

THE **EDGE** ANALYTICS SPECIAL ISSUE

ESG 2024

ENVIRONMENTAL . SOCIAL . GOVERNANCE



**A
BIG
RETHINK**

CALL TO ACTION: REGENERATIVE FARMING WITH THE ORANG ASLI

BY TAN ZHAI YUN
AND SACHA CHRISTOPHER

Following the Orang Asli on a trip into the forest is an eye-opening experience. With a swift chop of the parang, they harvest edible vegetables like the core of the palm tree, wood that is turned into structures and leaves that are woven to become a roof.

Unfortunately, deforestation activities over the past decades have greatly shrunk the forest that the Orang Asli used to hunt and gather materials in, and some villages are now surrounded by oil palm estates or other developments.

This has threatened their means of survival, and while some are smallholders of rubber and oil palm plantations, the returns are minimal.

Dr Teh Su Thye, CEO of Global Peace Foundation (GPF) Malaysia, observed these challenges in the Orang Asli villages that the non-governmental organisation (NGO) has been working with since 2014.

"Whenever we did water infrastructure and other projects at the villages, we asked them, 'What do you do for a living?' We always noticed that they were struggling. Relying on traditional livelihood is challenging because the kind of things they can gather from the forest is very little now. Some still do that, but they have very little income," says Teh.

"The older generation finds it harder to transition to working full-time in town. The younger generation is taking jobs in cleaning, grass cutting and in the plantation as labour workers, mostly unskilled. This is what we observe in Rompin."

The pandemic exacerbated the situation. Some Orang Asli have land to plant their own food but face challenges from pests or animals like wild boars and elephants destroying the crops. Other than cassava and bananas, there were few crops planted in the villages. Another

factor is the poor soil quality and lack of water sources due to deforestation and the expansion of plantations.

"During the Covid-19 lockdown, they couldn't work in a plantation and do other odd jobs, so they had no food because many don't have savings as well. That's when we realised they're really vulnerable," says Teh.

Recent official numbers for the number of Orang Asli living in poverty are unavailable, but in 2014, it was the highest for Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia at 34%, compared to the national rate at 0.6%, according to the Malaysia Millennium Development Goals Report 2015.

"Those days, their marketplace was the forest. It had a lot of nice things that they could eat, harvest and sell. The root cause of why they're struggling with poverty now is deforestation, and why they have very poor housing. They used to be able to harvest good wood in the forest," says Teh.

"They have health issues because their food sources are gone, the fish is gone, and it's getting harder to hunt."

To support them, GPF began a vegetable farming project with a few Orang Asli villages in Pahang a few years ago. The villagers were interested but found it difficult due to a lack of knowhow and capital. Then, in their search for alternative farming methods, GPF found A Little Wild, a farm in Johor that practises syntropic agroforestry, and thought it was a good fit for the Orang Asli.



"We always noticed that they were struggling. Relying on traditional livelihood is challenging because the kind of things they can gather from the forest is very little now. Some still do that, but they have very little income."

TEH

Teh (centre) with Mekar (left), an Orang Asli farmer from Kampung Subang, discussing soil conditions for planting.



PHOTOGRAPHY: SACHA CHRISTOPHER



Above: Teh (back row, centre) and GPF volunteers with Orang Asli farmer Jabar (on Teh's left) in his farm in Kampung Jong



Left: Syntropic agroforestry mimics the natural forest, and advocates for planting diverse species, mulching and using no chemical input, among other things



Pineapples are grown in many of the Orang Asli farms using the syntropic agroforestry method

Syntropic agroforestry is a regenerative farming method that focuses on regenerating the soil. It promotes diverse planting to optimise sunlight and leverage the synergistic relationships between different species and the soil with no chemical input.

Different species, based on their harvest cycle and needs, are planted in rows. For instance, durian trees – which are tall, need a lot of sunlight and take longer to grow – are planted 10m apart. Short-term plants like coffee, mangosteen and cacao are grown in between. Moringa, acacia and the Mexican sunflower are planted in between the rows to be pruned for mulching.

The ground is always covered with leaves and stems to retain moisture, thus reducing the need for irrigation or fertilisers. This mimics the natural process in the forest, where leaf litter covers the ground.

“Compared to modern farming, which is monocrop and chemical-based, this is closer to their culture. Some of them, after learning this method, say it looks like how their ancestors used to farm,” says Teh.

GPF sent the Orang Asli villagers to learn the farming method in Johor and worked with them, alongside GPF volunteers, to start their farms.

Three years after the project started, several of the farms have yielded a good amount of



Jamda's wife showing volunteers how the farms harvested bananas into bags to be sold

bananas, pineapples, cassava and other produce. The durian and coconut trees, which take a longer time, have not borne fruit yet. The farmers are eating their own produce and selling the excess, some in the form of crisps or jams.

Some are already expanding their farms to grow more crops, while others are adding their own plants, like forest trees, into their farms. GPF is working with 20 villages on this project.

Pests are not a severe problem if the soil is of good quality. But in some instances, Orang Asli are using their own experience of using tuba roots to spray on vegetables to prevent pest attacks. This is an example of how the community has adopted the new farming method and integrated their own practices.

