

## THE RURAL POOR: A PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION ON THE EXPERIENCE OF KAMPUNG SAGIL IN TANGKAK, JOHORE

by

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### Sinopsis

*Kertas ini, antara lain, cuba membincangkan teknik yang digunakan oleh Oscar Ornati untuk memahami dan membenakan konsep garis kemiskinan. Oscar Ornati telah menggunakan "rancangan pemakanan kos rendah" seseorang atau sesebuah keluarga sebagai asas pengiraan garis kemiskinan. Berasaskan pada fahaman ini maka penulis telah mencubakannya bagi mengetahui kedudukan sebuah masyarakat desa di Kampung Sagil. Ternyata bahawa penduduk kampung ini bukan sahaja hampir semuanya miskin, tetapi mereka berada jauh dibawah garis kemiskinan. Sesungguhnya garis kemiskinan yang dicadangkan bagi penduduk kampung ini adalah berbeza dengan garis kemiskinan negara yang disebut oleh kerajaan. Selain dari memahami hakikat itu kertas ini juga cuba menghayati pengalaman hidup orang-orang miskin tersebut; dan dalam pemerhatian awal ini penulis mendapati bahawa mereka itu sedang menghadapi masalah akibat dari perubahan dalam sosio-ekonomi kampung. Pada masa akhir-akhir ini penduduk kampung itu telah menunjukkan perubahan dan hanyut akibat desakan golongan kapitalis yang sentiasa mempengaruhi mereka melalui teknik pemaaran masing-masing. Orang-orang kampung kini lebih meminati barang-barang mewah, yang boleh dibeli secara ansuran bulanan, dan dengan itu mereka mempunyai kemampuan yang semakin kecil untuk membeli barang-barang makanan. Oleh yang demikian, bahagian akhir kertas ini mencadangkan supaya suatu perancangan yang komprehensif dengan benar-benar memberikan penekanan pada pentingnya mendapat bekalan makanan yang seimbang dalam hidup mereka setiap hari dilancarkan seberapa segera yang boleh. Pemikiran mengenai makanan yang seimbang ini perlu dijadikan inti untuk semua rancangan pembangunan dan permodenan desa yang kini giat dilakukan diseluruh negara untuk memperbaiki kualiti hidup penduduk desa.*

### Synopsis

*This paper, among other things, discusses Oscar Ornati's technique in understanding and constructing the concept of poverty line. In the construction of this concept Ornati uses "low-cost diet plan" of an individual or a family as its basis of calculation. Ornati's concept was then adopted by the writer to*

*measure the prevailing life chances of a rural society in Kampung Sagil, the result of which is indeed interesting. The population of Kampung Sagil are not only almost exclusively poor but their real earned incomes are mostly far below the poverty line. Indeed the poverty line suggested for this kampung is different from the national poverty line suggested by the government. In addition, the paper is also attempted to survey the experiences of the poor in this kampung. At this juncture they appear to have been suffering from the changing socio-economic environment of their own kampung. Of late they are unable to resist the influence exerted by agents of capitalist group whose marketing techniques in promoting their sales are indeed superb. The rural poor are now showing their preference for luxury goods which could easily be obtained through the hire-purchase system; and as such they are now having less and less funds for foods. Finally the paper is also suggesting that a comprehensive planning with an emphasis given to the importance of obtaining a balance diet for people's daily life is indeed long over due. This idea should be made explicit and central in all programmes for development and modernization which is currently being implemented throughout the country in order to improve the quality of life of the rural people.*

The purpose of this paper is to report briefly my recent observation carried out in Kampung Sagil on the subject of rural poverty. It is a common knowledge among those concerned with development issues that poverty currently poses a major social problem to people both in the developing and developed countries. The recently published report of Willy Brandt's Commission<sup>1</sup> showed the problem of inequality in terms of the distribution of world resources and wealth and this situation of inequality has produced vast differences between the developed North and the developing South. But the rediscovery of poverty has also been made much earlier by writers like Michael Harrington (1962) and Dwight MacDonald (1963). The work of Charles Booth (1889-1902) and Rowntree (1902, 1941) also representing classical poverty surveys in developed world. Indeed, a voluminous literature on this subject has been published by sociologists

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<sup>1</sup> An independent commission on international development issues under the chairmanship of Mr. Willy Brandt started its work in early 1977 to discuss the problem of inequality in the world and the failure of its economic system. The commission which is represented by eighteen members, coming from five continents, and different points of political spectrum. They have finally agreed on a set of bold recommendations, including a new approach to international finance and development of the monetary system. See Anthony Sampson (ed.), *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, Pan Books, 1980.

and many others who write in a sociological vein. However, the problem of poverty is still there in almost all societies and that in itself explains why serious research on it should be continued.

In Malaysia, for example, a large number of population particularly those living in rural areas are reported to live in a state of poverty: unemployed or underemployed, living under poor housing conditions and environment, having poor medical facilities, poor food, having insufficient income and being deprived of good education and good living environment. The government has introduced the New Economic Policy in 1970 as a means of combating poverty in the country. It was envisaged that within 20 years (1971-1990) the incidence of poverty in the country, especially in Peninsular Malaysia, would decline from 49.3% in 1970 to 16.7% in 1990. The government is confident of achieving this objective through a programme of rapid socio-economic development, with a particular emphasis on the participation of the poor. The Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-85) has, quite convincingly, showed that the government's intensive and concerted efforts have somewhat achieved the desired objectives. The overall incidence of poverty has declined from 49.3% in 1970 to 29.2% in 1980 (see Table 1). A reduction of 20.1 percentage point in ten years is indeed a remarkable achievement.

