
Labour Dynamics and Informal Cross-Border Trade in Rural Border Communities of Sarawak, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex labour dynamics and informal cross-border trade that influence the livelihoods of rural communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, with a focus on the Pantu District of Sri Aman, Sarawak. Situated close to the border with West Kalimantan, the Bukit Kelingkang mountain range forms a natural boundary between Malaysia (Sarawak) and Indonesia (Kalimantan). For generations, economic exchanges between villages on both sides have been deeply rooted in history. The Iban people, in particular, have maintained strong patterns of migration, reciprocal trade, and familial ties that predate colonial rule. Following independence, the political division of Borneo redefined these connections, with Iban communities on either side becoming residents of Malaysia and Indonesia respectively. The research explores patterns of migration, intermarriage, informal employment, and trade practices that shape the socio-economic fabric of the borderland. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys of 220 rural respondents with qualitative data from 12 in-depth interviews with longhouse leaders and two local community chiefs in Pantu, Sri Aman. Quantitative findings indicate a significant dependence on Indonesian migrant labour, especially for agricultural and plantation work, due to local workforce shortages. Qualitative insights reveal the prevalence of cross-border marriages, the pivotal role of Indonesian labourers, and the informal yet vital trade exchanges that sustain daily life. The study concludes that rural border communities in Sarawak rely heavily on flexible and informal economic arrangements to navigate socio-economic challenges. By examining these interconnected dynamics, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of rural livelihoods in borderland regions, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of communities facing structural limitations and evolving cross-border interactions.

KEYWORDS: Labour dynamics, informal trade, cross-border interactions, migrant labour, rural livelihoods, Iban community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural border communities in Sarawak, particularly in areas such as the Pantu District of Sri Aman, are undergoing significant socio-economic transformation shaped by evolving labour dynamics and informal cross-border interactions. Uniquely positioned near the boundary between Sarawak and West Kalimantan, this district is situated in a landscape where the Bukit Kelingkang mountain range forms part of the natural frontier between the two regions. Historically, this geographical setting has facilitated the movement of people, trade, and intermarriage among indigenous communities, particularly the Iban. These longstanding ties have supported social and economic interdependence across the border, rooted in shared histories and kinship networks (Amster, 2005; Bulan, 2011).

In recent decades, the expansion of plantation agriculture, especially oil palm cultivation has emerged as a key economic driver in rural Sarawak. Despite its central role, this sector is increasingly characterised by a shortage of local labour. Many young Sarawakians are reluctant to engage in

plantation work, viewing it as physically demanding, socially undervalued, and offering limited long-term opportunity (Zainol, 2015; Kaur, 2020). In response, rural employers and smallholders have turned to migrant labourers from neighbouring Kalimantan, who contribute essential labour to sustain agricultural output. By 2016, foreign workers made up more than 75% of the oil palm plantation workforce in Malaysia, reflecting the industry's structural reliance on transnational labour (Abdullah et al., 2016; Akmal et al., 2024). This pattern of cross-border labour engagement reflects broader household strategies that prioritise flexibility, resilience, and access to regional opportunities (Rosa Yi & Green, 2024).

At the same time, there has been a noticeable rise in cross-border marriages between Sarawakian residents and Indonesian nationals. These unions serve both social and economic functions, strengthening familial ties while enhancing household labour capacity and resource-sharing networks. Such marriages reflect the fluid nature of borderland life, where family formation and livelihood strategies often span national boundaries (Eilenberg, 2012; Amster, 2005). However, the informal character of many of these relationships can create practical challenges, particularly in matters of documentation, access to public services, and long-term mobility planning (Khairi & Hasan, 2025).

The persistence of labour migration from Kalimantan is driven not only by demand in Sarawak but also by broader regional disparities. Wage differentials, limited employment opportunities, and rural poverty in parts of Indonesia continue to act as strong push factors (Harahap et al., 2024; Khairi & Hasan, 2025). Many individuals seek work in Sarawak's plantations despite the challenges they may face in navigating unfamiliar settings and social barriers. For border households, this flow of labour, kinship, and exchange supports their day-to-day survival and offers pathways for economic participation amid constrained local opportunities.

