficient and self-reliant but also an anxiety about environmental (such as deforestation and over-exploitation of non-renewable resources) and ethnic issues. Conventional development approach tends to neglect the problem of scarcity, rendering it *ecologically blind* (Hettne 1990:184). The relationship between economic growth and the environment is of concern to this study because of its effect on rural resources. In many developing countries, economic growth is often pursued at the expense of the environment (Hettne 1990; Hulme & Turner 1990). A clear example is the overriding emphasis on large-scale urban-based industrialisation, which in the long run puts a heavy strain on natural resources. This heavy strain not only depletes resources but also leads to the degradation of the natural environment. One of the most disturbing environmental effects is in the area of forest destruction - which is relevant to the context of the present study. This has serious implications for the rural communities who are not only poor but who depend for their livelihoods on agricultural activities: farming, fishing, and collecting non-timber forest products. For the rural community, which directly depends on forest resources for its survival, degradation of the environment means they can no longer rely on the forest and rivers to sustain their livelihood (Parnwell 1994; Parnwell & Taylor 1996). In these circumstances, environmental degradation has devastating consequences for the poorest communities. As Parnwell (1994) has asserted, environmental problems are simultaneously development problems.

Conventional development approaches tend to focus on large-scale urban industries. In many developing countries, such industries have been estab-

lished mostly in a planned manner on large and medium scales, whilst at the same time hardly any importance is attributed to the development of rural and small-scale industries. Planners in developing countries believe that the prioritisation of large-scale urban industries is necessary to speed up the industrialisation process because basic economic principles suggest that industries need to be large and concentrated in order to take advantage of economies of scale. Regardless of the economic justification, the fact still remains that a large proportion of the rural population has remained poor and has not been able to participate in the large-scale modern industrial complex even through the process of city-ward migration (Saith 1990).

Undeniably, there has been rapid progress in many sectors in a number of developing countries, however, the overall impact has largely been limited to the creation of enclaves of modern industry, mainly concentrated in the urban areas, with continuing dependence on industrial technology, capital goods and technological services from developed countries. The nature and size of the technology package tend to be larger since it mostly involved *high* technology. Meanwhile the modern industrial sector constitutes only a small element in many developing countries suggesting that the benefits of employment and income have not *trickled down*, particularly to the poor as many were led to expect from the industrialisation-led strategy. Given that the poor mostly reside in rural areas, they have remained largely unaffected by industrial development, which has become overwhelmingly concentrated in the urban areas. In fact, poverty and unemployment have often become intensified in the rural areas. Most importantly, the basic needs of the community remain unfulfilled, creating and accentuating an uneven development in the developing countries.

Studies (Saith 1990; UKM 1986) have shown that early attempts at addressing uneven development through rural industrialisation fell short of their objectives because they merely involved the 'relocation' of large-scale urban industries to the rural areas. Furthermore, these industries have spawned a type of technology which has a 'dehumanising effect', that is indifferent to people needs, and which has a tendency to bring about cultural alienation (Webster 1984:184-5). What the developing nations need is for development to be based on Schumacher's (1973) principle of 'small is beautiful' and 'technology of production by the masses' which is:

conducive to decentralisation, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of scarce resources, and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines (Schumacher 1973:143).

To the proponents of AD (particularly the neo-populist), there is no realistic alternative to what Kitching (1982) calls the *old orthodoxy* which emphasises industrialisation as the key to development and affluence. The key to these things lies not so much in agricultural development but in industrialisation. Instead of rejecting industrialisation, the AD approach emphasises appropriate

technology as a way of increasing the pace of economic development in harmony with prevailing ecological and cultural conditions. To Parnwell (1990) and Arnold (1993) the type of industrialisation that they consider appropriate is sustainable industrialisation. As Parnwell (1990) has proposed, the blueprint for development lies in industrialisation:

which is dispersed, slower and smaller in scale – precisely the kinds of industrialisation which exist in the rural periphery of the South and which, in many cases, have systematically been displaced by the products of the large-scale modern sector.

### THE ROLE OF COMMERCIAL HANDICRAFT PRODUCTION IN OVERCOMING IBAN ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS

Having discussed the theoretical background of this study, this paper shall now proceed to discuss the significance of commercial handicraft production within the framework established above and the case for promoting it among the rural communities in general, and the Iban in particular.

