

Planting Mangrove, Harvesting Blessing

By Jumiati





West monsoon is the toughest season for fishermen in hamlet III, Sei Nagalawan Village. The community called this season as 'Bakat' or 'wak Uteh', which is the time when the weather was bad, the waves are high so that fishermen could not go to the sea. The peak of Bakat is in October to December when fisherman families are in economic crisis.

Bakat season makes the men could not go to the sea, while the wives could not go to the market because there is no shopping money. Finally, there was no other choice, the wives had to borrow or loan some money from a boss or moneylender, or in debt to the local shops.

In Bakat months, the most favored conversation by the women in this fisherman village was debt. "Who do you owe to, Las?" asked Nanik to Lastris when she was passing by her neighbor's house at Gang (alley) Jawa one afternoon.

Both were Sei Nagalawan villagers, still young. Nanik is 38 years old while Lastris is eleven years younger than Nanik, each had 2 children. Lastris and Nanik have average body with dark skin and curly hair. Both of them became best friends and often poured each other's heart about the condition of their household.

"As usual, Neneng's shop," answered Lastris. Neneng was the name of the owner of the biggest and complete shop in hamlet III. The shop provided all fisherman needs, from groceries to fishing gear, such as gasoline, diesel, and fishing rod. The villagers preferred to shop at Neneng's shop because the price was cheaper than other shops.

"Las ... if we go on like this, we might die standing, every day we just pay the debt without being able to save, we don't have extra income, and the expense is increasing. The rich get richer; the poor is poorer," said Nanik.



Indebtedness in bakat season was usual. The debt was not only in the form of money, but also in the form of groceries or other necessities, such as rice, oil, gasoline and cigarettes. Moreover, there are always some people offering loans, such as bosses and moneylenders who offered loans with high interest rates.

Fisherman families frequently were in debt. Iwan Acong was one of them. He was a father of three children. In the beginning there was no burden. His wife, Erni regularly borrowed some money for meeting family daily needs when he had trouble in getting some income from the sea. Sometimes she borrowed from a neighbor, sometimes she owed to the shop.

But little by little their debt got bigger. The family could not help borrowing from someone to pay someone else's debt, it was rob john to pay paul. Until finally Iwan had to borrow money from Bakir with 20 percent interest rate. Bakir stands for Batak Kredit, a designation for moneylender from Batak ethnic.

Since then the condition of Iwan and Erni's household was more difficult. Having had no choice, Erni eventually sold her family's inheritance rice field to pay off their debts. Even so, he still has high ambition,

"I am determined to send my three children to school until college. I hope they don't have the same fate as their father," said Iwan, who did not finish elementary school.

However for the women in hamlet III, debt made them unite and have same goal to be free of debt.

The goal was started in one evening of August 2005, at Incan's house, one of Nanik's sisters in law. That afternoon Nanik visited Incan. They chatted at the porch with holed nipa roof. The topic was still the same, debt. They complained about their own family's financial situation which was getting worse.



Then Niah joined them, while holding her baby. She had just given birth to her ninth child six months ago. Niah is still young, almost forty. She got married at the age of 19. Her first child was 20 years old. She spent her days by taking care of her nine children. She had to get up really early in the morning, and then prepared breakfast for her husband who would go to the sea.

She then bathed her baby and prepared breakfast for her children who would go to work and school. Her oldest child has already worked. Four of her younger children are at school, one is in a senior high school, one is in a junior high school and two are in a primary school. After the children have gone, she then cleans the house and prepares lunch for the family. Remarkably, during her busy schedule, she is still able to manage a stall in her house. "To get some extra income," she said.

Niah's arrival made the evening chat more excited. "How if we - the wives, have additional income too?" suggested Nanik. She proposed to create a group of women whose activities was selling groceries, because fisherman families often borrowed groceries. All of them agreed to Nanik's suggestion.

But selling groceries needed funds. Finally they agreed to fundraise by contributing Rp. 50,000 for each person. Towards dusk, they ended the chat. Before going home they promised to invite other friends to join.

It turned out that the invitation was welcomed by the villagers, not a few women wanted to join. In the first week of raising funds, they had collected Rp. 600,000. They spent the money on rice immediately. "We get about four gunnies of rice," told Nanik. One gunny contained 30 kilograms of rice.

