



Making a Difference to Poverty

By Zora Chan

The print media can play a part in alleviating poverty through information.

Longboats at the Song jetty, the only means of transport for those living in rural Kapit.

“You can’t swim, that’s your problem. Your job is to get the story,” an editor tells his young reporter.

Left with no choice, the reporter takes up the assignment reluctantly, with images of drowning when the boat he travels in to a longhouse upriver capsizes in the mighty Batang Rajang.

Fortunately, this did not happen and, today, the reporter, M. Rajah, heads *The Borneo Post*, *thesundaypost* and *Utusan Borneo* as the group chief editor.

Reporters often face difficult situations in their line of work, especially in rural areas where access is difficult. They have to take certain risks to make sure that their readers have the most comprehensive news when they open the newspaper pages or tune in to the television or radio.

The challenge reporters face is making the voice of the poor rural communities heard.

Recalling his early reporting days, Rajah said being a non-swimmer, he was anxious when his editor sent him to follow a politician to a longhouse upriver to cover the commissioning of a gravity feed pump.

“In those days, there were no life jackets provided and we travelled in narrow, flimsy longboats. I felt like I might drown at any moment throughout the journey. Thrill and joy replaced my anxiety when I received a warm welcome from the longhouse *tuai rumah* (headman) and dwellers,” he said.

Travelling to the interior of Sarawak was like that before roads were built. Rivers played an essential role in bridging the urban and interior areas, lest the rural folks be left out from mainstream development.

Despite the occupational hazard he faced, it was the warm hospitality from the rural community that gave Rajah the motivation and inspiration to write better, in order to help disseminate information to the people.

Coming from an urban area made him realised how far behind rural dwellers were lagging in basic infrastructure and socio-economic development, and the need to improve information dissemination among the people as a means of improving their livelihood.

There is a need to highlight the poverty and hardship that rural communities face so government aid and public donations can reach them.



The Borneo Post reporters on assignment in Sri Aman experience the difficulties of river transport.

Rajah pointed out that with just seven years left for the world to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which aims to reduce poverty and hunger by 2015, there is a need for more reports that will work towards that end.

Citing an example, he said *The Borneo Post's* coverage on the living conditions of rural communities in Long Lellang, Ulu Baram, and Mercy Malaysia's aid to improve basic healthcare had moved many readers and brought pressure to relevant agencies to improve its education and healthcare delivery system.

Dependent on limited and relatively more expensive air transportation, he said certain assistance such as food for boarding schools and medical supplies would have reached the needy if these were sent using the rivers.

Such stories also encouraged more people to volunteer in non-governmental organisations that served rural and disaster hit areas.

Newspapers like *The Borneo Post* and its sister paper, *Utusan Borneo*, have been able to reach out to the rural communities in the nooks and crannies of Sarawak, thanks to the amazing riverine system in the state.

Due to Sarawak's challenging geographical terrains, newspapers continue to be the second best information provider to many rural folks after the radio.

Since 1978, *The Borneo Post* has provided wide news coverage of the urban and rural areas and *Utusan Borneo*, started 20 years ago, has met the needs of rural communities who mainly speak Bahasa Malaysia. Last year, the Iban news featured in two pages of the paper was also established.

"About 40 per cent of *Utusan Borneo* readers are Iban and we have strong readership in the rural areas, especially in the Sibuan and Miri divisions," Rajah said.

He added that rivers in Sarawak have made it possible for the marketing and distribution department to deliver newspaper to rural areas where roads or land transportation was non-existent, such as Song, Kapit, Sebuyau, Tubau, Marudi, Mukah, Kanowit and Ulu Baram.

Issue such as rural poverty and migration, lack of electricity and clean water are brought to light in *The Borneo Post*.



Newspaper are sent using express boats, long boats and speed boats and the company has been absorbing all extra transportation costs out of its social obligation to providing information to the people, he said.

"Any extra charges will not be passed down to readers. If not subsidised, readers in the interior areas would have to pay about 50 sen more for their newspapers," he said. *The Borneo Post* and *Utusan Borneo* are currently sold at RM1.

"*The Borneo Post* is a newspaper for all," Rajah said adding that the newspaper enjoyed the largest readership in Sarawak. The daily circulation for *The Borneo Post* in Sabah and Sarawak is about 81,000, of which about 60,000 is distributed in Sarawak.

He said it is essential for the rural community to have equal access to information on government plans and policies so that they can keep up with mainstream development.

Rural folk still need the newspaper, which they can read if they've missed the news on radio while working on their farm or, worse still, if there is no electricity, as many of these communities still rely on diesel generators, he said.

Twenty years ago, Sarawak was the least developed state in Malaysia and, therefore, information on government policies and projects had to be disseminated clearly to people.

With better understanding of government policies via the electronic and print media, development projects could be carried out more effectively.

This eventually helped to reduce the poverty gap when people benefited directly from development projects such as roads, schools, clinics, water and electricity supply, as well as schemes for the poor, farmers and fishermen, Rajah said.

