

10MP neither inclusive nor needs-based
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Keruah Usit

A small primary school near Dalat, Sarawak, sits on the banks of a languid river, and is accessible only by boat. Getting there on the small express from Sibu takes almost two hours.

NONEThe school is a low wooden building, with a small walkway down to the jetty. Beside the walkway stands a small shack housing a diesel-driven generator.

The classroom, buzzing with 30 children, is neat and clean, with colourful children's drawings decorating the walls. The children are charming but shy, as in most similar rural communities in Sarawak.

The teacher has a laptop computer, but the Internet remains alien territory for most of the students. Even the electricity supply is not dependable, leaving the children with no ceiling fan or lights when the generator breaks down.

Teachers, examination papers and school supplies are all delivered by motorboat. The school has a typical mix of teachers, many from Peninsular Malaysia. There are the usual problems with homesick teachers and culture shock. A posting to a remote school, at a location unknown to all except the keenest geography teachers, tests the resolve and professionalism of even the best teachers from the peninsula.

School food is boring and stodgy. Rice plays a starring role, as does canned food and suspect fish. The Education Ministry sends food from towns, so fresh fruit or vegetables are limited to more durable food, like bananas, potatoes and cabbages. Centralised funding means remote rural schools are not allowed to source their own meat, fish and fresh vegetables locally.

Worse still, centralised funding inevitably causes what is referred to, in polite government circles, as "leakages". The rest of Malaysian society knows this as corruption. Suppliers, administrative officials, boat transport operators, school authorities and even cooks, bear responsibility for the poor quality of food arriving on the plates of the cheerful little boys and girls in blue and white uniforms.

the antidote article sarawak native logging school children 280409 06When the schoolchildren move on to secondary schools, they will be uprooted. Most will travel to Mukah or Sibu to stay in boarding schools. There, they will stay in dormitories, looking forward to their long journeys home on some weekends and during school vacations.

They will be homesick. They will face bullying from teachers and other students, disgusting food as before, vermin, scabies, unreliable toilets and water shortages. They will be force-fed a school curriculum imported from Peninsular Malaysia, with little relevance to their lived experiences or the oral history they learnt from their elders in Melanau village houses or the Iban longhouse ruai.

When they finish secondary school, a few will struggle to obtain bumiputera scholarships to colleges or universities. The federal authorities have made it clear in their administrative rulings that some Malaysians are better qualified as bumiputera than others, or "bumi-er than thou". The bureaucracy has demonstrated this by the treatment meted out to many

Sarawakian students, including Marina Undau, a bright young girl of Iban and Chinese parentage.

Despair in the jobs market

When these children from Dalat leave school, they will have poor linguistic skills and will be ill-equipped to earn decent wages. Most will gravitate towards Sibu to work as itinerant labourers or coffee-shop waiters. Tertiary education and employment opportunities in Sibu are scant.

The timber business is a twilight industry, thanks to greed and over-exploitation. The bulk of the rich fortunes of a handful of timber tycoons, wrung from the forests, have been invested overseas. Capital flight has ensured that economic stagnation prevails in Sibu and elsewhere in this resource-rich state.

Economic power in Sarawak has been concentrated in the hands of Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's family (including his predecessor and uncle, Abdul Rahman Yakub), and his family's business associates, for four decades. Sarawakians are leaving their homeland in droves to search for jobs in the peninsula and Singapore.

the antidote article sarawak native logging school children 280409 01Those left behind suffer low wages, earning RM12 a day in the towns, or RM8 a day in oil palm plantations. Some young men will end up in the underworld. Gangs and underworld activities always proliferate when the economy is slack.

The 10th Malaysia Plan (10MP) announced by Prime Minister Najib Razak in Parliament has promised little to lift the schoolchildren of Dalat out of poverty. Privatisation of national resources will benefit political cronies, but not the families of these poor Melanau and Iban children.

Emphasis on private medicine will further deplete the public hospitals of talent and skills. The families of the Dalat schoolchildren are unable to afford treatment in any of the private hospitals in Sibu, and will be forced to rely on short-staffed local government clinics and hospitals.

1Malaysia clinics, also given a boost in the 10MP, will of course be affordable. But our nation's healthcare has now grown into a three-tier system: private centres - containing the majority of specialists - government hospitals and 1Malaysia clinics, staffed by poorly equipped paramedics for the poor.

10MP: No way out of poverty

The New Economic Model rhetoric of "inclusiveness", "competitiveness" and "needs-based", has been superseded by the pragmatism of the 10MP, by political patronage and the lack of new ideas.

The poor Melanau and Iban students in the school by the river in Dalat clearly qualify for "inclusive, needs-based" economic policies, but remain confronted with desperately bleak education and employment prospects.

TNONEhe inevitable "leakages" show no sign of being plugged, despite official reassurances. There will be "leakages" in the 10MP allocation of RM230 billion, spent on, among other things, weapons, government buildings, mega-dams and oil palm plantations, and on a

flying doctor service that recently awarded a contract to a company with no experience and no functioning helicopters.

There will be jobs for the boys, but not the boys from the rural schools.

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