More days, more women wanted to join. Two months later, the member had reached 40 women. Apparently this success made the women in hamlet III more enthusiastic and they wanted to form a fisherwoman group.





It was in early October 2005. The women in hamlet III gathered at a stilted house with woven bamboo walls, nipa roof and boards floor. If rain fell, the house with the size as large as volleyball field was always wet because of leaking roof. The house which belonged to Jumiati's family was chosen as a meeting place because its location was in the middle of the village, right beside the street, so it was easily reached

Jumiati's house that day was very noisy. There were 30 women aged from 21 years to 50 years who attended the meeting. Everyone wanted to talk. They were discussing the name for their group. Ijum, the homeowner proposed Melati (Jasmine) as the name of the group, while Incan proposed Teratai (Lotus), others suggested different names. The debate about the name took a long time.

They did not realize someone watching the debate: Mr. Zaman, Jumiati's father in law, who was lounging in the corner of the house, wearing blue sarong. After some time, he became impatient with the long discussion about the name. Although he was not counted as member of the meeting, he suddenly interjected, "You all live on the tip of the estuary (Muara) near the cape (Tanjung) why don't you name the group after Muara Tanjung?"

Magically, as if the names previously proposed lost in the air, they all agreed. Muara Tanjung Fisherwoman Group was agreed as the name of the group. At the same day, they also chose the committee. Jumiati was chosen as the chairman, Nanik as the secretary, and Saniah as the treasurer.

But apparently the meeting had not yet finished. There were still many unasked questions about the name of the group. Two days later, one member of the group asked a question. "Why should there be a word fisherman in it, while we are women," asked Sri.

Nurlia, Sri's neighbor patiently explained. "Because we live in the coast and we sometimes also look for mussel, barnacle, fruit soil, and sea shells. We also cleaned up our husbands gear from fishing. Aren't we also fishermen? I think we are also fishermen.

Fisherman is not only for man but also for woman. Why should we be ashamed with the designation of fisherman? It's not a contemptible or plebeian job. We should be proud because of them we all eat fish." Nurlia's explanation could be accepted by her friends.

Since the founding of fisherman woman group, the members started to gather and discuss more frequently. Not only pouring their feeling and complaining, they also began to discuss issues that happened around the village, such as water scarcity and Perdani flood that usually came annually in February.

Besides Perdani tide, Sei Nagalawan villagers knew two other tides, high tide and low tide. During high tide the volume of the sea would usually increase, while during low tide, the contrary. The high tide usually happened for one week, after that it continued with low tide.

During high tide, flood usually occurred. Sea water entered fisherman houses. Their house became dirty and muddy. And they had trouble in getting clean water when the flood occurred. In the flood season like this, women usually got more workload. They needed to clean their dirty house because of the flood, and they also had to make sure that clean water for their daily needs was available.

Getting clean water in coastal areas was not an easy thing. They should make boreholes to obtain clean water. The borehole should be deeper than normal. It usually needed at least 18 shafts of 6 meter PVC pipes. For fisherman to make a well, it certainly cost no little amount of money, not to mention the cost of buying the pump. Those who could not afford it could only ask for water from the neighbor who had it, or they had to buy the water from the people who had it in the village.

Hamlet III was the only hamlet in coastal area of Perbaungan district, Serdang Bedagai regency, North Sumatra province. The hamlet was 7 kilometers away from the edge of Medan Tebing Tiggi highway.

There were about 150 fisherman families who lived there. The entrance to the hamlet was a river dyke. Along the river until near the estuaries grew various types of mangrove tree, but the coastal area was eroded by seawater.





Formerly, in around 1980's the coastal area of hamlets III was full of mangrove trees. Grandma Hamsyah, one of the elders there said that the mangroves in the area were cut down completely by the villagers. "People don't know the benefits of mangrove forest that time; they cut the mangroves for the opening of shrimp ponds owned by outside entrepreneur."

As the result of the cutting down, the coastal areas got abraded. Not only that, sea water also began to enter agricultural lands. That was the reason why Tris, a member of Muara Tanjung group encourage her friends to plant mangroves.

But apparently it was not easy to persuade residents of Hamlet III to plant mangroves. Tris decided to give an example. She believed mere words were not enough to encourage people; it had to do with real evidence. Tris started to look for mangrove seedlings around hamlet III, she began to plant them alone. The action raised questions from surrounding residents. What the mangroves are for? What is the benefit?

