

Revitalizing Rubber Community

By Akhmad Fauzi





One middle-aged lady playfully held the knife with a hooked tip. Just like an accomplished dancer, she swirled around and nicked the trunk of rubber trees along her path. While, occasionally, blew her cigarette's smoke into the air.

The lady's name is Mrs. Monon. She is a rubber tapper living in the village of Tempayung. The village is located in Kotawaringin Lama District, Kotawaringin Barat Regency, Central Kalimantan. Tempayung village is remote and secluded, bordered by the Lamandau River Reserve (SMSL) and surrounded by palm oil plantations. To reach this village, it takes about four hours drive from Pangkalan Bun, the capital of West Kotawaringin, using speedboat, followed by an ojek (motorcycle taxi).

Tempayung village actually has the potential of becoming small holder rubber plantations. It can be seen from the rubber plantations belong to the people. Even so, cast away the image of smallholder rubber plantation as a clean, neat and orderly state-owned large estates.



Smallholder rubber plantation contains local rubber plants mixed with other gardenplants, with different ages and they all grow randomly. This is because most of the rubber trees grow naturally.

People of Tempayung Village are already accustomed to using natural rubber latex for generations. Rubber tapping can be considered as a daily activity for Mrs. Monon and a number of other people. As soon as the dawn broke, with makeshift equipment they would go along the forest to the garden to tap rubber.

The rubber tapper approached the rubber trees, nick the outer skin neatly and carefully in order to not hurt the inside part of the trunk. Drop by drop of the sap fills the bowl underneath. The sap which have been collected is then frozen to form a slab ready to be marketed.





Formerly, almost all people started their morning with a ritual of nicking rubber tree. Now, it is no longer happening. Only a few who are still loyal, one of them is Mrs. Monon. The others, have taken side to palm plantation that has opened around Tempayung village in the early 2000's.

The impact of oil palm plantations' presence is very clear, it changes all situations. More than half of the rubber plantations turned into oil palm plantations. And, people are more prefer to be palm oil plantations' workers. Income calculations are felt to be more profitable.

The lowest worker gets a wage of Rp1.400.000, - plus 15 kg rice per month. Many people are tempted to be as one, that number is obviously more lucrative than tapping rubber that has unclear profit.

Does oil palm plantation improve the lives of the villagers of Tempayung then? Not really. Wages are high, but it needs to be paid with the time spent. They had to work from 06:00 until 14:00. Not much time left to produce other purposes, such as growing vegetables, keeping fish, even taking care of rubber plantations.

Consequently, there is a shortage of daily goods that makes prices soaring because the goods are not produced by many and have to be imported from neighboring villages.

If previously they can pick vegetables in the garden behind the house or bought cheaply from neighbors, now they have to pay Rp. 5,000, - to Rp. 7,000, - for one kilogram of vegetables and Rp. 35.000, - for one kilogram of tilapia fish. Wages as workers of oil palm plantation which once felt high become meaningless. There was not much money left at the end of the month. All is used only for daily meals.

Forest and land clearance for a large palm oil gives negative impact on the environment. Community can directly feel that. They are now having difficulties to get clean water and fish as many rivers dried up. Biodiversity around their village are reduced significantly due to monoculture palm oil plantations that do not give any space for other plants and wild animals.

The presence of other plants and wild animals tend to be seen as a pest. Although in fact, it supports the daily life of the community.



Forests' vegetables such as fern shoots, the young leaves of mango tree, *salam* (Indonesian bay) leaves, etc., as well as forest fruits, trees and fishes or games are no longer visible in the dominating palm oil trees.

"Mixed rubber gardens provide many additional advantages. Besides rubber, community can get a variety of other food sources in the rubber plantations. It provides high economic benefits. In addition to that, mixed farms also provide ecological benefits since plants and animals can live together and contribute to each other to maintain sustainable life," said Wardi, commonly addressed as PakDe, agricultural facilitator of Yayasan Orangutan Indonesia.

Palm oil plantations have changed the story. People who used to live blended with nature, in an instant become wage earners who have lost their livelihood sources.

I am among those who worry of the change in Tempayung village. For me, when people are in distance with nature and it can no longer provide the basics, that would mean that the people are in trouble. If it is being neglected, the bleak future of Tempayung village can easily be imagined. To minimize that condition, in my opinion, the solution is simple. Sustainable economic activities within the community need to be established. One of them is by looking back at mix rubber garden that provides economic and ecological benefit. It is a legacy of Tempayung predecessor that is maintaining the harmony of life.

