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Printed in Japan

ISBN 92-808-0055-8  
ISSN 0379-5764

HSDRGPID-3/UNUP-55

WORKING TOWARDS MEANINGFUL DIALOGUES:  
THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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**This paper, first presented at the GPID III meeting, Geneva, 2-8 October 1978, can be considered a contribution to the Dialogues sub-project of the GPID project.**

Geneva, June 1979

Johan Galtung

## Introduction: Development and Development Research

Although there is much disagreement over the precise definition of development and its objectives, there can be little dispute that a key feature of it is the improvement in the conditions of life and the opportunities to develop the capacities of the poor majorities in the underdeveloped countries with their participation in decision-making at all levels.<sup>1</sup> The subject of development studies assists in this process by analysing the nature and functioning of present local, national and international structures which impede or accelerate the process of participatory development amongst people and by revealing what social forces might be instrumental in changing people and structures in the directions required.

Given such a view of the subject matter of development, it clearly follows that how social groups and classes especially those not represented in the decision-making system or discriminated against by existing social institutions and trends, feel about the problems of their lives comprises an essential data base and possibly the only valid frame of reference whereby development can be discussed or measured. Although lip-service is given to obtaining the views of such people, in fact this is seldom done. As one villager remarked:

"We hear through radio and television that the government is going to do this and do that for the good of the people. However we can only listen and wait; we can talk amongst ourselves and comment on this and that, but what's the use, who can hear us? Can the government hear us? Can the planners hear us?"

He might have also asked, "Can the researchers and academics hear us?"

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1 Emerging Trends in Development Theory, Report from a Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries Workshop, August 8-12, 1977, editors Bjorn Hettne and Peter Wallensteen, Stockholm, 1978.

Hearing from the People: The Survey Questionnaire Method and its Defects

In Malaysia the most popular method used in development research is the survey questionnaire method. Even just as a method for eliciting information from people about what they want from development and what they feel to be their problems, the survey questionnaire has many defects.<sup>2</sup> Some of these defects stem from the fact that the method is culturally and socially alien to the non-western-educated communities found in Malaysia. The same would be true of many communities in other Third World countries. Among these communities, distrust of the government and its intentions often runs deep. An interviewer carrying a pile of questionnaires and recording answers is often seen as collecting information for income-tax or for other purposes which will not benefit people. Hence the reluctance to give information and the large element of falsification found in the answers.

As an instrument shaping the consciousness of the interviewer and the respondent, the survey questionnaire method has hardly any value. The comments below were made to interviewers employed by a Malaysian government agency in its survey to find out about racial interaction among young workers in nineteen factories. As the interviewers were ordered not to record anything which did not fall within the questionnaire proper, these comments were noted separately by one of the interviewers on her own initiative.

A Chinese female worker in a garment factory

"My pay was cut by the management because I stayed too long in the toilet this morning. Is there such a law in our country? The management accused me of being lazy and of purposely hiding in the toilet. Hah! If you have a look at the toilet you will see that no one can stay there longer than necessary. I hear all of you are from the university, tell me whether there is such a law in any factory!"

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2 Some of these problems have been discussed by Johan Galtung in his draft paper "Dialogue as a Method: Some very preliminary notes," Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development Project, Geneva, 1978.

An Indian girl in a jute factory

"I don't like to work night shifts, my house is too far away and the lane is too dark for me. When I first started working, the factory promised that I would be put only in the day shifts, but now they want me to do night shifts also, can I complain?"

A Malay worker in a coconut-processing factory

"I am very much discriminated against. Workers of other races, after working here for some time, can be transferred from one section to the other. But this does not happen to me! I am put in charge of the oven and it is the toughest job, the hottest. It has been so long since I was put here. I am not given the opportunity to be transferred to other sections. The Chinese workers get that opportunity in a short period of their service, why do I have to stick to oven-work?"

A young Chinese worker in the same coconut factory

"Oh, you ask me about my opinions of the other races. I think it is better for me to give the answer 'cannot generalise' so that I won't get into trouble. Right or not?"

An Indian male worker in a textile factory

"I am a machine operator, I have to step on a certain knob of the machine with my foot. But I don't know and my colleagues don't understand too, why is it that the machines would suddenly crash down and smash our toes! Many of my friends and I have been hurt. We receive free medical treatment here no doubt, but can't the management do something with the machines? Why does the management ignore our complaints? Do you know any way we can do something?"

In the examples given above, the respondents clearly wanted to engage in a discussion about their work and problems. Clear appeals were made by four of the five respondents to the university students whom they regarded as more knowledgeable. However, the use of the survey questionnaire method prevented these problems from being recorded. All that was recorded were various characteristics to be ascribed to each racial group, that is whether they were talkative, loyal, peace-loving, lazy, friendly, business-minded, co-operative and helpful, boastful, stingy or spend-thrift. Such an enumeration was not only of little value to the respondents but may have reinforced ethnic prejudices. For both interviewers and the workers they interviewed, the survey questionnaire method did not contribute in any way to their communication or to the raising of their consciousness. As one of the interviewers described it "the interviewees gained nothing from the survey and the interviewers learnt nothing except the art of indifference".

#### A Method to Hear from the People: Criteria

To enable academics and researchers to hear from the people and understand their problems, a different type of data-gathering method should be devised. This new method should fulfil certain criteria.