Tris explained that mangroves served as a barrier for coastal areas and also as a place for breeding of various marine lives. She asked her friends to compare fishing income before and after the destruction of mangrove forest in hamlet III.

Mangroves eventually became the attention of Muara Tanjung group and the villagers. Tris and Sutrisno, one of the fishermen there became the motivators. "Who else if it weren't us who plant," said Tris. She often motivated her friends to plant mangroves. Her explanation could convince her friends that mangroves could save the beach in the village from seawater erosion.

Muara Tanjung group started to look for mangrove seedling and plant it along the river in front of the villager houses and on the beach. They got the mangrove seedlings from the remaining trees on the riverbank. This activity was carried out regularly, not only by the women, but also by the husbands who later participated.

Since then the relationship between Muara Tanjung group and mangroves became more intimate. Moreover they met Ratna, a guest from Sulawesi who came visiting in around 2006's. She came to Sei Nagalawan Village to see the potential of nature especially mangrove forest which could be processed into food.

Ratna knew mangroves very well. She told Muara Tanjung group diverse information about mangroves, from the types, how to plant, till how to utilize part of the tree. One of them was how to process sea holly into food and beverage. Sea holly could also be used in medicine for lung disease and asthma.

Acanthus ilicifolius, the Latin name of sea holly is one type of mangrove trees, with spiny-edges dark green leaves. The stalk of sea holly leaf is as big as of a little finger. It grows wild and lives along the riverbank, with purple flowers. Young sea holly leaves could be processed into food and beverage such as sea holly tea. While its flower could be used as a dye for batik.

Many questions were asked by the group members during discussion with Ratna. What interested them most was how to process sea holly into food and beverage. Apparently the recipe was simple. For example, the way to make crackers using sea holly leaves. First, sea holly leaves were cleaned, the spines were discarded and then were mashed with a blender, and boiled for 5 minutes.

The sea holly solution was then mixed with starch flour, added with spices such as garlic, coriander, sugar, and salt. The raw crackers dough would be greenish white. The dough was then molded, thinly sliced and placed on winnowing basket and dried under the sunlight. Once dry, the raw cracker was fried, it was then packaged and sold.

Making tea from sea holly was much simpler. Once cleaned, the sea holly was thinly sliced and then dried till dry. It could also be fried without oil in a skillet over medium heat until the color was brownish. Sea holly leaves that had been dried just need to be put into hot water and served.





Muara Tanjung group began testing it. "We buslingly looked for sea holly along the river," said Nanik recalling their learning process. They did not care if their hands were pricked by the sea holly spines.

The lacking of knowledge in utilizing mangroves did not disempower the spirit of the fisherwomen group. They started to make processed food and tea from sea holly.

Initially there were many who scoffed their efforts. "There, crazy women, how come sea holly become food," recalled Nanik mimicking the ridicule of some people. At that time, sea holly did not mean anything, was only a regular tree that grew in the coastal area, and its leave became a waste when it fell to the ground, meaningless.

The first experiment was to make sea holly crackers. They managed to make it, but failed to market it. Not infrequently they brought back the crackers which they had made together to their own house. "We are broke, the crackers don't sell well. It's a big challenge for the group," said Nanik.

They still produce the sea holly crackers a number of times, until finally marketing difficulty reason made them stop the production for a year from 2007 till 2008.

The difficulty of marketing the crackers and tea made Muara Tanjung run out of money. Nanik said that those days were hard times since the group was established. Each group meeting on the 14th of each month returned to be the arena of complaint about the economic problem and the role of the group that can be taken to solving their common problem. Sea holly production was stalled, while the mangrove trees they had planted were still small, could not make any money yet.

"We have done the effort but we are still in debts," complained one member of the group. However, someone gave a brilliant suggestion this time. "What if we make savings and loan, but we must save, not borrow all the time, we then collect it for funds, for groceries. Those who needs most, we lend first," suggested Incan. The suggestion was welcome. The problem was they did not have any experience in managing savings and loan at all, but they agreed to try it.



They started it by saving for funds, and lent it to the group members. It ran for four months, but soon the first obstacle was in the way. They had difficulty in bookkeeping.