The incidence of poverty in rural areas has also declined quite remarkably, that is from 58.7% in 1970 to 37.7% in 1980 (see Table 2) while that of urban areas from 21.3% to 12.6%. One important point to note here is the ethnic distribution of those living in poverty. The existing record shows that the Malays accounted for 75.5% of a total of 688,300 poor households in the country, compared with only 15.9% and 7.8% for Chines and Indians respectively (FMP, 1981:45). The bulk of these Malay poor are to be found in rural areas, which accounted for 93% of the total Malay poor households. Hence rural Malays, particularly those engaged in small-holding agriculture, are always being viewed as synonymous with poor Malays. This paper is here presented to describe the experience of rural Malays who live in poverty and who earn their living by working in the rubber small-holding in Kampung Sagil or in the nearby rubber estates.

## II

To begin the discussions, let me briefly introduce first of all the general background of Kampung Sagil. The kampung which is located about 8 miles north of Tangkak Town (see Figure 1) may be considered as a medium-size village consisting of 3,537 population. Although the area is known as Kampung Sagil, in actual fact its

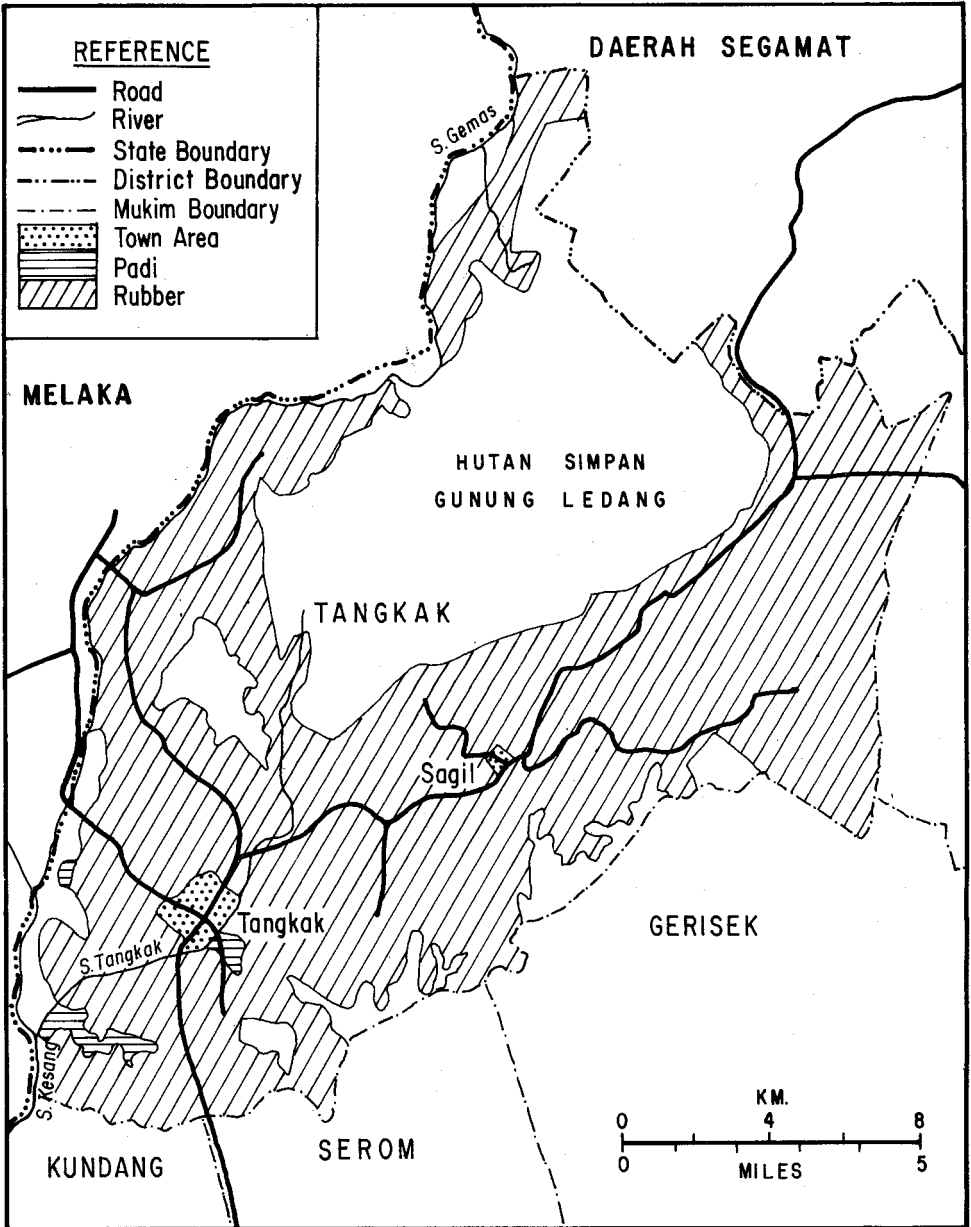


FIGURE 1: MAP OF MUKIM TANGKAK

**Table 1**  
Peninsular Malaysia: Incidence of Poverty by Sector, 1970, 1975 and 1980

Economic Sector	1970			1975			1980		
	Total house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)	Percentage among poor (%)	Total house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)	Percentage among poor (%)	Total house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)	Percentage among poor (%)
<b>AGRICULTURE:</b>									
Rubber smallholders . . . . .	350.0	64.1	28.6	396.3	59.0	28.0	425.9	41.3	26.4
Oil palm smallholders . . . . .	6.6	30.3	0.3	9.9	0.9	0.1	24.6	7.8	0.3
Coconut smallholders . . . . .	32.0	16.9	2.1	34.4	17.5	2.1	34.2	38.9	2.0
Padi farmers . . . . .	140.0	123.4	15.6	148.5	114.3	13.7	151.0	83.2	12.5
Other agriculture . . . . .	137.5	126.2	16.0	157.4	124.1	78.8	172.2	110.5	16.6
Fishermen . . . . .	38.4	28.1	3.5	41.6	26.2	3.1	42.8	45.3	2.9
Estate workers . . . . .	148.4	59.4	7.5	127.0	59.7	47.0	112.5	35.2	5.9
Sub-total ..	<u>852.9</u>	<u>68.3</u>	<u>73.6</u>	<u>915.1</u>	<u>576.5</u>	<u>63.0</u>	<u>963.2</u>	<u>46.1</u>	<u>66.6</u>
<b>NON-AGRICULTURE:</b>									