1. It should be socially and culturally acceptable to the communities it is used in.
2. It should not arouse the suspicions of the respondents that the data collected will be used against them or is useless to their needs. Neither should they be led to believe that the information provided can directly help them with their problems.
3. It should promote face-to-face contact between the researchers and grass-roots people.
4. It should result in a sharing of experience and a process of reflection and consciousness-raising amongst participants.

5. It should bring up the authentic and heart-felt feelings and needs of the people.
6. It should be an on-going process, providing a more holistic view of the social forces which shape people and structures, both on a historical and multi-dimensional level.

#### Experimenting with The Dialogical Method

A dialogical method appears to come closest to meeting the above listed criteria. The essence of this method lies in its unstructured nature and its underlying premise that the respondents are not solely the object of question but also the subject of learning. Some examples of dialogues conducted in Malaysia are provided in Cases 1-4. It must be stressed that the method is still in its experimental stages. However, from the content provided in the cases, it demonstrates much promise in enriching development research.

A good society was described by the respondents in rather different ways. To the fisherman it was one in which people felt for each other and were uncomfortable at any wrong around them. The analogy used by him is instructive:

"Take our body; we have hands, we have legs, bodies, hair, eyes, nose, ears and other organs. When one organ is hurt, for example, my finger-tip is cut, my whole body would feel uncomfortable. If the people in a society can feel that way when they see someone starving, when they feel as if an organ of their own bodies is malfunctioning, then the society would be a good one."

The squatter came close to expressing the same view as the fisherman. A good society to him was one which does not have "greed, bad desires [and an] absence of humanitarian feelings". With the labourer, a good society must meet a minimum of the needs of all people. The present society compelled people to compete and grasp more wealth. This was

however not due to greed but to insecurity - "there is no such thing as 'enough' in our society [today]. Everybody hopes to get more and more wealth. There is no end to this because everybody must grab what he can today, tomorrow he might be unemployed, his family might starve. Is this called greed? Of course it is not. It is insecurity that forces them to act this way."

Both the fisherman and squatter also expressed similar ideas on how to attain a good society. Proper education to the children was the key. The children must be disciplined and be taught to think and act correctly. Even minor acts of misbehaviour e.g. plucking a fruit from someone's tree must be rebuked. Three of the four respondents felt that material needs are not the only things to strive for in life. Religion was emphasised as being more important. "Everything after all depends on God". Besides religion and their immediate welfare needs (food, shelter, clothing) what was important to these people was harmony in the family and the community.

The stress on correct human behaviour indicates an awareness that despite the importance attached to religion, people are responsible for their own destinies and the condition of the societies they live in. Human beings must not be filled with greed. The problem of poverty is attributed to human greed manifested in corruption and exploitation. To have a good society people must have humanitarian feelings towards others. Co-operatives or communes were mentioned by two respondents as structures which could help overcome need and greed. However, no more concrete suggestions on how to attain a good society were obtained. Finally, the respondents were generally unconvinced that development was taking place which was benefiting them. Development, it was argued by one of them, should not be measured by the new roads or buildings constructed but by whether people were better-off. "We have progress here and there but this does not mean the people are better off. We have progress but the people are suffering more and more. Surprising indeed!"



Analysing the Dialogue Method

Case 4 is an example of a disappointing dialogue with unsatisfactory depth, content and communication value. There were many reasons for this. For a start, the dialogue was conducted through an interpreter speaking in Tamil. This language barrier made it difficult for the rubber tapper to understand what was being asked and for the researcher to find out what problems the respondent had in following her. The dialogue was also made unnecessarily formal by a tape-recorder placed in front of the respondent. The impatience and disappointment shown by the interpreter and researcher when the respondent could not answer a question further strained the dialogue whilst the respondent herself was obviously impatient to go to the shop to buy rice; hence the signs of curtness and impatience each time a question was answered. The consequent discussion therefore had more of the air of an interrogation: the researcher asked questions and the respondent answered. There was no rapport established or a sharing of experience and knowledge.

The dialogue with the labourer was also less satisfactory but for different reasons. Here the researcher expressed too much of her own views (much of this has been excluded from the text) with the respondent saying "Yes, yes", in agreement. This situation appears to have arisen from an over-anxiety on the part of the researcher to gain the confidence of the respondent. Hence her expression of some rather strong views influenced the thinking of the labourer during the course of the dialogue. In subsequent dialogues she felt she had gained the trust of the respondent as he spoke to her about secret societies in the village and other sensitive topics which he would not have talked about had she herself not been so open during the first dialogue. The problem in this case was to strike a balance between dominating the dialogue and offering as few opinions as possible which could put off the respondent or make him suspicious.

Cases 1 and 2 are examples of more balanced dialogues with both respondents showing little sign of ill-ease and providing articulate answers. In both cases the researchers were known to the respondents previously and this made it easier to discuss the more serious topics

freely. It does not appear too that the difference in race, culture and class between the researchers and respondents posed inhibitions to the latter, indicating that a dialogue method can be used successfully by outsiders to a community. The particular strength of these two dialogues lay in the educative impact on the participants. The squatter revealed how he had been left behind as many others in the race for progress - "how can I pay \$70 for the rent [for government-sponsored low-cost housing] when I am earning \$240 a month? And with water and electricity bills to be paid!" and "the people keep stretching their necks waiting and waiting for the promises to materialise". The fisherman, on the other hand, talked about the conflicts in his local co-operative due to corruption and a lack of consciousness ("human education is deficient"). At the same time, both squatter and fisherman learnt from the dialogues that there were individuals and organizations who were concerned about their problems. For the fisherman, the dialogue was a specially happy occasion as it was the first time he had Chinese visitors to his house during the Muslim New Year.

