

The 'Heart of Borneo'

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EXTENSIVE DEFORESTATION ON BORNEO, the world's third largest island, has transformed its once lush and untouched green landscape. With development set as a main priority, the conservation of nature often comes in second place, with displacement of indigenous tribes and the depletion of flora and fauna as a result. In order to reverse this trend, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) initiated the Heart of Borneo (HoB), a conservation agreement that is a voluntary, trans-boundary cooperation between the three ASEAN nations that constitute the island: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

With lush tropical rainforests and one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet, the HoB is not only the ideal place, but the sole place in Southeast Asia where both rainforests and biodiversity can still be conserved on a grand scale. The three countries work together to achieve the HoB's goals while maintaining and respecting each other's sovereignty, policies, and development needs for present and future generations.

Signed in February 2007 in Bali, Indonesia, the HoB specifically aims to conserve and manage the trans-boundary highlands of Borneo and parts of the adjacent foothills and lowlands. This, in turn, helps protect diverse biological species and the indigenous people that reside within the confines of the 200,000 km² rainforest preserve. Other objectives of the HoB include maximizing trans-boundary linkages, promoting the expansion of the Protected Area network, maintaining connectivity, and ensuring sustainable land use practices. The HoB is unique as it presents a location where the border does not divide, but rather unites.

Positive trickle-down effects

The HoB has brought about much development since its inception. Multiple activities and projects have stimulated awareness of conservation, while also improving the quality of life of the indigenous people living in the HoB. These communities have been supportive of the HoB from the very beginning, using their traditions, knowledge, and local wisdom to initiate trans-boundary grassroots support and sustainable development of the highlands. The experiences that these communities bring to the field greatly enrich the contributions made towards achieving sustainable development within the HoB.

Above: The Crested Fireback forest pheasant, Borneo. Photo courtesy Creative Commons /Flickr

One of the successful activities is the *Pesta Nukenen Bario*, or the 'Bario and Kelabit Highlands Food and Cultural Festival'; a unique community-run event that takes place in the highlands of Central Borneo. It lasts for three days and involves the celebration of food, farming, forests, and cultural heritage in the Kelabit Highlands. Tourists are shown the best that the local communities have to offer, but the event also provides a glimpse of what could be lost if further deforestation were to occur.

Capacity-building is key to the HoB agreement, and local communities have been keen to embrace new technologies as a form of learning, thus providing development at a personal level. For instance, the 'e-Bario telecenter' in the Kelabit Highlands serves as a platform to reach the community in the local Kelabit language, broadcasting about issues such as conservation efforts and environmental protection within the HoB.

Another project that reinforces cooperation between indigenous populations and external actors is the 'Bario Public Secondary School', or the *Sekolah Menengah Kerajaan Bario* (SMK Bario). The well-equipped learning facility near their own homes offers future generations an opportunity to study in a structured and high-standard environment, something that was previously unavailable. Better education increases the chances that local tribes become more involved in policy-making, leading to better prospects for an improved quality of life.

Current issues and future challenges

Even though the HoB has been active for five years, there are still various issues that must be better dealt with so as to improve the integration of the people living within the HoB's borders. These issues mainly deal with land ownership and property rights, and communication and participation of indigenous communities.

The root of the problem boils down to certain areas of native land that have been encroached upon by the government for development purposes, whereby people have been progressively alienated or removed from land that unites history, *adat* [customary laws] and cultural knowledge, and which is vital to the local communities. The HoB seeks to work in this social and regulatory space existing between governments and communities.

A land rights case that highlights the problem well is the Pulong Tau National Park (PTNP) in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak. Although the PTNP was originally proposed by the Kelabit Highlands community in the early 1980s, in order to protect the Highland forests from logging, the eventual

boundaries for the PTNP were only identified and gazetted in 2003. The area considered for inclusion was decreased significantly and no right of access was granted to the local communities for hunting or timber harvesting, leaving them only with land that was no longer 'Kelabit' in nature, but merely land that they happened to reside on.

Transparency is crucial to resolving these disagreements. If the laws and regulations are defined clearly, the indigenous communities will be empowered to fight back and claim what is rightfully theirs. Furthermore, proper allocation will pave the way for clearer development and conservation planning for both the local communities and external organizers. The issue now lies with whether transparency will be created, as there may either be political forces behind these ambiguities or difficulties in amending older laws.

The second issue revolves around communication and participation from the local communities. While community involvement was touted in the HoB, much more work needs to be done to harmoniously integrate locals into the project. At the very least, there needs to be a greater level of communication. The HoB is an ambitious plan that is implemented by a large non-government organization, which essentially assumes a top-down approach. This creates a particularly distinct lack of trust from the locals, as they suspect hidden agendas. Thus, transparency and regular communication become key aspects of gaining their trust and full cooperation.