Mining . . . . .	32.4	11.1	1.4	31.8	10.1	31.8	32.6	34.0	1.7
Manufacturing . . . . .	150.2	48.5	6.1	206.9	59.6	28.8	301.1	18.4	8.3
Construction . . . . .	35.0	12.8	1.6	44.0	13.4	30.5	56.3	21.3	1.8
Transport and utilities . . . . .	74.1	27.1	3.4	108.1	29.0	26.8	137.2	23.0	4.7
Trade and services . . . . .	461.4	109.9	13.9	595.5	146.5	24.6	793.6	14.2	16.9
Sub-total ..	<u>753.1</u>	<u>209.4</u>	<u>26.4</u>	<u>986.3</u>	<u>258.6</u>	<u>26.2</u>	<u>1,320.8</u>	<u>16.8</u>	<u>33.4</u>
TOTAL ..	1,606.0	791.8	49.3	1,901.4	835.1	43.9	2,284.0	29.2	100.0

Source: Fourth Malaysia Plan 1981-85, page 33

**Table 2**  
 Peninsular Malaysia: Incidence of Poverty by Rural-Urban Strata, 1970, 1975 and 1980

	1970			1975			1980		
	Total house holds (000)	Total poor house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)	Total house holds (000)	Total poor house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)	Total house holds (000)	Total poor house holds (000)	Incidence of poverty (%)
<b>RURAL:</b>									
Agriculture . . . . .	852.9	582.4	68.3	915.1	576.5	63.0	963.2	443.7	46.1
Rubber smallholders . . . . .	350.0	226.4	64.7	396.3	233.8	59.0	425.9	175.9	41.3
Oil Palm smallholders . . . . .	6.6	2.0	30.3	9.9	0.9	9.1	24.6	1.9	7.7
Coconut smallholders . . . . .	32.0	16.9	52.8	34.4	17.5	50.9	34.2	13.3	38.9
Padi farmers . . . . .	140.0	123.4	88.1	148.5	114.3	77.0	151.0	83.2	55.1
Other agriculture . . . . .	137.5	126.2	91.8	157.4	124.1	78.8	172.2	110.5	64.1
Fishermen . . . . .	38.4	28.1	73.2	41.6	26.2	63.0	42.8	19.4	45.3
Estate workers . . . . .	148.4	59.4	40.0	127.0	59.7	47.0	112.5	39.5	35.1
Other industries . . . . .	350.5	123.5	35.2	433.3	153.4	35.4	546.4	124.8	22.8
Sub-total . . . . .	<u>1,203.4</u>	<u>705.9</u>	<u>58.7</u>	<u>1,348.4</u>	<u>729.9</u>	<u>54.1</u>	<u>1,509.6</u>	<u>568.5</u>	<u>37.7</u>
<b>URBAN:</b>									
Mining . . . . .	5.4	1.8	33.3	5.3	2.0	37.7	5.4	1.8	33.0
Manufacturing . . . . .	84.0	19.7	23.5	120.4	21.0	17.4	182.3	24.4	13.4
Construction . . . . .	19.5	5.9	30.2	25.5	6.1	23.9	34.0	5.9	17.4
Transport and utilities . . . . .	42.4	13.1	30.9	64.4	13.8	21.4	85.0	16.3	19.2
Trade and services . . . . .	251.3	45.4	18.1	337.4	62.3	18.5	467.7	49.2	10.5
Sub-total . . . . .	<u>402.6</u>	<u>85.9</u>	<u>21.3</u>	<u>553.0</u>	<u>105.2</u>	<u>19.0</u>	<u>774.4</u>	<u>97.6</u>	<u>12.6</u>
TOTAL . . . . .	<u>1,606.0</u>	<u>791.8</u>	<u>49.3</u>	<u>1,901.4</u>	<u>835.1</u>	<u>43.9</u>	<u>2,284.0</u>	<u>666.1</u>	<u>29.2</u>