#### Guidelines Towards Better Dialogues

Most dialogues begin well if the correct approach is used. It is difficult to specify what a correct approach exactly is but generally it means an approach which is able to set the respondent at ease by not making the person nervous, suspicious, overtly cautious, antagonistic or feel unequal. The way in which a researcher carries himself, his dress, the terms he uses to address the respondent - these are some aspects of an approach which are crucial in framing for the respondent an impression that the researcher is a <sup>worthwhile</sup> person to converse with. Other aspects include sitting where the villager sits, eating and drinking what is offered, removing one's shoes. A female researcher, unless she knows the people very well should not shake hands with the male villagers; just a smile, a nod and some good wishes will do. Likewise with a male researcher when he meets the women villagers.

All communities have their particular social and cultural sensitivities which must be respected or else the dialogue will not get far or even be abruptly ended. It is usually worth the while for a researcher to invest some time and be acquainted with these sensitivities before he begins work. It is even better if before he conducts his dialogue, he is introduced by a person familiar to or respected by the villager. An introduction of this nature will often lay the basis for hospitality and a more frank dialogue than would be the case if he attempted to approach the villager himself, especially if he is a foreigner.

It might be added here that dialogues need not always be "formally" arranged or set up. Good dialogues can arise out of casual conversations struck up at the marketplace, in a coffee shop or at the bus or taxi stand. The main disadvantage of such dialogues is that they are liable to be discontinued as soon as the respondent has finished his business. Also, unlike in a more structured dialogue, the researcher will have little or no opportunity of obtaining information on the age, education, occupation, social class, etc. of the respondent. Such prior information is usually useful in helping guide along a dialogue, skirting topics sensitive to the respondent and evaluating the quality of the dialogue.

Once an approach has been made, the opening lines of a dialogue are quite important in establishing rapport between the villager and researcher. Most survey questionnaire methods require the researcher to go straight away to the content of the questionnaire. Few, if any, pleasantries are exchanged and the villager usually is filled with distrust (although this might be concealed) and discomfort (this is more visible). Both parties clearly want the interview to be over as soon as possible; in the researcher's case he is concerned with the number of interviews he is conducting per day and with making sure that this particular interview does not last longer than "necessary": with the villager, the feeling is the less said the better. The establishment of

rapport in a survey questionnaire interview (even for the limited purpose of obtaining good data) has always remained an ideal which is unattainable because of the contradictions in the method between regarding people as a piece of data-providing machinery and wanting them to tell about their human problems. In the dialogue method, a researcher wanting to establish rapport would begin by making small talk. Most people respond to positive remarks made about the children or family. A quick glance at the surroundings usually provides useful opening lines: "Your fruit trees look in very good condition" or "That's a pretty photograph". As much time should be spent on such talk as felt necessary to build this crucial initial bond between researcher and villager.

After the villager is relaxed and talking easily, the more serious topics can be broached. The approach to these topics should be through a subject familiar to the villager. "I see the crops in the field are soon to be harvested. Do you think it's going to be a good harvest?" The above line could be the introduction to a discussion on agricultural problems and development in the village. Or - "I noticed that the road to this village is unpaved and rather bumpy. Is it the same with the other villages in the area?" Abstract concepts or terms unfamiliar to the villager should be avoided. Most villagers will have received little formal education and they will only understand and respond to plain and simple ideas. Concepts such as "material and non-material", "basic needs", "a good society" have to be recast in the local dialect or language and much needs to be done in language translation to ensure that the message is being sent and received without distortion.

During the dialogue, no recording of any kind should be done. Even an unobtrusive notebook and small points noted here and there will disrupt a smooth and free dialogue. This means that a researcher must have (or develop) a strong memory power and should take the earliest opportunity to write out the dialogue. In writing out the dialogue, he would also do well to record the following details in order to organise his material and improve on the methodological and substantive aspects:

- date, time and place of dialogue;
- some biographical data on the respondent and his village;
- the general reaction of the respondent (apart from what he says) to the dialogue;
- an evaluation of the dialogue, in particular of its weaknesses.

Just as important as these procedures are the attitudes the researcher has towards the dialogue and the respondent. The researcher must be humble and when having a dialogue must go with the mind that he is going to share and learn something. Indeed there are many things to learn from the people. The researcher must always show positive views of the people and behave accordingly. Any touch of arrogance or disdain, any hint that the researcher feels that the respondents are not his equals (a villager will acknowledge a researcher's greater social status or economic wealth and be deferential towards him but this does not mean that the villager regards himself as inferior) and the entire dialogue will go astray. Most villagers have many problems but what they do not want is pity for this would only hurt their dignity. To be able to empathise with these people in their struggle for survival and yet avoid patronising them is not easy. Finally the researcher should develop a sensitivity to non-verbal features. Grass-roots people express situations and problems in very simple words. When words are not spoken, a smile, a shrug of the shoulders, a tossing of a head is frequently meant to signify something stronger.

