Mothering Innovation: Profiles in Sustainability
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The last decade marks a growing interest of the development community in women’s participation and leadership in rural and indigenous communities. There has been growing evidence and awareness that women are playing a very significant role in conservation of natural resources and empowering women spheres in the world today.

Barriers prohibiting women from equal access to jobs, education, public resources and participation in governance significantly inhibit a nation’s economic viability. Gender inequality results in greater poverty, slower economic growth and a lower quality of life. Education, health, productivity, credit and governance work better when women are involved.
Enhancing women’s rights, women’s access to resources, female empowerment, participation and leadership not only benefits women, but benefits communities and societies as a whole. Grassroot-women’s groups worldwide are redefining governance and development in their communities. Centre-staging grassroot-women’s practices, supporting their leadership and mainstreaming their perspectives are key to sustainable development.

Grassroot-women’s groups deal with everyday survival issues, and the social cohesion of their families and communities. In doing so, they develop the most ingenious solutions to issues like drinking water and sanitation, environmental sustainability, housing, health, responsiveness to natural as well as man-made disasters, and the eradication of poverty. They hold a valuable database of first-hand knowledge of what works and what does not work on the ground.

In order to learn from this rich reservoir of expertise, and to increase the influence of the role of grassroot-women in natural resource management, this very first book *Mothering Innovation: Profiles in Sustainability* will help motivate the reader and those involved in community development to strive to enhance the role of women in leadership and in setting role-model types.

Happy reading!

Dr Sundari Ramakrishna
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INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

Today’s development approaches seek to address the issue that women are made easy targets, and accordingly, aim at the larger picture of promoting gender equity. The rationale for such approaches is based on the fact that gender roles are not fixed, and that they change in tandem with changes in the economy, environment and even technology.

Glaringly, however, although there has been a significant shift in the ability of women to work and earn a livelihood, their ‘home work’ (also known as reproductive work) of caring for children, cooking and related activities has not changed. The weight of this burden varies from situation to situation. In some rural communities, out migration by males to urban
centres for livelihood generates a situation where women have to manage affairs in the village. In such situations, to accord gender equality because women are now visible as leaders is misleading.

**MOTHERS OF INNOVATION**

Women and men play very different roles in natural resource management or biodiversity conservation and management. These roles have indeed been recognized and, to some extent, documented. However, historically speaking, it has been the work and contribution of men that have been comprehensively documented, recorded and shared with stakeholders.

The authors of this book realize that especially in Malaysia, the significance of the contribution of women – both from an urban and rural setting – who are playing a crucial role in natural resources management has yet to be explored and documented.

Hence, *Mothering Innovation: Profiles in Sustainability* is a first attempt to compile the profiles of ten Malaysian women who have played a pivotal role, and who continue to contribute to the community’s wealth of traditional knowledge, to sustain biological resources, and to assist in managing the nation’s natural assets.

The women selected in this book represent diverse backgrounds and ethnic origins but they have some important elements in common: commitment, passion for the work they are engaged in, and quiet humility. More importantly, during the interviews, these persons seldom took personal credit (“I did that.”); instead, they often attributed collective credit (“We achieved that.”) to their group or community.

These ten ‘mothers of innovation’ did not regard themselves as role models but in the course of their work, evolved and developed skills and gained knowledge to lead community initiatives and spearhead social activism in sustainable development.
MALAYSIAN WOMEN’S EVOLVING LEADERSHIP

Malaysia is one of the 12 mega-diversity countries in the world with unique flora and fauna, let alone traditional knowledge and practices amongst local communities and indigenous peoples. Since the Rio Summit in 1992, many international donors and development aid agencies have come to our shores to provide assistance in natural resource management, sustainable development projects and community development. These externally-funded programmes and projects, which were implemented by civil society groups, including community-based organizations, have enabled communities to develop themselves – through the much-needed leadership of these ten women. Some of these women have progressed beyond project expectations, and have evolved to lead communities and organizations in their developed capacities.

The international donor community has recently ceased providing financial assistance simply because Malaysia has developed its economy, and has gradually moved to a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP), aiming to be a fully-developed nation by 2020.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Regardless of the scale of financial assistance awarded to community-based organizations, there have always been opportunities for both young and old women to play enhancing roles in the community. Many of the women featured in this book have used the experience gained through the small interventions in project implementation to grow from strength to strength. Mainly, these women were individually motivated to serve and lead their communities, villages and locales.

Though initially shy, most of them overcame their shyness when they had an opportunity to give feedback and comments, and to add their voices to decision making. Through these small efforts in empowering the women, each of them realized that they could make a difference by contributing their input – usually entirely from men – at village meetings. Gradually, the shyness and reluctance were overcome, and replaced with a real need to help the status of women in a collective manner.
Some of the profiles in this book highlight great role models, while others document emerging roles and capacities of the women in the various areas they are engaged in.

**CONVERSATIONAL STYLE**

The interviews for the ten profiles in *Mothering Innovation* were conducted over a period of three months from April to June 2010.

These profiles intentionally maintain the conversational style and manner in which the women spoke to the interviewer. Where necessary, minimal editing has been done only to ensure that the text retains the thought and intention of the interviewee’s spoken words. This approach is taken to allow the voice of the women to come through with their own experience, thus capturing the uniqueness of their work.

In order for the reader to have a better understanding of some of the technical and cultural terms used in these ten profiles, footnotes have been added. Some of these footnotes are explained more fully in the Glossary.
Anne, 52, is the executive director of PACOS Trust, and leads the organization in land and human rights issues for the indigenous people of Sabah, with a particular focus on gender.

BACKGROUND

I am of Kadazandusun heritage, and come from a family of 12 siblings, of whom I am the eldest. All of us are actively involved in community development and human rights work in Sabah. I am married to Felix, and have two children.

I like reading and gardening, and enjoy travelling and working with people, especially children and youth.
SUPPORTING PACOS

The issues in rural and indigenous communities focus on human rights education, and resource management in the villages. My work with PACOS has helped to address these issues.

PACOS started very small: two fulltime staff (Jenny and Jean); a group of supporters; and volunteers (Felix, Jean’s husband and I). We’ve grown to an organization of 60-70 people, including community teachers and local organizers in the village, like Mongulias (pg. 37) and Rotinah (pg. 61). We support them with a small allowance. Our expenses are quite high – we need RM 50,000 a month. But over the years, we’ve been prudent and learnt to be sustainable; so, we have a reserve: if there is no income at all, we would still be able to support these 70 people for two years. At the same time, to be prepared, the staff also work on fundraising programmes to add to the coffers. Some villagers have ecotourism packages and camps, and we link up these companies with young people who want to experience rural indigenous life. Some money from such activities is already supporting PACOS. So, that village is already ‘giving back’ and supporting us from the beginning of 2009. We are quite confident that in a few years from now, the youth can take over from us.
HOLISTIC WORLDVIEW

Our worldview has a lot to do with maintaining biodiversity. We never understood that before. We were focusing on socio-economic issues, education, literacy and rights. But we are now begging to see that all the work is linked to biodiversity. We are beginning to realize that if we lose what we have – the forest – we lose our knowledge, especially on herbal medicine.

We realize, as indigenous communities, that we have a very holistic worldview. So much of our culture is disappearing because of globalization, and conversion to more mainstream religions. Sometimes, the ‘new’ religion, or even commercialization and consumerism, does not look at life holistically.

However, indigenous communities have always looked at everything holistically, making sure nothing runs out. And this is how we have survived for generations. We see this as an important aspect of the work of PACOS.

CHALLENGES IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Why do I do what I do? As indigenous communities in Sabah, we realize that we are faced with a lot of problems. Firstly, we are fast losing our territory. Communities need the land to support them. For us, it is important work to see this through so that our community will move forward, and be on par with other communities in Malaysia. We need to capture our knowledge on culture. Now, we are very involved in advocacy work to get the government to recognize that we have this unique cultural voice. There is a lack of access to healthcare, education, and even basic infrastructure. I come from a village not too far from the city, so access was better.

I realize, as I travel in the state of Sabah, that there is a big gap between what is available near the town and in the rural areas. I also realize that there are not enough good schools, teachers and opportunities to improve the status or position of indigenous communities. Many of these communities are located in very remote areas, and though they’ve tried to protect these areas, they have been taken over by big companies, bulldozed or turned into oil palm plantations. It is quite sad to see.
Apart from these challenges, they also voice out what they want: mainly, better education for the children, pre-school, etc. As these communities are remote, maintaining what they have of the forest, and access to clean water, are very important. That is how we started talking about biodiversity and education; rights have to be considered in broader perspectives.

We see new opportunities in ‘climate change’ issues. We thought that respect for and harmony with the environment was our worldview, and wanted it to be recognized. But it has to be promoted – in the normal education system, it is not emphasized.

**KEEPING OUR LAND**

According to the land ordinance, if we have a piece of land, and we do not occupy or work on it, the government will take it over, saying that it is idle land. For us, it is not idle – we see it as having a ‘rest.’ But the government wants to see it planted with rubber or oil palm. So, we have to fight with that kind of government policy. Sometimes, when the communities get together and decide to clear the land, little do they realize that the land may be located in a water-catchment area. Then, after some time, the whole community will realize that there is no water left. And the policy on commercialization focuses on promoting oil palm – basically, money for development.

The prevailing idea of development is ‘tall buildings.’ But we need to realize that the land is for much more than that – it is for the quality of life, especially food security. So, our work is wider now, and not just about the struggle of being recognized as indigenous people, and the right to our property.

We are getting ourselves organized so that we do not lose our territory; at the same time, we teach them how to fish – not just give them fish. We also need to ensure that the fishing area is not polluted. Looking after the environment will ensure that our community survives to the next generation.
SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

When I was a senior student at UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or National University of Malaysia), I began to develop a social consciousness. I was involved in the Catholic student movement, and one of the things we were very much exposed to was the social teaching of the Catholic Church – not just about God and ‘being saved,’ but about our neighbours as well. When we were students, we realized there was a big gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’ We went to the village, and did an analysis. By the time we graduated from university, we were very much aware of the issues, especially those related to indigenous communities.

In the early 1980s, we were very active in Aliran. We did not move straightaway into indigenous issues but focused generally on poverty in Sabah, which was widespread. But by 1986, we started focusing on indigenous communities: it dawned on us that it was our community, and therefore, our issues; that we had better do something about this since nobody else was going to do anything. It was a consciousness that was being formed about social justice. We needed a way to understand the issues, and that’s when we established PACOS.

NOT STARTING FROM ZERO

My achievements at the community level are many, though there are big challenges. Most of what affects the communities is with regards to policy: the attitude of the government towards rural communities has a discrepancy. PACOS hasn’t moved into much advocacy yet. We have made many inroads, and communities themselves are aware of these challenges, and are willing to be part of the solution. It is no more us going to the village – the villagers come to us almost every day, telling us their problems. We are full now. But we have also come to a point where some villages are stronger; and so, when new groups of villagers who are aware of their issues and challenges come to us, we link them to a group which has been in this kind of work for a longer time. So, we do not start from zero; the other village can advise. This is an achievement.
WOMEN LEADING ... WITH CONFIDENCE

In terms of leadership, my main focus of work is building women leaders. Though I still see leadership dominated by men, I also see the women starting to come up with confidence, and taking certain responsibilities in their village – that is already an accomplishment. I can see the women becoming leaders – and I see that as a big achievement in that span of time. We can also see that these women are sending their children to do internship work with us. It is not just the mothers or the fathers; the children are also being sent with the hope that if they understand the issue, they will join us on graduating from school or college. If they have the capacity, they will come back and do something for the village, and be involved in this kind of work. Thus begins the next generation’s involvement.

CAPACITY BUILDING

A leader is someone who can bring a group of people together to do something. I see myself as a person with vision – I have an idea of what we can be in the community. For this, we need like-minded people. It doesn’t come automatically, like going to a village and finding leaders. There has to be capacity building, given that they already have the exposure. This is especially so for the women, as men have many opportunities to be elected to the JKKK (Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung or Village Security and Development Committee), and have the experience of leadership. But I see that women do not have that opportunity because they are tied down to domestic responsibilities, especially looking after children, ensuring there is enough food, and that the farm is tended to. It is even worse if the women have not gone to school.

As for me, I am the eldest of 12 siblings, and had to look after my brothers and sisters – I learnt to lead. So, when I went to school, I was a natural
leader – I was a prefect, and later, the head girl of the school. I was a student leader in the university, willing to learn and willing to take up responsibilities – and people make you a leader.

**GEN** **ERA** **BALANCE**

Women in the villages do not have the opportunity to lead; when they are young, they help their mothers look after their younger siblings, so there is no way to harness those leadership skills within them. When they get married, they look to their husbands as the leaders. When the government officers come to do their surveys, they would ask for the head of the household.

Working in PACOS, building leaders, and addressing gender issues, I understand why it is so important for the women to be involved – not just the men, who make all the decisions. In a village, if you ask the men what they want, they may say balairaya (community hall); but if you ask the women, they may say ‘water.’ It is true that women see different perspectives. There needs to be a gender balance. Women are bogged down with domestic responsibilities, and therefore, it is hard for them to take up other responsibilities. And even when they do take up other responsibilities, you must be able to provide the support system.