This paper takes a position in line with the main ideas of the neo-populists since they fit appropriately with a concern to examine the ways in which small-scale rural industries in general and cottage industries in particular might be established and promoted. Handicraft production is one form of cottage industry that should be promoted in rural Sarawak because it has a number of palatable properties.

First and foremost is the cottage industry's potential to alleviate poverty, generate employment and income. Secondly, it is an alternative to large-scale urban industries. The type of technology advocated would be labour-intensive, geared towards small-scale rather than large-scale production, and it is environmentally friendly. Unlike large-scale urban industries, cottage industry has lower capital-labour ratio, which is in line with the resource endowment of rural areas. Also, it uses appropriate technologies, is more responsive to the local availability of skills, has potential for the development of skills, and can be tailored to local requirements. Furthermore, commercial handicraft production in particular and cottage industry in general is more flexible and has better capacity to adapt to changing economic circumstances than large-scale production. The third argument for small-scale cottage industry is that it functions as a breeding ground for rural entrepreneurial talent and skills. The fourth positive attribute of commercial handicraft production is its ability to generate broad-based cumulative development through improved forward and backward linkages of agriculture, local industrial and other non-farm economic activities. As Parnwell (1998) have rightly stated,

the promotion of industrial production in the countryside – either by building up the capacity of long-established cottage industries or through a 'new domestic division of labour' which spreads or sub-contracts essentially 'urban' forms of manufacturing to

rural villages – is being championed as a pragmatic if challenging means of encouraging, *inter alia*, a great spatial spread of economic activity, the diversification of rural economies, a reduction in some of the imperatives for out-migration and the extension of the cost-competitiveness of the region's industrial economies.

Based on the above discussion, one tends to view cottage industry not as part of industrialisation in rural areas, but as the industrialisation of rural areas. Instead of focusing this discussion on the establishment of large factories in rural areas, this paper sees commercial handicraft production as a process as well as a means to diversify and develop Sarawak's rural economy. It provides an important route out of poverty for the rural Iban.

Theoretically, this paper uses the alternative development approach because it places handicraft production among the grassroots efforts of rural households to meet their own basic human needs and to achieve and sustain a socially acceptable standard of living (Alexander, Boomgard & White 1991; Berma 1996; Parnwell 1994; Stephen 1991).

The conventional approach mainly focuses on market forces without giving equal attention to other factors such as culture and politics. The alternative approach recognises that the rural economy is not only complex but it has many opportunities to generate non-farm income. This approach is also useful because it conceptualises handicraft production as a grassroots activity. According to this approach, handicraft production can result in a self-managed economic development that has a unifying effect especially in strengthening local material culture and institutions (Stephen 1991:101).

This grassroots conceptualisation of handicraft production also aims to understand how rural families empower themselves to meet their own household and community needs. This approach runs counter to the popular approach that non-agricultural activities (such as handicraft production) function as secondary activities to the agricultural sector and rural involvement in such activities are transient in nature (Saith 1990). Instead, this study associates rural involvement in commercial handicraft production with success in achieving livelihood security in declining economies. It suggests that handicraft production plays a significant role in achieving household self-reliance and community development, particularly in resource-scarce and low-income areas.

The approach does not view handicraft production as an economic activity solely for achieving material wealth, but one in which development is measured in terms of people's felt needs and aspirations, such as self-identification, ethnic consciousness, and solidarity (Parnwell 1994; Stephen 1991). Moreover, it recognises that craftspeople's values, attitudes and expectations change under different socio-economic, political and ecological conditions. It does not view rural involvement in handicraft production as the last remnant of peasant existence in a phased and progressive evolutionary path from part-time home production to full-time waged employment. According to this approach, rural



communities will continue to participate in handicraft production as part of their adaptation to benefit from new opportunities and to avoid constraints.

In this approach, handicraft production is considered important not only because it enables the rural communities to fulfil their basic needs, but because handicrafts are also important for equity. On equity grounds, handicrafts are particularly important for landless or near-landless households. Empirical evidence from developing countries shows that as farms become smaller, the share of non-farm income in total household income becomes larger. Such evidence suggests the importance of income from handicrafts and other non-agricultural activities in alleviating poverty.

