

Embracing Change: A Murum Penan Story



> A spectrum of colour showcased in the handicrafts produced by the community at Murum Resettlement.

He may only be 24 but the heavy responsibility David Beran bore as a young father is enough to make him realise how crucial it is to be included in the mainstream of development. Looking back on life yesterday and how it has changed at present, the father of four from Long Luar, a Penan village in the Metalun Resettlement area in Murum, is optimistic that his children now have a chance at a more secure future through education. David's childhood saw him growing up with very little and although his parents attempted to send him to school, they could not afford to keep him in it.

But with the resettlement opening up more doors to improving the lives of his community, David believes a brighter career path for each of his children is within grasp.

"Like everyone, I too had an ambition. I wanted to join the police force. The police in their uniforms command respect and I aspired to be one, but I couldn't," he said with a tone of distinct regret.

And regret is the last thing David wants his children to have. The resettlement has certainly changed the lifestyle of the villagers. Solitude has been replaced with a sense of community as the villagers have grown together.

Youths now end the day with a game of football or sepak takraw while some run track round the neighbourhood.

"We have become more active in sports given the space and with the satellite channels provided, we gather to watch the sports channel especially if there is a football game on," said the avid supporter of the Real Madrid football club.

As the conversation continues, one can't help but notice a sound system positioned across the *ruai* (corridor) and David proudly shared that the villagers were getting in touch with their roots as they practise traditional dance routines for an event.

"Yes, there's more to be done to improve the resettlement. For instance, I would want to see more emphasis given towards our children's preschool education. It's very important for them to get a head start to formal education. We can't just let them take off at any level or they won't be able to catch up. But I cannot deny that our lives have somewhat improved. We have much

"We have much better access to a school, a proper roof over our heads and my children do not have to go to bed with mud on their feet like how I used to at my old home."



David Beran
A resident of Metalun Resettlement Area

better access to a school, a proper roof over our heads and my children do not have to go to bed with mud on their feet like how I used to at my old home," he added.

Elder Saran Joo knows exactly what David means by describing the hardship and opportunity lost through isolation. It mirrors Saran's own experience living in the vast interior.

There was a faraway look on his face as he recollected his days walking through the jungles for a week just to attend school.

"At my time, we had it tough. The journey could last more than a week depending on the weather. There were times when I got stranded due to heavy rain, not to mention food was scarce.

"We depended on the river for water and we didn't have even basic necessities like proper toilets. I guess you can say we made do with whatever we have," he said.

In the face of this hardship, his parents made the move to live with a Kayan community located near a school so Saran could be educated. He made it till Form 3.

With the implementation of Murum Hydro Electric Project, Saran was among the villagers who were resettled.

Now living at Long Wat in the Tegulang Resettlement area, Saran heads the Parent-Teacher Association for SK Tegulang, a school set up by Sarawak Energy with the government for the settlers and nearby villagers.

The other school serving Metalun Resettlement is SK Metalun, also set up by Sarawak Energy.

He was chosen for his efforts in championing education among his people and he does this with pride for he believes education is the way out of poverty. He works side by side with SK Tegulang's then headmaster Sibi Lang to hold interactive sessions with parents of the 120 students.

It was at SK Tegulang and SK Metalun that the quest for knowledge among the young from both resettlement areas began.

Teachers Vinie Bujang and Robikah Mutang were among those to witness the positive growth of the students.

"Since the school started in January this year, we saw a lot of progress in terms of social skills, hygiene and most importantly parent's involvement," said Robikah.

Initially, they said the students used to argue with each other. At first, they thought it was due to merely lack of discipline but then they noticed that the students were arguing because they couldn't comprehend one another.

"It was really about starting from basics. We needed to educate them on how to interact with one another. Now, the students are able to get along well even with those from other villagers," they said.

Since many of these children never had formal education but still had to be slotted into Primary levels based on their age, the teachers concede that academic progress in both schools would only be visible in another five to six years with hopes riding high on those beginning at Primary One.

The adults also had their share of learning how to read and write through

"It is always a challenge to adapt to something new but our community must realise that we need to change if we are to move forward and be at par with the rest of the races and ethnic groups in Sarawak."



Labang Paneh
Chairman, Murum Penan Development Committee (MPDC)



> A Penan youth reads out loud as Maria proudly looks on.



> Kuit Killah hones his parang-making skills, a craft passed down through generations.