**SUPPORTING GENDER INITIATIVES**

When we want a mother to be involved in PACOS activities, we have to plan for it in the budget so that she can bring her children and have them cared for by someone we hire; or even support her in bringing someone, like a sister, to help. Then, she can gain the knowledge to build herself as a leader. Building leadership at that level is a challenge. It is easy to say that we want gender balance but it takes more than just getting women involved. For example, there was a situation...
in which we wanted women to join us at the district office to get some information. One of the women could not come because she needed to finish harvesting; so, we went to help her finish harvesting. In another situation, a woman’s husband would not let her go; we needed to see how we could intervene.

We need to understand how to work in the community. In urban areas, women make more decisions as they are educated. In rural areas, it is different. So, that’s when we talk about leadership and gender – it has to be a conscious effort rather than something that is taken for granted. We have a policy in PACOS that if there is an invitation to attend a conference, we send both male and female participants. It is a policy we made consciously.

As leaders, one of the things we are proud of is that we are able to build new strong leaders who would be accountable to their villages and community. We are even prouder if those leaders are women. When we have women willing to come here – even the men who are ketua kampung (village chief) or heads of village committees – then, we know we’re making headway.
**GENDER SENSITIVITY**

Being a woman, there are a lot of challenges for me in the work I do. Of course, I am a mother, I am a wife, I live in an Asian society – and still, there are a lot of Asian values that are gender-biased. Of course, it helps for women to have supportive husbands who are gender-sensitive – they are the ‘empowered’ men. Being a woman leader can be challenging in public meetings – you have to prove yourself most of the time. It is not that you are not capable, but you need to go the ‘extra mile’ to prove yourself. I guess it is not easily accepted by the community. But things are getting better as the villagers now come to PACOS. Still, being a woman, we have to really ensure our own safety; we cannot be caught off-guard.

Of course, there are some good things about being a woman. We are feminine, we are more in touch with our emotions, we talk more about how we feel, and that is good. We talk about it more openly. This is something our male colleagues find difficult to understand – such is our society. We hope it is different with our sons and the young men: that they will be more in touch with their emotions; that they are not expected to be strong. Expectations are very high for men. For example, men have a lot of pressure from their families that they must earn more than their wives. When a boy falls in love with a girl with higher education or higher income, he has to be empowered to be able to handle that situation.

**SOCIAL ROLE MODELS**

Society needs role models, especially in gendered relationships. I always think about the ‘role model’ concept. Women are thought to be weak, but we are capable of so much if given the opportunity. Women not only do certain tasks, but must be seen to be able to do them. Being a role model – with the values we hold – impacts our outlook on others. The kind of person we show ourselves to be: leading a simple life, being open, being strong, making good decisions, being courageous and...
bringing up certain issues that are not right – these are important to be a role model. We can be in the forefront – not just the men.

If women are given the opportunity, support and exposure, they can be good leaders. For biodiversity and community development work, it is important not to leave the women behind.

SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

What are the ideas that women and girls have? For indigenous communities, much of the knowledge on biodiversity is in the hands of women. We must not forget that, and we must be proud of it. Women are farmers; their knowledge of herbal medicine (for the family) is much wider, but it is not being acknowledged. Women know much about handicraft and medicine but this is not known in the public sphere. Giving emphasis, recording their knowledge, or making them talk about what they know are ways of acknowledging their knowledge.

I remember the case of a medicine woman in Kipovo Village (in Penampang, Sabah). When we first met her, she was the victim of domestic violence; her husband then left her for a younger woman. The community really looked down on her. When we began to take note of her knowledge, we realized that what she knew was valuable. Now, she goes from village to village, and people look for her when they are sick. Other women want to know the knowledge that she has.

I also know the other extreme – women who were very good herbalists have forgotten what they know. Now, they feel very useless, and worse still, when they grow older, they just depend on their children to support them. If they were independent, they would feel very good about themselves.

HIGHLIGHTING OUR CONCERNS

This publication helps put our plight on record. Some people would not know about the women in this book. How many people would I be able to talk to, or to interact with? I believe that if we document it in print, then we will be able to disseminate it wider. One of the weaknesses of indigenous people is that we have very strong oral traditions but we do not have strong writing
skills. I think writing is very important. We need to be able to highlight our concerns and our work. For now, I write short articles.

**SPARKING THE FIRE**

Motivating others to take up similar work has to do with awareness. Even I became aware and interested through student activities and awareness. You need to be aware of biodiversity and climate change – not only your economic needs, such as a big car and a big house. That balance is important, and when you go further, you’ll question who holds this balance. You may be surprised to learn that these people who are seemingly uneducated hold the key. We, the so-called middle-class indigenous community who have been urbanized, would not really have achieved anything if not for our rural counterparts. Maybe we would just have become successful in business. I know I would have been a successful businesswoman – and have a big house, big car, and go for holidays every year, not knowing what to do with my money! But because of that spark, that journey of awareness, we started linking our life to many things.
Notes

1. PACOS Trust (or PACOS – Partners of Community Organizations) is a community-based non-governmental organization set up to help raise the quality of life of indigenous communities. See Glossary.

2. Kadazandusun is the term assigned to the unification of the classification of two indigenous tribes (in Sabah) – the ethnic groups Kadazan and Dusun. Kadazandusun is made up of forty sub-ethnic groups of the Dusun and Kadazan. (wikipedia)

3. Ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” Ecotourism unites conservation, communities and sustainable travel. http://www.ecotourism.org/

4. *Aliran Kesedaran Negara* (National Consciousness Movement) is the oldest human rights group in Malaysia. *Aliran* is Malaysia’s first multi-ethnic reform movement dedicated to justice, freedom and solidarity.

   http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/more.html
Hellan, 31, is the president of Persatuan Wanita Desa Sarawak (WADESA – Sarawak Native Women’s Association). She mobilizes, educates and strengthens the stake of indigenous women in their rights, voice, power, and gender equity in society.

BACKGROUND

My family is of Dayak\(^1\) ethnicity, and I am the eldest of four siblings. I have a sister and two brothers. My father works for the government in the Department of Agriculture. My mother is a housewife.

I got engaged [pre-marriage rite] in December 2009, and our ‘big day’ will be at the end of 2010. My husband-to-be, David, is of Kenyah\(^2\) ethnicity from Baram, Sarawak.
My other interests are travelling to new places. This is the most interesting part of my job as I have the opportunity to travel a lot and meet many interesting people.

STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS WOMEN

I work for WADESA, and our official mandate is to lead women, especially in Sarawak, to delve into learning and knowledge, in addition to planting the spirit of tolerance among its members, and the community in general. WADESA was formed to strengthen and educate indigenous women, especially the women in my Dayak community. This is because most indigenous women are left behind in representation and recognition. We are not involved in discussions and decision making, and we do not have confidence in any work that we do, especially in the longhouse or kampung (village) community.

EMPOWERING JOURNEY

Why do I do this work? It is part of my task and responsibility to develop and strengthen my community, and also because I am an indigenous woman. In this role, I can also contribute to my community’s well-being, especially when I can help manage their problems.

I became motivated when I took a good look at the situation in Sarawak, my homeland. I realized that what was happening to the indigenous community was a very bad thing – and a big issue in my community. I realized I can help them. In Sarawak, only a few women are there to do this kind of work. So, when I do this work, at least I can help my community to be aware, and to empower the women so that they would know about their rights and their equal status in society. Doing this work is part of my personal journey.

It is not that easy to achieve this goal in a very short time as I just took on the role of president [of WADESA] two years ago. At that time, I was
I see myself as a leader mainly because of my position; secondly, because of my tasks and responsibilities; and thirdly, because I am going to manage myself and other people so that they can mobilize themselves in an effective way.

I am also a leader in how I communicate with the villagers and deliver at their level so that they can understand and follow what is good for them.

When I introduce myself as the president of WADESA, most of the women are interested to join. Unless the women respect me, I will not have enough capacity to really mobilize them. Sometimes, the position I have in the organization helps in gaining the women’s respect. And they are motivated, and I manage to convince them and to encourage them to be stronger in the community.

I am also a community organizer for the indigenous group. I tried to mobilize villagers at the village- and grassroots-level. I tried to create teamwork so that they can undertake activities in the village. So far, we’ve received good feedback and responses from members of WADESA.

When I was WADESA coordinator, I played a leading role, and tried to assist my staff in their work. I tried to guide them in their needs, and in dealing with their communities and the indigenous people. I also guide them in trainings – how to conduct and run them. So, at the community-level, they know what they need. I try to involve women staff so that when we return, we can do the training together and co-facilitate.

My work is, of course, linked to biodiversity as most of the work concerns native customary rights. Definitely, oil palm plantations, logging, and dam building will destroy biodiversity, especially in the Dayak community areas. Other communities, like the Orang Ulu, Penan and Iban, will also be affected. We hope that the community will know how to protect their land as a result of our work. If logging is done on their land, their biodiversity will be affected – and lost. Now, they realize their river is polluted because of
logging. Then, they will no longer be able to fish or have a livelihood to support them. We educate them that their lives are affected because of this logging and pollution. Now, they understand the resulting devastating loss of the biodiversity in their area. We hope they understand that they not only need to have the oil palm in their area, but more importantly, they need the forest to survive. This is the important work of awareness.

Additionally, my advice is for women to spend some time to understand what biodiversity is, and how it is important for their lives. I hope that especially indigenous women will be interested and encouraged to learn, and be aware about these important areas of their lives – because our land is our life, our nature is our life. And also because the natural world, like our forest and our biodiversity, is our livelihood.
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**CHALLENGE OF TRADITION**

In my experience, most of them in my community are still in their traditional thinking. The challenge is that the men feel their role (e.g., during a discussion) is to be dominant, and the women’s role is to be silent. The men don’t accept it when the women start to voice out something – and this is a big challenge for me and the women in the community. Usually, when I talk about WADESA, it is to both men and women. The men will ask: “If the women start attending the training, what happens to their husbands at home?” Hence, the assumption is that the women are supposed to look after the children, and not go for the training. This situation is one of the challenges we face.

**THE GENDER QUESTION**

I am a role model for other women in terms of my background, and how I do my work. Some of my WADESA members are motivated to follow me, and say: “Oh, she is brave enough to speak in front of people.” They are inspired to have the skills to talk in front of others.

I hope everyone understands that men and women have equal rights, access, benefits and everything else. And I hope they also understand why women are stakeholders of the benefits.

We have to invite women to join activities related to biodiversity and gender. If they are not exposed to these issues, they will not be interested in championing these causes.

If you just talk in the house or coffee shop,
that will be nothing but idle gossip. But once they are involved and attend
the programmes, they will know the importance of their rights. When they
attend the workshop, seminar or training, this awareness will spread. ☺

Notes
1. The Dayak are a people indigenous to Borneo. It is a loose term for over 200
ethnic sub-groups, each with its own dialect, customs, laws, territory and culture,
although common distinguishing traits are readily identifiable. (wikipedia)
2. The Kenyah are indigenous people of Borneo. Kenyah is an umbrella term for
over 40 sub-groups that mostly share common migration histories, customs and
related dialects. The Kenyah community is one of the indigenous tribes that
http://www.seacology.org/projects/
3. Native customary rights to land consists of rights to cultivate the land, rights
to the produce of the jungle, hunting and fishing rights, rights to use the land
for burial and ceremonial purposes, and rights of inheritance and transfer. See
Glossary.
4. Orang Ulu (Malay term for ‘remote people’) is an ethnic designation politically
coined to group together roughly 27 very small but ethnically diverse tribal
groups in Sarawak. (wikipedia)
5. The Penan are a nomadic aboriginal people living in Sarawak and Brunei. They
are one of the last such peoples remaining. The Penan are noted for their practice
of molong which means ‘never taking more than necessary.’ (wikipedia)
6. The Iban are a branch of the Dayak peoples (see note 1) of Borneo. In Malaysia,
most of the Ibans are located in Sarawak, a small portion in Sabah and some in
Peninsular Malaysia. (wikipedia)
Mariam, 44, also known as Suzanna, is the executive director of Institut Pribumi Malaysia Sarawak (IPIMAS – Indigenous Peoples Institute Malaysia Sarawak). She works with the community on biodiversity and conservation projects.

BACKGROUND

I am of Bidayuh\(^1\) heritage from Bau, near Kuching, Sarawak. I come from a big family, and have settled in Miri, Sarawak, with my husband, Raymond, and my two loving, active sons.
COMMITMENT TO WOMEN
The main reason for my commitment is the situation faced by women. Other
than my work, my interest is to be more involved in the women’s group, and
with unwed mothers. In the urban environment, there are many problems.
I have gathered and mobilized a few of my friends, especially among the
indigenous people. We do not want the women to be manipulated in the
urban areas; for example, babies being abandoned (by unwed mothers) for
fear of stigmatization.

GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY
I am lucky that my parents recognized that education is important. Hence,
we (the daughters) were sent to school, and for further education. We are
at a level where we can look back and contribute to our communities in
the village. I was very successfully running the sugar bun outlet throughout
Sarawak. But I wondered why my peers from school were left behind.

In the corporate sector, men and women are equally involved, but this is not
the case in more traditional settings. So, I started thinking of what I could do
to help the women in these settings. I felt I must do something. Even before
I met Raymond, it was already in me to ‘give back’ to where I came from. I
am Bidayuh, but I do not limit my work to this indigenous group only. I have
the knowledge, and I can, at least, share that.

MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES
Another reason for my commitment (other than my involvement in women’s
groups) is the need for conservation. Rivers used to be so clean, cutting
wood used to be a nearby activity, and honey bees are disappearing.
Raymond motivates me a lot – he is well-versed in conservation matters,
and I ask him a lot of questions. That is when we started talking about
resource management and CBNRM\(^2\) projects, etc. So, we ventured into the
community, and started talking to them about resource management.
I am also from the community, but because of higher education, I am a little different. I feel it is my responsibility to educate them through training, and also through the CBNRM project.