The alternative approach should draw our attention to the fact that rural community involvement in handicraft production is not static, because it functions within a dynamic system. What this means is that the survival of Iban craftspersons does not depend on the perfection but as the adaptability of their handicraft production. This approach indicates that it is more relevant to study the way in which Iban craftspersons produce knowledge and technology, than to examine what the technology looks like at any one point in time. The following section discusses the extent to which the commercial handicraft production can act as a form of 'alternative development' in Sarawak.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this paper is based on two comprehensive set of *bilik*-family<sup>1</sup> (Iban households) level data over periods spanning three to four years. For the analysis, this study uses data from a survey of 200 Iban from eleven *rumah panjang* (longhouses) in Kapit Division, Sarawak. The survey was conducted on 113 respondents who were involved in commercial handicraft production, and 87 who did not participate in commercial handicraft production. The study was conducted between 1993 and 1996. This study defines participants in commercial handicraft production as those who are involved directly or indirectly in the production and sale of handicrafts for commercial purposes. They are termed as commercial craftspersons (CPs). The non-participants are those who are not involved in the production and sale of handicrafts for commercial purposes. Some of them may be producing handicrafts for utilitarian rather than commercial purposes. In this study they are referred to as the non-commercial craftspersons (NCPs).

## COMMERCIAL HANDICRAFT PRODUCTION: A DESCRIPTION OF OPPORTUNITY

Considering commercial handicraft production as a reflection of this alternative development approach, or a development project that "*pu[s]* the *last first*" –

borrowing Chambers' (1989) terms – how has commercial handicraft production fared? One can find some of the answers to this question by assessing the role of commercial handicraft production in the rural Iban economy. The discussions in this paper will be guided by the following questions: Does commercial handicraft production promote productive work that increases income? Does commercial handicraft production, by the nature of its requirements, utilise resources available at the local level? Does involvement in commercial handicraft production provide sufficient means to improve the quality of life of the rural people? Are the local people allowed to participate fully in the development initiatives? The answers to these questions will provide some means to discuss commercial handicraft production as part of an alternative development strategy for the rural communities in Sarawak, Malaysia.

#### COMMERCIAL HANDICRAFT PRODUCTION AS A SOURCE OF PRODUCTIVE WORK

One of the key questions is: Does commercial handicraft production promote productive work that increases income? In order to answer this question, one must assess the contribution of income earned from selling handicrafts to total household income. The disaggregation of total bilik-family income into a number of components provides a first-hand picture of the effects of commercial handicraft production on the various sources of bilik-family income. Interviews with the CPs gave some ideas of their income, which have been listed in Table 1. It must be remembered that the information requested was sensitive and the answers could not be easily crosschecked suggesting that the list is not a conclusive one. The survey results show that the monthly income per bilik-family in the surveyed area is RM1,080.36 and the per capita income is RM209.64. Bilik-families who are involved in commercial handicraft production earn an average monthly income of RM1,168.78 compared to RM1,168.78 for the non-participants. For the CPs, contribution from self-employment (including commercial handicraft production) is high. Comparing mean income from self-employment, CPs earns 63.2 percent more than NCPs. This figure indicates that income from selling handicrafts is a major contributor to total income in general, and non-waged income in particular.

The disaggregated picture reveals a clearer picture of the contribution of commercial handicraft production to total bilik-family income. Table 2 shows that income from handicraft production accounted for a large percentage of total income earned. Table 2 shows that 53.9 percent of participating bilik-families earn between 1.0 to 10 percent of their total income from commercial handicraft production. In fact, some (0.9 percent) of them earn more than 50 percent of their total income from selling handicrafts. To these bilik-families, handicrafts provide an important source of cash income; it is not a trivial sideline activity to be

TABLE 1. Summary of average monthly household income by involvement in commercial handicraft production

Income Sources	Craftspersons			Difference* (Percent)
	All Household Ringgit Malaysia	Commercial (CP) Ringgit Malaysia	Non- Commercial (NCP) Ringgit Malaysia	
Waged Income	564.35	599.18	519.10	15.4
Self Employment	331.10	398.22	243.92	63.2
Transfer Payment	99.46	93.33	107.40	(-13.1)
Asset	75.45	78.03	72.08	8.2
Total Income	1,070.36	1,168.78	942.51	24.0
Income Per Capita	209.64	234.49	177.36	32.2
Total Respondents	200	113	87	

