



## History, education, and border area: An introduction study on education at the Indonesia-Malaysia border, Sebatik Island, North Kalimantan

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### Abstract

This study aimed to identify educational problems at the Indonesia-Malaysia border (Sebatik Island). The study also investigated what had been and was being done by various institutions to provide education for children at the border area. This research used two methods, namely Focus Group Discussion and interviews. The research team that conducted the FGDs in Sebatik-Indonesia and Sebatik-Malaysia aimed to gather as much information as possible about various educational problems in Sebatik. In-depth interviews were also conducted with selected community members and officials at the local level, community leaders, and community organizations. The study found a bleak portrait of education for children at the border, both in Sebatik-Malaysia and Sebatik-Indonesia. Since the Malaysian government closed access for Indonesian children to school in the country, many illiterate cases have been found among the children of oil palm plantation workers. Various efforts undertaken by the private sector such as the establishment of the Border Area School and Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School cannot be maximized due to limited funds and human resources.

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### Introduction

The study of the border region with all its problems is always interesting and important. Various studies on borders in Europe, America, and Asia have been carried out (Kearney, 2009; Keawsomnuk, 2017; Kowalski & Albanski, 2018; Martinez, 1994; Teangsompong &

Sirisunhirun, 2018), but this is not the case in Indonesia. In other words, studies on borders in Asia, especially in Indonesia, are still very limited. One of the important border areas in Indonesia is Sebatik Island. The life of this island community is a very typical life like the other border areas between Indonesia and Malaysia. Borderland milieu of the two regions was formed by the contrasting economic developments between the two countries, geographical proximity, and also ethnic and cultural attachment of the population on both sides of the border. The direct consequence of this situation is the high orientation of the Sebatik population towards Malaysia in almost all fields (economic, social, and cultural). The lack

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of educational facilities in Sebatik, for example, caused some families to choose to send their children to Tawau-Malaysia (Biantoro, 2011; Puryanti, 2016; Puryanti & Husain, 2011; Puryanti & Husain, 2016).

Education is not only useful for the future of students, but also a means to introduce citizens from an early age to the nation and the state along with ideas about citizenship, identity, character and national character. Besides teaching science, one of the goals of formal schools in Indonesia that began during the New Order government highlighted the character and ideology of the state among students in an effort to form good citizens and thus be able to maintain the unity of the state and nation of Indonesia (Eilenberg, 2005; Tirtosudarmo, 2007). According to Barbara Leigh, Indonesian schools are sites where minds of the new generation of citizens are being developed (Leigh, 1999, pp. 34–56).

Generally, border communities face problems of isolation, underdevelopment, poverty, high prices for goods and services, limited infrastructure and public service facilities, and low quality of human resources. One of the important issues in the border regions of Indonesia and Malaysia is an access to education for children whose parents work in the Sebatik-Malaysia oil palm plantations. At present, there are approximately 53,000 children of migrant workers who need access to education. Prior to 2002, Indonesian migrant workers were still free to work and send their children to school without documents, but after the Labor and Education Act was issued in 2001, their activities were restricted. All foreign workers and students must have completed their documents (Puryanti, 2016).

With the increasingly limited access to education, this problem has become really problematic. Those who need education are not only Indonesians in Sebatik-Indonesia, but also those in Sebatik-Malaysia. The problem is that the government does not have the maximum ability to provide this educational facility. This is what then encouraged various private institutions to participate in providing alternative education for children of Sebatik Island. This study identified education issues in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region (Sebatik Island). The study was not only about the problems facing education at the border, but also looked at what had been and was being done by various institutions to provide education for border children. In other words, this study shows how historical background and border issues between countries have a significant influence on education for children in Sebatik.

## Methodology

Border communities are groups of people or individuals who live in a border area between countries, both land and sea borders, and who have common interests, both social and economic. The study was conducted on border communities in Sebatik Island, an island located in northeast Kalimantan. This study used two methods to collect the data, namely Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews. The writing team that conducted the FGDs in Sebatik-Indonesia and Sebatik-Malaysia aimed to gather as much information as possible about various educational problems in Sebatik. In addition to the FGDs, in-depth interviews were also conducted with selected community members and officials at the local level, community leaders, and community organizations. The people interviewed were not only those living in Sebatik-Indonesia, but also the Indonesian people residing in Sebatik-Malaysia who work as oil palm plantation workers. Besides FGDs and in-depth interviews, this study also used a number of studies and literature that had been carried out on these border communities. Because it was a preliminary study on education in the border area, this article is necessarily descriptive and based on field and literature studies. It aimed to give rise to a research agenda for better education for the children who live at the border, especially the borders of Indonesia and Malaysia.