Initially, they may not understand what there is to take an interest in. At meetings, their presence would usually be for cooking and making coffee, while the men would be in discussion. It takes time to coax the women. Sometimes, I feel we need to create programmes to initiate them, and surely they will gain. After some exposure, especially if it is outside their village, they will be involved in the work.

Fear makes them give many excuses. Sometimes, they say it is always in English, and they do not understand. However, I tell them that as long as they have eyes and ears, they will be able to understand somewhat. For major projects, we coax the women to participate, to share the work with the men. We assure them that it is okay if they fail – as long as they try.

Eventually, the women’s group started helping and coming for the training, even out of the village to Miri. They would be quiet but we emphasize that we are together and that we will learn together. Later, slowly, through the subsequent programmes, they are able to participate. They realize they need it. Initially, there was some resistance because they could not read. However, in the last programme, more than half were women. They participated a lot, and their ideas were so good that I told them never to underestimate their abilities. It was not only the educated ones who knew a lot; we can learn from those who learn differently in the villages. Even the men can learn from the women.
Women have been more confined to families, what to feed the children, and what to farm. So, we are educating them that their world is not so narrow, and that they have the right, for example, to chose what to wear and consume, and not be manipulated by other people. They have the right to education and the right to know much more – these are not just for the men and boys.

One day, I will be able to achieve a certain aspect of the women’s lives, and change them. Now, if you invite them, they come in, though it is still the men dominating the discussion. Still, it is encouraging to see them participate, and also with greater confidence.

CAPACITY BUILDING

I have been working in IPIMAS for more than ten years but have recently been very active with the CBNRM and micro-hydro\(^3\) electricity projects.

We focus on community-based development, especially on biodiversity sustainability, in handling natural resources. For example, we teach how not to wipe out indigenous plants, like rattan, ensuring that replanting is done for future use. We help empower the community by encouraging them to be involved in projects rather than sending them for training and exposure. Recently, we got them involved in a participatory programme involving women’s and men’s groups. The training for leadership is getting them to undertake projects so that in the future they are able to do this with less of our help.

The training focuses on capacity building in indigenous communities, by empowering women and men in their rights to health, education, freedom of culture, food and consumption. The training gives emphasis to CBNRM as this is important for their lives, and so that they do not suffer from lack of natural resources. Whatever their needs are, they must be able to get it from their forest ‘supermarket’. The forest is very important to them; without it, they

It was not only the educated ones who knew a lot; we can learn from those who learn differently in the villages. Even the men can learn from the women.
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CONSERVING FOR POSTERITY

We are very closely working on managing natural resources. There should be a continuity of such resources, and they should not be wiped out. Take, for example, rattan in the nearby villages. Villagers have to walk three to four kilometres instead of one kilometre as before. So, we educate them that they should not let all these disappear. Whatever they harvest must be replanted. We have replanted over 5,000 trees, and the continuation of the DANIDA⁴ project is also for replanting. We
do not have enough primary forests; and due to the logging problem, we do not have many trees left.

Lack of conservation, and pollution is affecting indigenous communities, especially women’s groups. We tell the women that a lot depends on them, and that they should manage the forest with the men – their families depend on it. Even the river is there for consumption and bathing; so, it is important for them. It is not our responsibility but we help them manage it. Replanting is going very well with the community undertaking it properly.

Funding is usually just for a few years but for trees to be maintained and to make sure they grow well takes a minimum of five years. So, we have to keep getting funding for the continuation of the project, even though the community has undertaken a lot through gotong-royong (cooperation
DOCUMENTING COMMUNITY ASSETS

We are also looking into traditional medicine. If we do not make an effort to safeguard our knowledge of traditional medicine and plants, it will become extinct. So, we encourage them to keep it alive through herbal gardens. We are replanting medicinal herbs in a garden plot, and the community looks after it. Then, the next generation can learn, keep the knowledge alive, and pass it on.

We have also produced some documentation and leaflets. These have not been published yet due to lack of funding and also due to piracy. It would be sad if this knowledge is taken away from the community as they do not own the intellectual property rights. We are trying to figure out how to handle this. We brought in the Sarawak Biodiversity Centre, but how far their assurance of preserving community assets will work – we are yet to see.

towards a shared goal). DANIDA has helped us in extending the funding. River conservation should not stop when the project stops – and so, of course, funding helps.

COMMUNITY APPROACH

IPIMAS and the work we do is community-based – the community guides us along. In turn, we guide them in leadership skills to lead other members of the community. They learn how to do the project, which includes simple skills, like bookkeeping. Our projects have training, skills and exposure; so, the community is able to do things on their own. In the beginning, they cling to us, but now the dependence is much less, though they still consult us. It is a small achievement, but to me, it is great. Previously, they just cut what they need from the forest, but now, they also replant. With regard to the herbal garden, the women used to ask me what they should do about the depletion; but we asked them, in return, what they wanted to do. We do not want to tell them what to do – they know what they want. We just help them get involved in leadership, coordinate their work, and lead their own people.
NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The way the villagers do things is different. They do not know how to come together to do it. It is not about forcing them to do something. In the corporate world, it is ‘money’ at the end of the day – but in the community, it is just the opposite. We have to listen to them, communicate, and take into account their opinions. To be successful, community involvement is very important, not just us giving them solutions.

I do not design the projects – we go to the communities and ask them what their needs are. Before any proposal, we ask them first. The micro-hydro project was a result of this needs analysis. Then, we applied to the Global Environment Facility for grants. The CBNRM project in the Mulu Ngabong area, which was completed in 2009, was a result of their concern that the oil palm plantations were encroaching their land. We do not initiate interventions but listen and then apply for funds for them.

WITH AND THROUGH THE COMMUNITY

Our achievements are the achievements of the community – not how many projects or the funding we get. Achievements are not personal to me, but to IPIMAS through the community. The biodiversity link is through the sustainability of the forest. In the last six years, we have worked through various projects: CBNRM and those coordinated by MNS (Malaysian Nature Society). The community knows we want to help them through training and links with government. River management systems are important, like the use of the tagal system where fishing can only be done at certain times of the year.

To ensure sustainability, everyone in the community gets involved – this is the role of IPIMAS. The roots of sustainability come from the community and are within the community, and we have just come in to help them. They used to complain that the river was smelly because of chemical pollution from the oil palm plantation, and that children could not swim due to this. So, we told them to refer to the tagal system. When they ask how to do it, we teach them, and help put in the proposal for funding.
EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

I always believe we should impart our knowledge, and through this, the community will learn. This is our main duty as leaders. My efforts will be a success when I see indigenous community members leading and imparting knowledge of a certain project on their own. Through the CBNRM project that we are doing, we want to empower them to lead on their own – that is our main objective.

Personally, as a woman, I do not face much resistance from the community. They would listen to outsiders but they will not listen to women’s groups. We tell them we know the same things, and learn from each other. The women’s groups feel assured that we will listen to them. I always say that we make decisions together. It was not easy for me in the beginning: coming from the corporate sector, I could be the ‘boss’ and the others would listen to me.

Our achievements are the achievements of the community – not how many projects or the funding we get.
However, the indigenous women just need encouragement to be on par with the men, not to feel inferior. Here, I have to be communicating on equal terms.

**ROLE MODELLING**

I tell them: If I can do it, why can’t you? That is my attitude in the village. If the herbal medicine project stops, the work should not stop. So I tell them we must work together for the benefit of the community. And if they are able to continue, I feel great about it as I am together with them – I am part of the community. It will not fail without me, but we are learning together, and I can be a role model for them. As a community, they always have gotong-royong, and I tell them to use it well.

As a role model, I can guide and encourage the women. Men need role models too, but women need them more.
As a role model, I can guide and encourage the women. Men need role models too, but women need them more. I tell them even if I do not come from the same ethnic group, we can still work together, even if it is in English. I stress to them: If there is a will, there is a way. They were worried about problems that would arise when we started the tree replanting. I encouraged them that there would be problems but these will bring us together to work on them. I ask them not to worry, and that we can do it; and even if it fails, it is okay. Knowledge must be passed on to the next generation, and not end with them.

RAISING COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Biodiversity management is everyone’s responsibility, especially the women. Always believe that you are part of the biodiversity – wherever you go, you will need it. You cannot always think in material terms – we cannot trade off environment with materialism. The indigenous people have a very important role; not the urban folk. The air we breathe is the same for everyone.
I hope one day, the women in the cities will realize what is happening in their villages, and the awareness will begin, and change the situation.

There are no more programmes in the town. We do not do much in the cities. I tell my friends to remember their community in the village. By word of mouth, we bring awareness. Imparting knowledge is important, sharing it can be powerful, and we – in the cities – can help the indigenous communities in the villages who lack education to have the awareness.

Notes

1. Bidayuh is the collective name for several indigenous groups found in southern Sarawak that are broadly similar in language and culture. The name ‘Bidayuh’ means ‘inhabitants of land’. (wikipedia)

2. The community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach combines conservation objectives with the generation of economic benefits for rural communities. See Glossary.

3. Micro-hydro is a term for hydroelectric power installations that typically produce up to 100 kilowatts of power. (wikipedia)

4. The Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) is the agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark for providing development assistance to developing countries. (www.um.dk/en)

5. The Sarawak Biodiversity Centre initiates programmes for the conservation of biodiversity in Sarawak. See Glossary.

6. The Global Environment Facility is a partnership for mainstreaming global environmental concerns into national sustainable development agendas. See Glossary.

7. The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) is Malaysia’s largest and oldest non-government environmental organization. MNS has become a strong voice for the protection of Malaysia’s natural heritage. http://www.mns.my/

8. Tagal is a community-based resource management practice of fish and river conservation. See Glossary.
Mongulias Mongak

Mongulias works with Komokitukod (Society of Traditional Knowledge Discovery), a community organization, and gives training in traditional dress weaving.

BACKGROUND

I am from Kampung Liu, Pitas, Sabah, and of Rungus\(^1\) ethnicity. I am married with five children, and have five grandchildren.

COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION

I work in the village as a pre-school teacher. But this year [2010], we do not have students as the
RESUSCITATING A DYING ART

My interests are making crafts, such as weaving to make traditional clothes. I did not know much about the craft in the beginning. But when I saw the elders weaving, I realized the trade was becoming extinct. Indigenous knowledge in weaving is dying, and I had a desire to continue this practice for the younger generation. Many have lost interest in such activities.

A group of women, including me, felt that the art of weaving was important for our tradition; so, we decided to revive it. In this way, indigenous weaving will not become extinct, and we can share the skill and knowledge with our children.

government has set up a pre-school which the children are attending. So, we are using our pre-school as a Community Learning Centre (CLC), where we run weaving classes.

PRESERVING TRADITION AND IMPROVING LIVELIHOOD

I do my work not for myself but for the community. In the CLC, we have students taking weaving classes, and we promote this art to the villagers. We teach them so that more would know about the art of making traditional clothing by weaving. In this way, we can also improve our livelihood. When people place orders, we can increase the income of our families.

WEAVING TRADITION

We are always given exposure by PACOS$^2$ to learn new skills, such as traditional crafts. That is when we first realized that we, too, have such crafts but that the art was dying. There was no one ‘good enough’ to do it. So, we started thinking, had a meeting and decided to have a weaving class for the community to preserve and increase the knowledge of indigenous people.

GIVING WEAVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

My achievement within the community is mainly that I was able to mobilize my women friends to promote weaving classes. There are many women
who are interested, and I feel that my achievements so far are satisfactory. As for me, I was not good at weaving in the beginning, but after a year of training, I am able to weave, and also to teach the art. So, that is a personal achievement as well.

My work has a link to biodiversity management; even in the pre-school, we have environmental education programmes, so that our biodiversity does not become extinct.

STARTING YOUNG

In Komokitukod, I am not only in the CLC but I also head the group to replant original trees at the water-catchment area. My work has a link to biodiversity management; even in the pre-school, we have environmental education programmes, so that our biodiversity does not become extinct.
PERCEIVED LEADER

My understanding as a leader is that we can enable the community to be united, and to work together and cooperate. I do not consider myself a leader; I just want to work together and help the community in the village. But the community believes and regards me as a leader, though I do not see myself as one.

As leaders, we must be prepared to face the problems in the community with a give-and-take attitude, not give up easily, and be responsible for all that we do.

FACING THE CHALLENGE

Among the women, I see myself as a role model. I feel I need to face all the problems that I experience, and to give-and-take in relationships – this makes
me strong and ‘fresh.’ The challenges are there, but whether it becomes a leadership obstacle is another question. It is a challenge, for example, if the villagers do not cooperate or are dissatisfied.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

My advice to other women is that as leaders, we must be prepared to face the problems in the community with a give-and-take attitude, not give up easily, and be responsible for all that we do. As motivation for other women, we have to communicate with them since they know how to lead a community with regards to gotong-royong (cooperation towards a shared goal). The women are a vital communication line for the health of the village.

Notes

1. The Rungus are an ethnic group of Borneo, residing primarily in northern Sabah. A sub-group of the Kadazandusun, they have a distinctive language, dress, architecture, customs, and oral literature. Their beadwork easily distinguish the Rungus from the other ethnic groups of Sabah. (wikipedia)

2. PACOS Trust (or PACOS – Partners of Community Organizations) is a community-based non-governmental organization set-up to help raise the quality of life of indigenous communities. See Glossary.
Rahayu, 45, is a team leader with WWF–Malaysia. She leads, guides and supervises work on turtle conservation.