#### The Potential for Dialogues in Malaysia

In 1975, out of a total of 1.9 million households in Peninsular Malaysia, an estimated 44% or 835,000 households were considered to be poor.<sup>3</sup> These poor households included farmers, fishermen, plantation labourers,

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3 The poverty line income employed to distinguish poor households from other households is a monthly income that is necessary to cover minimum nutritional requirements and essential non-food expenses to cover a decent standard of living. These figures are obtainable from the Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980, Government Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1976, p. 73.

other agricultural labourers, mining workers, construction workers and other urban workers from all the three major ethnic groups in the country - the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

All these people belong to what may be referred to as the under-class in Malaysian society, unable to meet their minimal requirements in nutrition, housing, clothing, transport, education, recreation and other needs and putting up with low standards of living. As a group they are also underprivileged in the sense that they have little access to the planners and government. Thus their views of what kind of society they want and the changes they see as necessary in the present system to enable them to reach their desired goals are ignored. Much scope exists for dialogue work in Malaysia amongst this group to provide another method to the more conventional ones for their views to emerge and be heard.

Case 1 : Dialogue with a Squatter

Notes:

The dialogue was held on 25th August 1978 at 5.30 pm. in a squatter village in Batu Uban on Penang Island.

The researched is a Malay worker aged about 40 years, employed by the Local Council Authorities as a cleaner. He is married and has four children. The family live in a simple wooden and thatch house which has one living-cum-bed room and one small kitchen. The house is rented and is in poor condition compared with many other houses in the kampung.

At the time of the field visit, the worker whom we shall identify as Pakchik<sup>4</sup> was resting in the bed-room. It is the month of Ramadan in the Muslim calendar and he looks very tired, having gone without food and drink for most of the day. He apologises for his condition and that of his house but invites the researchers to sit with him.

After exchanging a few pleasantries the dialogue begins.

Dialogue:

Researcher (R) : Pakchik knows how to play the tambourine?

Pakchik (P) : I teach some children here to sing nasyid.<sup>5</sup>

R : How much does each one cost? The tambourine?

P : About \$60 each. Pakchik doesn't know how to play, pakchik merely teaches the children how to sing nasyid.

R : According to pakchik, is western music better than the traditional music here?

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4 A Malay word meaning "uncle" or "elder". Used commonly to show respect when speaking to an old Malay man.

5 Islamic hymns.

- P : I am not an expert in music. I can't tell.
- R : Does pakchik feel traditional music should be encouraged?
- P : I can't tell, western music and traditional music both have aspects that are good and bad.
- R : Would pakchik allow your children to learn western music?
- P : No, my children already are weak in their schoolwork. Just history, geography and so on ... already they cannot cope. What more if there is another thing - music!
- R : Pakchik, what do you think are the characteristics of a good society? What are the elements that make a good society?
- P : (Calling to the son) Explain to me what this is, what's the meaning of this question, son?  
(His son is sitting at the doorstep leading to the kitchen. There is no answer from him)
- R : What does pakchik consider a good society should be? What are the characteristics that make a good society?
- P : (Pondering) What are the characteristics ... that make a good society ... ? There must not be greed, bad desires, (haloba) absence of humanitarian feelings!
- R : What else?
- P : I think that's it, human beings must not be greedy and have bad desires. This then would lead to the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer. Those greedy people e.g. they already possess some riches, still they are not satisfied; they want more and more, more and more, they don't think about the poorer people.



R : Why do they behave this way? What are the ways whereby we can remedy this situation?

P : These people are greedy. That's why we Malays say "peribadi, budi bahasa"<sup>6</sup> is very important. From young, my children are taught not to be greedy, not to take other people's things, not even just a small guava fruit from the neighbour's garden. Although this is a small matter but if from young, they learn to take people's things without permission as they grow up they would take bigger and bigger objects - to take small things I also consider as 'stealing'. The parents must teach their children properly. If a child steals an egg and the mother does not scold him but breaks the egg and cooks it for him, he would be encouraged to steal. As for my children, I don't allow them to take anybody's things. I am very strict, you ask my children and see.  
(He pointed to his younger son sitting on the bed.)

R : Yes, you're right, the children must be taught from small otherwise when they grow big, they might become robbers. So besides the question of "peribadi, budi bahasa" what are the other characteristics that a good society must have? Just now pakchik stated that the rich being greedy will continue to acquire more and more although they are already rich. What could be carried out so that this won't happen?

P : That's what I say. For example, announcements are made over radio and T.V. as to what should be done to bring about a better society. It is said that smoking is not good, dangerous to health, that it can cause cancer. On the other hand, advertisements of this cigarette and that cigarette are still allowed. What is this?

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6 Good behaviour and good deeds.

R : So how do you prevent this from happening?

P : Difficult. The children must be taught from young. That's why pakchik now teaches the children to read nasyid. Those who are big cannot be cured anymore. Those who are still young can still be rescued. Just like "puasa"<sup>7</sup>. These are teachings in the Koran that all must puasa so that we can understand the situation of the poor when they are short of food for several days at a stretch! But still there are people who don't obey, who were caught! But what's the use? Heh! After they are put in jail they would puasa, when they come out they start eating again. So what! But in Thailand, ha! Then they know, they would become bongkok (hunched-back) when they come out from the jail.

R : Ha! Ha! So you know much from Thailand.

P : No, I heard from friends. Look at many of the youths nowadays, many have become drug-addicts! Some university students also! What is this? A religion like Islam teaches them not to misbehave, not to drink, not to take drugs, not to be greedy!

