

In situ off-farm work in the transport industry among oil palm smallholders in Sabah: Negotiating the borders of licit and illegal activities

Abstract

This paper examines the informal transport sector within the smallholder oil palm economies of Kinabatangan and Lahad Datu areas of eastern Sabah by looking at the metaphoric border that is constructed between licit and illegal activities that take place on roads. It describes the work of two groups of drivers, namely, those who are themselves smallholders who provide a crucial service to the community in getting their fresh fruit bunches to mills on time; and the *piret* (pirate) taxis who transport passengers including foreign nationals, some of whom are illegal workers. Many have been driving for some time, thereby challenging the notion about off-farm work as providing a temporary safety net to smallholders. Drivers whose permits may be current may have used illegal means (such as *meminggir* - logging without licence), to accumulate the initial funds for acquiring their vehicles and necessary permits. Moreover, their clients are unconcerned about their 'illegal' status. Consequently, this paper maintains that there is no agreed-upon norms about legality/illegality, and law enforcement being uneven, the zone in which drivers operate is a fluid one. © 2009 The Author Journal compilation © 2009 Victoria University of Wellington.