BACKGROUND

I am from Kuantan, Pahang, and come from a family of five. I’ve got two younger sisters. Kuantan is nearby, so I like working here in Kerteh [in Terengganu] and the surrounding areas. I like travelling, reading, scuba diving, and cycling quite a bit.
**SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY**

*I feel it is my responsibility as a Muslim to protect the environment, and to play a role in conservation. We bring up this matter in workshops. In Islam, humans are considered khalifah (leader). And as a leader, we should protect and conserve – not pillage and plunder!*

**MEKAR**\(^2\) collaborated with Institut Kemahiran Islam Malaysia (Islamic Skills Institute Malaysia) to prepare a Friday prayer sermon text on conservation. This text was approved by the Jabatan Agama Islam Terengganu (Islamic Religious Department of Terengganu), and read in more than 400 mosques sometime in November 2008.

**MEANINGFUL PASSION**

I left legal practice, and went into conservation work with ‘eyes wide open.’ Sometimes, when I am down, I regret my decision but commitment makes me soldier on. I do what I do because I want to do something meaningful in life. Conservation is something I am passionate about. The combination of ‘passion’ and ‘meaning’ makes me do what I am doing.

When I was working in Kuala Lumpur, I used to actively participate in MNS\(^3\) activities. I used to volunteer a lot with them. Through them, I used to enjoy and appreciate the outdoors. Through this involvement, I felt the environment is something we need to protect.

**VITAL TURTLE CONNECTION**

I have managed to mobilize groups of villagers in Kerteh, Paka and Kemasik\(^4\) to be actively involved in turtle conservation.\(^5\) Many of the threats to turtles are from human beings. Protecting the turtles by keeping them in hatcheries, etc., would not work because the threats are still there; for example, egg consumption, indiscriminate use of certain fishing gear, and habitat destruction. These are threats caused by humans that need to be tackled. The best way to do so is by working with the local community.

These destructive activities may be due to people being unaware of their actions. Through participation and conservation activities, we make them
aware; through this realization, they actively participate in turtle conservation. We actually succeed in behavioural changes, such as stopping turtle egg consumption, and reducing the use of illegal fishing gear.

**BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES**

The success would be that when I came seven years ago, people were not very interested. The people’s attitude was: “So what if the turtles are going to disappear?” They do not understand the roles turtles play in the ecosystem and their relationship with humans. For these people, turtles live in the sea and they live on land: “We do not meet, and we can still carry on with life.”

We have to educate them on how the turtles ensure the health of the sea grass bed, and how this sea bed is a nursery ground for fish. And if the sea grass bed is not healthy, it will affect the fish population. Eventually, the fisherman’s source of income is compromised.

I am beginning to see behavioural changes. People come up to me and say that they used to eat turtle eggs; but after listening to me, they have stopped. This is a positive change.

**COMMUNITY FOR COMMUNITY**

I work with MEKAR, which comprises members of the local community – fishermen, housewives, teachers, businessmen, villagers and local youth. They carry out awareness and capacity-building workshops for the local community. There are 16 men and three women in the MEKAR committee.

I hope I have inspired my colleagues that if we persevere enough, we should be able to work successfully with our local community. For example, when we first came, no one knew me and I knew no one, and we started from scratch. I am proud to share that MEKAR has grown from an entity that did not know much about turtles; now, they have taken it upon themselves to
carry out awareness activities, and to look for funding to do so. I see that as an achievement.

CONSERVATION THRUST

Turtle conservation comes under the purview of the Department of Fisheries. The DOF have their own education awareness component, but due to lack of funding and personnel, they were unable to be very effective. So, with the setting up of MEKAR with our help, MEKAR was able to take over some of the functions of DOF. Now, MEKAR is more independent and confident of carrying out their activities. The DOF will take care of the hatcheries and egg collection, and MEKAR complements what they do. So, in terms of biodiversity management, MEKAR plays a role or complements the work of DOF.

One approach we take to conservation is through the proper treatment of turtle eggs. When we collect these eggs after they are laid, we have to be
very careful how we handle them. Within two hours after being laid, the eggs must be transferred into the hatchery, and buried in the sand. The eggs are very sensitive to movement. So, we have conducted trainings on how best to handle the eggs for the people doing this: rangers who patrol the beach and collect the eggs, hatchery workers, and those who handle the transfer of eggs.

A leader has got to be visionary because you are leading a group of people to a goal. So you need to know what it is you are leading people to in the first place, and to work together to achieve that goal.

So far, we have seen an increase in the success rate of the hatchery; and I believe it stems from the knowledge and skills of those who handle the eggs. We also work closely with the licensed egg collectors, who have been given permission to collect eggs from stretches of beaches that are not very productive, or not cost-effective for the DOF to undertake. Previously, the egg collectors could sell these eggs in the market. They give some money to the government, and this is put under a tender scheme, and they sell the eggs to the market. But now, we work with the collectors and buy the eggs from them. They sell them to us for incubation at the hatchery. So, we have seen an increase in eggs being sold to us as well.

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

A leader has got to be visionary because you are leading a group of people to a goal. So you need to know what it is you are leading people to in the first place, and to work together to achieve that goal.

I see myself as a leader. My aim when I first got here was to mobilize the community who, at that time, were apathetic towards turtles. At that time, they did not even know there was turtle nesting here. I wanted them to work collaboratively with the authorities on turtle conservation as this is their area, and their responsibility to work together for conservation. They have learnt some skills, but have a lot more to learn and cope with – we are halfway there. The buy-in from the government is also important, and getting them to work closely with MEKAR is another area to concentrate on.
I am proud that the fledgling MEKAR that knew nothing about turtles is now recognized in this area to give talks in schools for turtle awareness programmes in the hatcheries, to participate in exhibitions, and to put up posters. It is recognized not just by other organizations but also by government agencies; for example, the district office. I see MEKAR as a ‘baby’ that has grown up.

**ENGAGING THE MALE DOMAIN**

I do not face many challenges being a woman in my work now, but when I first came, I was an outsider. Terengganu is a male-dominated society, and leaders are mostly men. Here I was, a woman trying to engage mainly older men in my work; it was a little tricky. I did not realize, due to my naivety, that it was politically incorrect to have a chit-chat with the *pak cik* (older males) in the *kedai kopi* (coffee shop). But later on, I made it a point to get to know the wives. Initially, they were a little jealous, and I had to manage that. Now, they realize I am just here on business, and not after their husbands or any such hanky panky.

I am a role model for other women mainly because I am not intimidated by other men. Men sometimes look down on me, and I can be aggressive; though I do not think that it is necessarily role-model behaviour. However, I do have the ability to work in a male-dominated society.

**GENDER EQUITY**

I think there is gender equity on paper, but in reality, there doesn’t seem to be. There shouldn’t be gender discrimination. We should look at a person as a whole – not as a ‘he’ or ‘she.’
PURSUING THE CAUSE

Women in the East Coast [of Peninsular Malaysia] have a big role to play as they are mainly homemakers. They have a big influence on their children and husbands. So, even if they do not have the necessary technical skills, if only they become aware of what role they can play as a community member, they can pass this on effectively to others, and this can be a powerful network of communication.

You must have a lot of patience, be very resilient, and be able to handle disappointments to take up the cause. At the end of the day, it is part of the work process, a job hazard. Nothing is straightforward in life. It makes you stronger – part of capacity building for yourself. It makes you confident in dealing with other situations in the future.

Notes
1. WWF stands for World Wide Fund for Nature. WWF–Malaysia is a national conservation trust that runs more than 75 projects covering a diverse range of environmental protection and nature conservation work in Malaysia. http://wwf.org.my/about_wwf/
2. MEKAR is an acronym for Persatuan Khazanah Rakyat Ma’ Daerah (Association of Ma’ Daerah, the People’s Heritage). It is a community-based organization. See Glossary.
3. The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) is Malaysia’s largest and oldest non-government environmental organization. MNS has become a strong voice for the protection of Malaysia’s natural heritage. http://www.mns.my/
4. Kerteh, Paka and Kemasik are towns in the state of Terengganu.
5. A turtle conservation centre was set up in 1999 in Ma’ Daerah, which is located between Kerteh and Paka. See notes 2 & 4, and Glossary.
6. An ecosystem is a biological community and its physical environment. See Glossary.
7. Gender equity means “fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs.” See Glossary.
Reita, 37, is the coordinator of Gerai OA (Indigenous People’s Shop), where she is craft researcher, revivalist and ‘revitalizer’ of indigenous crafts.

BACKGROUND
My family are my parents and a brother in Johor Baru, Johor.

REVIVING THE DYING
Gerai OA sells handicraft made by the Orang Asli, and I am focused on this work – I have no time for personal interests. I do what I do because I can.
Nobody else is going to do it, right? I do not even regard Gerai OA as an organization. When Gerai OA volunteers are exposed to our work, especially in other sectors of society – like ‘hidden’ communities in poverty – that many people don’t know about, they become our most dedicated volunteers. They see the ‘other’ side of Malaysia.

An example of the work we do is reviving the crafts, as they are dying even before we can document them. So, one of the strategies we adopted was that as we document, we ask the villagers to give us a copy of the item or to re-produce it for documentation purposes. We found that the items were cute and saleable, and that we could take them to the market.

RECOGNIZING COMMUNITY ASSETS

When you work in the interior areas, you see many things. A lot of skills are being wasted: some places do not have raw materials, or the old people have nothing to do until we give them something to do, and then, they find value again for the knowledge they have. Then, the village realizes the value the old people have, and the women are recognized for the value of knowledge they have.

In the past, they regarded it as just a skill that was unimportant, but which now has economic value. I saw this firsthand, and thought it was ridiculous! I think we have helped the women get a little organized, and find a market for their products.

ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIZATION

By undertaking such crafts, we preserve the source of these materials. For example, by using the pandanus leaves, we have to replant a lot of the cultivars. This is one of the ways we preserve the stock. For those harvested in the wild, we have to preserve the forest for the pandanus, rattan or whatever we need. The women are more acutely aware of the value of the forest for them. Those who are in the projects for the long term also run sensitization programmes for outsiders, in which they take them around their village and also to their ladang (plantation), where the women point out the plants around them.
Old people have nothing to do until we give them something to do, and then, they find value again for the knowledge they have. Then, the village realizes the value the old people have, and the women are recognized for the value of knowledge they have.

DOCUMENTING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

Unfortunately, I am not an ethnobotanist, so I cannot sit down and write all that they tell me. We do not have enough manpower. But I am working on a book on pandanus. Even for pandanus alone, there are so many details involved. Just in harvesting alone, you learn that these women know so much: just by being in tune with the cycles of the moon, they know when to harvest and when to plant.

They have known sophisticated information from way back; for example, they know that plants have higher sugar and sap content at full-moon, which is why harvesting is not done during a full-moon as it invites attacks by animals. The only thing they harvest is bamboo. Many don’t know this, and that is why we have to document it. We have to increase the number of pages [of the documentation]. We are distributing it to women’s communities so that they can sell and add to their income.

RAISING SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

These are essentially income-generation initiatives that we are trying. We do not get grants – and we do not request for them either. It is a bit of a headache trying to apply for grants. It can actually be done cheaply, unlike
some projects. Also, when the donor pulls out, the project goes down the drain. In our case, the women had nothing to start with – so the only way we can move their income level is up. When we started the project, we made it in such a way that after they are established, then we can apply for funding, because nowadays, everyone wants to give money for indigenous initiatives – corporate social responsibility, etc.

But whether the group has funding or not, it will not fall apart because they never had funding before. So, they just collect money little by little whenever they can; for example, by microcredit and other such facilities. There is no way they can go down; they are already at the bottom rung. These women are from 23 villages, and we do not work with all women; just groups of women from each village who want to work, as not all women want to. Crafts are hard work, and not everyone has the skill or patience. So, we work only with those who want to, and the benefits go directly to them.
COMMUNITY EXCHANGE

We have done training and capacity-building on a small scale. We had a donor who funded training for the *pandan*us master-weaving class in 2007. We gathered two or three master weavers per village, and sent them to Kampung Chang Lama (Chang Lama Village), Bidor, [in Perak]. This was an important move – we cemented the network we have under Gerai OA.

When I tell women of one village that I am going to another village to help them with the crafts, they know who I am talking about. They trade plants and seeds to help each other as well. For example, a particular type of rice planted by the Semai disappeared. My women in Sabah gave them certain species, including red rice, which had been extinct for sometime among the Semai, and they were very happy.

PRESERVING COMMUNITY CRAFT

It’s common for women to have kitchen gardens and to trade plants. When they go for mutual visits, they bring back plants to their village. You find that kitchen gardens – if they have any – in these villages are still home to vegetation that grew in the area but which does not exist any more, except in the garden. So, a woman could have plants which are used as soap or as shampoo for the hair, although the original place she took it from does not have those plants anymore.

These women are the keepers of such vital knowledge and preservers of that knowledge. If you bother to talk to them, you find that many women consider this common knowledge. It is really about the women themselves. They really need a bit of guidance. But of course, it is a little strange for a young person to tell a 60-year-old what to do, but they do engage in the process.
For example, in Sabah, they have the seeds so that we have a constant supply. And we found that the species that are becoming extinct in Peninsular Malaysia have a variety of colours in East Malaysia. It helps when someone leads and guides them.