"The most important goal is self-sufficiency, which means they can grow what they want to eat and preserve on their own farm. The ability for them to do it on their own is very important," says Teh.

GPF has also formed Jaringan Akar, a platform for the Orang Asli farmers to share resources with one another, he adds.

"If the Orang Asli can become role models for regenerative farming, it will give value to them, and it's something they can champion. They're the forest guardians. But the forest is gone. So, if they can grow back their food forest, I think it's something they can be very proud of."



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

ESG spoke to several Orang Asli farmers from the Jakun tribe in Pahang who are practising syntropic agroforestry with the Global Peace Foundation (GPF), and a volunteer.

JAMIDA AND EFRIDA NELITA S FROM KAMPUNG BUKIT BIRU

Jamida and Efrida live in a village just off the main road, where some houses are covered with tarp canvas. The couple says this is because there are no longer forests nearby to harvest good building materials.

In the beginning, the hard soil on their land made it difficult to plant any crops, but with a lot of hard work, the soil is now healthy and produces good harvests.

Today, there are over 10 different types of crops on their farm. This includes banana trees, coffee plants, lemongrass bushes, and durian trees that are all planted in neat rows along their sloping farmland. Jamida and Efrida are proud of their pineapple harvest. "Our pineapples are big and sweet," says Efrida.

They used to plant cassava without a system on their land, but now, under the guidance of GPF, they are maintaining a system of planting that keeps their farm tidy. "The yield is higher because there are more types of vegetables and fruits planted," says Jamida.

The couple is now able to earn some side income from selling the produce, including to corporate volunteers and through GPF.



ALAN AKAM FROM KAMPUNG JONG

It took Alan three trips to the farm in Johor to convince her that she could plant crops without using fertilisers and pesticides.

"Before this, [the farm] was just full of very tall wild grass. I didn't think it was possible to plant anything there. When my husband told me, I didn't believe it. After that, he brought me to the course in Kota Tinggi, brought back the compost and they lent us a rotor to plough the soil, put chicken dung, cover it with soil and, after two weeks, start planting. I saw that the farm became green," she says.

But she lost motivation to keep up the farm upon the recent passing of her husband. GPF encouraged her to continue and sent volunteers to help maintain the farm and build an irrigation system.

Now, Alan is managing the farm with her son and is encouraging him to also attend the course. "I asked my son to go because I'm too old. Young people should go and open their minds and eyes to this new way of farming," she says.



JABAR FROM KAMPUNG JONG

GPF is also working with the villagers on chicken farming. Jabar, one of the farmers, set up an enclosure next to his house to rear free-range chickens.

"There is a big difference between my chickens and the chickens from the factories. I feed them vegetables from my farm, like cassava," says Jabar. The chickens are active and roam around freely within an enclosed area on the farm.

"When starting my farm, I asked the trainers about sandy soil, because that is what my farm has. They said it would require more effort and higher costs. But I'm very proud now that my farm has more than just crop harvests," says Jabar.

His family makes crisps when they harvest their bananas and cassava. "This provides us with a good side income," he says.

On the farm is also a nursery where they prepare seedlings for the next planting or for friends who need them.



MELOR FROM KAMPUNG SUALANG

Melor became interested in joining GPF's programme after seeing her friends doing well in their farms. She began preparing the soil at the corner of her father's small oil palm plantation. But it was difficult because the soil was dry and there wasn't enough water.

So, they built an irrigation system and an electric fence to keep wildlife out. Her husband Abu even built a contraption made of tin that makes a noise to keep the monkeys away.

"We planted some vegetables like lemon-grass by ourselves but we weren't successful, and cassava as well but it was thin and not healthy," says Melor.

Now, she is satisfied with the farm. "I feel happy looking at it. It's green; the birds come here. I like it," she says.

PRISCILLA LIM, GPF VOLUNTEER

Lim, a retired educator, has always been passionate about imparting her 20 years of knowledge and helping those in need. Despite her slight figure, she does not mind hard labour. As she has some farming experience with Kebun-Kebun Bangsar in Kuala Lumpur, she decided to volunteer with GPF when she heard about the programme from her nephew.

"I was a little bit nervous when applying for this programme as I am the most senior of this batch of volunteers," she confides, but ultimately, she is thriving in this week-long programme.

"After I stopped teaching and training, I have been looking for a way to channel my knowledge to organisations that are not too commercialised, something that would be able to help communities," says Lim.

"I have learnt so many new things here, but most delightful is the brewing of the Mexican Sunflower drink. We grow the plant also in Bangsar, but not as much as on these farms. Over the past few days, we have been planting over a hundred Mexican Sunflower plants; it's wonderful!"

The pruning of this plant is part of the mulching process, which is one of the tasks volunteers help the Orang Asli farmers with. "This plant is very nitrogen-rich, which helps with regenerating the soil," says Lim.



During a dinner with the Orang Asli farmers and families, the volunteers were encouraged to speak about their experiences. Lim expressed her wish to impart some of her time and skills to the teachers within the Orang Asli community.

"Some parents approached me to say they would like to learn alongside their children too," says Lim. She will continue her discussion with GPF on the various ways it can utilise her experience in its education programmes. ♣