R : Every religion teaches us to be good. This sort of thing happens not only with the Islamic religion but also with the other religions too.

P : That's it.

R : Pakchik is very faithful to your religion?

P : Yes.

R : What do you think pakchik? Are material needs more important than spiritual needs?

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7 Abstinance from food and drink during the daylight hours by Muslims during the month of Ramadan.

P : Spiritual needs are more important but material needs are also important. Yes, material things are also important in life! But we must get our living by honest means, never be greedy. Things that are illegal (haram) should not be made legal (halalkan). According to the Islamic religion, if we are paid for 8 hours, we must work a full 8 hours. And we must have time to pray to our Allah, we must not neglect our Allah.

R : What does pakchik consider as basic necessities in life? House, water, food ... ?

P : Yes, house, water, food ... not that I don't consider material needs as unimportant, I also want material things if I can get them but all through honest means.

R : But prices have been going up. The price of chicken for example, is higher by 60-70 cents although there are more and more people rearing chickens in farms.

P : Everything-lah! I just don't know what has happened to this country! Just look at the price of rice and sugar. Not very far from Malaysia, just at Padang Besar near the Malaysian Thai border, the rice is so much cheaper and the sugar also cheaper. Why are the prices here high?

R : Through middlemen? Has the government done something?

P : Yes, through radio here and T.V. there we hear they are going to do this, going to do that .... But those are the things they say, leaving us behind to stretch our necks - longer and longer - waiting for such things to materialize!

R : Isn't the country progressing very fast? Factories here, road there, bridge here?

P : Yes, progressing. (Solemn) Yes! That's how they measure progress. They don't care about the poor people. They want to build a road here, the poor people have to move. Then some years later the government wants to use the place there for development, the poor people have to move again.

R : Yes. It is not easy to understand sometimes.

P : Yes, I am surprised too! We have progress here and there but this does not mean the people are better off. We have progress but the people are suffering more and more. Surprising indeed!

R : Why does this happen? Can something be done?

P : What can be done? We can talk (bercakap), but what would be the result? I work as a labourer. One day, my colleagues and I were cleaning a road when a lorry came and dirtied it with mud. We complained to our supervisor to see the lorry driver to ask him not to do it. Our supervisor saw the driver and the lorry drove off. After a while it came back and dirtied the road again. This time there was no protest from the supervisor!

R : Ha!

P : Everywhere, these greedy people/here and there and we the poor people, what can we do? We are suppressed! (He lowered his shoulders as if he had a big weight on him). Yes, how can we move? It's not only the poor. The University students protested the last time. What happened? Ha!

R : The Baling case?

P : Yes! They were locked up!

R : So there is nothing that we can do to improve the situation?

/group

P : Yes, we can talk among ourselves and repeat what we say but what can be done?

R : In some cases we would have the right to voice our grievances, haven't we?

P : It is difficult. How? It is difficult to get proof. Just look at a sundry shop. An inspector came to check on the prices, and the towkay<sup>8</sup> is found to be guilty of something. After the inspector emerged from the back-room of the shop, he did not charge the towkay with anything but walked away quietly. I saw that, but what do you think I can do?

R : Is pakchik's land affected by the coming development over here?

P : (Smiling) I had wanted to avoid talking about this but since you have asked, I have to answer. There are people who own this land, they have lots of land but they have no 'budi bahasa'<sup>9</sup>. Let's say I want to build a house on this piece of land. I want to pay the land-owner \$500, he refuses; I give him \$1,000, this is also refused. \$2,000 is also not acceptable. What he would do is to build small huts on his own and rent to the poor people for \$70 to \$80 a month.

R : I have seen a small attap hut up there renting for \$50 a month.

P : That's what the land-owner wants to do!

R : Is this state land or private land?

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8 A shop proprietor

9 Good deeds, human feelings

P : This could be considered government land because it is within oh ... I forget how many yards from the high tide level.

R : So the situation would be bad for the people.

P : That's what I say, the poor people are often exploited. So far we haven't received any notice! There are so called cheap houses for us poor people - but how cheap are they? \$27,000! The cheapest is \$14,000! How can I pay \$70 for the rent when I am earning \$240 a month?  
And with water and electricity bills to be paid! What do I have?

R : Yes, you would have very little for your children's education!

P : That's it! The poor becomes even poorer. The rich becomes even richer.  
Development is wanted but the people are not taken care of. That's what I say. There's propaganda through the T.V. and radio and the people keep stretching their necks waiting and waiting for the promises to materialize. We have progress, but the people are even more impoverished, what progress is that?

Case 2 : Dialogue with a Fisherman

Notes:

The dialogue was held on 4th September 1978 at 10.00 am. in Bagan, Bukit Tambun, a fishing village of about 60 households in Province Wellesley, North-West Malaysia.

The researched is a middle-aged Malay fishermen (initials IK) well-respected in the village since he is chairman of the mosque committee and also of the Fishermen's Co-operative. He has a wife whose father is a Chinese and mother a Malay. Because of this the couple can speak Hokkien quite fluently. They have 2 children who are not of schooling age yet. Earning about US\$60 a month, IK can be considered as belonging to the poverty group in the country. (In 1975, of the 41,600 households in Peninsular Malaysia dependent on fishing as the major source of income, 63% of them were estimated to live in poverty). Lately his village has been affected by pollution from a nearby palm-oil factory which has killed fishes, prawns and cockles in the river. The group of researchers included staff members of the Consumers Association of Penang, a voluntary organization, who are making their third visit to the village.