Fortunately, Muara Tanjung group received support from KEKAR foundation in Tebing Tinggi, neighbor of Serdang Bedagai regency. The organization willingly trained all members of Muara Tanjung group for 2 days. The group was taught to know what savings and loan are, credit union principles and its bookkeeping systems.

After asking around and discussed among members of the group, they agreed to form a business unit of Savings and Loan or it is known as Credit Union, the abbreviation of CU. It was officially established on May 16, 2007. The number of the members at that time reached 22 people. Each member must pay registration fee of Rp. 10,000, also monthly fee of Rp. 5,000 and voluntary savings.

Hard work and courage to try finally paid off after the first 6 months. They began to feel the benefits of CU. The savings and loan helped the group members slowly get out of debt. Through CU, they could borrow and save with ease without having to provide collateral. Installments were also made under an agreement between the borrower and the CU committee. The members also get the surplus by the end of the year.

Seeing the success of the women in running the savings and loan institutions, made the men, the fishermen want to join too. Muara Tanjung group committee agreed to extend CU membership to man. Fishermen who need funds to repair boats, engines and fishing gears could get a loan if they become the member of the CU.

Now every month the CU was able to turn over the funds as much as Rp. 3,000,000 – Rp. 5,000,000 to be borrowed by the members. At least 30 fisherman families there had felt its benefit. To foster a sense of belonging, each member had a task of taking CU members' daily routine fee in turn.





After the savings and loan business run smoothly, Muara Tanjung group returned to think about the production of sea holly food and beverage that had been stalled. They agreed to start it again in 2009. If they used to make sea holly crackers by steaming and then cutting, drying under sunlight and frying. Now they tried a new recipe.

After several attempts, they finally got the right recipe. Sea holly leaves that had been cleaned and mashed was then boiled and mixed with flour which had been added with traditional seasoning. The seasonings were coriander, garlic, salt and sugar. Once mixed, the dough could be molded according to taste.

Their crackers were now more favored. "People say it tastes good and savory," said Nanik. Sea holly crackers were increasingly known. More over, they were becoming smart in promoting it to their friends and through exhibitions organized by the government.

Exhibitions or bazaars were considered important in introducing the sea holly crackers, that the crackers were delicious and not dangerous.

Now sea holly cracker had become one of the typical foods of Bedagai Serdang regency.

Not only sea holly, this fisherman women group started to process other sea produce for crackers material. Now they produced crackers from tuna and anchovies, also syrup and jam from Pidada, another type of mangroves. The sales of the products each year could deliver a profit of Rp. 4.3 million.

Muara Tanjung group also began eyeing other marketing opportunity, i.e. the habit of the husbands to drink coffee or tea after fishing. Usually the fishermen would stop by at a coffee shop for a cup of tea or coffee, or just for chatting with other fishermen after fishing. "Something is missing if we go home without stopping by at the coffee first," said Ahmad Yani, one fisherman in hamlet III.

In 2010, they decided to make a coffee shop near the place where the fishermen landed and sold their fishes after fishing. They named this coffee shop after 'Posko'. It was built in collaboration with Muara Baimbai group.



The initial funds for the coffee shop were not much, only Rp. 75,000. It was taken from the cash of Muara Tanjung group which they collected monthly in the group. The funds were for buying sugar, tea, coffee, flour, vegetables and other ingredients to make fried cakes.

Every day, some members of Muara Tanjung group looked after the coffee shop in turn. Each day Rp. 5,000 was deducted from the sales to be set aside for the group's cash. After the day's sales were subtracted with the day's expenses, the remaining money was used as the wages to pay the women who had looked after the shop that day.

The coffee shop was favored by the fishermen. The profit was quite decent. They could even equally give the money they had collected to the members of the group every Lebaran. Last year net income which reached Rp. 700,000 was distributed to 22 people. This year's income was higher. "Now it has reached around Rp. 900,000."

Seven years had passed swiftly since Muara Tanjung group was founded. The members were now busier. Muara Tanjung began thinking about how to make similar group or multiply the group so that it could help and encourage other women and also how to have a strong network externally. They decided to form another woman group; True Woman group (literal translation from kelompok perempuan Sejati). The members of True Woman group were 8 women; they were also fisherman's wives.