I am working in Yayasan Orangutan Indonesia, or commonly abbreviated Yayorin. It's a local institution in Pangkalan Bun, Central Kalimantan. Yayorin is founded in 1991. The focus concern is on environmental preservation through education, advocacy and research.

Tempayung and Babual Baboti village were included in Yayorin work program, along with the support from GEF-SGP to implement agricultural programs based on integrated rubber cultivation.





The focus is the development of permanent without burning mixed garden demplot. This is a strategy of forest fires prevention around SMSL conservation area and of rural economic income increase.

Consequently, the essence of the meeting was not conveyed smoothly. The idea of revitalizing mixed rubber garden also was not quite interesting because it can't produce big money in a short time.

Program can be designed, but community support is not an easy thing. And, indeed, without community's support, the program could not be implemented.

Having refusal was not convenient indeed. But that's not what primarily concerns me and Pakde that night. The meeting with no results was ended at 10 pm. It was already too late to return to Pangkalan Bun.

Me and my colleague, Wardi, commonly called as Pakde, feel a polite rejection when trying to offer and explain the program to be implemented in Tempayung village.

Our efforts to meet community representatives in a meeting got no positive response. Not many people attended the meeting, even those who attended were coming in late and did not stay long in the meeting.





No motorcycles and speedboats operated that time of the night. There was only one choice, to stay in the people's houses. But, where? After the meeting, none of the people offered us to stay.

Amidst the confusion of where to stay, I met one villager named Mr. Mantra. He greeted us friendly. He asked who we were and our backgrounds, as well as the intention and purpose of coming to the village.

"I'm from Yayorin, from Pangkalan Bun. We'd like to see the potential of the village, who knew there could be something to be developed," I answered the question.

"Did you mean there would be aid for us?," asked Mr. Mantra in curious.

"Not an aid, Mr., but we wanted to facilitate some activities that were already existed in the community. For example, rubber cultivation, aquaculture, and others. Quite incidentally, we have a little agricultural knowledge and we want to share and learn with the community here. Who knows that could be useful," I said.

For me it is important to explain from the outset that our presence were not as people who will provide assistance. Rather, as facilitator to share knowledge and learn from each other. This is to avoid false expectations and dependence in the future.

Mr. Mantra seems to be a social person and responsive to new ideas. He invited us with open arms to stay at home that night. Speaking of the devil, I said to myself while smiling faintly at Pakde. I didn't know whether he saw it or not because we were enveloped in blackness of the night.

After dinner we talked with Mr. Matra and Mrs. Monon, his wife. We're talking about rubber and tilapia fish farming in ponds in Tempayang village. We also shared stories about the success of Setia Kawan fish group in Tanjung Terantang village, Pangkalan Bun.





It was a pleasant conversation, especially since Mr. Mantra and Mrs. Monon were excited to share various informations and asked questions about new things they did not understand.

In the next day, we went touring. Mr. Mantra invited us to see his rubber plantations and fish pond. Not far, it's just a 5 minute walk from his house. But we saw no ponds. Just meadow grass and shrubs.

"Where is the garden and fish pond sir," we asked in confusion.

"The garden is over there, and the pond is over there," said Mr. mantra, pointing to the right and then to the left.

We understood once we came to the place he appointed, by brushing the grasses and shrubs. There are indeed newly planted rubbers and fish pond, but they were abandoned and covered with grasses and shrubs at breast's height.

That condition became the topic of our discussion. We tried to explain the techniques of rubber cultivation and tilapia aquaculture that have been successful elsewhere.

One of the techniques is a garden and pond's care in proper ways. Mr. Mantra was interested, especially about aquaculture. It seems to be answering his longing. Over the last few years, he has always failed in tilapia aquaculture.

Pak Mantra did not only speak. He even decided to come with us to Pangkalan Bun and asked for accompany to visit fish farmers who were already successful. For two days we took Mr. Mantra for a tour of fish ponds owned by Setia Kawan Farmers Group in Tanjung Terantang village.

Visits and direct dialogue with farmers and fish breeders made Mr. Mantra excited. He was determined to prove his ability in raising tilapia and catfish.

Meetings, conversations and shared knowledge with Mr. Mantra have opened my eyes. Personal approach is important when trying to offer programs to the community.

We can not just gather people in the village hall, discuss, have agreement, then the program will be implemented. Me and my friends in Yayorin, accompanied by Mr. Mantra then intensified visits to people's houses to exchange information and to carry out awareness process.





It takes time indeed, but it was also more convincing because we can directly discuss in depth the things that were still considered confusing.