## Results and Discussion

### *Historical Background*

Administratively, Sebatik Island is divided into two parts (North and South). This division began with a convention in 1891 between the British and Dutch governments, known as the London Convention (Grenzen Borneo Treaty) between the Dutch East Indies (Nederlandsche Indie) and the British protectorate in North Borneo (British North Borneo Protected) (Biantoro, 2011, p. 17).

In 1916, a new treaty was agreed upon under the name of London Protocol. In the protocol it was determined that the boundary of the sea and land area between the Netherlands and England lay in the parallel line of 4° 10' North Latitude. The North area was a British region and the South was the Netherlands. This convention underlies the division of Sebatik Island into two parts (SvNI, 1916). The area of Sebatik-Indonesia is half more than the area of Sebatik Island, which is 244.64 km<sup>2</sup>. These areas include Sebatik District, East Sebatik District, North Sebatik District, West Sebatik District, and Central Sebatik District. The Figure 1 shows the geographical location of the border island.



**Figure 1** Sebatik Border Island  
**Source:** Ghafur, 2016

Sebatik Island population consists of various ethnicities, such as Bugis, Tidung, Timor, Javanese, and others. However, the Bugis is the largest population in the region. They came in several waves from Sulawesi, both South and Central. Some of them came directly from Sulawesi (Bisri, 1985), but they also came from Tawau and had previously worked at Malaysian owned plantations. Their work on this island consists of many things, ranging from fishermen, cocoa and palm farmers, civil servants, traders, artisans, and others.

On this exotic island, Bugis people inhabit almost all districts. This is different from Timorese who are concentrated in Lordes, Central Sebatik. They generally are farmers; both oil palm and cocoa farmers. Meanwhile, many Javanese live in East Sebatik. They work as food vendors selling food such as meatballs, chicken noodles, fried food, and others.

#### *Educational Issues on Sebatik Island*

In 1990, the government issued the regulation number 28 on Basic Education, which regulates various matters relating to the fulfillment of the rights of citizens to receive education. The regulation also regulates the rights of Indonesian citizens abroad to obtain education, especially basic education (Peraturan Pemerintah, 1990).

This regulation is a strong basis for government representatives in Sabah Malaysia to strive for children's education for those who follow their parents to work in Malaysia, including those on Sebatik Island, Malaysia.

Access to the basic education for Indonesian children in Malaysia, especially in the Sabah region began with a high-level discussion between the President of the Republic of Indonesia and the Prime Minister of Malaysia at the "Annual Consultation" meeting in 2004. The meeting resulted in an agreement in which the Malaysian government approved the Indonesian Government's proposal to send Indonesian educators to Sabah. Therefore, a Community Learning Center was established in the palm oil fields. Moreover, in January 2008, the Malaysian Government approved the establishment of the Kota Kinabalu Indonesian School (SIKK) which began to operate in 2013 (Puryanti, 2016).

Before 2002, Indonesian children who followed their parents who worked in Malaysia, attended the Malaysian National School, but after that, the kingdom closed access. As a result, many Indonesian children dropped out of school. In exchange, the Malaysian Government handed over the education affairs of the foreign children to an institution called Humana Child Aid Society. In 2006, through an MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia, Malaysia agreed with the Indonesian Government's efforts to open special learning centers for Indonesian children. Since that time, there have been Indonesian children who have attended school in Humana and also learning centers established by the Indonesian Government (Muyamin, 2019).

Up until the current study, Humana continued to provide education for Indonesian children in collaboration with PKBM and had the support of Indonesian teachers.

However, basic education services for migrant workers' children in the Sabah region were still far from meeting the needs, being only able to serve around 14,000 children out of around 53,000 children of migrant workers. Several other issues also arose from this situation. Some very important issues that needed attention were (1) children from PATI, (2) teaching materials from Malaysian curriculum, (3) no degree certificate, (4) limited only to primary and junior secondary education. The long-term consequence of these problems is chronic poverty in the children of migrant workers passed down from one generation to the next (Muyamin, 2019).