This study investigates the intersection of labour mobility, informal trade, and cross-border marriage in shaping the livelihoods of rural communities in Sarawak's border region. Using Pantu District as a case study, it explores how individuals and households negotiate changing labour markets, maintain cross-border ties, and sustain local development in the face of structural change. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how informal transnational practices function not as exceptions, but as integral components of everyday life in Malaysia's rural periphery.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Labour dynamics in Malaysia's rural sectors, particularly within plantation agriculture, have undergone considerable shifts over the past few decades. These transformations are primarily shaped by declining local participation, structural economic changes, and the increasing reliance on transnational labour. Several studies have documented a consistent decrease in local involvement in agricultural employment, especially among youth, who increasingly associate plantation work with physical hardship, social stigma, and limited socio-economic mobility (Zainol, 2015; Kaur, 2020). Rural-to-urban migration, education-driven aspirations, and the broader socio-cultural devaluation of manual labour have further contributed to this trend, creating a vacuum in the labour market that has been filled predominantly by migrant workers.

This demographic and occupational shift has made Malaysia's plantation sector particularly oil palm cultivation heavily dependent on foreign labour. As early as 2013, Indonesian nationals made up approximately 69% of the total workforce in Malaysian oil palm plantations, a figure that underscored

the indispensable role of migrant labour in maintaining agricultural productivity and cost-efficiency (Abdullah et al., 2016). By 2016, this dependence had further intensified, with foreign labour comprising 77% of the 429,351 individuals employed in the sector (Akmal et al., 2024). These statistics reflect not only the scale of dependency but also the structural embeddedness of transnational labour in the plantation economy.

Beyond economic imperatives, researchers have increasingly drawn attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of labour migration, particularly within borderland communities. Studies by Amster (2005) and Bulan (2011) reveal that kinship ties, cross-border marriages, and ethnic affiliations play a pivotal role in shaping labour mobility and settlement patterns in areas such as the Kelabit Highlands and along the Sarawak–Kalimantan frontier. These forms of social embeddedness facilitate the formation of transborder communities that share labour, exchange goods informally, and provide mutual support across national boundaries. In such contexts, cross-border marital unions often serve as practical strategies for household survival and labour continuity, fostering informal but functional systems of economic interdependence.

However, while these transborder relationships may promote socio-economic cohesion, they also raise significant concerns related to legal recognition, citizenship rights, and institutional exclusion. Eilenberg (2012), for instance, highlights how informal cross-border arrangements often operate in legal grey zones, leaving individuals—particularly undocumented migrants and their families vulnerable to exploitation, limited access to public services, and insecurity. National policies tend to frame these issues within the context of legality and border control, frequently overlooking the lived realities and survival strategies of communities residing in frontier regions.

In more recent scholarship, attention has shifted towards the organizational and managerial factors that influence labour performance and retention in plantation sectors. Anggak et al. (2025) emphasize that leadership practices, personality traits, and the provision of a psychologically safe and inclusive workplace environment significantly affect worker productivity and job satisfaction. Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2020) argues that well-designed human resource practices such as performance-based incentives, structured skills training, and inclusive feedback systems—are critical for enhancing workforce motivation and reducing high turnover rates. These findings suggest that beyond recruitment, the internal dynamics of workplace management are essential for sustaining labour performance and long-term industry viability.