Since gaining independence in 1963, the poverty rate in Sarawak has been reduced through the government's efforts such as the New Economic Policy, formulated in 1970 to better people's livelihood.



The Borneo Post reporters participating in the SIWT raft race on Sungai Lemanak.



"The Borneo Post's coverage on the living conditions of rural communities in Long Lellang, Ulu Baram, and Mercy Malaysia's aid to improve basic healthcare had moved many readers and brought pressure to relevant agencies to improve its education and healthcare delivery system."

– Mr M. Rajah
Regional Chief Editor, The Borneo Post

The New Economic Policy introduced many schemes in Sarawak. The poverty rate, which stood at 13.74% in 1995, has been vastly reduced to 8.02% in 2004 (Measuring and Monitoring Poverty & Inequality, EPU-UNDP 2007).

Rajah said the newspaper started out in major towns and slowly spread out to rural areas after setting up distribution networks and getting provision shops to help out in selling the newspaper.

"We have an excellent rural distribution network and we're still expanding. We also hired at least 15 stringers (part time reporters) for *The Borneo Post* and *Utusan Borneo* to be based in rural areas so that we can have better coverage as well as providing some job opportunities for the educated rural community", he added.

Rajah said *The Borneo Post* and Sarawak Rivers Board-United Nations Development Programme fortnightly column in *thesundaypost* had helped to raise people's awareness on the importance of rivers and the difficulties faced by rural communities.

He said that the articles received good feedback from readers, including one who asked that the column be published every Sunday. In addition, school children also find the column useful and informative.

Rajah said *The Borneo Post* and *Utusan Borneo* looked forward to future collaborations with other organisations in community-based projects that supported rural poverty and environmental conservation efforts.

Besides its collaboration with UNDP and SRB, he said the company has just started a 12-part series on global warming in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of Stihl-KTS partnership as a Corporate Social Responsibility project.

The project aims to raise awareness among Malaysians on global warming issues through local perspectives and eventually to get them to do their part to mitigate the problem, he said.

Opposite: Mercy Malaysia treating rural children for lice in Long San.

Sarawak's Rivers and Their Uses

By Sharon Ng

The Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) sponsored a children's drawing competition titled "Sarawak's Rivers and Their Uses". The competition, which involved more than 120 students from eight schools, was part of an educational and awareness programme that sought the views of students and teachers from predominantly rural schools, who use the rivers as a daily means of transport.

On 29th March 2007, UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, Dr Richard Leete, and UNDP Assistant Resident Representative (Programme), Dr Chung Tsung Ping, travelled to Pusa and Sebuyau, Sri Aman, respectively, and, on 4th April 2007, Major (R) Sharkawi Dawi, SRB Assistant Controller (Enforcement), visited SK and SMK St Mary's to give out prizes and certificates of participation to all students involved.

Congratulation to the students from Sekolah Kebangsaan (SK) Tebelu, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Sebuyau, SK Tuanku Bagus, SK Pusa, SMK Pusa, SK Kalok, SK St Mary's and SMK St Mary's who won prizes. SRB and UNDP appreciate the creative efforts of all the students who participated in this competition.

Sharkawi (second from right) and SRB Officer Galang (fourth from right) with teachers and winners from SK St Mary's, Kuching.



Opposite page: There is a total of 1,456 (2005) schools in Sarawak – 1,267 primary and 182 secondary schools. Many school children especially in the Mukah, Miri, Betong, Limbang and Kapit Divisions still rely of river transport to go to school. It is significant that in areas like the Baram District, over 90% of the schools are located next to rivers. UNDP and SRB sincerely thank the Education Department, Sarawak and all the schools that have participated in the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport (SIWT) System Study's Education and Awareness Programme.





This page – left column (Top to Bottom):
 Consolation Prize (Primary) – Hakikah Ismail, SK Pusa;
 First Prize (Secondary) – Ngu Phei Chee, SMK St Mary's;
 Second Prize (Secondary) – Fadillah, SMK Sebuyau;
 Right Column (Top to Bottom):
 Consolation Prize (Secondary) – Sharon Lim, SMK St Mary's;
 Consolation Prize (Secondary) – Fikri Hasbullah, SMK Sebuyau.

This page – left column
 (Top to Bottom):
 First Prize (Primary)
 – Abg Dzulfadhil b.h. Madani,
 SK Kalok, Pusa;
 Consolation Prize (Secondary)
 – Asfia Razali, SMK Pusa;
 Right column (Top to Bottom):
 Second Prize (Primary)
 – Redzuan b. Latip,
 SK Tebelu, Sebuyau;
 Consolation Prize (Primary)
 – Clarissa Chia, SK St Mary's,
 Kuching; Consolation Prize
 (Primary) – Mohd Zahid Jam,
 SK Tuanku Bagus, Sebuyau.



Richard Leete giving out prizes at SK Pusa in Sri Aman.