Source: Survey 1996

Note: \*Difference = (CP/NCP)/NCP × 100

TABLE 2. Percentage of income from handicraft to total bilik-family income

	Percentage
Less than 1 percent	15.9
1.0 to 9.9 percent	53.1
10.0 to 19.9 percent	15.9
20.0 to 49.9 percent	14.2
More than 50.0 percent	0.9

Source: Survey 1996

pursued casually. Nor is it just *duit kopi* (income for simple luxuries) for the Iban in rural Kapit. In fact, income from handicrafts provides the *bilik*-families with cash income to cater for their expenditure and their consumption in times of difficulties. Given that the average *bilik*-family income is just slightly above the poverty line, cash income from commercial handicraft production provides rural Iban with the extra income needed to bring them out of absolute poverty.

Looking at the amount of income earned from selling handicrafts provides another perspective. Of the total CPs surveyed, 35.4 percent earned about RM250.00 from selling handicrafts, 30.1 percent earned between RM251.00 to RM1,000.00, and 33.4 percent earned more than RM1,000.00 from selling handi-

crafts. The CPs earned an average income of RM1,168.00 from selling handicrafts. One bilik-family earn as high as RM8,940.00 throughout the whole year of 1993. The survey results add to existing evidence that non-agricultural activities, particularly commercial handicraft production are an important route out of rural poverty.

#### UTILISATION OF RESOURCES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

One of the basic arguments against large-scale, growth-oriented projects is their non-utilisation or under-utilisation of local resources (such as skills, and human & natural resources) for development purposes. The rural Iban can benefit from alternative development based on commercial handicraft production because it is oriented towards the use of technology permitting full development of their region's natural resources and human skills. Also, handicraft production has some of the basic principles of alternative development because it enables the rural Iban to mobilise natural resources from their surroundings, such as rattan, wood, bemban and bamboo. As Kedit (1994:25) has rightly mentioned:

The whole material culture of the Iban is based on the rainforest... The *pua* is a good representation of what the plant world can contribute to man for art and everyday utility purpose because the materials are from plants.

Iban craftspersons use production techniques, which are generally oriented towards minimising waste and maximising the use of natural forest resources. Indirectly, commercial handicraft production enable the Iban to retain their ethnic identity through their handicrafts' designs and art works. Commercial handicraft production also reflects Iban religious and cultural values and the very things which they consider important; for example their art forms and designs have important meanings such as unity, harmony, bravery, challenge, respect for others, responsibility and so on. The importance of commercial handicraft production is not limited to increasing income; has to take one also into account the socio-cultural aspect of Iban life, which has not been captured by statistical analysis.

One of the reasons for the limited *success* of many large-scale rural projects is that they tend to limit participation of certain underprivileged individuals (for example women, the elderly, landless and smallholders). Commercial handicraft production is only successful as a rural development project if all sectors of the rural population are able to be involved. The survey results show that women mostly pursue commercial handicraft production. This study finds that commercial handicraft production activity is very important to women's welfare. Of the total number of CPs, 92.0 percent are women. The majority (80.4 percent) of the craftspersons are married, 8.9 percent are divorced, 8.9 percent are widows and 1.8 percent is single. Of the total respondents, 4.5 percent has a bilik-family size

of I and all have women as the *tuai bilik* (head of bilik). They value handicraft production highly because it is one of the few sources of cash income available to them. For some women, commercial handicraft production is not just a source of cash income but more important it is a secure one. It provides an important means of subsistence where there is no male provider.

This paper corroborates the findings of earlier studies (Lanjouw & Lanjouw 1995; Lanjouw 1997, van de Walle 1994; Hazzel & Haggblade 1993) regarding the importance of non-agricultural participation to poverty differences by gender. This study shows that growth in non-agricultural activities is beneficial to women since they participate more in these activities. The majority of the handicrafts sold are *pua kumbu* (Iban ceremonial blanket), which are woven only by women. These *pua kumbu* are sold between RM50.00 to RM700.00 per piece based on their quality and size. The strong emphasis on the production and sale of *pua kumbu* is due to their high economic returns and tourist demand for them. Other less important handicrafts sold are *tikai* (mats), *raga* (baskets), and beads making. As in the case of *pua kumbu*, women also weave these handicrafts. Men are also involved in handicraft production, but their number is very limited. Most of them prefer to pursue other forms of non-agricultural activities such as waged employment and petty commerce.