Slowly but surely, the shifting of perception began to happen in Tempayung village.

That afternoon, the heat and dust from the quarry scattered along the village haunted Tempayung village. The village was quiet without any sound from the occupants, but that did not dampen the spirit pounding in my heart, in Pakde's, Mr. Matra's and Mr. Sachyuni's. All four of us clean the bahaum hall (village hall). Later that evening, we will hold a meeting. And, we believe there were at least 20 people attending.

True, 24 people present at this meeting. It is so different from the previous meeting. Since the beginning of the meeting, participants chattered lively, excitedly.

They questioned the background of farmer groups formation: from the objectives, benefits, up to terms of membership.



We discussed them in open. "Being organized not to ask for help, but to grow and establish an atmosphere of mutual cooperation that has long been missing in Tempayung village," said Pakde firmly on them. The audience who came to the meeting agreed. Groups to strengthen their independence will not be a media for the beggars mentality.

That evening, July 7, 2012, participants were agreed to form an integrated farming group called Suka Maju Farmers' group. The group's principal activity is the cultivation of rubber combined with other activities, such as freshwater fish ponds, vegetable farming, and others.

The agreement of group formation was followed by the discussion of the rules that must be adhered to all members of the group and activities plan. The atmosphere of the discussion of these two topics was very festive.

Everyone was eager to speak, whether conveying good opinion or just throwing jokes that created laughter. Intimacy and openness were spreading, made the evening feel warm. I thought seriously that this meeting was in contrast to the previous without enthusiasm meetings. Secretly, I said thanks.





The establishment of Suka Maju Farmers' Group started the story of changes in Tempayung village. Every month, the group carried out regular monthly meetings in different places, depending on the draw result of their arisan (informal community social gathering). Members of the group that got the draw will become the host in the next social gathering.

Since the formation of Suka Maju Farmers' Group, people who become members often gather and discuss outside the regular meeting schedule. Atmosphere of mutual cooperation were already seen to grow again. Every Sunday, a group of people did not hesitate to get themselves into the murky and muddy water to make the group's fish pond.

Four months is a short time for a journey of a group with big goals. And, within that short time, the achievements of Suka Maju Farmer's Group are not small. They have two fish ponds measuring 5x12 meters intended for tilapia and catfish aquaculture. Last October, they also carried out training of rubber cultivation techniques. The matters were about the good way of selecting rubber seedlings, nursery techniques, grafting techniques and rootstock orchard management, as well as ways of maintenance, fertilization and control of disease in the rubber plant. The future plan, the group will learn the techniques of fish hatchery and explore the rubber market to get a better price.

Indeed, the most important results achieved by this group is the revival of the spirit of togetherness and mutual respect that had withered.

It looks increasingly strengthened in every activity undertaken together. Another thing is equally important, they are confident to continue their rubber-based farming in the pressure of palm oil plantations.

I, as the facilitator of Tempayung villagers, of course, hope that the small steps taken by Suka Maju Farmer's Group can have a real impact. Not only for the members of the group, but also to inspire other community members. From the land and ancestor knowledge there are prosperity and virtue that they can benefit of.

I was daydreaming, it would be nice to see Mrs. Monon no longer "dancing" alone among the gum trees one day. Rather, they will in group dancing, nicking rubber tree, especially when the rubber culture get back to life in Tempayung village.

"Titt... tiittt...tiit..."

I stopped my daydreaming and grabbed the mobile phone that just rang. There was a short message inside. From Mr. Mantra apparently.

"Mr. Fauzi howou? FYI, on the 12th month tilapia pond will be harvested. Pls make some time to come to the village..."

Thank God, I immediately murmured. My throat was choked up to read the text. Really, it was a happy story untold, it was a benchmark that what we were doing so far were not useless.

Tightly I knotted my fingers while chanting the prayers.

Akhmad Fauzi

Ahmad Fauzi is known as Fauzi. This man joined Yayasan Orangutan Indonesia (Yayorin) which is based in Pangkalan Bun, Central Kalimantan. Central Kalimantan is a province on Borneo Island with a majority of Dayak tribe and their "Kharingan" belief. Actually, Fauzi came from Pandeglang, Banten. He learn about Yayorin in 1999 when Fauzi was doing research on Proboscis in Borneo. Currently, Fauzi is responsible for managing development programs of mixed demonstration plot as measurement effort to avoid fires in the forest and area around Baboal and Babuti Tepayung villages.

His love of the community and the environment makes him endure living far away from family. His family settled in Pandeglang, Banten, and usually they meet once every two years.