Source: Fourth Malaysia Plan 1985-85, page 34

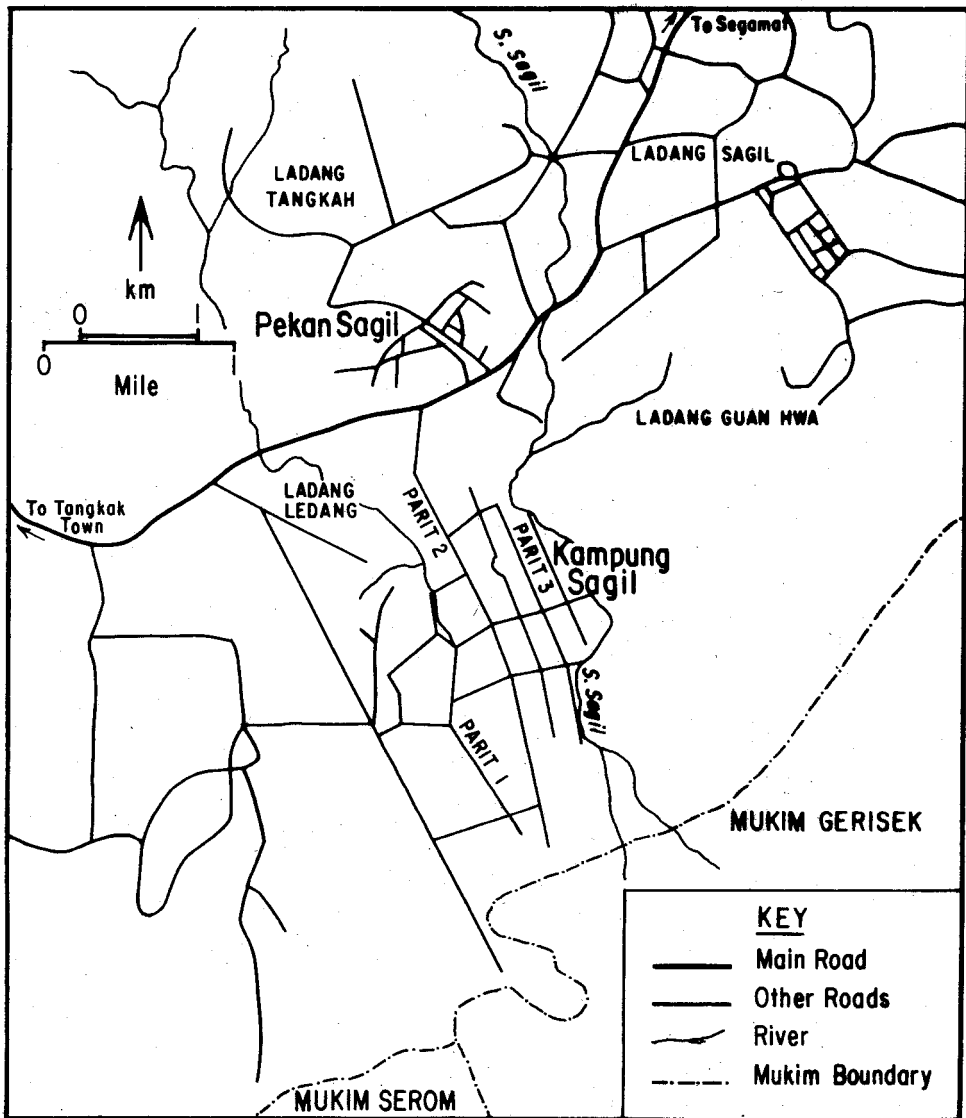


FIGURE 2: MAP OF KAMPUNG SAGIL

population are divided into four smaller communities, each is identified on the concept of *parit*. Thus one may find that the community of Parit Satu is separated from the community of Parit Dua, Parit Tiga, and Melayu Raya simply because such *parit* forms a linear type of settlement and has its own history. Each *parit* community has its own *Ketua* (chief), *surau*, *balai raya* (community hall) and *Pusat Pembangunan Pekebun-pekebun Kecil* (PPPK). All the four *parit* communities, however, shared one *masjid* (mosque), one *klinik desa* (rural clinic), one primary school, and one office for *Rancangan Pembangunan Kawasan* (Regional Development Programme).

Physically, all the four *parit* communities are situated in close proximity and surrounded by three large rubber estates, namely Tangkah Estate, Ladang Estate, and Guan Hwa Estate (see Figure 2). Historically the *kampung* was opened up by the Javanese immigrant labourers in the early 1920s. They first made their settlement in Parit Satu, and the subsequent immigrants opened up Parit Dua and Parit Tiga. Melayu Raya was created only in the early part of 1950s by the British as part of their strategy in facing emergency. The British ordered a group of people to leave Bukit Gambir in Mukim Gerisek and resettled them on a plot of land near Parit Tiga. This resettlement area later evolved into a village now known as Melayu Raya. Indeed these four *parit* communities are strategically situated in terms of the over all supervision of new settlement areas created during the emergency period. In this sense, this *kampung* shared the characteristics of new villages which were created to accommodate the Chinese community during the emergency period.

Kampung Sagil as a whole has an interesting population characteristic as reflected in Table 3. While the sex ratio of the population is 114.5, those in the 0—4, 15—19, 25—29, 40—44, and 55—59 years age group have their sex ratio of 67.1, 98.1, 87.9, 95.5, and 86.5 respectively. Unlike many other developing societies, the population pyramid of this *kampung* is indeed different. It does not show a wide base (see Figure 3). In fact the 0—4 years age group is only 3.3% of the population, much smaller than the 5—9 years age group which is 7.7%. The 10—14 years age group is even bigger in proportion (9%). The largest group is, however, the 15—19 years age group which is 29.1% and followed by the 35—39 years age group which accounts for 10.4%. The other age groups fall within the range between 0.7% and 8%.