Despite this growing body of literature, critical gaps remain particularly regarding how informal labour networks, cross-border mobility, and family-level strategies intersect in the everyday lives of rural households in Sarawak's borderlands. Much of the existing research has focused on Peninsular Malaysia or macro-level policy analyses, with limited ethnographic or ground-level studies on East Malaysia. This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding the voices and practices of rural households in the Pantu District of Sri Aman, Sarawak. It situates their experiences within broader debates on informal economies, borderland development, and labour governance. In doing so, the research aims to contribute a grounded and context-specific perspective to understanding how transnational interactions and informal systems not only respond to structural exclusions but also serve as engines of resilience and socio-economic continuity in peripheral rural settings.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore labour dynamics and informal cross-border interactions in rural Sarawak, particularly in the Sri Aman, Sarawak. The research focused on understanding how migration, intermarriage, and livelihood strategies intersect to shape socio-economic conditions among rural communities, including both Malaysian citizens and Indonesian migrants. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social realities within this rural borderland setting.

The research design employed was a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, which involved collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analysing them separately, and then integrating the findings during interpretation. This design allowed for triangulation, where findings from one method could validate or deepen insights from the other, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the overall study. The participants for the quantitative component consisted of 220 adult respondents selected through purposive sampling from several longhouse communities within the Pantu District Sri Aman, Sarawak. Participants were chosen based on their active involvement in economic activities such as plantation work, subsistence farming, and informal trading. The inclusion criteria required that they lived in the area for more than five years, ensuring their familiarity with local economic and social conditions. The sample included both male and female respondents aged 18 and above, enabling the study to examine gendered patterns in labour participation and livelihood strategies. For the qualitative component, 14 key informants were selected, comprising 12 longhouse leaders and 2 local community chiefs. These individuals were purposefully chosen due to their leadership positions, extensive knowledge of local history, and direct engagement with the community on matters related to labour, migration, and family formation. Their roles provided them with deep insights into long-term demographic shifts, the presence and integration of migrant workers, and the consequences of informal cross-border marriages on both families and the broader community.

To collect quantitative data, a structured survey questionnaire was developed and administered face-to-face. The questionnaire was pre-tested among a small group of respondents to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Each interview session took between 30 and 45 minutes, and all participants gave verbal and written consent before participating in the survey. For the qualitative data, in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected key informants using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews explored several thematic areas, including observed changes in labour dynamics over the years, the economic roles played by Indonesian migrant workers, the motivations and social consequences of cross-border marriages, and informal trade linkages. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia or the Iban language, depending on the preference of the respondent. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed for analysis.

The analysis of the quantitative data employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. This process involved a close reading of the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns. A coding framework was developed based on both the research questions and new themes that emerged during the interviews. The qualitative findings were used not only to provide deeper insights into the statistical trends but also to offer personal narratives and lived experiences that illustrated the socio-cultural dimensions of labour and migration in the region. The final stage of the research involved integrating both data sets. The findings from the quantitative survey were compared and contrasted with the insights gained from the qualitative interviews to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity. This integrated approach enabled the research to move beyond surface-level observations and generate a

richer, more grounded understanding of how local and foreign actors together shape rural livelihoods in Sarawak's border communities. Overall, the use of a mixed-methods design allowed the study to capture both measurable labour trends and the complex human stories behind them. This methodological framework strengthened the credibility and contextual relevance of the research findings, especially in highlighting the interplay between economic necessity, social adaptation, and institutional gaps in a rural borderland setting.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyses the findings of the study on labour dynamics and informal cross-border interactions in the Pantu District, Sri Aman Division, Sarawak. Based on both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview narratives, the findings are organised thematically to highlight patterns in employment, household livelihood strategies, and socio-cultural exchanges across the Malaysia-Indonesia border. The analysis captures the lived realities of rural communities operating within a dynamic and transnational context.

Labour Participation and Employment Patterns

The findings of this study confirm that agricultural livelihoods remain a cornerstone of household economies in the Pantu District. Among the 220 households surveyed, 153 (69.54%) reported primary involvement in farming activities, whereas 67 households (30.46%) relied on non-agricultural sources of income, including informal trading, domestic services, and remittances from urban migration. Among cash crops, oil palm cultivation emerged as the predominant economic activity, followed by rubber and pepper. Cross-tabulation analysis revealed a statistically significant gender disparity in labour participation, with male respondents more likely to be engaged in plantation work than their female counterparts ($\chi^2 = 11.37$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, women were more frequently involved in supplementary income-generating activities, such as preparing food or selling a variety of local produce, particularly vegetables at nearby markets including those in Lachau and Pantu, as well as roadside stalls along the Pan Borneo Highway.

