

Book Review 'Poor Malays Speak Out'

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This book pleads for a group left behind in Malaysia national development: the poor Malay paddy farmers of Muda. We all know that the Muda Scheme is a great success. Most farmers now plant two crops of paddy a year, whereas they could get only one before the Scheme. Total production of paddy has more than doubled, and average farmer real incomes almost tripled. Even international agencies like the World Bank say that Muda is a success. The first and most important aim of this book is to show the serious poverty problem in Muda. Recent research by the Center for Policy Research at Universiti Sains Malaysia in collaboration with the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA) has shown that despite some success in reducing poverty since 1972, almost half (46%) of the paddy farm families in Muda still earned less than the official poverty line income of \$60 per person per month in 1981/82. Follow-up interviews done especially for this book by the authors have found that this poverty is real and that it is being more than reproduced through the children of the poor. Their sad, sometimes heartbreaking, stories are told in the first three chapters, each of which focuses on one or two families in depth. No claim is made that these families are scientifically representative of the Muda poor in all detail, but we do argue that there are thousands of poor Malay paddy farm families in Muda living in similar, difficult situations and having had sad, sometimes tragic, experiences of the same kind.

The second objective of this book is to show that the persistence and reproduction of poverty in Muda is due to the grossly unequal distribution of the benefits of and opportunities for development, and that this, fundamentally, is due to the highly unequal distribution of paddy land among farm households within the Scheme. More than half the farmers in Muda have paddy farms which are simply too small to produce an income above the poverty line. And opportunities for alternative employment or for earning additional income are grossly inadequate to meet the need. Inequalities in the distribution of land are increasing, while opportunities to earn off-farm income are declining, with the small farmers caught in the crunch.

The third aim of this book is to argue that in light of the above, the poverty problem in Muda can be reduced substantially in the foreseeable future only by increasing the farm size of the poor. i.e., by enabling them to obtain more paddy land to farm. There are some ways of doing this within existing policy, and Government should try these first. If they prove to be insufficient, however, a major policy change in favour of land reform, possibly like that carried out in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea after the last war, will have to be made, if the number of poor Malay families in Muda is to be reduced to a figure that is acceptable in light of the impressive economic growth that has taken place in the region. Public support, i.e., readers support, would be required for such a policy change. It is the authors hope that this book will help readers to make up their own mind on this important matter.

The authors also like to express their gratitude to the Center for Policy Research at UniversitiSains Malaysia, which made available some of the data from its Poverty Study. At the same time the authors would like to make it clear that the Center is not responsible in any way for the contents of the book, nor does it represent in any way the views of the Center. The author also owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the seven families featured in the book; Saad, Awang, TokTeh, Rokiah, Ramli, Hamid, Ahmad and Md. Isa. Not only did they agree to be included in the book, but also they gave freely of their time while the authors educated

themselves on the nature and causes of paddy poverty in Muda. In the authors opinion the only value of this book, which would not have been possible without their co-operation, will be in the degree to which it helps to bring their real problems to the attention of the policy makers and results in efforts to reduce their poverty substantially within their lifetimes.

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