In addition to education organized by the government and international NGOs, education on Sebatik Island-Malaysia is also supported by Ms. Suraidah, a midwife who resides in Central Sebatik. Ms. Suraidah, through her foundation called the Ar-Rasyid Foundation, set up Early Childhood Education (PAUD) in Malaysian plantations, specifically in the Borne Co Palm Plantation (Arifin, 2017).

#### *Non-profit Initiative*

In Sebatik Indonesia, several schools were also established by private institutions such as the Ar-Rasyid Foundation and the As-Adiyah Foundation. In this section, two private educational institutions which have an important role in fulfilling the rights of border children to obtain education will be described. They are Tapal Batas School and Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School. The motivation of the private organization to providing educational facilities for border children is based on social responsibility.

#### *Border Area School*

The Darul Furqan School was founded by Ms. Suraidah in 2014. Currently the school occupies the land of former Indonesian Workers' lodgings. The school is focused on eradicating illiteracy, providing education for migrant workers and empowering independent business education for the Sebatik community. The existence of this school is very encouraging, however, it is also cause for concern. For the operational needs of the school, Ms. Suraidah had to pay the teachers, feed the children who live in the dormitory, and provide other school needs. Luckily, Dompot Duafa, which is managed by *Republika Newspapers*, was willing to be a funder for this school. However, the contract between the Border Area School and Dompot Duafa ended in September 2016. In addition, PT Pertamina EP Tarakan Field provided support through

its CSR program. However, there was no guarantee that this support would continue.

As of the end of 2019, this Boundary School had four classes; Class (1), (2), (3), and (4). Along with the infrastructure issues such as inadequate classrooms, the issue of human resources in the form of teachers was also a serious problem in this school. Up until this point, there were only three teachers plus one religious teacher who had the duty to foster children for the Quran memorization. For children, both male and female students, whose parents live on plantations, dormitories are provided. The number of students for each class was: class (1), 14 students, class (2), 14 students, class (3), 10 students, and class (4), 14 students.

Currently, Border Area School has three learning programs, namely Early Childhood Education (PAUD), Madrasah Ibtidayah (Elementary School), and Madrasah Diniyah (Junior High School). This school also has 'A Package' and 'B Package' to eradicate illiteracy. The curriculum of 2013 which is integrated with the curriculum of the Department of Religion is used. Students who live in a dormitory provided by the school get additional lessons in the form of memorizing the Qur'an, which is taken care of by an ustadz (religious teacher) (Curriculum Document, 2016).

The presence of this school is very beneficial for children whose parents work as an oil palm plantation workers in Sebatik Malaysia. One of the students who is very enthusiastic about the presence of this school is Hamidah, a grade 4th student with a disability. Initially, she had to walk as far as six km from her house to get to school. The hilly road conditions worsened the weight of the journey that she had to undertake. Every morning, she had to leave her home at around 05.00 and arrive at school around 07.00. However, the burden of Hamidah and her parents was slightly reduced because Ibu Suraidah offered for her to live in a dormitory with other children (Pertamina, 2018).

The problem of the teachers who are willing to serve in this school is also a major problem faced by Ms. Suraidah as the school principal. With salaries ranging from Rp. 400,000–Rp. 500,000, not many teachers can survive in the middle of an oil palm forest. According to her, it is common for teachers who have attended teaching workshops in Nunukan or Tarakan to ask to leave because they do not like teaching at Border Area Schools and choose to move to other schools which give more financial support (Suraidah, 2017). However, such conditions do not dampen her spirit and enthusiasm to continue serving selflessly.

### *Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School*

The existence of Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School is closely related to the large number of children of Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) in Malaysia, especially in various oil palm plantations, who cannot enjoy education. With that concern, in 2007 the establishment of this boarding school was pioneered. The central government through the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) began to build the Islamic boarding school for the education needs of Indonesian Migrant Workers' children. In 2008, the Islamic boarding school began to operate. Occupying about five hectares of the land, there are spaces for classrooms, foundation office room, and dormitories for students. This boarding school is under the auspices of the Indonesian Islamic Foundation Sebatik Island (YIIPS). The foundation received the mandate from the government to develop boarding schools, which were originally intended for the children of migrant workers facilities who work in the city of Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. As a school under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion, this school implements religious-based education (read: pesantren) with a boarding school system.

