

HHH was a four-year initiative by LEAP-Forever Sabah to explore systemic ways to improve outcomes for communities and the environment from infrastructure development in Sabah and Malaysian Borneo with the Pan Borneo Highway as a case study.

We built Coalition 3H comprising ten civil society organisations to share learning and unify voices, and we engaged with the relevant government agencies and other stakeholders.

Our inter-disciplinary teams gathered available data, studied project design, and assessed outcomes through field work, consultations, and spatial analyses often in partnership with local impacted communities.



We listened to the various players in Sabah's infrastructural development process to learn with them where problems emerge and how they might be solved.

We shared in real time our analyses of issues – and their potential solutions – with the responsible authorities to explore how better information might improve Sabah's performance.

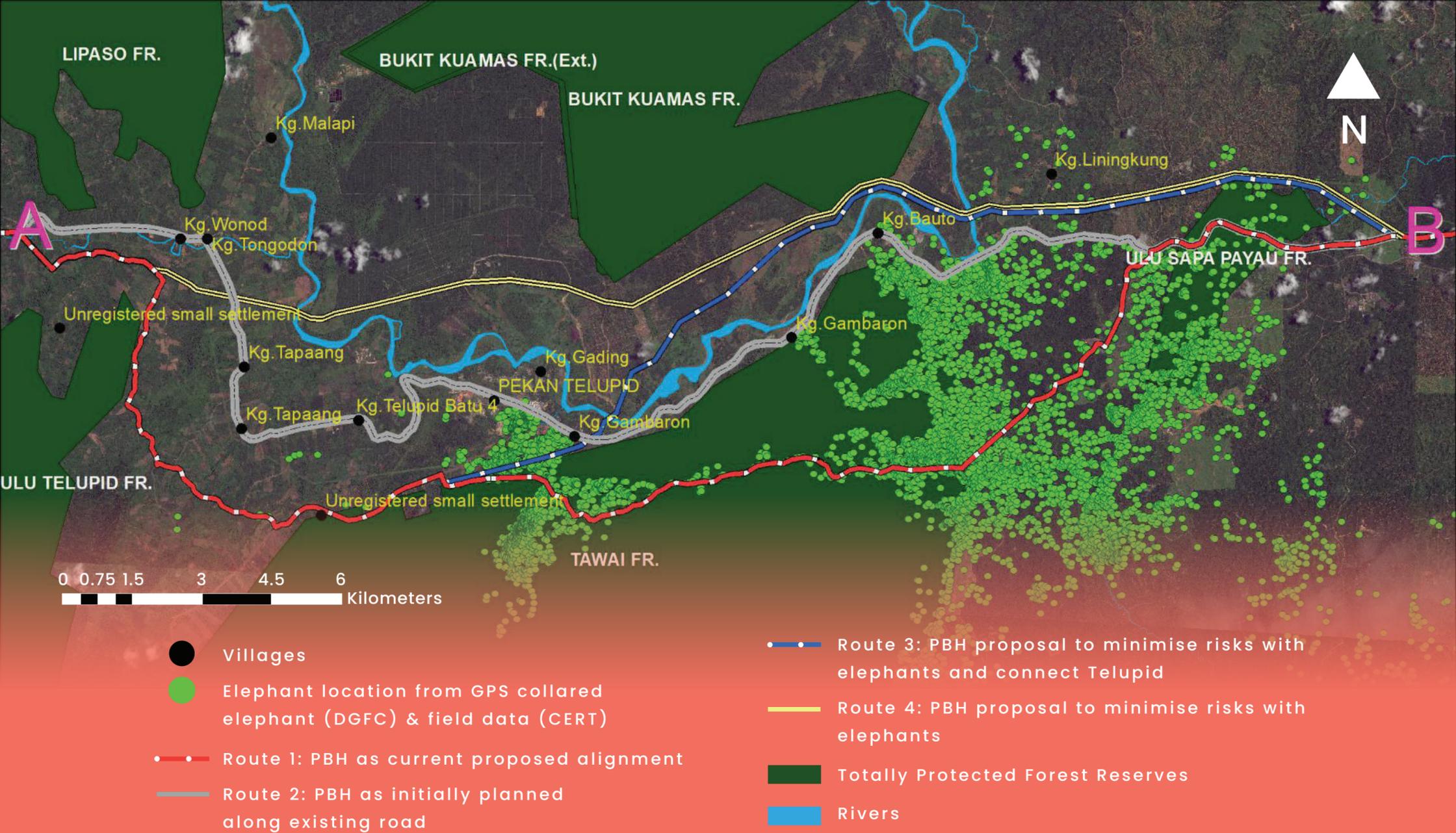
The public keenly engaged in this process, through print and social media, through film, and through on-line forums; Sabahans are eager for infrastructural development but quickly concerned when planning fails to avoid unnecessary social and environmental costs. Youth, especially, believe new paradigms are necessary and possible.