At the time of the field visit, IK was away, chatting with some friends in a neighbouring house. His wife went to look for him and called him back to the house. After exchanging greetings (it was the first day of the Malay New Year), the dialogue which was conducted in Malay began.

Dialogue:

IK : (On hearing that the group has just finished visiting some other fishermen friends and will be visiting some padi farmers later). The fishermen are the rougher people. We talk and shout about what we feel, using very blunt words. The padi planters are very soft, good-mannered and shy people.

R : I did not realize that, I find them more quiet.

IK : I would like to know whether CAP is a government body.

R : No, it is independent from the government.

IK : I wonder also how many staff members are found in CAP?

R : There are over 30 staff members in CAP.

IK : Oh, I see, I am interested in knowing more about the organization. Sometimes ... oh, (turning to one member of the group) could I know how much of a salary you receive?

R : I am not working there at present. I was there two years ago.

IK : I was thinking about this sometimes - about the United Nations. I think the UN must get itself interested in the poverty problems of the underdeveloped countries. Take for example Kedah where the farmers are suffering from drought, many people are so poor and pollution from certain factories is endangering the crops of certain padi areas. I read this in the newspapers. Of course I don't know much because I have received only primary 5 Malay education. So whatever I know would be from the Malay newspapers. I wonder whether CAP receives money from the UN? Whether CAP can help to solve the poverty problems of the people? I was wondering too whether there is a section of CAP where the organization can channel some energy into the poverty problems of the people?

R : CAP is very concerned about the consumer problems but the organization has no allocations to start projects for the farmers or fishermen. But as long as there is a consumer issue - e.g. pollution that affects people, CAP will take it up.



IK : Changing the subject, in Malaysia, I feel that the various races must encourage mixed-marriages so that there would be greater harmony. Don't you think so? It is now a modern world. I have friends who marry people from other races and get into trouble because of religion whereas others do not bother so much. Each one should follow his own religion. I think as long as the husbands and wives can agree there won't be much problem. Like a friend of mine who has passed away, on certain occasions his Chinese wife and son would stay with her grandmother. So they celebrate the New Year twice! - the Malay New Year and Chinese New Year.

R : IK, just now you talked about mixed-marriages in order to have greater harmony in our country. What do you think then should a good society be?

IK : I think we should start with family education. We as parents must start educating our children from small so that we build a high level of discipline in our children and when they grow up, they would be disciplined. Also I think education in school and in universities is very important so that they know how to read well and think well. I think if our people are all well educated, disciplined, think well and think correctly, then it is possible to have a good society.

R : IK, do you think that education is the only way to achieve a good society?

IK : Yes, as I see it there is no other way. Take me, I received only 5 years of primary education. I can only read Malay and what I know would be from Malay papers and Malay books. I can't understand the white man's language and I have missed so much. I think people must come into contact all the time, have discussions, meetings etc. so that we can understand one another's problems. For example, the university students must go to the villages to see the problems of the people and do something or tell the people what should be done.

- R : But there are many university students who care only about their books, their money and their status!
- IK : Oh? But I find many university students nowadays do go to the kampungs to ask about the problems of the people?
- R : Yes. But some of them want information to write their reports to get better grades.  
(IK and his wife listen with eyes wide open).
- IK : This means that these people have studied but are still not educated?! I feel that the people must have religion too so that they would be disciplined because all religions teach people to be good. Right or not? We must think about the teachings of God so that we won't go astray.
- R : IK, do you think that spiritual wealth is more important than material wealth?
- IK : This is a difficult question, let me think a bit. I think material wealth is important. We see many people who get into trouble, or are suffering because they are stricken with poverty. But let's say if someone is sick, has stomach cancer, what do you think is the cause?
- R : There could be many causes?
- IK : For example, if we say we are able to eat this biscuit, (he took a piece of biscuit and chewed in his mouth) where does this biscuit come from? From the flour, where does the flour come from? From a type of plant, where do these plants come from? Don't know! So there must be somebody who is more powerful than us who decides on things. God is more important because what we have comes from God.
- R : Coming back to the question of a good society. What do you think do people require in order to make a good society?

IK : (Thinking deeply) Take our body; we have hands, we have legs, bodies, hair, eyes, nose, ears and other organs. When one organ is hurt, for example, my finger-tip is cut, my whole body would feel uncomfortable. If the people in a society can feel that way when they see someone starving, when they feel as if an organ of their own bodies is malfunctioning, then the society would be a good one. If the rich people can feel that the poor people are also a part of themselves, there would be a good society. But you look at our society, - the rich do not feel for the poor, the poor do not feel for the poorer. I am only giving my opinion, I do not know whether this is right. (Turning to a researcher) Your eyes are so bright and exploring - as if you have studied psychology. (Turning to his wife, he said, "you know people who study psychology can read people's minds. Before you say something, he or she would already know about it." His wife smiled). - What do you study in the university?

R : I studied Social Science. I did not study psychology as my major, so I know very little psychology. IK, what would be the ways which would enable human beings to function as you have explained just now?