**LEADERSHIP BY NEED**

To be a leader, you have to take responsibility for so much, and a lot of planning is involved. If possible, I do not want to be a leader. But I have to be – as we need to shape the projects; though where possible, we try to delegate the work to the village since we have village-level coordinators to run the show. The position I am holding is that of coordinator – not CEO – of *Gerai OA*. I coordinate the work which is done in the villages. The craft is done there – we pass the responsibility down the line to the village.

I am very proud that the women earn something for their knowledge. This was the knowledge that was ‘pooh-poohed’ by the village men, who asked them how much they could earn. You will be surprised that the earning is not just from the crafts but also from the visitors who come to the villages. The women of Pulau Carey (Carey Island – in Selangor) host tourists, and show them around through sensitization tours. Visitors come, and researchers stay as well. Doing something that others cannot do gives the women a sense of usefulness. Some women really had issues with self-esteem. The network that we helped them create is important for them to stay together.

**STARTING SMALL**

In the village, a few like-minded women got together and undertook activities: that is how the group started. They help each other: sometimes financially, and many times, through emotional support. The group developed, and the network helps them stay together. It is always a small core group that starts off. The women of Pulau Carey are so strong. We have proper women’s workshops now – and the men are afraid of it! When we meet to pick up the crafts, pay for them, and have our monthly chats, you can see the men sitting in the periphery – afraid to come near!

*Multi-tasking is what women are good at.*
When we do our pick-ups, sometimes people wonder why we take so long. I usually warn the car volunteers that it could take the whole day – it is not just ‘pick and pay.’

We distribute medicine which was donated. We listen to village gossip to “catch up” on it. There is a lot to do, and people have no idea how much work it entails. It looks like a little but it is actually a lot.

MULTITASKING CAPACITY

The work is the people – and the people are the work. There is a lot of work in preparation for the pick-up; and when we are there and the pick-up is done, then I can relax.

I am always working till the last minute: packing medicine and money, especially small change as they usually do not have it. Multi-tasking is what women are good at, and that is why God gave us the ability to give birth: the men cannot take the pain or the trauma or the ‘multitasking-ness’ to take care of babies and themselves.

That is why when we plan our meetings, we work around the women’s schedule. For those who have kids, we schedule it in the evening; for those who tap rubber, we have it around noon or after lunch.
CHANGING MALE PERSPECTIVES

A challenge I have faced is that the men never took us seriously. One reason we got away with many things is that the men ‘pooh-poohed’ our efforts, and generally left us alone. It turned out to be a good thing. For the men, who are usually village heads, projects mean money. When we come in, we tell them upfront that we have no money. So, our real workers and beneficiaries are the women moving from ‘nothing’ to ‘something.’ The men later realize that we keep coming back, and that the villager we are assisting is getting richer, and getting groceries. Slowly, the men start getting interested.

The worst part is the first year: you start building trust for three months, putting quality control in place, and after a year, the products could be sold.

MANAGING LOGISTICS

Logistics is also always a problem, especially for a woman to get to the village. The bus drops me off near the village, and then I need to have
coordinated transport into the village. The women want to help me but they have no transportation of their own. They’ll send some boys over to pick me up but they drive like mad! They try to get young girls to help me out – to become my local go-betweens. There is a girl who transfers me around and ferries me, and we pay her. On her part, she learns about the crafts, and gets some level of respect as she is seen as my liaison with the villagers. Unfortunately, these girls move on, and I need to look for replacements.

Motivation is not something that can be taught – it has to be in you as this type of work takes a lot of time, money and patience. If it is not in you, you can be the most well-paid person, and you would not be happy, and would quit. You just have to want to do it.

CONFRONTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

It is a curiosity to see myself as a role model. Seriously, this is not the type of work that many people want to do. Even the most loyal volunteers that I have ‘drop dead’ by the third shift! In addition to that, the villagers try to matchmake me! Trying to stay single in this line of work is tough. They even volunteer to ask the ancestors to help find me a man with a car who will drive me to these places, and who will understand what I do. These are the job hazards!

REALITY CHECK

My advice to other women: whatever you decide to do in a village, make sure you consult on the ground before you even start. I have seen many projects fail because they went to the ‘top,’ and did not see the ‘bottom.’

Many projects did it that way: parked a lot of money but failed because they were not in touch with what was going on. That is why I sometimes cannot stand funded projects because they do not take into account the realities on the ground.
SUSTAINING THE MOTIVATION

Motivation is not something that can be taught – it has to be in you as this type of work takes a lot of time, money and patience. If it is not in you, you can be the most well-paid person, and you would not be happy, and would quit. You just have to want to do it. There is a lot of heartache as well. You realize, as you get more involved, that you just cannot get rid of poverty, injustice, and even children dropping out of school. It becomes too much after a while. I would not recommend this to anyone, even my worst enemies!

There are a lot of opportunities, but not all are available to women who are married, especially those with children. Many women drop out of the field. It takes a lot, and that is why many of us are single – we cannot manage work, family and husband at the same time. Give a serious thought to all this.

Notes

1. Gerai OA is a nomadic, volunteer-run stall that sells handicrafts made by the Orang Asli (OA). See Glossary and note 2.
2. Orang Asli (Malay term for ‘original’ or ‘first’ people) are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a collective term for the 18 sub-ethnic, non-Malay tribes, which total about 150,000 people. See Glossary.
3. Pandanus is a species of tropical plant used widely as flavouring in cooking. The Gerai OA (see note 1) sells handicraft, such as mats, weaved from pandanus leaves.
4. A cultivar (from cultivated variety) is a variety of a plant that has been deliberately selected for its specific desirable characteristics. (wikipedia)
5. An ethnobotanist systematically studies the interactions between a culture and the plants in its environment, particularly the knowledge about and use of such plants. http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/
6. The Semai are one of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, and live in central Peninsular Malaysia. They are a semi-sedentary people, and are particularly known for their non-violence. (wikipedia)
Rotinah Sakim

Rotinah works with Monungkus (Inheritance of Rungus Culture), a community organization, as treasurer and pre-school teacher.

BACKGROUND

Of Rungus¹ ethnicity, I come from Kampung Tinangol (Tinangol Village) in Kudat, Sabah, and am married with four children. My interest is in making handicraft, especially beading.

GUIDED MOTIVATION

My work is with my own village community: to teach in the pre-school, and to train the people
on awareness of biodiversity management.

I started this work because I like working in my community on biodiversity management; for example, in water-catchment projects. My main motivation is from the guidance of PACOS, which gave me a lot of community awareness through economic assistance, education and resource management.

MILESTONES

My achievement within the community is that the students, whom I taught in pre-school and who went to school in 1999, have completed their Form 5 [fifth year of high school] education.

Another achievement is that we have managed to look after the water-catchment area successfully.

My achievement as treasurer in the organization is the management of funds – whether to get funding externally or through socio-economic projects; for example, the agrotourism project since 2003. But thankfully, in 2009, we got additional support from an international company to continue our projects.

LEADING THE COMMUNITY

For me, leadership is enabling the community to be united and to work together in activities in the villages to overcome problems. And we want to know the suggestions of the villagers: whether good or otherwise.
I never regarded myself as a leader in the village. But as there was no one else to facilitate better understanding among the villagers, they felt I could lead some of them to undertake activities, such as gotong royong (cooperation towards a shared goal), replanting trees, repairing the water-catchment gravity piping together, and gathering to have workshops, or giving awareness to the community. Still, the achievement I am most proud of in my leadership is that our community was able to get enough clean water through the UNDP\textsuperscript{4} and CBNRM\textsuperscript{5} projects. As these were cooperative programmes, the community and I were able to learn from both organizations working together.

**PERSISTENCE IN COOPERATION**

Even though I am not a man, I can do the work of a man. As leaders, we do not think that just because we are women, we cannot go into the forest.

My most important advice to other women in community work is to cooperate without giving up. Even though there may be challenges, we must be spirited.
In every activity in the community, we leaders must join together as the villagers will see our example. And I have never thought of the challenges – there is only a ‘can-do’ attitude.

I am an example in leadership to other women as I never give up, and show other women how I do the work. Therefore, my most important advice to other women in community work is to cooperate without giving up. Even though there may be challenges, we must be spirited. We must be together with the other women so that we can motivate them to be confident to do the work.

**VISION ... AND MISSION**

I believe we must always be patient, because if not, we will stop working. Many women are like that – if they do not see benefits, they will stop and lose interest in continuing the work. I do not feel like that, or that the money is too little – because the benefit is for everyone, including my own family. I have the hope that one day our children will also follow in our footsteps.

**Notes**

1. The Rungus are an ethnic group of Borneo, residing primarily in northern Sabah. A sub-group of the Kadazandusun, they have a distinctive language, dress, architecture, customs, and oral literature. Their beadwork easily distinguish the Rungus from the other ethnic groups of Sabah. (wikipedia)

2. PACOS Trust (or PACOS – Partners of Community Organizations) is a community-based non-governmental organization set-up to help raise the quality of life of indigenous communities. See Glossary.

3. Agrotourism is the travel programme in which visitors directly experience agricultural life. Visitors have the opportunity to work in the fields alongside real farmers, and wade knee-deep in the sea with fishermen hauling in their nets. http://www.ecotourdirectory.com/

4. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN’s global development network. In all their activities, the UNDP encourages the protection of human rights and the empowerment of women. See Glossary.

5. The community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach combines conservation objectives with the generation of economic benefits for rural communities. See Glossary.
Tamilselvi, 42, is a volunteer teacher in ecological education with Penang Suya Meiyarivagam (PSM – Penang Centre for Self-Wisdom), an educational organization.

BACKGROUND

I have a lovely and happy family. There are six of us: three are married, and three are still living with my mother. My father has passed away.

WEEKLY ENRICHMENT

For ten years, I have been a volunteer educator in ecology\(^1\) with PSM, which has 200 students taught
SPIRITUAL MOTIVATION

I used to do work just for the money. But to satisfy my heart as a Hindu, I was also looking to do some work – meaningful work – as a contribution to the community. So, I wanted to make what people refer to as Hinduism into a way of life, and also wanted to make it practical. So, I looked around for such a practice, and that is when PSM started its work.

I started learning for myself, and as I learnt, I started contributing by volunteering. It is better for others than it is for me. I am learning a lot, and gaining much knowledge. It specially makes me very happy, and I am also contributing to others.

When they started classes at PSM, they were short of Tamil teachers, and I thought: maybe I could do it as well. But I needed to know Tamil. So, some of us learnt Tamil at the Temple of Fine Arts to become fluent, and then taught the children at PSM. As we learnt and taught, our fluency increased.

LEARNING ... AND TEACHING

My main achievements are personal. For example, I have started to learn Tamil. I did not know much about it other than what I learnt in school.

LEARNING AND LOVING

I have also made many good friends at PSM. I never really engaged with children before, but by working here, I actually started to love children. I learnt what love is, learnt interaction and learnt to speak in public. I was a very shy person before. Additionally, in this organization, I can lead people
to grow, and can guide a volunteer teacher to grow – this is something I learnt in my work here.

ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

As a volunteer teacher myself, I am growing too. My knowledge of the environment has been boosted by my work at PSM. My work links with ecology both in theory and practice. We have a herbal garden; so, we teach children that if they want to learn how to plant a tree, they have to go through the theory of identifying seeds, sand, earth, etc. Going step by step like this allows the ecological learning to take place naturally. Usually, people do not have the basic knowledge: we need to know the purpose and benefits of the plants.

I have gained a lot of knowledge – that is the impact of my work. I know much more about herbs now. Before, when I went to various temples, and they gave holy water with different types of herbs, I never understood what their significance was. So, I started researching to find out the purpose of the herbs, and I started to get interested. In Hinduism, there is so much symbolism, with meanings that are not so obvious.

GUIDED LEADERSHIP

To teach ecology requires innovation and leadership. However, I cannot see myself as a leader, but I would like someone to observe me. Then, they can tell me my weaknesses and strengths, and from there, I can improve. I can then see if I can lead or not, and what corrective measures I need to take to lead better. I feel I have some leadership qualities but I also need others to judge because I cannot comment. It is wrong to declare oneself a leader. In my work, I do not think I have done anything very great in leadership, but I can guide and lead others. There are results, and when I see them, I am very happy, be it for the students or anyone else. Whenever I lead them, if the result is good, I feel very happy. And it is not just for me – it is important that they lead as well.

We teach children that if they want to learn how to plant a tree, they have to go through the theory of identifying seeds, sand, earth, etc. Going step by step like this allows the ecological learning to take place naturally.
A WOMAN CAN!

The challenge I face as a woman in my work is basically that everyone says: “Women cannot do anything.” About me, people say that I am so small: how can I do any work? They wonder how I will go to the garden to do work. They think I cannot even carry the hoe! So, it is really challenging. But I said I can do this ecology work. I have been active since young, and I started doing all this since young. But still, others say that doing this as a woman is an amazing thing. Everything is the same work: whether you are a man or woman, you have to carry the hoe, and you have to dig the earth.

MUTUAL GUIDANCE

I have never had anyone tell me that I am a role model. But in my other work in the factory, I am a good worker, and my bosses have noticed this. Work-wise, I am a little strict, unlike my volunteer engagement at PSM. And I am progressing. The other teachers and I guide each other, not like role models or such – I guide them with what I know, and vice-versa.
BEYOND THE KITCHEN

My advice to other women is: women should not just confine themselves to the kitchen. They need to think beyond the ecology of the kitchen, to think and be aware of what is needed for the cooking itself. They need to view the ingredients as part of ecology. As the ladies of the house, they need to learn what they can prepare by themselves for cooking, and growing the food by themselves. They must not always be ‘behind’ – they must come to the ‘front’ and attempt the work. It does not matter if they fail but they must try – they must have courage.