The data also indicate a generational divide in agricultural engagement. Younger adults exhibited lower participation in farming, often citing aspirations for education and formal employment in urban centres. This trend aligns with prior studies highlighting rural youth's declining interest in plantation-based work, driven by evolving career aspirations and the pursuit of upward socio-economic mobility (Zainol, 2015; Kaur, 2020).

Qualitative interviews support these patterns. Several community members expressed that agricultural work is increasingly seen as a transitional or fallback occupation, rather than a long-term livelihood strategy. For instance, one respondent shared: *"Most young people prefer to go to Kuching or Miri. They don't want to work in the Kebun or Umai anymore, even if it pays"* (Interviewee 4, Male). This sentiment was echoed by other interviewees, who observed that younger generations often view agricultural labour as physically demanding, economically unstable, and lacking in long-term prospects. Another informant remarked: *"After they finish their studies, we encourage them to look for work in town. Life on the farm is not like before, it's difficult and uncertain"* (Interviewee 7, Female). These qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative findings and underscore a broader socio-cultural shift in rural labour perceptions. The move away from agricultural work reflects not only economic motivations but also changing values, aspirations, and perceptions of modernity among younger rural populations.

Cross-Border Labour Mobility and Social Networks

The findings reveal that cross-border labour mobility between Sarawak and Kalimantan remains a persistent and integral aspect of rural livelihoods in the Pantu District. This mobility is underpinned by shared ethnic identities, intermarriages, and enduring kinship ties among communities residing on both sides of the Malaysia–Indonesia border, particularly among the Iban and other indigenous groups. Such social networks facilitate fluid movement and enable informal labour exchanges that are rooted more in reciprocal social obligations than in formalised wage contracts. Quantitative data from the household survey show that 42% of respondents reported receiving labour assistance from relatives or acquaintances residing across the border within the past year. These forms of assistance were most commonly reported during peak agricultural seasons, such as harvesting or land-clearing periods. Assistance typically involved support in plantation work particularly in oil palm, rubber, or pepper cultivation and was compensated through in-kind arrangements, small cash payments, or future reciprocation.

The qualitative interviews reinforce and provide deeper context to the patterns observed in the quantitative data. Many respondents emphasised that cross-border labour support is rooted in social obligations rather than formal employment contracts. As one female interviewee explained: *"We don't see it as a border. Our cousins from the other side come to help during harvest season, and next time we return the favour."* (Interviewee 8, Female). Another respondent elaborated on the practical importance of these cross-border interactions in addressing local labour shortages: *"Sometimes, it's hard to find workers here. But our relatives from Kalimantan still come to help when needed. We share what we can, such as food, a bit of money but mostly it's because we are family"* (Interviewee 2, Male). These narratives suggest that the concept of the international boundary is experienced as flexible and deeply embedded in kinship ties and shared rural livelihoods. For many residents, the border between Sarawak and Kalimantan is not perceived as a strict dividing line but rather as a space of social continuity, familial cooperation, and mutual support. This perspective resonates with the work of Amster (2005) and Bulan (2011), who observed that indigenous communities in Borneo maintain long-standing cross-border relationships that transcend formal state demarcations.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that cross-regional labour mobility takes multiple forms, including both reciprocal exchanges and individual migration in search of work. While some labour flows are seasonal and based on familial obligations, others involve individuals from Kalimantan seeking temporary employment in Pantu. This trend is especially evident during busy farming seasons. As one male farmer described: *"Some workers from Kalimantan come here to earn money, work in farms or plantations. We pay them in ringgit, but the arrangement is usually personal, through friends or relatives"* (Interviewee 5, Male). These insights highlight the central role of informal social networks and long-established cultural ties in shaping labour patterns in rural communities near the boundary region.