Given such a population structure, Kampung Sagil therefore displays a very low dependency ratio (37.25) which is presumably the lowest in the country. We arrive at this conclusion by working on the assumption that all population in the 15—54 years age group, irrespective of sex and qualifications, are engaged in gainful employ-



**Table 3**  
Population of Kampung Sagil by Sex & Age, 1981

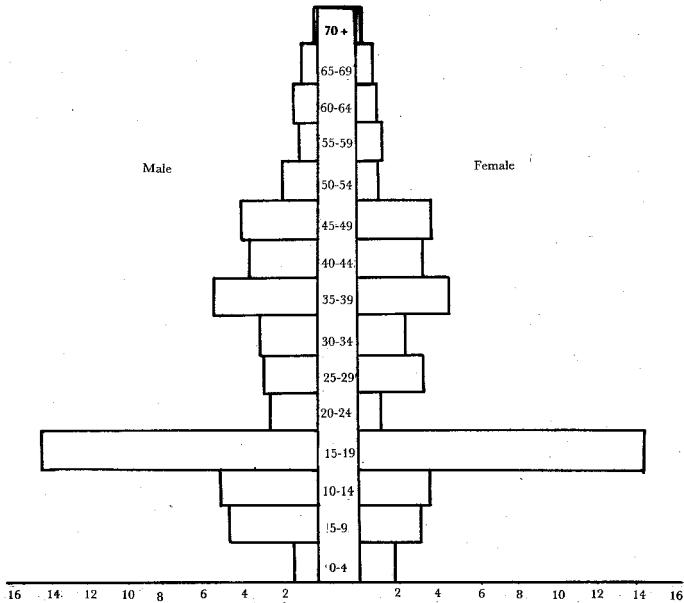
Age Group	Male	Female	Total	Sex Ratio
0 - 4	54	62	116	87.1
5 - 9	161	112	237	143.8
10 - 14	188	129	317	145.7
15 - 19	510	520	1030	98.1
20 - 24	93	53	146	175.5
25 - 29	102	116	218	87.9
30 - 34	105	72	177	145.8
35 - 39	198	171	369	115.8
40 - 44	126	132	258	95.5
45 - 49	141	135	276	104.4
50 - 54	68	35	103	194.3
55 - 59	39	45	84	86.7
60 - 64	47	34	81	138.2
70 & above	18	5	23	360.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,888</b>	<b>1,649</b>	<b>3,537</b>	<b>114.5</b>

Source: (i) Office of Ketua Kampung, (ii) Office of the Election Commission in Tangkak.

ment. This assumption, however, very often does not reflect the true situation of a community. Kampung Sagil, for example, is one of those communities that may not be enjoying such luxury of low dependency ratio. There are a lot of youngsters in the 15—19 years age group who have yet to secure any form of gainful employment. They are recent school leavers, some of whom are Form Three drop-outs. They have to depend on their parents for food and non-food requirement. If we were to include the 15—19 years age group in the dependent groups, then the dependency ratio of Kampung Sagil would be different.

About 95% of the working populations here are engaged in tapping rubber either on their own land or in nearby estates. The other 5% are doing various forms of work such as working as daily-paid construction labourers in Tangkak or taxi drivers. On the other hand, there are also youngsters who are not engaged in any form of employment. Some of them are contemplating of migrating to urban centres in their pursuit for suitable job. They do not follow their parents to tap rubber trees because they do not have the necessary skills. And as such they are now actively looking for suitable job elsewhere. Furthermore, their parents do not have enough land for them to work on. From a sample survey (Zuraidah A. Majid, 1981) which has been

carried out recently, it was discovered that not more than 7% of the population owned land exceeding 10 acres each, about 20% owned between 5 and 10 acres each, and majority of them owned less than 5 acres each. In fact 35% of them owned less than 2.5 acres each. That being the case, the youngsters lack sufficient job opportunities in order to be fully functional at the village level.



**Figure 3:** The Population Pyramid of Kampung Sagil

Kampung Sagil has been neglected during the colonial time. Changes took place only after independence. Risda came in only in the late 1960s and created PPPK in Parit Satu and Melayu Raya. Another PPPK was established in Parit Tiga in 1975 and *Rancangan Pembangunan Kawasan* was introduced in 1977. Other basic facilities like water supply and electricity were extended in 1980. When I made this observation last year, Public Work Department was still in the process of improving the roads. School, *klinik desa*, *surau*, *masjid*, community halls were only constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The development of infrastructures in this village has, to a certain extent, benefitted the community as a whole. A number of them have received subsidy from Risda under the replanting scheme, and this has contributed to their increased productivity.

One basic question, however, remains unanswered. As rubber tappers, they are not only subjected to the forces of nature but also to the fluctuations of externally controlled rubber prices. Lately rubber prices in the world market were not very encouraging and this unstable price situation has affected the village income quite substantially. Living in such a market networks, the village folks of Kampung Sagil could not escape the vicious circle of poverty being relatively deprived vis-a-vis other communities in the country.

### III

Poverty is one subject that has caused many scholars to be drawn into controversial polemics. Economists define poverty as "a condition of having insufficient funds to maintain an acceptable standard of living" (Perlman, 1976:3). In the same manner Harry Johnson offers a straightforward definition that poverty exists when resources of families or individuals are inadequate to provide a socially acceptable standard of living (1966:183). This factor of inadequate spending power has been singled out as the major feature of poverty by social planners in many countries. The Third Malaysia Plan (1976-81), for example, classifies the poor as comprising those who earn insufficient income to pay for a minimum nutritional and non-food requirement in order to sustain a decent standard of living. The Economic Report (1974:93) published by the Treasury estimated that an income of \$25.00 per head per month or \$140.00 per family per month is the minimum required to support a decent standard of living. Many however are still in the dark as to how the Treasury has arrived at this figure. Probably, as it appears to be, the figure was reached by multiplying \$25.00 by 5.6, which is estimated to be the average family size in Malaysia.