ECOLOGY BEGINS AT HOME

It is a little difficult to motivate other women to take up this ecological work; most women now are working. So, the first thing we do is to talk to them; talking in a way that they will love nature. If they feel close to nature, then you can talk to them, and they will start learning little by little. And if they start that way, they will take a deep interest in ecology. When it starts at home, it will spread everywhere.

Notes

1. Ecology is the scientific study of the distributions, abundance and relations of organisms and their interactions with the environment. See Glossary.

2. Yoga is an ancient Hindu spiritual tradition which involves harnessing or integrating the forces of embodiment (mind, body and spirit) in order to transcend embodiment. http://www.answers.com/

3. The Temple of Fine Arts is a non-profit organization set up to help promote art and culture in order to create a society that is aware of its cultural heritage. In Malaysia, the Temple of Fine Arts has centres in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Baru and Malacca. http://www.penang-online.com/
Siew Luang is the Organic Farming Project Coordinator for CETDEM. She organizes activities, networks with people involved in organic farming, and creates awareness among the public on consuming organic food and farming.

BACKGROUND

I come from a humble family, and have two older brothers, an older sister and a younger sister. I was educated in a Chinese school. I am married to Gurmit Singh.

I have many interests. I like handicraft and patchwork – people will not believe it looking at my rough hands.
STIRRINGS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

I do not come from a rich family, and my biggest influence was my father. He was always sympathetic to poor people, always giving money to those who begged. I began to have a soft spot for the less fortunate.

A particular experience I went through had a big impact on my work. There was a hospital behind our house in Johor. Ironically, many winners of the local Miss Muar\(^5\) beauty pageant ended up there. Perhaps they had mental problems as a result of being cheated, and were then locked up in jail since they had become insane. My family used to visit them. My rich aunt used to work as a matron in the hospital, and told us many stories: the nurses did not treat the poor patients well, unlike the rich patients. And I noted the injustice.

My sense of justice also came from my reading. I read a lot when I was young. Coming from a Chinese school,\(^6\) we read about the good, the bad, and the heroes people look up to. Also, in the opera that my mother took us to, there were performances based on the concepts of good and evil. There, my awareness of justice began.

I also like cooking and carpentry work. There are quite a few other things I am interested in but I have not made time for that.

GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

In terms of organic farming, what I am doing more of now is addressing my belief rather than my interest. Interest can die off, but not belief – which is why, after all these years, I am still doing the work and championing the cause [of organic farming].

I do what I do because of what I believe in, and my principles in life; that is, whatever I receive from society, I must return. From the time I was young, I have been very critical of myself; and have asked myself what the meaning of life is. So, I always tell myself I want to do something good, to better myself.
EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

I began to be involved in service work through Service Civil International (SCI), and the peace movement. I had the opportunity to serve in India. It was a good exposure for me to see how people live and work together. It is easy to talk about loving your neighbour and so on, but to live it is difficult. After that, I went to Japan to attend a course. It was a good opportunity for me to realize that I can learn. That was how I became what I am today.

LEARNING AND SERVING

I feel very lucky that I received a lot of support from people and organizations, and that is why I feel I should ‘give back.’ That is also why I came back and set up the organic farm with CETDEM. When I was in Japan, people invited me to do service work, but I decided that it was enough for me, and that it was time to return to Malaysia. I believe that if I did not do it then, I would never have done it – I know that no one is perfect; that’s human nature. An organic farm is a good platform for me to continue learning and serving people. That is why I am still with CETDEM.

SETTING STANDARDS

I refrain from saying what I have achieved on the ground – it is always difficult to gauge. For myself, I would say that I am still doing what I set out to do. As for CETDEM, we have created an impact (for the organic farming project I am involved in), and we have touched on and created an awareness; for example, for farmers: on organic practices and what organic farming should be like. Other than that, it is creating awareness for the people, and so far, CETDEM has been doing well. If we had the manpower, we would go even further.

And in terms of Malaysian standards, CETDEM has also played a vital role. We pioneered organic farming in Malaysia, and have conducted educational programmes. We have held organic and natural product exhibitions and seminars, and brought in an external certification body to certify organic farming and wholesalers in Malaysia before the Malaysian certification
unit was set up. Then, there is also kitchen gardening, composting and Hari Organik⁸ (Organic Day), in addition to organic farming courses – I believe we were the first to run such courses. We continue to bring changes and a new direction. When people are able to do these activities, then we will move forward. So CETDEM is an initiator.

LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE

These achievements belong to the organization. I do not want to use the word ‘leader’ in the organization – I prefer to refer to leadership in terms of CETDEM. I have never thought about leading people. For me, it is more through my action – and people can see this. I do not think I qualify to be a leader; I know I have a lot of shortcomings. To be a true leader, one has to have a lot of calmness and wisdom, and I do not think I have that!

‘HUMAN’ SIDE OF BIODIVERSITY

We have to help farmers understand that they need to diversify their farming system. In this way, we are promoting and creating the awareness of the importance of biodiversity. This is an environmental issue, but the human perspective is to create an awareness and understanding for the farmer to farm responsibly.

Organic farming is linked to biodiversity. My work relates to biodiversity through farming, and various nationalities and ethnicities are part of the process of creating such an organic culture by working together. We bring people together, and work with various groups of people.

We are taking people back to their traditions in terms of food and lifestyle. It is not just about consumption, but about bringing back our traditional lifestyles. We need to be more cautious about our actions which affect the environment.
CHANGING MINDSETS

If people understand what organic farming is all about, there would not be a need to elaborate on its various ecological benefits. Organic farming is about crop management, water management, and soil management. The heritage of organic farming, and the Slow Food Movement that we believe in, both promote the use of local ingredients as much as possible in a gentle, communal way of creating and consuming food. We are taking people back to their traditions in terms of food and lifestyle. It is not just about consumption, but about bringing back our traditional lifestyles. We need to be more cautious about our actions which affect the environment.

In recycling, we encourage people to re-use kitchen and farm waste. In such matters, training techniques are one aspect, while biodiversity is the other. But it is also about training people in terms of their mindset. For example, organic farming is not just farming to produce and to supply, but more than that. It should also be about how to make the farm more energy-efficient, which includes both labour and traditional energy resources.

Siew Luang (standing) talking to a Kitchen Gardening Group
We need to cut the reliance on external input. We also get them to understand about packaging, post-harvesting, and farm management – as all these affect biodiversity.

GENDER PERCEPTIONS

Now, I do not feel many challenges being a woman in my field. However, back when we had a farm around 1986-1996, some men might have wondered why they should take orders from a woman. Some farmers question why they should listen to a woman; when we have male staff, some of them feel this way. In my interactions with other people, I do not think there was discrimination. But I feel some men really have that ego, especially those who have not received higher education. This is especially so if the man is a chairperson of some community in a small town.

I also find it strange that women themselves are very jealous of one another. When I was younger, I did not look ‘too bad.’ A female need not be very good-looking but just the way she carries herself can be attractive to people. Back then, when they realized I can attract the attention of men, the women became very jealous. I found it strange why women need to be that way. And I am not the only one to experience this.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

I’ve come a long way since those days. I never thought of myself as a role model for other women or anybody else. I do my work because I believe it is my duty and responsibility as a human being. God created me, and I try to understand why He brought me to this world, and what He has given me until today. He created all this, and He helps me realize what I want to be and what I want to do, and with all that I have received, I should give. Simple as that!

INNER MOTIVATION

My advice to other women is to be committed, and to be strong. The hardest parts are the challenges, and also the sincerity, honesty and integrity. When
you have all that, nothing can fail you. Be persistent about what you want to do. I really do not know if anybody has been motivated to go into this field by knowing me or reading about me. So far, I do not think I have been able to motivate anybody; at least, I haven’t been told about that. I do not have a tool to motivate people. Motivation is very much within the person. But for someone to give up so much, to the extent of sacrificing having children, is rare.

My advice to other women is to be committed, and to be strong. The hardest parts are the challenges, and also the sincerity, honesty and integrity. When you have all that, nothing can fail you. Be persistent about what you want to do.

MOTIVATION THROUGH LEARNING

What you read, how you look at things, and what you have experienced in life: these are what you have in you. It is the learning in various settings that motivate you to be a better person. I always believe that when you have that certain ‘something’ in you, and you get exposure, and meet the right kind of people in a related environment – all these will motivate you to see the importance and meaning of that kind of exposure. Then the person will want to pick up the cause.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

As for me, so many events and experiences influenced me – not just one thing. I was influenced by the opera, by what I read, by my great influential teachers of civic education in primary school, by articles in the Chinese newspapers, and by volunteering with SCI. Through the organic farm, we were trying to bring various ethnic communities together. I was hoping to influence people. Now, people go into organic farming for whatever reason – motivated by money or health or something else. People realize they can eat healthily and do good as well. It is a good start.
Notes

1. Organic farming is “the form of agriculture that relies on techniques such as crop rotation, green manure, compost, and biological pest control, to maintain soil productivity and control pests on a farm. It excludes the use of synthetic fertilizers and synthetic pesticides, plant growth regulators, livestock antibiotics, food additives, and genetically modified organisms.” (wikipedia)

2. The Centre for Environment, Technology and Development, Malaysia (CETDEM) is an independent, non-profit, training, research, consultancy, referral, and development organization. It is committed to improving environmental quality through the appropriate use of technology and sustainable development. http://www.cetdem.org.my/wordpress/

3. Gurmit Singh is the chairperson of the board and founding executive director of CETDEM (see note 2). He is also the adviser to the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia.

4. Patchwork (or pieced work) is a “form of needlework that involves sewing together pieces of fabric into a larger design.” (wikipedia)

5. Muar is a town in Johor.

6. A school for ethnic Chinese in which the medium of instruction is Mandarin.

7. Service Civil International is a volunteer organization dedicated to promoting a culture of peace by organizing international voluntary projects for people of all ages and backgrounds. http://www.sciint.org/about_us.phtml

8. For the fifth time, Organic Day was held on 4 July 2010. The main objective of the programme is to promote an “organic” lifestyle and sustainable living. The community-based event showcases organic fresh farm produce and organic processed products. See Glossary.

9. Ecological benefits are any “improvements in human well-being, whether material or subjective, whether direct or indirect, that result from changes in ecosystems, including ecological functions or processes.” http://yosemite.epa.gov. See note 6, page 49.

10. The Slow Food Movement strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine, and promotes farming of plants, seeds and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem. The movement was founded to counteract “fast food” and the “fast life.” See Glossary.
Tijah, 42, is a community organizer with Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Perak (JKOAP – Network of Orang Asli Villages in Perak). She is also the founder of Sinui Pai Nanek Sengik, and Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (JKOASM – Network of Orang Asli Villages in Peninsular Malaysia). She gives guidance, advice and confidence to the work of community organization on the issue of basic human rights of the indigenous people of Malaysia.

BACKGROUND

Of Semai heritage, I come from a family of nine siblings. Three of us are single, and look after our invalid mother.
I like to read and fish, especially the latter. Whenever I have time or am tired, I will go with the villagers to the lake or river to catch fish.

**CARRYING THE TORCH**

I am a community organizer, and focus on the Orang Asli community in Perak. This work has now spread to other states [beyond Perak]. JKOAP focuses on human rights, freedom of speech, land rights, and the right to education and knowledge (for the community’s cause) of indigenous peoples.

People have asked me why I do what I do. I am indigenous, and I understand the heart of the people. It is a lot of work and sacrifice. I chose the work I do because I feel it is something I must do. Even if I am tired or fed-up, I still do it – who else can I wait for to take up our issues over the past 53 years [since Malaysia’s independence]? Others have done this before, but what have the results been? There needs to be continuity from the efforts of previous generations. I am responsible for continuing the efforts in the form of initiatives suited to our times and current community needs.

Secondly, there is no choice. If I just sit and do nothing, all of us will be in ‘dire straits.’ To carry the cause is also challenging, but at least something is being done. Thirdly, if I do not do it, who is going to do it for the people? The other communities fight for their rights – and someone has to do it for us. Fourthly, I do not want my life to be wasted: I want to contribute. Life is short; I want to use it to help others.

**INDIGENOUS ... AND MARGINALIZED**

My parents were activists; because of this, people say the children are fortunate. My father died when I was 12, but my mother brought us up, sickly as she was. We siblings learnt from our parents to help other villagers.
Also, when I studied in school, I heard much discrimination and prejudice towards indigenous peoples. I saw that other races were unable to accept us, and isolated us. From then, I started questioning why my peers reacted towards me in such a way, calling me names and teasing my lifestyle; not just to me, but other indigenous children in the school as well. This started me thinking about our fate.

Then, when I was in a boarding school hostel, the warden ‘tortured’ our community, saying that we need to realize who we are, and be grateful to the government – especially before every modest meal. It felt as if there was something wrong with us that we had to be quiet. I fought back this injustice to our community.

CHARITY OR JUSTICE?

In the 1990s, I fought against a priest in the indigenous people’s camp run by the Catholic Church. He was rudely yelling at us, saying that we wanted handouts from the government, and now, from the Church as well. I scolded the priest and the bishop, asking them since when they had borne our burden. I asked them for a list of all that they had spent on us, and to detail their claims. As we argued, he apologized, saying that he only knew what he had read in the papers. So I told him that he and many urban folk judged us without knowing us personally. Of course, we accepted aid because we needed it; and also, if we did not accept it, we would be labelled as “arrogant.” But we never asked for aid – we were given it. We were taught to accept both by the church and government. And of course, if it is given, we learn to accept. That is when I decided I could not let this situation go on.