This form of labour mobility also corresponds with the findings of Fariastuti (2014), who reported that limited employment options in certain areas of Indonesia, particularly West Kalimantan, drive individuals to seek work in neighbouring Malaysian territories. Overall, the interaction between familial support systems and the arrival of workers from neighbouring regions underscores the pluralistic nature of labour mobility in this context. It encompasses both socially embedded reciprocity and informal employment migration. These practices reflect a socio-cultural logic that prioritises kinship, mutual assistance, and practical cooperation over administrative formalities or rigid territorial delineations.

Household Livelihood Strategies and Resilience

The study findings reveal that households in the Pantu District employ a variety of diversified livelihood strategies to maintain economic security and adapt to the challenges of rural living. These strategies integrate subsistence and small-scale commercial agriculture, informal cross-border trade, and reliance on extended kinship and social networks. In settings where access to formal employment and stable income sources is constrained, such adaptive mechanisms are vital for sustaining livelihoods. Quantitative data indicate that most households rely heavily on agriculture as their primary source of income. However, to supplement these earnings, many households engage in informal trade, particularly with nearby communities in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. This trade includes the exchange of agricultural produce, forest products, and traditional crafts, typically facilitated through kinship ties and interpersonal networks rather than through formal market structures.

Qualitative interviews offer deeper insight into these everyday economic exchanges. Respondents consistently described routine, small-scale trade activities involving individuals from West Kalimantan particularly from the districts of Sungai Ketungau, Nanga Bayan, and Belubu (located in the Sintang Regency) who travel to Pantu to trade goods. Lachau Town, situated within the Pantu District, emerged as a central marketplace and logistical hub for these interactions. One male respondent shared: *"During the fruit season, people from Kalimantan come to Lachau or even sell by the roadside along the Pan Borneo Highway near Lachau Town. They bring fruits such as durian, and sometimes even selukai bark"* (Interviewee 6, Male). Beyond fruit, the trade also includes high-demand items such as pepper, woven crafts, rattan baskets, and other forest products. According to respondents, many of the traders from Kalimantan undertake long, arduous journeys on foot, sometimes taking more than four hours to walk from Belubu to Nanga Bayan, onward to Sungai Ketungau, and finally to Kampung Gua in Lachau. A notable motivation behind these informal exchanges is the relative advantage in currency value. Although the transactions are small in scale, they enable traders from Kalimantan to purchase household items such as rice, sugar, cooking oil, and processed foods, items that are either costly or difficult to obtain in their home regions. Several interviewees noted that Lachau's retail shops, which offer a wide range of daily necessities, serve as a major attraction for cross-border visitors.

In addition to cash-based transactions, a barter system also exists between communities in Kalimantan and households in Pantu. This traditional exchange involves the direct trade of agricultural produce and forest products for essential goods such as sugar and other staples. These reciprocal arrangements are valued not only for their economic utility but also for fostering inter-community relationships and reinforcing social cohesion across the border. These findings mirror patterns observed in previous research. Eilenberg and Wadley (2009) documented similar informal and kinship-based economic practices among Iban communities in the Sarawak-Kalimantan borderlands. Eilenberg (2012) and Rigg (2006) further argued that in marginalised and geographically remote border zones, where the reach of state institutions is limited, local livelihoods tend to rely on flexible strategies, including informal trading, mobility, and community-based resource sharing. In this context, households in Pantu demonstrate a high degree of resilience, drawing upon a mixed livelihood portfolio that blends agricultural production with cross-border exchange and communal support. Kinship ties that transcend national boundaries provide critical resources and serve as an informal safety net during times of economic hardship, such as crop failure or labour shortages. These findings underscore the importance of social capital, regional interconnectedness, and local adaptability in shaping sustainable rural livelihoods in borderland communities.