Defining poverty in terms of spending power or the amount of ringgit earned is perhaps the easiest thing to do. Sociologically, such definition only satisfies one of the many needs of the individual in society. However, the concept of poverty line, measured and calculated on the basis of income earned, is at present very widely used. This concept is constructed on the basis of "low cost diet plan" of an individual or a family in their food budget. It is assumed that an individual, who is normally the housewife, is a very careful shopper and a skillful cook. All family members must take meal at home. The idea is that no one in the family is going against the concept of "low cost diet plan" and that the purchase of a minimum diet just enough to avoid nutritional deficiencies must be allowed. Past-experiences have shown that the low income family spend about one-third of their income on

food. Based on this observation, it is then suggested that the cost of such "low cost diet plan" must be multiplied by three in order to arrive at the total consumption index. Thus the concept of poverty line is also known as poverty index.

Poverty index therefore is not a measure to state categorically whether the poor are actually starving or not. When their total income is too low, they spend more than one-third of their earning on food. Thus the struggle for survival dictates that the lower the income, the greater the part of it the poor spend on food.

It is generally argued that poverty index as a concept falls short of a social definition of poverty. It can tell us "how much is too little" but it does not tell us "how much is enough." The question of "how much is enough" is not easy to determine. Perhaps it may not be at all possible to do so. Social standards change over time and different society operates on different sets of norms. Realising this shortcoming, Oscar Ornati (1967) has therefore developed a concept not to describe absolute poverty but a relative one. Ornati suggested a scheme, called poverty band, consisting of three thresholds. The lowest level known as the minimum subsistence line, is comparable to poverty line. It determines the limit for public assistance. The middle level, known as the minimum adequacy line, represents the level at which a household or a family would be able to pay for non-monetary welfare services. The upper level is called the minimum comfort line and it marks the limit for public assistance of any type.

The significance of Ornati's poverty band is that the threshold levels increase over time, and this therefore reflects the growth in purchasing power or the average household or family. Thus Ornati's lowest threshold differs somewhat from the poverty line in that it includes a rise in real terms for the minimum survival budget.

Secondly, the relative concept of poverty acknowledges the fact that social satisfaction cannot be achieved by moving families from the lowest income earning to the subsistence level. In other words man cannot live by bread or rice only. They need many more things other than just food. This is basically the essence of sociological concept of poverty. Dudley Jackson (1972) defines poverty as a state of inadequate social functioning - not being gainfully employed, nor able to maintain a household, nor engaged in satisfying personal and social relationships. That distinguishes the sociological definition of poverty from a purely economic one. It is a fact that meeting nutritional needs via simple income transfers satisfies only one aspect of adequate social functioning. Wants would be fulfilled, but the deprivation aspect of poverty such as unemployment and inability to develop rewarding

social relationships would remain. However it is rather difficult, from the practical point of view, to establish a sociological poverty line. Literature on poverty and policy prescriptions do emphasize the basic nature of want satisfaction, and the need to fulfil it as a means of maintaining health and a normal life span. But the nature of the non-economic aspect of poverty is such that it is not possible to draw the line in order to distinguish between the poor and the non-poor. Townsend (1970) believed that the poor do not necessarily form a single class or stratum. There are cases where it is difficult to place families in class categories.

#### IV

As stated earlier, Kampung Sagil has been provided with basic social amenities though these facilities came in the later part of 1970s. Some were recently brought in, that is as late as in 1980 and 1981. Pipe water supply and electricity, for example, were only extended to this kampung last year. In addition, I also noticed that many of the houses have been recently modified. In fact there is, as I observed it, a craze among the house owners to enlarge and beautify their houses. This certainly represents a type of change taking place among the village folks of Kampung Sagil, and hence the kind of house they own is now becoming an index of status symbol. Those having big and beautiful houses, for example, are always being praised and envied upon by those who have not.

From my observation of Kampung Sagil, I am most inclined to say that while physical infrastructure of the kampung is improving, much more has yet to be done on the socio-cultural aspect of the community's development. Through informal meetings and casual discussions I have had with some of the village folks, I was able to gather more information regarding their society and culture in general and their problems which reflect the state of poverty in particular. I have, on a number of occasions, had the opportunity of being invited to be with them for lunch and dinner. It was during these occasions that I was able to get first-hand information about their food and the way their food being prepared.

Their food is basically the same as that taken by other peasants. They take rice, dried or salted fish, local vegetables like *pucuk ubi* and *pucuk paku*; and occasionally they have meat and fresh fish.<sup>2</sup> Accor-

<sup>2</sup>Fresh fish is a luxury item nowadays. They used to buy it cheap either in Tangkak market or from fish mongers who sell a variety of fresh fish every day. Nowadays not only its price is soaring at unprecedented rate but the choice is very much limited. Fish from Muar and other neighbouring places are exported to S'pore and this tremendously affects the supply for the local people.

ding to dietician,<sup>3</sup> these people would have no problem in fulfilling the minimum requirement (of about 2,500 calories per day for the average adult and slightly less than that for their children) because very often they take a lot of rice and they use extensive cooking oil or coconut milk in preparing their food. A normal rubber tapper in Kampung Sagil therefore looks very fit and appears to have sufficient physical strength to work in the field every day. Their wives and children too look alright. The dietician however cautions me that having sufficient physical strength alone as measured by the amount of minimum calorie intake every day, may not fulfil the concept of minimum nutritional requirement, as suggested by the low cost diet plan. Very often these rural folks take too much rice,<sup>4</sup> which is carbohydrate, and other starchy food but very little fish and vegetables. Meat is taken occasionally, mainly during festival. Fruits are also not taken regularly. Thus most of them are said to suffer from lack of protein and vitamin. In other words, they do not have a balanced diet.