As a rural development project, commercial handicraft production not only provides employment and income-earning opportunities to women, but also provide similar opportunities to the elderly, the young, uneducated and the unemployed. The average age of craftspersons involved in commercial handicraft production is 45 years. Of the total CPs, only 23.9 percent are less than 35 years old, suggesting that commercial handicraft production is mainly pursued by the elderly. In terms of education, 46.5 percent of CPs is without formal education and 42.0 percent have primary education. It is evident that commercial handicraft production provides income-earning opportunities to the less educated Iban. By encouraging them to participate in commercial handicraft production, it is by no means an attempt to deny them the opportunity to seek better alternatives in the urban economy. The important issue is the availability of an alternative economic activity for those who wish (or forced) to remain in the rural areas.

#### ROLE OF COMMERCIAL HANDICRAFT PRODUCTION IN IMPROVING RURAL IBAN QUALITY OF LIFE

One of the basic arguments for alternative development strategies is their ability to improve the socioeconomic position of the rural population. Undeniably, income earned from selling handicrafts is generally lower than that earned from other economic activities such as logging, cash agriculture and waged employment. But to the rural Iban, who has few alternative sources of income, commer-

cial handicraft production provides them with the opportunities for gaining a reasonably profitable livelihood and earning a secondary income.

An examination of the respondents' expenditure, savings and investment patterns, reveals the importance of cash income in their economy. The rural Iban use cash income to facilitate their consumption, purchase consumer items, improve their house and finance their farming activities and children's education. Some saved their income earned from selling handicrafts in banks, while others invested in Amanah Saham Bumiputera (ASB), Amanah Saham Sarawak (ASSAR), and Amanah Saham Nasional (ASN). There is enough evidence to suggest that involvement in commercial handicraft production has enabled the rural Iban to earn some cash income, which directly or indirectly helps them to improve their socioeconomic position and their quality of life.

#### LOCAL LEVEL PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

According to Kottak (1990) compatible and successful projects avoid what he calls the 'fallacy of over-innovation', which means that realistic and workable projects should promote change; not innovate in excess. A successful project is one that does not require major changes to the participants' daily lives or interfere too much with customary subsistence pursuits. Successful projects respect, or at least do not work in opposition to local cultural patterns. Also, these projects should not be based solely on planners' objectives. The projects can only be defined as successful if they allow the rural people to participate fully in the development initiatives. The basic premise of the alternative development approach is that it is based on the principle of bottom-up, rather than top-down decision-making.

There is no straightforward answer to the question whether or not commercial handicraft production allows the rural Iban to participate fully in development initiatives. Commercial handicraft production as a rural development project has indeed created new income-earning opportunities for the rural Iban. Among those involved in commercial handicraft production, the majority started selling handicrafts without much direct support from the government or *towkays* (Chinese business persons) suggesting a high level of initiative among the rural Iban in the longhouses where the research was conducted. However, one must not overlook the fact that the government has played an indirect role by creating a favourable environment to enable the rural Iban to develop commercial handicraft production. Those who started because of government or towkays support may appear to be dependent and lack initiative. However, viewed from a different perspective, these craftspersons are also the same people who took the initiative and established economic networks with government agencies or towkays.

It is also useful to examine the types and sources of innovation to establish the creation of new economic ideas among the rural craftspersons. There are

differences in the level of initiative between those who *beragih*<sup>2</sup> with the towkays or the government agencies and those who do not. Participants in *beragih* or government-sponsored handicraft projects, tend to rely heavily on the government or the towkays initiatives and support. Undeniably, the presence of towkays and government's support helps to counter some of their business problems (marketing, capital, raw materials), but it has the tendency of stifling local initiatives. In contrast, those who do not participate in *beragih* with Chinese towkays and government agencies, rely on their own initiatives. The majority of them have innovated to suit the changing demand for handicrafts. In most cases, ideas originate from the craftspersons themselves. They claimed that innovations are '*leaked*' or spread through a network of family and friends. Usually these innovations represent a response to persistent problems related to fluctuations in price and demand for handicrafts and the availability of resources. This study suggests that government and towkays involvement in commercial handicraft production promotion can have both positive and negative influences on the development of local initiatives.