Conclusion

The HoB has proven to be successful so far, with some challenges still remaining. While community involvement and collaboration have resulted in programmes and projects such as *SMK Bario* and *Pesta Nukenen*, initiatives which will improve the local communities' quality of life will help gain their trust and dedication, thereby producing a smoother passage towards sustainable programmes in the future. Transparency also remains a key issue, ranging from better communication to land rights issues and regulations.

Thus, the three ASEAN nations and the WWF must continue to persist in their efforts to remain focused, commit more resources to the preservation of the remaining tropical rainforests, and to continually educate everyone involved. With the high profile publicity that the HoB has received, all participating governments must ensure the sustainability of its implementation through greater involvement and participation from all relevant stakeholders.

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Women can't have it all: gender and politics in Singapore

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POLITICS IS CLEARLY A MALE-DOMINATED ARENA, yet a small number of women have managed to rise to the top. Asia is a case in point as the geographic region has featured several prominent female political figures in recent decades. Just think of those women who have held the highest political office: Indira Gandhi (India), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), and Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka). In Southeast Asia, we are familiar with Yingluck Shinawatra (Thailand), Corazon Aquino (the Philippines), Gloria Arroyo (the Philippines), and Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia). Dominating the news lately has been Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese opposition politician who won 59 percent of the national vote in the 1990 elections. Significantly, these women all belong(ed) to powerful, dynastic families – unfortunately their rise to the top is an exception to the rule.

What then of the ordinary woman in these countries? There appear to be no explicit structural obstacles for women to join politics, so can we expect their numbers to rise? Focusing on Singapore, this article puts forth insights gained from in-depth interviews with six current and former female politicians, and one who ran for a seat in the 2011 General Elections.

Since independence, the lives of Singaporean women have changed significantly. Today Singapore can boast a near gender parity in many areas. In education, girls and boys have equal access to schooling, and the gender gaps in literacy are minuscule. Men and women have equal access to healthcare, and in fact, the country's life expectancy ratio of 1.06 surpasses that of the global average 1.04 (Global Gender Gap Report 2011). A gender gap continues to exist, however, in labour force participation, and in economic participation

and opportunity. And of course, in the political arena. But the ordinary Singaporean woman does most definitely participate in politics. As in the rest of the world, Singaporean women have consolidated enormous voting power. Moreover, women in this country boast a strong history of voluntary and non-political organizations. However, in terms of female representation in office, their numbers are still relatively low.

Singapore has come a long way in terms of female representation in politics. Since the 1990s, numbers have progressively risen. In 1984, there were three women MPs, joined by a fourth in 1988. With the introduction of Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) in 1990, numbers grew even more. Currently Singapore has eighteen elected female parliamentarians, out of a total of 84 elected MPs. Seventeen are from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and one represents the opposition, the Worker's Party. Singaporean women represent just a small fraction of parliament (albeit above the world average). The absence of structural obstacles begs the question whether women are shying away from the political domain for reasons unique to being female.

In Singapore, politics is not a full-time career. MPs hold down jobs in addition to taking on a political appointment. Furthermore, the parties tend to invite only *married* women into their folds because they represent the majority. Divorced and unmarried women are mostly sidelined, because they form the minority; however, things have been changing as there have been five unmarried women in parliament since 2001 although one of the five has since been married. Unfortunately, traditional gender ideologies still persist, and women are expected to bear the bulk of domestic

responsibility towards children, spouses, and ageing parents. Thus, married women who consider entering politics must balance the three spheres of family, work, and politics.

Traditional gender roles are reinforced by government policies. For example, fathers are granted three days of paternity leave, whilst new mothers receive up to twelve weeks of (paid) leave. The policy clearly reflects who the government expects to care for the children. The multitude of expectations placed upon women makes it impossible for them to keep their family, work, and political domains entirely separate.

Unmarried women, or at least those without families of their own, are generally more easily convinced to join the political arena. In fact, research in the US in the past has found that female political candidates were often less likely to be married, less likely to have young children still at home, and less often in the labour force for long stretches of time. However, this has changed considerably as today's woman resembles her male counterpart: she has more labour and political experience. Moreover, voters' views of women as political leaders have also changed as more women are winning elections.

It is clear that women have to pay a price if they wish to enter politics. Something will likely have to give: either family or career. And as long as women are forced to juggle the demands of family, work, and politics, they are more likely to retreat rather than actively participate in the political arena.

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