> Many from the community are now able to display basic reading skills after going through the Murum Penan Literacy Programme.

the Murum Penan Literacy Programme, collaboration between the Society for the Advancement of Women and Family Sarawak (SAWF) and Sarawak Energy. The literacy programme was initiated to narrow the literacy gap among the Penans.

According to a 'Contemporary Ethnography' survey in 2009, 517 out of 550 Penans in Murum who are of education age were not in school. The programme started in February 2012 when the first batch of facilitators began classes in the old longhouses.

"After working with them for a couple of years, I have observed some changes. In the beginning of the literacy programme they were shy, but after attending the programme where they learnt how to read and write, they are now friendlier.

"It is a continuous process and we have since moved on to stage III of the programme where participants are taught simple accounting, home economy and it will include a parenting workshop (to start in May 2015)," said Maria Peter, a trainer from SAWF.

To Maria's delight, some of the children who also joined the programme improved significantly, enabling them to sit for their UPSR (Primary School Evaluation Test) last year despite not attending school before. Aside from academic progress, the resettlements are also experiencing a resurgence of interest in their cultural heritage as the women folk engage more in traditional basket weaving as demand escalates for these handicrafts.

Long Wat is also home to a legendary sapa musician, Kuit Killah, who has performed on numerous occasions in Kuala Lumpur. In the village, he is also a metal smith whose *parang* (machete) making skill was passed down to him through generations.

Wearing his name tattooed across his forearm, Kuit's enthusiasm was infectious as he spoke on the trade while forging a new *parang*.

"This is the life of Penan, *nak* (my child); it was passed down to us. The *parang* is our life when we go into the jungle. The *parang* I make have carvings on them for a personal touch. A typical Penan *parang* comes in pairs, one is the main and the other is a smaller knife. Both complement each other," said the elder.

Asked if the younger generation were enthusiastic to learn the skills, Kuit said there were a few who had approached him to work as his apprentice.

"I tell them that these are essential skills for a Penan man and we must not let this heritage of ours fade," he added.

Murum Penan Development Committee chairman Labang Paneh admits that the changes in Murum were helping to guide the community to stand shoulder to shoulder with others.

"It is always a challenge to adapt to something new but our community must realise that we need to change if we are to move forward and be at par with the rest of the races and ethnic groups in Sarawak," he said.

Labang obviously knows what he's talking about for he has grown relatively as an entrepreneur.

He and his wife Isah Abang were among those who were quick to understand that a change in mindset was crucial to enhance the family's standard of living.

The couple became a role model in the community. Isah said she was often asked by her neighbours on how she and Labang were successful in uplifting their children's education.



> Sarawak Energy has recently started purchasing a number of fine handicrafts from the resettled community and offering these items as exclusive gifts to the company's corporate guests.

"I have always liked browsing through books and magazines and it builds my curiosity to want to know more on how I can help improve my family's status. Religion also serves as a strong motivation.

Isah is known as one of the most vocal in the community as she desires to see it progress along with others.

Talking about the challenges that might impede this, Isah said the community need to be more open to changes.

"Many of them still hold on to the old ways like refusing to be separated from their children making it difficult for the child to pursue education elsewhere," she said.

The children were brought up to be more cautious to "outsiders" coming from a community that has always lived apart from others, she explained.

"But it is no longer like that. The community is more social now and they warm up to others much better than before," she added.

However, Labang acknowledged that while they are quite independent, there are also areas where they need government aid.

"We have experienced improvements to our lifestyle, but there's more to be done. We want to be at par with the other ethnic groups but we also need the essential facilities to help get us there," he added.



> Saran Joo, like the rest of the villagers, often stops by the longhouse's tuck shop for groceries and sometimes to sell the catch of the day.



> The community of Long Malim Kenyah have started generating extra income through selling their farm produce at stalls near their longhouse.



> Florida Havit, Sarawak Energy Community Relations Assistant distributes school bags to students at SK Metalun at the beginning of school term.

Note: For its CSR initiatives in Murum, Sarawak Energy has won the "Excellence in Provision of Literacy and Education Award (Gold)" at the 7th Annual Global CSR Summit and Awards 2015 in March and also the coveted "CSR Excellence Award" at the Sin Chew Business Excellence Awards last year. Recently, the company also bagged the "Utility of the Year Award" at the Power and Electricity World Asia 2015 in Singapore.