Following the low cost diet plan mentioned earlier in this paper it may be interesting to estimate the amount of ringgit that they should spend on food in order to obtain minimum amount of nutrients. It must be remembered, however, that the population of Kampung Sagil are exclusively rubber tappers and as rubber tappers they do not produce their own food. The concept of self-sufficiency, that is to consume whatever they produce, is not applicable here. Nothing but rubber trees is grown on their small plot of land. Within their house compound, I could see a mixed type of fruit trees, such as durian, rambutan, jambu, mango, and sometimes banana and papaya too. But vegetables are rarely grown. That being the case the rural poor in Kampung Sagil have no choice but to purchase all their daily food requirement. Even *pucuk paku* and *pucuk ubi* have to be purchased from the market in Tangkak or sundry shops (if available) nearby. Thus other than fruits mentioned above, which come seasonally, every family in Kampung Sagil has to depend on the strength of its total income in order to purchase the food it requires.

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<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to Puan Wan Cha Pawan Chik, a dietician at the Medical Faculty, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, who has spent her valuable time with me discussing this issue.

<sup>4</sup>It is not uncommon that rubber tappers here in Kampung Sagil take the balance of last night's dinner, which is rice, for their breakfast. Sometimes they fry the rice and hence adding to it cooking oil. One tea-spoon of cooking oil is estimated to be of equalvalent to 45-50 calories.

In a highly conservative estimate, if they were to obtain a balanced diet, an average person needs about \$75.00 per month on food. In making this estimate allowances are also made for the presence of visitors. A very careful and skillful buyer may however be able to reduce it to about two-third (which is \$50) of that amount. Children, of course, need a little less than that. An average family of nine members in Kampung Sagil therefore need to spend about \$450.00 per month on food. Again a very skillful and careful shopper may have his way of reducing it to about two-third, and therefore it would be enough for him with \$300.00 for a month's food supply. If we were to follow the suggested method of calculating poverty index, this figure should be multiplied by three. Hence \$900.00 is the poverty line for Kampung Sagil. Any family with nine members and earning a total income of less than \$900.00 per month would have to spend more than one-third on food. This would effect their budget on non-food requirement.

The above calculation was devised to measure poverty in an entirely different cultural and social environment. The local definition of "socially acceptable standard of living" is not necessarily European or American in nature. But Kampung Sagil is not an isolated village. Foreign cultural elements are creeping into this community through various ways and means. That, to a great extent, has affected the values and life style of the village folks: becoming very status conscious and hence projecting self and individual image, competing for prestigious goods and positions, measuring success in terms of wealth accumulation or ability in moving up the social ladder. Foreign cultural elements have exerted their influence on the local population in a big way.

The newly constructed roads and the extension of electricity to this kampung have made it easier for the rural folks to bring in foreign cultural goods into their home. They are now able to purchase goods such as motor-cycles, radio, television set, and other electrical appliances through an easy hire-purchase arrangement. They do not have to have ready cash. Thus an increasingly large portion of their income is practically needed for the purchase of non-food items. In fact, as I observe it, more money is being spent to beautify their houses and to purchase non-food goods. A few of them told me that they were prepared to spend less on food so long as their house is not looked upon as "small and incomplete" because such a home would bring shame upon them. Anyway, they said, no one really could see what they eat in the house.

It appears to me that the rural poor are changing their taste and values but they are doing it at the expense of their own well being. According to a sample survey (Zuraidah A. Majid, 1981) recently carried out, not more than 2% of the families in Kampung Sagil are earning more than \$500.00 per month. In fact about 9% of them are earning less than \$300.00 per month. Given the present state of inflation, most of them are in deep trouble. For instance, a kilo of *ikan bilis* is now priced at \$15.50, a kilo of *ikan kembong* (fresh one) \$4.50, and *kangkong* \$1.00. Their monthly income is then just enough to pay for food. In the event that they have to pay for hire-purchase instalments for non-food goods like radio, television set, sewing machine, and other electrical goods or motor-cycles, they are in fact doing it at the expense of their low cost diet plan. In such circumstances they may, and indeed many families do, resort to taking more rice and other starchy food and less fish and vegetables. Hence, they may have no problem of fulfilling the minimum requirement of about 2,500 calories per day and yet they still suffer from the problem of imbalanced diet. Their growing children may not have sufficient amount of protein and vitamin. And that may affect their mental development.

## V

I am rather amazed to observe that from this kampung only one student is now studying at the University, none at all at Pre-University, five in Form V and nine in Form IV. It means that only one out of 146 population in the 20-24 years age group is now in the University, 14 out of 1,030 in the 15-19 years age group in Form IV and V (see Table 3). The other children are still in their lower secondary and primary. These data show us that children from this kampung have problems of getting through public examination at Form Three level. Even those who manage to pass and are now in Form IV and V are not really the cream.

