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Helping the Penans on their feet

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This damaged section of the off-track road has yet to be repaired.

THE nomadic Penans have always loved their forests, probably more than most conservationists.

But their instinctive longing to remain in the forests is perceived largely as backward and problematic. The Penans view progress differently, often putting themselves at odds with the opening up of land to lay the groundwork for rural infrastructural development.

Even though many of them have decided to give up their nomadic ways and put down their roots, leading a settled existence has not been easy. Their way of life and livelihood after being resettled, have changed. At times, many of them couldn't even fulfil their basic need — food.

A Lahanan woman, Bulan Kulleh, from Sungai Asap, has been living with the Penans at Lusong Laku for 22 years. And she has witnessed their struggles.

The 31-year-old said apart from those working at the school, most of the Penans at the resettlement area did not have a stable income.

"Their life has been very difficult — they do not have enough cash to buy things. Because of this, they used to starve while waiting for the harvest. They went looking for papayas, potatoes, sago and other produce in the jungle because they could not afford rice. It's very sad," she noted.

For Bulan who owns a sundry shop at Lusong Laku, debt has become a problem. Despite feeling sorry for the Penans, she said she had to be firm to prevent them getting deeper into debt.

"I can't always allow that (giving credit). It's not good for them — very bad for my business too," she said, adding that to avoid debts, she sometimes barter-traded with the Penans who sold their crafts at the school and the clinic at Lusong Laku.

Major problem

Self-sufficiency in food production is a major problem for the Penans. To help them out, iM Sarawak came up with the Wet Padi Project to train the Penans in modern farming. The project was implemented last year — and the Lusong Laku Penans had been waiting eagerly for the harvest on Feb 25.

Besides the Wet Padi Project, iM Sarawak had also launched a food aid programme to cover the Penans' basic sustenance ahead of harvesting.

Under the programme, 133 Penan families at Lusong Laku receive RM100 in food aid each per month to buy essential items such as rice, sugar, cooking oil and milk. The programme is based on a cashless system to ensure the end-recipients benefit from the intended purpose. It encourages transparency as all transactions are monitored through a reporting system.

Donors will be able to see how the money is spent and who the beneficiaries are. In this way, cash misuse will be reduced and efficiency in welfare management enhanced.

The programme has proven effective. Even Bulan has found it so.

"I can see the difference. The Penans no longer have to starve. Some still look for produce in the jungle but at least, they now have something to cover their basic needs," she noted.

According to Bulan, each household has RM100 to spend every month, and if less is spent, the remainder can be carried forward to the following month.

"They buy their daily needs such as sugar, rice, cooking oil, bread, noodles and other necessities on the given list," she added.



The Penan community at Lusong Laku have benefitted from the iM Sarawak Wet Paddy project.

Selected as merchant

Bulan was picked as a merchant under the programme after an interview and survey by iM Sarawak. In selecting a merchant, iM Sarawak emphasised the ability to ensure there is sufficient stock for the Penans to buy from every month.

Delivering stock to Lusong

Laku is a challenge for the merchants because of the road condition and the distance between the settlement and town. Lusong Laku is about seven hours' drive from Bintulu town — four hours on tar road and three on off-track road.

Bulan herself has to go to Bintulu at least three times a month to stock up her laundry shop. It has not been easy.

"Logistics is difficult. I use my pick-up truck to deliver goods. I can't load too much in my car because of the poor road condition. The car will get damaged, making it very dangerous to drive. In fact, I have to send my car for servicing every month. Just to have enough stock of rice, I need to make at least three trips to Bintulu," she lamented.

At times, she cannot restock due to the damaged road.

"I can't go to town when the road is broken. Normally, if that happens, I will explain to the villagers and tell them to be patient — that I will go to town as soon as the road is repaired," she said.

Not life-long assistance

The food aid programme is not life-long. iM Sarawak's aim is to train the Penans in modern farming to help them move forward and stand on their own feet.

The RM100 aid was determined after discussions with donors. Based on a survey some five years ago, so long as the Penans are able to cover their basic needs, they can move on.

According to Bulan, on average, one Penan household's expenditure is RM200 per month.

"They will get RM100 from iM Sarawak and top that up with another RM100 themselves.

They need to spend the extra RM100 on other items not on the given list such as gas cylinders, costing RM50 each at Lusong Laku."

Bulan's father who is a businessman, used to work at the school as a cook before buying a piece of land to start a sundry shop. She has now taken over his business.

She said she is happy to be part of the food aid programme, adding that it has not only enabled her to help the Penans but also pick up some entrepreneurial skills from iM Sarawak.

"I learned a lot from this programme. I've always loved business and I hope to become a successful businesswoman. At the same time, I can help the Penans — I've seen how hard their lives can be."

She said she planned to run a homestay in the future.

Bulan, who obtained a nursing certificate from a college in Kuala Lumpur, said her husband who works at a Bakun logging camp, return to stay with her and their daughter at Lusong Laku whenever he is on leave.

During the Christmas season, the family moves back to Sungai Asap and arranges for an assistant to look after the sundry shop.



Two Penan women with their children.



What do you think of this story?

Great (33%)

Interesting (33%)

Nothing (11%)

Sad (0%)

Angry (22%)