

CHAPTER I

# Improving River Transport for Poor Communities

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Building roads take time. In the meantime, Sarawak's rivers will have to serve as the super-highways for many.

River commuters travelling at daybreak near Song, a small trading town on the Rajang, Malaysia's longest river. As a safety precaution, river travel is only permitted between sunrise and sunset.



In Peninsula Malaysia, river transportation has long given way to road and rail links. In Sarawak, rivers are not only essential for trade, which ultimately goes through its seaports of Kuching and Sibuloc located in the south, as well as Bintulu and Miri along the north coast, but also for communities and, especially the poor, to access schools, clinics and markets.

The state's road network is still underdeveloped and, unlike in Sabah and the Peninsula, there are no railway networks to connect the different parts of the vast state. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010, RM702 million has been allocated to Sarawak to upgrade rural and village roads to increase accessibility and connectivity between rural and urban areas. But building roads to better connect people will take time. In the meantime, the state's rivers will have to serve as the superhighways for many.

*Sarawak has an enviable record of development since joining the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Yet, Sarawak's overall poverty rate was recorded at 7.5% in 2004. The level is much higher among the rural population, who comprise slightly over half of the state's total population. Many poor rural communities, settled along the rivers rely on the rivers for access to basic services and for their livelihoods.*

Effective transport is crucial for connecting the rural communities to Sarawak's larger cities and towns, for decreasing isolation and for providing employment opportunities. Of course, human needs are not just physical. Effective modes of transport can also help to increase social capital.

### Pollution of Sarawak's Rivers

As elsewhere in Malaysia, the water quality of Sarawak's rivers is deteriorating. With development, river pollution has increased and water quality has declined. All of our lives depend on our rivers. Polluted rivers affect the health of plants, animals and humans.

River pollution is caused by discharges of sewage, nutrients, waste water, chemical waste and oil, plastics and debris, thermal pollution, riverbank erosion and sedimentation. We can contain the problems and preserve and enjoy the beauty of our rivers.

Promoting community-based eco-tourism along rivers can help increase awareness of sustainable river management. It can also help generate income for poor communities. A community-based eco-tourism project at Krokong, Bau, under the EC-UNDP Small Grants Programme for Operations to Promote Tropical Forests, does just that, and supports fishery management as a conservation strategy.

### Community Water Transportation

In designing and implementing an effective mode of Community Water Transport (CWT), it is necessary to take into account issues of access, size, cost of operation and river maintenance. Access to the CWT must consider the individual needs of men and women, both young and old.

Cost for commodities, such as diesel fuel and petrol, fares and tolls, should be taken into consideration as fluctuating prices can have an immediate impact both on service providers and customers, especially those of low income.

Longboat tourism in Batang Ai, Sri Aman.





Many of the nomadic tribes, including these Penan children, have been resettled by the Government.

CWT can be environmentally friendly, energy efficient and a low-emission transport mode. But the management of CWT in the unpredictable conditions of rivers, including climate conditions and water levels, is challenging. Larger boats may be harder to navigate but are safer on rapid waters. They also have higher carrying capacity and lower unit operating costs. But, safety needs to be considered. If the size of boats and the speed at which they travel are unregulated, the risk of boat collisions and accidents can be high.

Environmental problems and risks associated with CWT include canalisation and dredging (reactivation of polluted sediments into surface waters), shipping operations (noise pollution and risks of accidents) and the importation of invasive species (water-borne diseases from bacteria and microbes that live in the river). These effects and risks can be minimised if communities can be educated and made knowledgeable about the value of rivers and mobilised to help with clearing or dredging of the small waterways.

The objectives of developing CWT are to increase market activity, to improve livelihoods and to increase access to hospitals, clinics and schools. From an economic point of view, an improved CWT will lead to better lives and livelihoods of the people. It will also allow all communities, rich and poor, to be better informed about social, economic and political developments in Sarawak.

We need to change the perception of policy makers, planners and developers that water transportation is slow, old-fashioned and outdated. By providing safe and efficient water transportation, especially for rural communities, and by embracing the rivers and sharing their natural pleasures, we have a chance to change these perceptions for the better.

Community based tourism provides income opportunities for Penan communities in Mulu.