IMPROVING PLANNING

Sabah and Malaysia could take full advantage of the knowledge of its researchers, civil society and local communities to ensure federal and state investments achieve the highest benefits while avoiding the worst problems; this can be achieved by establishing a Joint (inter-sector) Committee to contribute information and ideas early in the planning process.

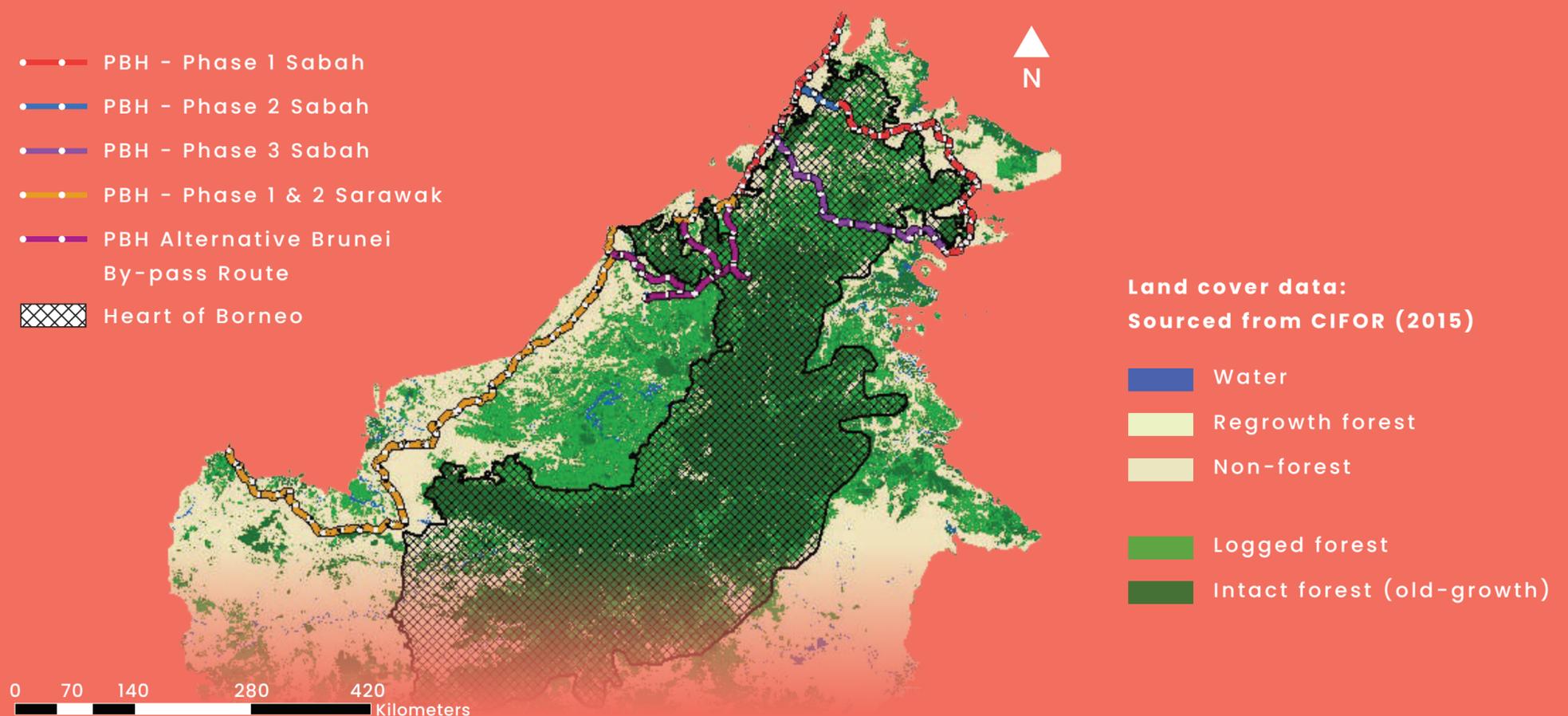


Holistic and locally informed multi-stakeholder planning can find solutions for harmonising development and environment objectives (such that, for example, roads do not damage tourism potential or reduce state rice self-sufficiency); this requires early and full consultation with local stakeholders.



A more engaged and less marginalized civil society could help mobilise federal funding for sustainable development investments in Sabah, rather than opposing poorly conceived projects. Civil society could also call for improved balance in federal budget allocations between investment and maintenance and strengthen oversight of construction standards, so that, for example, new roads do not quickly fall into disrepair.

Sabah's Species Action Plans and other environmental policies could be respected fully in approvals of infrastructural development projects; Sabah could no longer approve major roads and other infrastructure in protected areas and endangered species' hotspots.



STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENT IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Mega Projects have unintended impacts at large scales. Therefore, "Special" whole project EIAs are needed to identify and tackle those issues that cannot be addressed in individual Work Package EIAs.

EIAs are too late in the project process to be fully useful; mitigation is often more expensive and less effective than avoiding high risk areas. Environmental and local social impacts could therefore be made integral to project planning and included from the start, so that these aspects do not wait until after project plans are fully developed and become an obstacle to implementation.

EIA Terms of Reference could be strengthened around identifying hydrological issues (drainage, flooding, siltation, tidal movements).



EIAs often neglect social impacts on local communities. Sabah could develop a Social & Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) approach that includes fruitful consultation with local communities rooted in Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