DIVINE INSPIRATION

Finally, I have another motivation for doing the work that I do. I do not usually share this with others; just with a few friends. But I think the time has come for me to be more public with it. Maybe this event is also something that strengthened my spirit. When I was 22, I dreamt I went to a church where everyone was dressed beautifully and smelling nice. Everyone had
arrived by the time I got there. There was only one place left – right in front – where the others did not have the courage to sit. I had no choice but to take the seat as it was the only one left. I was ashamed of my ragged clothes. In front was a priest, who picked up a trophy and said, “This is my body. I want to say that from now, Tijah is my wife.” To prove it, he tore the red part of his priestly cloak and put it on my shoulder. It felt very heavy. He went back to the altar, and said that I need not be afraid as He [God] was in me and I was in Him [God]. Then, I saw a figure with the priest’s face enter his being, and he said, “With this, I will take you to a place where others want to go, but you will go.” I remember wondering why I had been chosen, looking the way I did. When I left the church, nobody else wanted to look at me but my heart was happy.

MILESTONE GATHERING

Now, almost everyone in the community gets involved in the cause to improve the lives of the indigenous people. Previously, the attitude was that if you wanted to get them involved, they needed everything easy: to provide transport, food, etc. But not anymore. They realize that their problems also need to be handled and solved by themselves. For me, this is a big achievement.

When have we ever had indigenous people gather at Putrajaya? Even with all the intimidation by the powers that be, on 17 March 2010, about 3,000 of us marched to Putrajaya. This was a significant event – the biggest demonstration by us. The best thing was that it was organized by the community themselves. Even when I organized food for them, they scolded me for thinking they were ‘beggars’ who need to be fed. The success was not monetary, but very significant. Self-confidence among the grassroots is priceless. Previously, a lot of memorandums were given to the government but there was no response from them. But now, I see the government responding to my mobilization – even if 90 percent of it is negative, we still get a response. What I am proud of is the attention we are getting – which is what we want; and in this way, they show their own weakness and ‘brutality’ to the community.
I think about this dream – it gives me motivation. I used to study other religions to find out more about them. When I was 12, I studied Christianity: Methodist and other denominations, but finally went back to Catholicism. When I had this dream, I felt it was God giving me a sign and encouragement.

Because of the movement, they are now more confident to say what they want in terms of their rights and position; unlike before, when it used to be “I don’t know.”

FRATERNAL SUPPORT

Subsequently, I looked back at my work and my past, and tried to ‘connect the dots’ and thought: maybe the dream was a premonition of my life’s direction and events. Till today, that dream has been an inspiration. I also have friends who have supported me so much, who have been with me through the years.

Even among my own people, I have sometimes been treated badly and criticized as they did not see me as educated or aware of what I was doing, but these friends of other races have tried to understand and support me. They gave me the space and chance to emerge and acquire experiences, and were there to encourage me to do my work. I did not feel we were different in race or education.

ASSERTING THEIR RIGHTS

I think what I have done this far has borne fruit, at least for me. There are indigenous people who are more aware now. Previously, in this work, those who spoke were the ones who understood. But the grassroots were not aware even though they attended, and feasted together. Their thinking remained shallow. I think the awareness at the grassroots came about after I started the Orang Asli movement.

Now, even if I am not around, they are able to carry on the cause, and I am proud of that. Also, because of the movement, they are now more confident
to say what they want in terms of their rights and position; unlike before, when it used to be “I don’t know.” By now, the other states [beyond Perak] also have the movement; even the women have the courage to be vocal. Many decades ago, the women never got involved. However today, even if they are making tea, the women are still contributing ideas and are more involved.

**PERCEPTION SHIFT**

I do not really like to say that I am a leader or head; I prefer to see myself as a community mobilizer. The success is the perception of the community towards the women. Our traditions actually respect the women in our community. But through time and with external influence, the role of women has been degraded. Their importance, role and emergence is only in the culture, and not in governance. Bringing other women to the fore has changed the perception of the people – this is a personal achievement for me as a woman.
AN UNORDINARY PERSON

The men and the other women can see that we women can be more courageous, vocal and self-sacrificing compared to the other women. And this has influenced the community’s thinking to accept that women can also lead. In meetings these days, even the male tok batins (village headmen) can accept me talking to them.

My attitude is also to go with an open mind; in my journey, I feel blest as I have gained a lot of knowledge and wisdom. I can handle many situations. Even the police and government think twice before acting or saying something when they realize I am involved. District officers and wakil rakyat (members of parliament) deal with me differently – not like an ‘ordinary’ woman.

ENVIRONMENTAL BOND

It is very clear that indigenous peoples will not be complete if they do not have their traditions and biodiversity around them. And this is what I stress to them: their beliefs and practices are their reality and everyday life. Unlike other communities and religions that have symbols as intermediaries, the indigenous religion is life itself. This is our life. God is intelligent; if He wanted us to be like the other races, He would have created us that way from the beginning. We may assimilate into the cities maybe after a long struggle and process. Many times it has been forced on us. If we want to save the community, we have to save our traditions, land and territory, and our biodiversity.

The indigenous people are like the key to the preservation of nature. If not for us, Malaysia would never have its forests; in other countries, forests have been destroyed. Even though logging is happening here, it is still a little difficult. When logging happens, we make noise; and this causes some resistance, whether successful or not. So we still have some forest left. Even though there is some stealing of logs and sand, there is still resistance.

If we want to save the community, we have to save our traditions, land and territory, and our biodiversity. The indigenous people are like the key to the preservation of nature. If not for us, Malaysia would never have its forests.
The existence of the community is linked to the environment – traditions and cultures with rocks, trees, fruits, animals and wind. We live at the waterfalls with our own traditions. We need to protect all this. The community cannot change drastically; a lot of them are not prepared, even if all of them say they are ready.

They need income, yes; but they need nature for themselves and others. I tell them they are not respected because of their money but because of their principles, dignity and a clear philosophy of life.

BIODIVERSITY PLUS RIGHTS

My story and fight is that this is what indigenous people are all about, this is what is happening, and this is what we need to do. Because of my work, many indigenous communities are aware that they need to protect themselves and their territory. Previously, they were driven to think that their existence and success depended on the house and their progress. They would only be accepted as successful if they had a large oil palm plantation with fixed income. I tell them it is otherwise. They need income, yes; but they need nature for themselves and others. I tell them they are not respected because of their money but because of their principles, dignity and a clear philosophy of life; if they have a stand, and self-pride, then they will be respected. If I had money and spent it on cars, others will not respect me; they would say I am showing-off, while my peers live in poverty.

I stress this slowly, through the fight for the rights to their land and territories, making them realize that the land is not the government’s but theirs. Which is why they now want to defend their land, and the traditions linked to the environment. Their heritage and culture are harmonious with other people and the environment, and they realize that this is special. And from the beginning, I realized that this was the basis of my work for all the other efforts: from biodiversity to land rights. I cannot just focus on biodiversity; it has to be extended to include all rights. There will one day be a self-emerging group that will take up the natural resource management cause. I cannot do it myself right now; there is so much else to do.
ON EQUAL TERMS

There are many challenges I have faced as a woman. People have never seen, since our country’s independence, an indigenous woman who has taken up the cause as I have. To my community, even though I am a woman, they can see I speak the truth about our plight.

That is my challenge: to get them to trust me, and not be sensitive, weak, or feel outraged. They need to realize that even though I am a woman, I am equal to a man. It is also tough, as men will not be interested in me as I would be a threat to them in terms of my guts and equal standing. Moreover, I decided not to get married as I would have too many responsibilities that would hinder my work. Another challenge is that being single, I still have to deal with many men around, including elder leaders and other women’s husbands. I need to learn how to convince the people that what I do has nothing to do with man-woman relationships; that I am not here to seduce the men; and that no other feelings arise.
CLEARING SUSPICIONS

I have had to carefully arrange my movements and behaviour, and check my attitudes so that no one is suspicious of my motives. These are also challenges, and not just with the government. Such a situation happened in my village. My mother told me that the women were speaking ill of me. I called them over for tea, and told them that I have no ill intentions towards their men; looking at their husbands, I could find a partner from outside. If their lives were unstable, I would not want a man from among them who would also destabilize my life.

I told them that what I do is with money from my earnings, such as the tea for the gathering that day. I asked them: If I was walking from Bidor town to my Kampung Chang Lama (Chang Lama Village) in the rain, and if one of their husbands offered me a lift, should I not take it? I have sacrificed for them; would they let me get soaked in the rain, and be in danger of the wild? The women cried, and that was the end of their accusations.

FOLLOWING THE MODEL

I am not sure if the women can now see that I can be a role model for the indigenous community. But I see from the way they call or meet me that I give them confidence. They are proud of me, proud of what I am doing.

The women who are married with children feel limited but dream that when their children are grown, they will do work with the communities here and beyond, in other states. The able women have also started community organizing work with me. They call me friendly names, like kakak (elder sister), emak (mother), etc. They invite me to their homes, and cook me feasts. They are courageous, and follow what I do in their own villages.

GENDER JUSTICE

My advice to other women with regards to indigenous issues of land, rights and biodiversity is simply that women should emerge and not just depend on the men. Both men and women have desires and hopes. Both men and women are important, and have the ability, but sometimes the men are not
able to think from the women’s perspective. I do not want the women to just think of their plight, but of the common plight of the indigenous peoples. The debates and discussions will look after everyone. If the land rights were not given only to the men, our protest in Putrajaya would not have happened. We brought it to the women and realized that there was no sensitivity as the land grants were only allocated to the men. Women need to realize the weaknesses of men, that they are not perfect. Physically, women may not be strong, but spiritually they are stronger. So, women: we need to stand up for our rights – and fight! ☺

Notes

1. Orang Asli (Malay term for ‘original’ or ‘first’ people) are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a collective term for the 18 sub-ethnic, non-Malay tribes, which total about 150,000 people. See Glossary.

2. Sinui Pai Nanek Sengik (Semai language for ‘New Life, One Heart’) is an informal group of Orang Asli individuals based in Chang Lama Village in Bidor, Perak. One of the objectives of SPNS is to provide guidance to Orang Asli communities to take responsibility for their own future. See Glossary.

3. The Semai are one of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, and live in central Peninsular Malaysia. They are a semi-sedentary people, and are particularly known for their non-violence. (wikipedia)

4. Putrajaya serves as the federal administrative centre of Malaysia. The seat of government was shifted in 1999 from Kuala Lumpur due to the overcrowding and congestion there. (wikipedia)


6. The gathering was held to protest against the proposed Land Entitlement Act. The LEA proposes limits and conditions on Orang Asli land. See Glossary.
1. **Biodiversity**

The 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro defined biodiversity (or biological diversity) as the “variability among living organisms from all sources, including terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part: this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems”. This definition is used in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

The year 2010 has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity. The IYB is meant to help raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity through activities and events in many countries. This means, as well, to influence decision makers, and to elevate biological diversity nearer to the top of the political agenda. *(wikipedia)*
2. Community-Based Natural Resource Management

The community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach combines conservation objectives with the generation of economic benefits for rural communities. The three key assumptions are that (1) locals are better placed to conserve natural resources; (2) people will conserve a resource only if benefits exceed the costs of conservation; and (3) people will conserve a resource that is linked directly to their quality of life. When a local people’s quality of life is enhanced, their efforts and commitment to ensure the future well-being of the resource is also enhanced.

‘Traditional’ policies have often discounted the role of local people in designing and implementing solutions for the sustainable management of natural resources. Proposing an alternative approach, the CBNRM program works with the local men and women most directly involved with natural resource management. Often they are the poorest of the rural poor, and belong to ethnic minorities which are politically and economically isolated. The CBNRM program recognizes that these men and women may have intimate knowledge of the local resource base, and that they would be motivated to improve productivity if they are assured of benefiting from it.

The United Nations advocates CBNRM in the Convention on Biodiversity.
http://www.enrap.org/resources/documents/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_resource_management

3. Community-Based Organization

A community-based organization (or community organization) is a civil society non-profit organization (NPO) that operates within a single local community. Like NPOs, CBOs are often run on a voluntary basis and are self-funding. Within CBOs, there are many variations in terms of size and organizational structure. Some are formally incorporated, with a written constitution and a board of directors (also known as a committee), while others are much smaller and are more informal. The recent evolution of CBOs, especially in developing countries, has strengthened the view that these “bottom-up” organizations are more effective in addressing local needs than are larger charitable organizations. The fundamental basis for a community-based organization is that a group of people living and working together are more likely to achieve greater awareness as against individuals or organizations working in isolation, and involvement of those affected in the cause is likely to result in more acceptable long-term solutions.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_organization
http://wwf.org.my/
4. Ecology

Ecology is the “scientific study of the distributions, abundance and relations of organisms and their interactions with the environment. Ecology includes the study of plant and animal populations, plant and animal communities and ecosystems. Ecosystems describe the web or network of relations among organisms at different scales of organization.” Since ecology refers to any form of biodiversity, ecologists research everything from tiny bacteria’s role in nutrient recycling to the effects of tropical rain forest on the Earth’s atmosphere. The discipline of ecology emerged from the natural sciences in the late 19th century. Ecology is not synonymous with environment, environmentalism, or environmental science.

http://www.medbib.com/Ecology

5. Ecosystem

An ecosystem is a biological environment consisting of all the organisms living in a particular area, as well as all the non-living, physical components of the environment with which the organisms interact, such as air, soil, water, and sunlight; it is a biological community and its physical environment. The entire array of organisms inhabiting a particular ecosystem is called a community.

