

# SUSTAINABILITY, DEVELOPMENT AND DEVASTATION: NEW ENCOUNTERS IN INDIGENOUS DIALOGUES

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According to the World Bank, indigenous people number approximately 370,000,000 people across 90+ countries, but comprise some of the most impoverished and disenfranchised groups globally. Exploitation and appropriation of their territories are implicated in contemporary social and economic developments across the world, while the voices of indigenous people are muted and their political leverage compromised by insufficiently reformed legacies of historical marginalisation.

Previous ethnographic work undertaken by the first two authors with indigenous communities in the Tasik Chini lake and forest areas of West Malaysia, **as reported** previously in *Discover Society*, explored the obliteration of diverse lifestyles in the push towards modernisation. The push towards Malaysia's achievement of full development status in 2020 has tended to steamroller over any other considerations in favour of industrialisation and economic wealth, viewed as entirely congruent with the national Social and Economic Development agenda. Based on our **research** the experiences of the Orang Asli, Peninsular Malaysia's indigenous people, strongly indicates that far from enriching and empowering the Orang Asli, such policies and their profiteering ramifications have had a very detrimental effect, eroding Orang Asli autonomy and access to traditional (and endangered) indigenous territories, damaging the people's ability to maintain traditional livelihoods of subsistence and swidden cultivation, hunting and fishing.

The engaged nature of our ethnography meant that relationships formed with participants endure and our concern for their plight remains. A recent UK call to the Global Challenge Research Fund (**GCRF**) to undertake research with low income countries focusing on the UN Sustainable Development Goals was the ideal opportunity for further work through a collaboration of four universities: Bournemouth University, UK, the National University – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the UN Mandated – University for Peace and Universidad de Costa Rica. The Social Development goals relevant to this study are poverty reduction, raising the visibility of hidden needs and amplifying muted voices, social justice and human rights – and, importantly, where the development of indigenous research methodologies is key.

The first year of this study took an innovative approach in bringing together representatives of two indigenous communities from across the globe to share experiences and discuss areas of concern. These foci related to the exploitation of indigenous territories in the light of the two significant international policies, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which recognises the inherent and essential connection of indigenous people to their land as irreplaceable socio-cultural capital.

The two participating groups comprise of representatives from the Tasik Chini community and the Bajo Coen Bribri indigenous people of Talamanca, Costa Rica. Our choice of co-researchers acknowledges both the intriguing differences as well as the similarities in the situations facing our indigenous participants. In the drive towards full development status Malaysia and Costa Rica have sought different paths towards sustainable development, through the plantation of monoculture and heavy industry in Malaysia; or ring fencing of 'protected areas' in the pursuit of eco-tourist dollars in Costa Rica. In either case these national drivers hold serious implications for the future of indigenous communities, leading to their entrapment in endemic poverty.

The first set of dialogic encounters between the two groups occurred in August 2018 at the Bajo Coen community (with the second taking place at Tasik Chini this summer). These dialogues are entirely experimental in nature, as despite being welcomed by the people, we could not be sure that sufficient obstacles relating to difference could be overcome. The issues were potentially great, including differences of culture, identity, social norms and religion, together with the very different history of colonisation where for the indigenous groups these comprised of both Spanish and British imperialism as well as that of post-colonial nationhood that marginalises indigenous groups. The immediate issues of language barriers required thought, where four main languages (Bribri, Spanish, Bahasa Malaysia and English) had to be negotiated.

Yet, despite worries, nothing deterred our indigenous co-researchers some of whom were disorientated by a very complicated journey from Malaysia, including, for one, the first ever horrid experience of flight travel, long transfer waits in bewildering airports and unfamiliar jetlag.

Living with the Bribri for the dialogues provided a complete contrast to unnatural and dehumanising modes of modernity. Our Tasik Chini co-researchers relaxed completely at Bajo Coen, feeling almost entirely at home and describing it as the way of life they used to know before the big industries moved in to cut their forests, mine their lands and defile their lakes. They spent time exploring the area and comparing knowledge of medicinal plants with the local Bribri *Awa* (traditional doctor). They saw with approval that the Bajo Coen communities had managed to retain much of their land after their successful dispute with the nineteenth and twentieth century US banana plantations owners and entrepreneurs.

The crumbling roads that march through the communities (now blurred by jungle plants), which this community scorn to maintain or emulate, are a reminder of these foreign, exploitative incursions. Not all Bribri have been so fortunate as the Bajo Coen people but their stories of resistance and reclamation cheered up our Tasik Chini co-researchers immensely, in seeing how resurrection can, despite odds, be achieved. However, in their case capacity to resist has been sapped by physical and psychological intimidation by big industry and oppressive State policies; and thus requires all the greater fortitude and determination.

The Orang Asli were fascinated to meet a powerful, female political leader, the area's Bribri government president to hear how the Bribri people have achieved a greater voice in parliamentary discussions; and how the people have dealt

decisively with poor representation of their needs. Such issues of authentic and genuine representation of indigenous voices are a continuing problem for all Orang Asli.

Leaving Bajo Coen was a considerable wrench for our Tasik Chini co-researchers but they were enthusiastic about the next phase of the study, where this time they would host Bribri representatives and the dialogues would continue. They indicated that the trip had exceeded their expectations in terms of what they had learned, been able to share and in reviving their optimism and beaten down hope.

Although the formal research aims have been articulated in terms of (hopefully) meeting certain UN Sustainable goals, along with the research 'outcomes' of indigenous narrative 'storybooks', shared teaching and learning resources, peer-reviewed publications and so on, the real outcomes for the indigenous groups will evolve and unfold over time. These do not so much depend on academic know-how as where the indigenous communities now wish to go with their new alliances and knowledge. Thus the study holds great untapped potential for transformatory ideas and actions, where indigenous people are and must be the main actors for change. The difficulties of achieving positive change, cannot be underestimated, where exclusion and oppression of indigenous people extends back centuries and where the social, political and economic pressure to conform to homogenous ways of modernized being are immense, and often entirely overwhelming. Accordingly while a comparative haven exists today in Talamanca, thanks to the resistance of the Bajo Coen ancestors, the community, while wealthy in land and culture, is still bedevilled by issues of low income and general underprivileged status.

In the meantime in Malaysia there is new energy to project the plight and issue the demands of indigenous people for their share of full citizen rights. This was exemplified through this year's Orang Asli National Convention, 2019 held at the Putrajaya International Convention in April, entitled simply but clearly 'Upholding the Rights of The Orang Asli'. The event was officially launched by Malaysia's veteran statesman, Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who has triumphantly returned to power. The Convention brought together more than a thousand Orang Asli leaders, academicians, NGOs and representatives from government agencies to discuss the Orang Asli issues under the new elected government. Celebrated as its first large scale event organised by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, the convention has shed a new light on the Orang Asli's long struggles as it produces 136 resolutions covering 7 themes: Land, Education, Health, Economy, Leadership, Infrastructure and Culture.

Finally, upon reflection we see our research role not so much as offering political advocacy but in terms of using our power as academics to facilitate the means for enabling cross-cultural indigenous dialogues to take place for indigenous empowerment. Our collective hope is that these will add to peacefully bringing about those developments that are chosen not imposed – and a genuine hearing of the voices and needs of indigenous communities from the people themselves.