Gendered Roles in Labour and Mobility

The findings of this study reveal distinct gendered divisions of labour and mobility patterns within rural households in the Pantu District. While men are primarily engaged in physically demanding tasks, particularly in plantation work such as oil palm harvesting, land preparation, and rubber tapping, women assume multifaceted roles that are central to both the household economy and the broader informal livelihood system. These roles extend well beyond the domestic domain and include production, exchange, and social reproduction activities. Women in Pantu are actively involved in a range of economic and subsistence-based tasks that significantly contribute to household resilience. A notable domain of women's expertise lies in traditional handicrafts, especially in weaving multifunctional baskets. These baskets are carefully designed to serve specific purposes across various stages of paddy cultivation namely planting, harvesting, storing, and milling and are essential tools within the local agricultural system. Additionally, baskets are widely used for everyday tasks such as collecting forest produce, fishing, and carrying goods, reflecting their integral role in daily life.

Beyond craft production, women also play a critical role in natural resource gathering and informal trade. Many housewives and elderly women engage in foraging for jungle produce such as wild fruits, bamboo shoots, edible plants, and medicinal herbs. These forest products are often sold at local markets, particularly the *pasar tamu* in Lachau and Pantu towns, providing supplementary income for their families. This form of informal economic participation serves as a buffer during times of agricultural instability or when male members migrate for work outside the area. Furthermore, qualitative interviews revealed that women are also involved in facilitating transboundary interactions. In certain instances, women act as intermediaries in small-scale cross-border trade with communities in Kalimantan Indonesia. These exchanges typically involve bartering or selling local produce and handmade items in return for household goods that are either unavailable or more expensive locally. Such activities underscore women's agency in sustaining economic linkages and social networks across national borders.

These findings challenge gendered assumptions that men are the sole breadwinners in rural economies. Instead, women's contributions though often informal, are central to the economic and social fabric of borderland communities. Their multifaceted roles span economic production, environmental stewardship, care work, and cross-border networking. As such, women in Pantu play a critical role in sustaining household livelihoods, supporting community resilience, and reinforcing social cohesion in a context shaped by both local and transnational dynamics.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to investigate the complex relationships between labour dynamics, informal cross-border interactions, and livelihood strategies among rural communities in Sarawak, with a specific focus on the Pantu District in the Sri Aman Division. One of the most significant findings of the study is the strong dependence on informal labour from neighbouring Indonesia to support plantation and agricultural work. This reliance is primarily the result of ongoing labour shortages within the local population and the economic necessity faced by rural households. Informal labour arrangements are often facilitated by shared cultural ties, historical relationships, and personal networks that span the Malaysia and Indonesia border.

Another major finding is the widespread occurrence of cross-border marriages, particularly between Iban men from Sarawak and women from Indonesia. These marriages serve both social and economic purposes, functioning as strategies to stabilise household labour and to extend transnational kinship

networks. The research also draws attention to the gendered aspects of rural labour and livelihoods. Rural women, including both local residents and foreign-born spouses, make substantial contributions to household and community economies. They often engage in informal, unpaid, or subsistence-based activities that are essential to family well-being. Despite their critical roles, these contributions remain largely unacknowledged in formal economic planning and policy interventions. Overall, the findings demonstrate that labour migration, marriage, and livelihood strategies in the Pantu border region are closely linked to informal cross-border processes that are deeply embedded in local socio-cultural contexts. Rural communities have shown considerable resilience and adaptability in managing structural challenges through informal economic and social arrangements that operate outside the formal boundaries of state regulation. In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for more inclusive and context-sensitive policy responses that better reflect the lived realities of rural border communities. Policymakers and development practitioners must take into account the informal and transnational dimensions of rural life when designing interventions aimed at improving livelihoods and labour conditions. By acknowledging and addressing the complexities of cross-border interactions, future policies can contribute to more equitable and sustainable development outcomes for rural populations in Sarawak and other similar borderland regions.

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