(wikipedia)

6. Gender Equity

Gender equity and gender equality are not the same. Gender equality entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female.

Gender equity means “fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.” (ABC of Women Worker’s Rights and Gender Equality)

7. Gerai OA

Gerai OA is a nomadic, volunteer-run stall that has been selling handicrafts made by the Orang Asli (OA), the indigenous minority peoples of Malaysia, since October 2004. Gerai OA’s philosophy is to help indigenous communities help themselves. Every sale contributes towards the revitalization of the indigenous craft heritage of Malaysia. As it is volunteer-run and operates only at rent-free premises, the entire proceeds from sales go directly back to the craftspeople. In addition to sales, Gerai OA has also extended its services to organizing workshops for and with various Orang Asli craftspeople.

http://www.coac.org.my/

8. Global Environment Facility

Established in 1991, the Global Environment Facility is the largest funder of projects to improve the global environment. The GEF unites 182 member governments – in partnership with international institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector – to address global environmental issues. The GEF is fundamentally a partnership for mainstreaming global environmental concerns into national sustainable development agendas. The GEF partnership includes 10 agencies, among which are the UN Development Programme and the UN Environment Programme.

An independent financial organization, the GEF provides grants to developing countries and countries with economies in transition for projects related to biodiversity, climate change, international waters, land degradation, the ozone layer, and persistent organic pollutants. These projects benefit the global environment, linking local, national, and global environmental challenges and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

http://www.thegef.org/gef/whatisgef

9. Land Entitlement Act

The gathering was held to protest against the proposed Land Entitlement Act. The LEA proposes that each Orang Asli head of household be granted between two and six acres of plantation land, and up to a quarter of an acre for housing – but at the cost of losing their customary lands. It has been estimated that Orang Asli would lose almost 80 percent of their customary lands if the LEA is implemented. (Photos of gathering at http://picasaweb.google.com/colin.images1)

http://aliran.com/1358.html
10. MEKAR

In August 2005, a local community group known as Persatuan Khazanah Rakyat Ma’ Daerah (MEKAR) was officially registered as a society in Kuala Terengganu. The group comprises of local fishermen, retirees, teachers, local youths, housewives, village heads, businesspersons and other members of the local communities, almost all of whom are volunteers. MEKAR’s core mission is to create awareness among the local communities within the areas of Paka, Kerteh and Kemasek on turtle conservation issues through education and awareness activities, with technical advice and support from WWF-Malaysia.

http://wwf.org.my/about_wwf/what_we_do/species_main/turtles/

11. Native Customary Rights

Native customary rights to land consists of rights to cultivate the land, rights to the produce of the jungle, hunting and fishing rights, rights to use the land for burial and ceremonial purposes, and rights of inheritance and transfer. According to native ideas, the clearing and cultivation of virgin land confers permanent rights on the original clearer (Geddes 1954; Freeman 1955; Richards 1961).

As the term implies, native customary rights may only be claimed by a native, or a person who has become identified with and has become subject to native personal law, and is therefore deemed to be a native. ‘Native’ refers to the indigenous groups who inhabit the state, as listed in the schedule to the Sarawak Interpretation Ordinance and Article 161A, Clause 6 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

http://epress.anu.edu.au/apem/borneo/mobile_devices/ch03s02.html

12. Orang Asli

Orang Asli (Malay term for ‘original’ or ‘first’ people) are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a collective term for the 18 sub-ethnic, non-Malay tribes, which total about 150,000 people. The Orang Asli make up less than one percent of Malaysia’s 28 million population, and are generally disadvantaged in terms of income, health, education and living standards.


13. Organic Farming

In 1939, Lord Northbourne coined the term *organic farming* in his book *Look to the Land* (1940), out of his conception of “the farm as organism,” to describe a holistic, ecologically-balanced approach to farming – in contrast to what he called *chemical farming*, which relied on “imported fertility” and “cannot be self-sufficient nor an organic whole.” This is different from the scientific use of the term “organic,” to refer to a class of molecules that contain carbon, especially those involved in the chemistry of life. (wikipedia)

14. PACOS Trust

PACOS Trust (or PACOS – Partners of Community Organizations) is a community-based non-governmental organization set-up to help raise the quality of life of indigenous communities.

PACOS aims to empower indigenous communities through: (1) systematic building and strengthening of community organizations; (2) strengthening of indigenous knowledge systems on natural resource management; and (3) strengthening of positive indigenous values as well as improving early child care and development. PACOS is registered under the Trustees Ordinance Chapter 148, Sabah.

http://www.sabah.net.my/PACOS/

15. Sarawak Biodiversity Centre

The Sarawak Biodiversity Centre was set up in 1998 by the Government of Sarawak to initiate programmes for the conservation, utilization, protection and sustainable development of biodiversity in Sarawak, which is located in one of the world’s mega biodiversity regions.

One of the core activities of SBC is to conduct bio-prospecting on Sarawak’s indigenous biodiversity which may lead to development of pharmaceutical, cosmeceuticals and herbal therapies for healthcare, as well as other products including essential oils, bio-pesticides and commercial dyes. Screening for anti cancer, anti fungal, anti bacterial, anti protease, anti inflammatory compounds and immuno-modulatory proteins are carried out here too.

SBC is also compiling a biodiversity database for the state while networking with organizations of similar interests around the world. Facilitating the documentation of Traditional Knowledge of the local communities’ use of biodiversity is also one of SBC’s core functions.

http://www.sbc.org.my/

http://www.etawau.com/HTML/Kuching/Sarawak_Biodiversity_Centre.htm
16. Sinui Pai Nanek Sengik

*Sinui Pai Nanek Sengik* (Semai language for ‘New Life, One Heart’) is an informal group of Orang Asli individuals based in Chang Lama Village in Bidor, Perak.

In 1986, Tijah started tuition lessons for the children of Chang Lama Village. Gradually, she managed to garner the support of her fellow villagers, and with the help of a few of them, SPNS was formed in 1997. Tijah, who founded SPNS, presently serves as its adviser.

From those simple beginnings, SPNS now has projects with other Orang Asli villages in the nearby states. SPNS now handles several issues: from something as practical as starting a savings scheme for a village; to helping the other villages start a kindergarten; to organizing discussion groups among village headmen.

The objectives of SPNS include (1) to provide guidance to Orang Asli communities in being independent and to encourage them to take responsibility for their own future; (2) to instil the importance of education; and (3) to instil awareness amongst the Orang Asli women of their rights and help them become more independent.

http://www.hati.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=111&catid=0&Itemid=64

17. Slow Food Movement

The Slow Food Movement was founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986. *Slow Food* strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine, and promotes farming of plants, seeds and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem. The movement was founded to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. To do that, *Slow Food* brings together pleasure and responsibility, and makes them inseparable.

The SFM has expanded globally to over 100,000 members in 132 countries. Slow Food is part of the Slow Movement, a cultural shift toward slowing down life’s pace.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Food_Movement

http://slowfood.com/

18. Tagal

*Tagal* is a community initiative, and refers to the practice in which the river is closed for fishing, and only opened once a year to allow the fish to mature.
Loosely translated, *tagal* means ‘don’t take’ in the Dusun languages. It is a traditional community-based resource management practice of fish and river conservation – it used to be a common understanding that rivers and water sources were to be protected for the good of the people. Villages declare, often voluntarily, a certain stretch of river – usually the closest two or three kilometres up and downstream of the village – as *tagal* (off-limits). The *tagal* system is enforced under the Native Customary Law of Sabah, and under the Freshwater and Aquaculture Fisheries Enactment 2003.

http://www.flyingdusun.com/004_Features/046_bukatagal.htm


19. Turtle Conservation

Ma’ Daerah, located between the towns of Kerteh and Paka, is an area with 1.7 km of beach and 70 hectares of flat sandy plains. The Ma’ Daerah Turtle Sanctuary lies within the Paka-Kerteh rookery, and has always been an important turtle nesting beach for all four species of marine turtles found in Malaysia. However, due to rampant coastal development within the past 30 years, the number of nesting turtles within the rookery has reduced significantly. Ma’ Daerah’s existence as a turtle nesting haven is critical.

In June 1999, the Department of Fisheries Malaysia, BP and WWF-Malaysia decided to turn Ma’ Daerah into a model turtle conservation centre in Malaysia. Apart from turtle hatchery management and monitoring of nesting females, other activities at this haven for turtle nesting include education and awareness, especially for the local school children and community. This was made possible with annual funding provided by private companies.

http://madaerah.org/

20. United Nations Development Programme

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN’s global development network, an organization advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. The UNDP is present in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and their wide range of partners. UNDP’s focus is to help countries build and share solutions to these five challenges: democratic governance, poverty reduction, crisis prevention and recovery, environment and energy, and HIV/AIDS. In all their activities, UNDP encourages the protection of human rights and the empowerment of women.

http://www.undp.org/about/
Dr. Ratna Malar Selvaratnam is the gender consultant for MENGO’s efforts in mainstreaming gender in biodiversity management in Malaysia. The founder of The Peace Café, she is a peace ecologist committed to bringing peace approaches to human systems. She has an M.A. degree from the University of Mississippi, USA, and a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Leicester, U.K. Dr. Ratna Malar has taken her work internationally, and collaborates with various stakeholders in her home country, Malaysia.

Dr. Sundari Ramakrishna has a teaching background of 13 years with a Diploma in Education from the University of London in 1990. She obtained a Ph.D in Marine Microbiology from the University of Malaya in 1997. She has been actively involved
in wetlands conservation and management for nine years in her previous capacity as Director of Wetlands International – Malaysia Office. As Coordinator of MENGO, she was involved in the mainstreaming of gender and biodiversity, and emphasising the voices and roles of Indigenous Peoples in Malaysia through a project funded by the Government of Denmark. Her passion is in pursuing the conservation and protection of Mother Earth through policy intervention and advocacy. Dr. Sundari has numerous publications and articles on wetlands conservation, marine fungi and civil society work. ☺
ABOUT MENG0

A grouping of Malaysian environmental NGOs, called MENG0, was formed under a programme for environmental assistance to Malaysia. The programme was supported by the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), and the MENG0 coalition was formed in November 2001.

The objective of the programme is to strengthen Malaysian environmental NGOs, and facilitate their impact on decision making at all levels in Malaysian society. One of the main strategic aims of the programme is to support and facilitate a more effective interaction between MENG0 and the Government of Malaysia on environmental policies.
ROLE OF MENGO

Malaysian environmental NGOs play a very important role in the country’s path towards sustainable development. Their primary roles are as follows:

- **Collaborate** and provide services to the government, where appropriate, thereby complementing and supplementing government initiatives;
- **Educate** and raise awareness on environmental concerns;
- **Facilitate** community mobilization and participation in environmental issues;
- **Empower** ordinary citizens, including those from the grassroots, to defend their environmental rights;
- **Contribute** fresh insights to the environmental debate, and advocate improvements in environmental policy and legislation;
- **Act** as watchdogs to ensure that the country genuinely embarks on a development model which is environmentally sound and socially just; and
- **Promote** the implementation of Agenda 21 and other appropriate international environmental agreements and conventions.
MEMBERS OF MENG0

1. Borneo Resources Institute Malaysia (BRIMAS)
   brimas.www1.50megs.com/
2. Centre for Environmental Technologies (CETEC)
   www.cetec.org.my/
3. Centre for Environment, Technology & Development, Malaysia
   (CETDEM) www.cetdem.org.my/
4. Consumers’ Association of Penang (CAP)
   www.consumer.org.my
5. Environmental Management and Research Association of Malaysia
   (ENSEARCH) www.ensearch.org
6. Environmental Protection Society Malaysia (EPSM)
   www.mengo.org/epsm.shtml
7. Global Environmental Centre (GEC) www.gecnet.info
10. Malaysian Society of Marine Sciences (MSMS)
    www.mengo.org/msms.shtml
11. Partners of Community Organisations Sabah (PACOS)
    www.sabah.net.my/PACOS
12. Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) www.foe-malaysia.org.my
13. Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI)
    www.seri.com.my
14. Sustainable Development Network Malaysia (SUSDEN)
    www.mengo.org/susden.shtml
15. Third World Network (TWN) www.mengo.org/twn.shtml
16. TRAFFIC (Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network) Southeast Asia
    www.mengo.org/traffic.shtml
17. Treat Every Environment Special Sdn Bhd (TrEES) www.trees.org.my
18. Water Watch Penang (WWP) www.waterwatchpenang.org
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Mothering Innovation: Profiles in Sustainability

This book – the first of its kind – captures the profiles of ten Malaysian women from urban and rural settings who have played a pivotal role in natural resources management, and who continue to contribute to the perpetuation of the community’s wealth of traditional knowledge, biological resources and natural assets.

The women featured in Mothering Innovation: Profiles in Sustainability represent diverse backgrounds and ethnic origins but they have three elements in common: commitment, passion and humility. These women do not regard themselves as role models but have evolved skills and gained knowledge to lead vital community initiatives, and spearhead social activism in a specific aspect of sustainable development.

These dedicated and determined women went beyond boundaries and overcame challenges to promote and enhance the status of women in their communities. They continue to be accessible models of focused perseverance and endurance in pursuing their community goals.