IK : I think this has to do with up-bringing, education and co-operation. For Malaysia, I think we must set up as many genuine co-operatives as possible. Teachers' co-operatives, farmers' co-operatives, fishermen's co-operatives, soldiers' co-operatives, hawkers' co-operatives - co-operatives in every field. Within one co-operative the people would come together, do something, do projects together, then they would understand one another's problems and help one another. Then the different co-operatives would have representatives who would come together and discuss their problems and share views. Thus the whole country would be made up of various small co-operatives and unite to form a big co-operative.

- R : How do you form a good co-operative? For example, IK's co-operative, how is it run?
- IK : Our co-operative has some conflicts. Again I would say, human education is deficient. Some people want to acquire this and that so there is much conflict between the committee members. ("Acquire" here implies the use of dishonest methods). That's why, the uneducated people after getting money, greed for more money. This actually shouldn't be done at all. (This was an oblique reference to the conflict in the Bukit Tambun co-operative where some committee members were alleged to be corrupt).
- R : If human beings must not be filled with greed, what do you think are the basic needs in life?
- IK : I think the most basic need would be to have rukun (harmony, concern, love) in the family as well as in the neighbourhood. The human being must also have harmony with the environment. Houses must not be so congested. Look at the flats. They are so congested that human beings shut in such places would really go crazy.
- R : Yes.
- IK : I think each family must have an area of about 150 square yards in order to have a small house and a distance between each house. Otherwise, there is no rukun. In each compound must be planted some trees, grass, flowers to have a soothing feeling. There must be rukun with the environment too. You know I have received very little education. My wife too. But my wife's younger brothers and sisters received much education. Both of us, ha, the less educated, come together. That's why I am stupid now.
- R : That's not true.

IK : (Wistfully) You know, I always came out first in the class during my 5 years of education. However, all my friends had money to take a bus to go to school. I had to cycle - a broken bicycle, you know, for a few miles and each day I felt very tired. One day I told my father to let me take a bus to school. My father was angry and stopped me from going to school from then. You know how much I have suffered? Coming from a poor family? My father's house was really a torn one; it looked as if it would tumble down any time! I can still remember when I was small during one Hari Raya (New Year) when my mother had only 50 cents in her purse and my father did not get any fish on that day. My mother cried the whole night. All of us went hungry and slept with empty stomachs. Then when I stopped schooling I worked in a coffee shop for \$10 a month. When I was older, I assisted my father catching fish. Now we are a little better off. You Chinese, surely you won't have experienced that. You are rich people.

R : No, we are not rich people. Not all Chinese are rich.

IK : I think the Chinese are not as badly off as the Malays economically.

R : Maybe IK hasn't been to the poor Chinese' areas?

(Silence) IK, you talked about your life just now. But you missed something, ha!

IK : What?

R : You didn't tell us how you met your wife!

(All laughing away!)

IK : My parents chose her for me. Before I got married, I hadn't seen my wife. On the wedding day I found, oh, my wife looked like this! Ha! Ha!

IK's : Although I am from Pulau Pangkor, which is a great distance  
wife away we were still able to meet. It is what we call jodohlah  
(fated marriage ties). Take the cakes, don't just keep  
talking.

R : As it is late, we had better go back now. Thank you.

IK : (As all are going out) Thank you for coming. It is the first  
time in my life to have Chinese visitors coming to my house  
during the New Year. I really feel honoured.

Case 3 : Dialogue with a Labourer

Notes:

The dialogue was held on 25th July 1978 at around 4.00 pm. in Kampung Liang Seng, North-West Malaysia.

The researched is a young Malaysian Chinese man in his late 20s. His parents own 4 acres of cocoa and coconut smallholding and he works as a labourer in the nearby oil-palm estate. The family can be considered to be of lower middle-class status in the Malaysian context. The man has received 6 years of primary school education but he reads many books written in Mandarin and also reads Chinese newspapers everyday.

He was relaxing in a coffee shop and returned to his house to meet the researcher. The researcher explained to him what she was doing and he expressed his willingness to have a dialogue. The dialogue was conducted in Mandarin and Teochew.

Dialogue:

Researcher (R) : What do you think is essential for a good society?

Young Man (YM) : To have equality.

R : Equality in what sense?

YM : To have equal economic wealth.

R : What do you think are the basic needs of human beings?

YM : To have enough food and clothing to keep alive. But in our present society, the capitalist society, it is impossible to have equality because although we earn our living today, we are not certain of our living tomorrow. So if we don't compete and grasp more wealth today, we might not be able to survive tomorrow!

R : What do you think our society should be then? How do we bring about a good society?

YM : A commune type of society where the people are sure of tomorrow's living. All would have enough food and clothing under the commune system. Not like now, there is no such thing as enough in our society. Everybody hopes to get more and more wealth. There is no end to this because everybody must grab what he can today, tomorrow he might be unemployed, his family might starve. Is this called "greed"? Of course it is not. It is insecurity that forces them to act that way. Do you think Malaysia can have a good society?

(A short discussion on the need to have a change in the system, the role of the masses and the attitudes of the Chinese Malaysian community then takes place).

YM : It's true, many of the Chinese care only for themselves. They are very individualistic. You know what, I think the Chinese could only cooperate when they are "pressed flat to the ground", then they would cooperate and mind you, by that time it would be too late!

R : What do you think about the Indians in Malaysia?

YM : Oh! The Indians, they are the worst-off group! To compare them - Oh! They are worse than the dogs of some rich fellows! So many of the Indians here have to struggle like mad. They look for wild vegetables outside our house here. Many of them have no money to buy food. I really pity them. Compared with our situation, we are better off than them. They are the most miserable group in Malaysia. You visit our place here and the Indian areas too?