Muara Tanjung group is now also a part of Muara Baimbai mangrove conservation group whose members are about 65 people. In the past, a lot of the women's time in the village was wasted everyday, but now it was not any more. "In the past if there was an invitation for training and some members were asked to go and stay there, nobody wanted and their husband forbade, but now they will sulk if not invited and all husbands allow," told Nanik. The woman group has managed to bring change and learning enthusiasm in the village.





Their knowledge was also broadening because they were invited to various meetings and trainings, and they had a lot of friends too. In the national level they joined Indonesian Fisherwoman Sisterhood (PPNI, Persaudaraan Perempuan Nelayan Indonesia) and actively became a part of the People's Coalition for Fishery Justice (KIARA).

"In the group we also start discussing about the government, government policies, and the importance of the existence of regulation that is in favor of the fisherman," said Nanik. Muara Tanjung group began entering the domain of politic in decision making.

Their first experience was during discussion about local regulation on the removal of fisherman tools that damage marine habitat in Serdang Bedagai regency. The meetings made their spirit flare. They believed that fisher women's voices should be listened in the decision making process.

They sent their members to join the protests in the parliament office of Serdang Bedagai regency with other fisherman groups. The participants of the protest demanded the Parliament to pass the regulation immediately.

Their demands were fulfilled. The regulation was approved by the Regents and the Parliament of Serdang Bedagai. To this day the local regulation was still being adapted at the Legal Bureau of North Sumatra Province. The regulation would be a powerful tool for the fishermen so that they could securely make a living at sea without any fear of being crossed by a great vessel using large trawling.

Since then Muara tanjung group began to establish relations with the government. They were often invited to attend the exhibitions and discussions organized by local government. They did not take this good relationship for granted. They proposed collaboration with the government to manage mangrove tourism object in Sei Nagalawan Village.

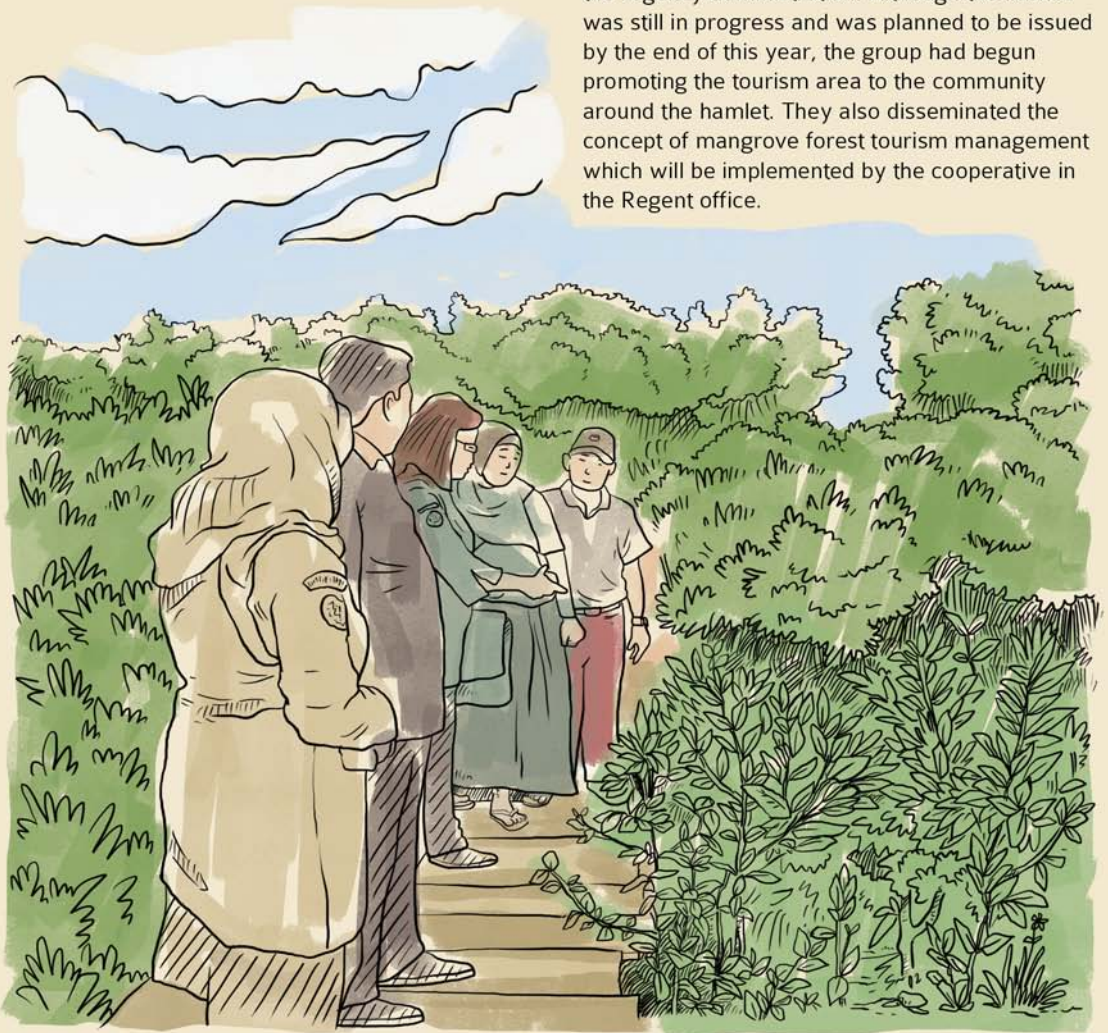
The mangrove trees which had been planted regularly since 7 years ago were now 3 till 7 meter tall. Not only mangroves, they also planted a variety of trees; they took care of them, cleaned the area and replaced dead trees. All of it became the group's main work now. The group members also agreed to share work in taking care the mangrove forest once a week. They chose every Saturdays starting at 2 pm.