According to YIIPS Deputy Chairperson, this Islamic boarding school was originally named Darul Fikri YIIPS. However, because there was a policy from the government, the name was then replaced with Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School. Since its establishment, the pesantren has accommodated around 70 santri (students) at the junior high school level. However, because it is still a brand-new school, there are only 40 students of migrant workers in Tawau who are actually there. The rest are children of local residents. However, the acceptance of non-Indonesian migrant worker children is very useful to integrate the children of migrant worker and non-migrant worker. Thus, the way they view Malaysia and Indonesia relations which they have always believed can soon change (Ibid.). So, it is hoped that the existence of quality schools in Sebatik Indonesia can change the way the community views that to get a good education there is no need to go to Malaysia.

The curriculum used by the Islamic Boarding School is the National Curriculum, which is then continued with a religious curriculum. This form of education allows for the maximum intensity of care for students. In its management, there is an adjustment policy to determine the grade level of students who previously attended the school in Malaysia. The student level will be adjusted with their level going down one level. The reasons for the enactment of this policy are because the curriculum used is not the same, and due to the need to obtain a National

Registration Number when undergoing education in Indonesia (Puryanti, 2016).

The existence of this boarding school is very beneficial for children who cannot get proper education or do not get a diploma after completing their education while living in Malaysia. Muhammad Zainal Abidin, for example, was one of the students who was very happy to be able to study at this boarding school. According to him, he had attended elementary school education in Tawau, because at that time he was still following his parents, who worked in Malaysia as workers in oil palm plantations. However, he did not get a degree certificate from the Malaysian Government when he graduated from elementary school. Therefore, when his brother invited him to go to school again in Sebatik, Abidin immediately agreed. Moreover, he did not need to attend elementary school anymore. At Pondok Mutiara Bangsa he was immediately able to study in first grade of junior high school. However, his parents still lived in Tawau. The opportunity to meet his parents was only possible if there was a holiday.

The habit of going to Tawau every holiday to visit parents is practiced by almost all students who are children of migrant workers. However, this opportunity is currently very limited since the Sebatik Indonesians are no longer permitted to cross to Tawau. Understandably, the desire to meet parents is unbearable. Therefore some of the children tried their luck, still crossing the border. This recklessness led to some children being captured by Malaysian royal soldiers and required to pay a substantial amount (Latasi, 2017).

As children who were mostly born and raised in Malaysia, the caretakers of the boarding school admitted that it was not very easy to take care of and teach them. One of the difficult things is teaching them things that are very Indonesian to them. For example, the teachers need more days to teach the Indonesia Raya song. It is very difficult for them to recite the song. Instead, they memorized the Malaysian national anthem (Ibid.).

### **Conclusion**

The case of education at the Indonesia-Malaysia border on Sebatik Island, North Kalimantan, is a good and interesting example to see how limited access to education is owned by the community. Since the Malaysian Government closed down the access for Indonesian children to get education in the country, there have been many illiterate cases among children of oil palm plantation workers in Sebatik-Malaysia. Fortunately, this condition can be handled somewhat thanks to a non-governmental organization called Humana Child Aid

Society, which concentrates on the education of migrant workers' children in Sabah, Malaysia.

Actually, those who are in Sebatik-Malaysia can go to schools in Sebatik-Indonesia, but they face the geography issue, which is the distance between the school and their place of residence. Children who study in Sebatik-Indonesia have to travel tens of kilometers back and forth. To overcome this problem, several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and religious institutions, made several efforts to help the government so that the children of this island enjoy education. These efforts include establishing the Border Area School in Central Sebatik, establishing the Madrasah Ibtidaiyyah (Elementary School) and the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (Junior High School) in Aji Kuning, and establishing the Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School.

However, various efforts undertaken by private parties such as the establishment of the Border Area School and Mutiara Bangsa Islamic Boarding School cannot be maximized. This is caused by limited resources, both funds and human resources. If this is not taken seriously by the government, it will not be surprising that many school-age children cannot enjoy education. They eventually become illiterate and ultimately become oil palm plantation workers, like the work done by both their parents.

### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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