It could be argued that there are several factors that may have contributed to their poor performance in school. Parents however are resigned to the fact that their children are simply not good in their studies. They accept that poor background as justification for the poor performance. Others blamed both the home and the school for being inadequately equipped with facilities. One could discuss this issue endlessly but he should not forget the fact that these children of the poor might also be suffering from the lack of protein in their food. Dietician believed that lack of protein may cause damage to their mental development.



In addition, a large number of these children, particularly the very young age group, are suffering from skin disease. Normally rural mothers breast-fed their babies. But many young mothers in Kampung Sagil do not do so nowadays. They give their babies bottle milk instead. And the irony is that they feed them with condensed milk.

This is an indication of their ignorance regarding food for babies. It appears that they are accepting a new baby-feeding practice brought in by a foreign culture, but they are not doing it the right way. When I asked them why did they give their babies condensed milk, they confidently said that condensed milk is good for growing children. Obviously this is something that they have picked up from one television advertisement that says "Susu cap junjung (a brand of condensed milk) is good for growing children".<sup>5</sup>

## VI

From the above discussion, it is very clear that babies of the poor are getting poor treatment from their mothers. Their parents, whose income falls below the poverty line, do not give particular attention on food for them and other growing children. It appears to me that they (parents) do not understand the concept of balanced diet or minimum nutritional requirement. As far as they are concerned condensed milk is already good. And rice is their staple food. They would be very sad if their babies and other growing children do not take rice. I have seen few cases where mothers feed their toddler boys with rice and salted fish only.

It may appear that I have overgeneralised the matter and showed that every family in Kampung Sagil has undergone the same experience. Of course it cannot be denied that few families whose income is above the poverty line experience a different pattern of life. The Ketua Kampung, for example, owned more than 10 acres of land and earned a total household income of more than \$1,000.00 per month. A few of his children are working in Kuala Lumpur and every month they remitted fund home as a form of gift to their parents. The Ketua Kampung himself is a knowledgeable man and appears

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<sup>5</sup>A random survey by Datasearch Management Sendirian Berhad carried out recently showed that people who are the most faithful to the television set (or idiot box) are those with earning below \$600.00 per month. The majority of them are rural folk and a big number of them are blue collar workers. According to the results, 62% or 2.54 million of the estimated 4.1 million adults who could be reached by TV Malaysia have a household income of the viewers, the Chinese 35% and Indians and others 11%. Females may be termed more avid TV viewers (50.6%). See *Malay Mail*, Monday, June 14, 1982.

to have fed his family members well. In fact all of his children are, relatively speaking, more successful than the others. The sundry shop owner is another good example that appeared to have a different pattern of life. His children too are now in upper secondary school in Tangkak. However the majority of the population in this kampung are living below poverty line. They are literally living from hand to mouth. They could not imagine what lies ahead for their children.

The experience of these rural folks, living in a state of poverty, has aroused a lot of frustration among the younger generation. They realised that as long as they are to remain in the kampung they will have no future at all. A number of those in the 20-24 years age group is already mentally geared to migrate to other places as a means of improving their life chances. Some of them have already decided to move out to urban centres to look for jobs and others to newly opened up Felda scheme. Their decision to leave Kampung Sagil has an immediate impact upon the society. Kampung Sagil has lost a number of people who were active and very able to lead various organisations. The kampung is now left with the older age group and relatively less active people. The present 15-19 years age group are still very young. But this group too are already contemplating of migrating to Kuala Lumpur or Johor Bahru to search for jobs. It is however to be noted that these young population are not having either skill or qualification.

## VII

To conclude this paper, it is perhaps important to note that while the Fourth Malaysia Plan claimed that poverty incidence in rural areas has declined by 21.0 percentage point during the last ten years (1970-80), the experience of Kampung Sagil does not, however, support this trend of change. In fact the out-migration of youth would render the home community to be saddled with problems of effective manpower. For instance, activities of PPPK and RPK, to a certain extent, were slowed down because the remaining rural poor could not actively participate in their projects anymore. It is true that the rural poor in this kampung have benefitted from Risdan in that their newly replanted rubber trees have increased their production. But productivity in this aspect alone does not cover all the needs the village folks should satisfy in order to render themselves as functional units in society. For instance, increasing productivity in itself does not make any sense at all when the marketing and pricing of their produce is always not only beyond their control but also unfavourable to them.

It must be realised that as a community of rubber tappers, as mentioned earlier in this paper, they are not food producers. Rather they

are cash croppers. They have to sell whatever amount of rubber they could produce in order to obtain cash. The amount of ringgit they receive would then dictate the amount they could spend on their lifestyle. If their income is under the poverty line they should, as suggested earlier, use it first to accomplish minimum nutritional requirement for the family members. The rural poor in Kampung Sagil, however, did not adhere to this principle. They appeared to have been emphasising a different order of priority.

If healthy population is to be measured not only in terms of physical strength but also of their intellectual ability, then the folks of Kampung Sagil have a serious problem before them. It is not enough just to own big and beautiful houses. It is also absurd to introduce them luxury items like electricity and television set when we know that they are yet to utilise their limited resources for more meaningful items. This is an area, to my mind, of paramount importance. Towards this end, an explicit food policy is indeed long overdue. Rural folks should be made to understand categorically what will their future generation be if they were to continue neglecting food that can provide them not only energy but also protein and vitamin. Indeed it is not easy to change their established habits and values. No such changes could be made over night. But over a period of time, I am sure, they will change their habits provided that a long term planning and policy towards this goal is immediately initiated and every one responsible in running the machinery for rural development and poverty eradication programmes adhere to this policy.

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