R : Yes. I do.

YM : You visit the Malay kampungs too?

R : Yes.

YM : How's their condition? Are they better off then before?

R : Some of them are.

YM : That's how the present policy is wrong! It is trying to create a rich Malay capitalist class. How can we have a good society? In this situation the richer Malay capitalist class would pressure the poor Malay class. One day surely the poor Malays will rise up and protest against the government!

The political parties - the ruling and the opposition parties are also not representing the masses of the working and sweating class. The party that really worked for the working class has been suppressed and parties that work for the working class in the future would also be suppressed! How can we arrive at a good society? The last time we had a good political party, it was suppressed. The opposition parties now are also equally capitalistic. You are educated. I am not, I have only standard 5 education. Do you think it is possible that one day the whole world would have the commune type of system?

R : It is not easy. Look at the USSR. What has happened there?

YM : Going back to capitalism!

(He thinks and ponders for a long time).

R : Thank you, it is late. We had better make a move.

(Later the young man met us again and invited us to drink in a coffee shop but as it was turning dark, we decided to move on).

Case 4 : Dialogue with a Rubber Tapper

Notes:

The dialogue was held in a rubber-plantation in Gurun, Kedah state at around 4.30 pm. on 31st July 1978.

The respondent is a Malaysian Indian woman, in her mid-forties, with a dozen children. Her husband is not working. Her eldest daughter works as a weeder. She workes as a rubber tapper to support the family. The quarters provided by the plantation owner is too congested for the family. The children sleep on the cemented floor of the sitting-room.

The respondent was at the doorstep when the researcher and the interpreter arrived.

The researched looked tired and impatient. She was also suspicious of the tape recorder placed on a chair.

Dialogue:

(Q) : Are you doing high or low-tapping?<sup>10</sup>

(A) : Low-tapping.

(Q) : How long do you take to tap 600 trees?

(A) : I finish tapping at around 10.00 am.

(Q) : At what time do you start tapping?

(A) : Around 6.30 am.

(Q) : What are the problems of the people here?

(A) : Electricity problem and housing problem.

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<sup>10</sup> Refers to tapping positions. High tapping done on older trees is much more exhausting.

- (Q) : Do you know that the people here are asking for electricity through the management?
- (A) : I don't know.
- (Q) : What do you think a good society should be?
- (A) : Society? There's no society here ... I can't understand.
- (Q) : What do you think a good community should be?
- (A) : Community? I don't know.
- (Q) : Let's say how can the rubber-tappers here be happy?
- (A) : The rubber-tappers here? Stay happily? How? I don't know.
- (Q) : Amongst your neighbourhood, how can you live happily?
- (A) : Yes, we live happily here.
- (Q) : What are the problems here? Neighbourhood problem?
- (A) : No problem about neighbourhood. My problem is that I am financially broke. My family needs 6 gantangs<sup>11</sup> of rice in a month. I earn merely \$140/-. My daughter works as a weeder. How can we get enough?
- (Q) : Have the authorities come to do anything for the people here?
- (A) : I don't know.
- (Q) : In what way do you think the people here can live happily?
- (A) : We must have good houses to stay in and have land to cultivate.
- (Q) : Can the land in front of your quarters here be cultivated?

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11 A local measure of weight equivalent to one English gallon or 3.6 kg.

- (A) : Not in front of the houses here. The land a bit further from here can be cultivated.
- (Q) : Do you know any way you can get land?
- (A) : I can, provided I have money.
- (Q) : Have you heard about FELDA<sup>12</sup> schemes?
- (A) : I heard, it is happening somewhere, very far from there.
- (Q) : What are the basic things that one must have?
- (A) : One must have a decent house and a piece of land.
- (Q) : Land for what purposes?
- (A) : To put up a house and plant crops for self-consumption.
- (Q) : If you children grow up and they also want to cultivate the land, then you would have to divide up the land. Would there be enough for self-consumption?
- (A) : I am not going to divide up the land. I want my children to work outside.
- (Q) : Don't you prefer your children to work on the land?
- (A) : I prefer them not to work on the land.
- (Q) : Why don't you like your children to work on the land?
- (A) : If my children were to work on the land, there won't be enough for them. When my husband and I get old, we would work on the land. My children would work elsewhere so that they would be able to save money.

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12 A government-sponsored land resettlement and development agency.

(Q) ; What do you think about the other races here?

(A) : I don't like to comment. I don't want to comment on the different races.

(Q) : What about the Malays?

(A) : I don't want to talk about the other races. I want to talk about my own race. The Indians are very jealous of everything. When some Indians get richer, the poor ones would try to topple them.

(Q) : Is that so?

(A) : Yes.

(Q) : Do you believe in God?

(A) : Yes.

(Q) : God and wealth, which is more important?

(A) : Both are important.

(Q) : Which is more important?

(A) : God is more important. Everything after all depends on God. Oh! I am quite hard up for time. I am going to buy some rice for dinner; the rice container in the house is empty now.

(Q) : O.K. Aunty. Thank you so much. Just one more question. Why do you think people drink tuak?<sup>13</sup>

(A) : It is because they are tired and sad and they want to forget about all their problems.

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13 Fermented coconut milk. Indian plantation workers especially, consume large quantities of this potent drink.