Another issue explored in this paper is the 'trickling down effects' of commercial handicraft production. It is important to know whether commercial handicraft production has led to the development of related businesses or economic activities. The study shows that the development of commercial handicraft production in the researched longhouses has led to the formation of several new trading activities and to the growth of informal business such as collecting and processing of raw materials. New trading opportunities have been created for handicrafts, which were previously regarded by the Iban as practically 'without any economic value'. Traditionally, the Iban only produced handicrafts for personal consumption or utilitarian (cultural) purposes. Nowadays, the rural Iban are able to sell their handicrafts and earn cash income from such activities.

Another example of a new trading field is the marketing of forest-based raw materials used in the production of pua kumbu, mats, baskets and wood carvings. Pua kumbu weavers use raw materials such as *engkudu* (*morinda citrifolia*), *engkerbai* (*psychotria viridiflora*), *lia amat* (wild ginger), from the surrounding forests. In the past, the craftspersons relied on family labour to search for and prepare these raw materials from the forest. These forest-based raw materials are becoming scarce and difficult to collect due to deforestation. Some individuals have started to specialise in the searching, preparing and selling of these forest-based raw materials to the weavers. One woman claimed she sold a monthly average of 20 bunches of well-processed bamboo at RM7.50 per bunch to her customers. The number of individuals involved in this new form of trade is increasing due to a high demand for their services. One successful craftsperson claimed she preferred to purchase the processed forest-based raw materials from other individuals because she did not have the requisite family members to assist her. The growing difficulties involved in the searching for and processing of raw materials, due to time and distance, and in part linked to growing scarcity

of non-timber forest products, will increase the demand for processed raw materials. There is also a ready demand for processed materials from the urban-based craftspersons because they do not have the time or the proper knowledge to search for and prepare these raw materials.

Another business associated with commercial handicraft production is the longhouse visit. Bilik-families who participated in the longhouse tourist visits were paid by tour agencies to display their skill in weaving, carving or plaiting to the tourist. Craftspersons became involved in these tourist visits, and can even benefit from such activities by selling their products to these tourists.

### CONCLUSION

This study has shown that handicraft production, which was once regarded as a disadvantage to rural areas and an economic activity of last resort as well as causes of rural marginality are now being increasingly interpreted as advantageous and sources of growth. This study highlights the important role of handicraft production in the rural economy. For the poorly educated and the unemployed, their involvement in commercial handicraft production provides them with the opportunity to earn cash income and participate in part-time employment. Commercial handicraft production is also an important source of economic empowerment to the disadvantaged groups such as the poor, women and elderly in rural Sarawak. As an income-generating project, commercial handicraft production is flexible and can be easily tailored to the needs of the rural Iban, particularly women and the elderly. It is small and uses local resources. It does not require heavy financial capital or expensive machines. Also, the economic success of some Iban craftspersons shows that the Iban do not reject modernisation, but rather pursue local and grassroots control of modernisation. Commercial handicraft production represents a case of Iban grass-roots efforts to empower themselves to meet their own bilik-family needs and achieve self-reliance and community development. This analysis has shown that in many ways commercial handicraft production play an important role for Iban in rural Sarawak, but most importantly, it enables them to earn income and sustain interest in their traditional art and culture.

### NOTES

1. The term *bilik* applies to the privately-owned apartment unit in Iban longhouses. The *bilik*-family applies to the nuclear family unit. The common Iban settlement is a single longhouse composed of 4 to 50 independent family units (an average of 14 in Kapit region) that are called *bilik*-families. The *bilik*-family has an average of 5.5 members. It is usually composed of two or three generations. While the Iban live in a single longhouse, each *bilik*-family constitutes a separate household that cooks and eats together, owns its own land, cultivates its own crops, has its own rituals,



- charms, taboos, and its own sacred rice. Each *bilik*-family is an independent unit in the longhouse.
2. An Iban term for production sharing contract or relationship between two or more individuals. In the case of Iban weavers in this study, they establish *beragih* with Chinese towkays. Under this contract the towkays provide all the raw materials to the weavers with the promise of purchasing all the handicrafts produced by the weavers. In return the weavers produce the number of handicrafts at the price agreed by both parties. The weavers are bound by contract to produce and sell handicrafts only to the towkay with whom they have established the *beragih* relationship.