The Environment Protection Department (EPD) needs additional resources to monitor and enforce EIA provisions (assisted by civil society on the basis of greater EIA transparency); contractors and consultants could be held to account legally and financially for failures to identify issues, design effective mitigation, or to follow their approved EIAs.

Sabah could explore legal mechanisms to enhance enforcement of environmental law, such as extending “locus standi” or establishing “rights of nature”.

IMPROVING SOCIAL IMPACTS

An early-stage consultative planning process could identify alternative sites or routes with lower social impacts to minimise displacement of local communities from their homes, communities, lands & livelihoods; and the SEIA would then fine tune and mitigate this impact at the final design stage.



The compensation and translocation process for those who do have to be displaced could be rendered more transparent and less disruptive; compensation could include covering buildings, and other improvements (such as orchards) for long term residents who lack land title.

Mega-projects could include, at the design stage, the creation of income earning opportunities for local communities (e.g. highways could establish parking and concession areas for local produce sales and eateries rather than only lots for major commercial vending chains).



SEEING THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN ASSET

Sabah's natural assets could be recognised as its greatest comparative advantage economically as well as culturally; the environment could no longer be regarded as a special interest and an acceptable and inevitable "cost" to development. Instead planning could engage stakeholders in civil society, business and local communities to co-design development around the environment as a valuable asset.

Alternative locations could be found for major projects instead of damaging Forest Reserves and endangered species hotspots (e.g. for Bornean Elephants and Proboscis Monkeys); where infrastructure projects are already implemented in such areas, imaginative and effective mitigation measures could now be pursued.

Planning could recognise that infrastructure can drive habitat fragmentation so careful planning is needed around location and wildlife protection/crossing mitigation measures.