Their patience and perseverance had brought result now. The coastal area looked verdant. The goal of Muara Tanjung group went to the next level, from freeing the members out of debts, now they aspired to manage the forest area into tourism and learning area about mangroves.

They believed the management of mangrove forest would give benefits to fisherman families in increasing their income, and also to the environment in making the area protected from abrasion and other threats.

However, they could not manage the tourism area in the group's name. They must have a business entity. Finally they made a cooperative form of business entity. Muara Tanjung group and fisherman group of Muara Baimbai cooperative member worked together to pioneer the management of mangrove tourism park.

The first requirement was to take care of the management license. They used the name of the Muara Baimbai Cooperative to get the license from the regency administration. Although the license was still in progress and was planned to be issued by the end of this year, the group had begun promoting the tourism area to the community around the hamlet. They also disseminated the concept of mangrove forest tourism management which will be implemented by the cooperative in the Regent office.



The management of mangrove forest as tourism area and its food and beverage products would become the mainstay of Muara Tanjung group in the future. They did not mess around in realizing this dream. They began to invite other groups to support their mangroves restoration efforts. One of them was GEF-SGP. The institution provided support for mangroves seeding and planting.

The saying "Those who sow, will reap" was proven in hamlet III, Sei Nagalawan village. The goals of Muara Tanjung fisherwoman group were realized one by one. They had proven that unyielding spirit and a sense of sisterhood among the members of the group which had begun seven years ago bore fruit.

"We believe woman is a person who can do anything and has brilliant ideas. Mangrove forest which was considered as nothing has been proven to be the contrary by Muara Tanjung fisherwoman group. Forest is a source of knowledge and life. "

"Bakat season is not as tough as before. We change failures and challenges into opportunities for advancement. Keep forging, never go back," said Nanik in excitement.



Jumiati

This calm, cheerful and friendly lady is always excited when telling her activities with the other 22 women from Muara Tanjung women group in Seinagalawan village, Hamlet III, Perbaungan district, Serdang Berdagai regency, North Sumatra.

The 32-year-old lady was initially a reserve person who slowly changes into an open and active person because of her love toward Muara Tanjung group, the group where she is currently chairing. The environmental conditions added with a low standard of living, especially the women, inspire Jumiati to help to improve the lives of women in Seinagalawan village. Jumiati with her women group conduct mangrove conservation activities as well as post-harvest processing mangrove product (crackers and tea of jeruju/sea holly leaves (*Achantus Illicifolius*)). Their struggles for seven years slowly pay off and fruitful. They also conduct savings and loans to members of the group as well as introduce educational material of family financial management.

Coconut tree became her personal symbol. It inspires her to keep in high spirit and be useful to themselves, parents and others. She was elected as one of the women figures of Indonesian Women's Food Fighters.