## REFERENCES

- Abdul Kadir Haji Din. 1992. The Relevance of Tourism to Socio-economic Development in Sarawak. In King, V.T. (ed.). *Tourism in Borneo: Issues and Perspectives*. Papers from the Second Biennial International Conference, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo Research Council Proceeding Series, pp. 113-130.
- Alexander, P., Boomgard, P., & White, B. (eds.). 1991. *In the Shadow of Agriculture: Non-farm Activities in the Javanese Economy*. Past and Present. Amsterdam: Rural Tropical Institute.
- Arnold, J.E.M. 1993. *Non-farm Employment in Small-Scale Forest-Based Enterprises: Policy and Environmental Issues*. Oxford: Oxford Forestry Institute Working Paper No. 12.
- Beckerman, W. 1995. *Small is Stupid: Blowing the Whistle on the Greens*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd..
- Berna, M. 1996. The Commercialisation of Handicraft Production Among the Iban of Kapit Division in Sarawak, Malaysia: Constraints and Potential. Ph.D Thesis, University of Hull.
- Bernstein, H. 1979. African Peasantries: A Theoretical Framework. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 6(4): 421-443.
- Caslake, J. 1992. Tourism, Culture and the Iban. In King, V.T. (ed.). *Tourism in Borneo: Issues and Perspectives*. Papers from The Second Biennial International Conference, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo Research Council Proceeding Series, pp. 67-90.
- Chambers, R. 1989. *The State and Rural Development: Ideologies and Agenda for the 1990s*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies Discussion Paper No. 269.
- Chambers, R. & Conway, Gordon R. 1992. *Sustainable Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies Discussion Paper No. 296.
- Chee Peng Lim. 1985. 'A Review of Nonfarm Activities in Malaysia' in Mukhopadhyay, S and Chee Peng Lim (eds.), *Promotion of Small-Scale Industries and Strategies for Rural Industrialisation: The Malaysian Experience*. Kuala Lumpur: Sun U Co., Ptd.Ltd..
- Esderts, Hans J. & Ismail Md. Salleh (eds.). 1990. *Promotion of Small-Scale Industries and Strategies for Rural Industrialisation. The Malaysian Experience*. Kuala Lumpur: Sun U Book Co., Sendirian Berhad.

- Hazzel, P. & Haggblade, S. 1993. Farm-Nonfarm Growth Linkages and the Welfare of the Poor. In Lipton and Van der Gaag (eds.), *Including the Poor*. Washington D.C: The World Bank.
- Hettme, Bjorn. 1990. *Development Theory and the Three Worlds*. London: Longman.
- Hulme, D. & Turner, Mark, M. 1990. *Sociology and Development: Theories, Policies and Practices*. Hemmel Hempstead Harvester: Wheatsheaf.
- Islam, R. 1984. Non-farm Employment in Rural Asia: Dynamic Growth or Proletarianisation? *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 14(5): 306-324.
- Joseph, Rebecca M. 1987. Diffused Batik Production in Central Java. Ph.D Dissertation. University of California, San Diego.
- Kedit, Peter M. 1988. 'Iban Bejalai and Sarawak's Development. In Cramb, Rob A and Reece, R.H.W. (eds.), *Development in Sarawak: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Monash University: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Paper No. 17: 135-156.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. An Overview of Iban Traditional and Cultural Values and Social Implications for Contemporary Sarawak. *Sarawak Museum Journal*, Special Issue, No. 4, pt.4, Vol. XL: 1-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Iban Bejalai*. Kuala Lumpur: Ampang Press Sdn. Bhd.
- King, V.T. 1992. Tourism and Culture in Malaysia, With Reference to Borneo. In King, V.T. (ed.). *Tourism in Borneo: Issues and Perspectives*. Papers from the Second Biennial International Conference, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo Research Council Proceeding Series, pp. 29-44.
- \_\_\_\_\_. & Parnwell, Michael J.G. (eds.). 1990. *Margins and Minorities: The Peripheral Areas and Peoples of Malaysia*. Hull: University of Hull Press.
- Kitching, G. 1982. *Development and Underdevelopment in Historical Perspectives: Populism, Nationalism and Industrialisation*. London: Methuen.
- Koppel, B. & Hawkins, J. 1994. Development or Deterioration? Understanding Employment Diversification in Rural Asia. In Koppel, B., Hawkins, J. and William, J. (eds.). *Development or Deterioration? Work in Rural Asia*. London: Lynne Rienner, pp. 249-275.
- Kottak, Conrad P. 1990. Culture and Economic Development. *American Anthropologist* 92(3): 723-731.
- Lanjouw, P. 1998. Ecuador's Rural Nonfarm Sector as a Route out of Poverty. *Policy Research Working Paper*. 1094. The World Bank.
- Lanjouw, J.O. & Lanjouw, P. 1995. Rural Nonfarm Employment: A Survey. *Policy Research Working Paper*. No. 1463. The World Bank.
- Munan, H. 1989. Sarawak Handicrafts: The Economic Aspect. *Sarawak Museum Journal* XL(61): 117-124.
- Parnwell, Michael J.G. 1992. Tourism and Rural Handicrafts in Thailand: To Change or Not to Change?. Paper presented at the International Conference in the ASEAN Region. Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, 31 August to 3 September, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. Environmental Degradation, Non-timber Forest Products and Iban Communities in Bintulu Division, Sarawak: Impact Response and Prospects. Paper presented at the ASEAUK Conference on The Environment in South-east Asia, University of London, 28-30 March.
- \_\_\_\_\_. & Taylor, David M. 1996. Environmental Degradation, Non-Timber Forest Products and Iban Communities in Sarawak: Impact, Response and

- Future Prospects. In Parnwell, Michael J.G. and Bryant, Raymond L. (eds.). *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People, Politics and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge, pp. 269-300.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. Rural Industrialization in Indonesia: A Case Study of Community-Based Weaving Industry in West Java, review of the book. *The Journal of Development Studies* 34(3): 153-155.
- Sarawak Agricultural Development Project (SADP). 1994. Sarawak Agricultural Development Strategy: A Perspective Plan Approach, (unpublished).
- Saith, A. 1990. Location, Linkage and Leakage: Malaysian Rural Industrialisation Strategies in National Perspective. In Esderts, Hans J. and Ismail Md. Salleh (eds.). *Promotion of Small-Scale Industries and Strategies for Rural Industrialisation. The Malaysian Experience*. Selangor: Sun U Book Co. Sendirian Berhad, pp. 64-100.
- Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful. A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. London: Sphere Books Limited.
- Schmitz, H. 1982. Growth Constraints on Small-Scale Manufacturing in Developing Countries: A Critical Review. *World Development* 10(6): 429-520.
- Stavenhagen, R. 1986. Ethnodevelopment: A Neglected Dimension in Economic Development Thinking. In Arthorpe, Raymond and Krahl, Andras (eds.). *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, pp. 71-94.
- Stephen, L. 1991. Culture as a Resource: Four Cases of Self-Managed Indigenous Craft Production in Latin America. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 24(1): 101-130.
- Taylor, Fraser D.R. & Mackenzie, Fiona (eds.). 1992. *Development from Within: Survival in Rural Africa*. London: Routledge.
- UKM. 1994. Poverty Study of Selected Areas in Sarawak. Final Report Submitted to Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Sarawak.
- Van de Walle, D. 1994. 'Rural Poverty in an Emerging Market Economy: Is Diversification into Nonfarm Activities in Rural Vietnam the Solution?' Policy Research Department. The World Bank. Mimeo.
- Zeppel, H. 1992. Getting to Know the Iban: The Tourist Experience of Visiting an Iban Longhouse in Sarawak. In King, V.T. (ed.). *Tourism in Borneo: Issues and Perspectives*. Papers from the Second Biennial International Conference, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo Research Council Proceeding Series, pp. 59-66.

Madeline Berma  
 Lecturer  
 Faculty of Economics  
 Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia  
 43600 UKM Bangi  
 Selangor Darul Ehsan  
 Malaysia  
 e-mail: mac@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my

