



Rice revitalization and food sovereignty in Sabah

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Accepted: 24 April 2020 / Published online: 11 May 2020
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Forever Sabah works towards a circular economy in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. We are a hybrid between a social movement and a facilitated cross-sectorial change process.

Sabahans are rice eaters in a rice culture. Our stories and annual *Kaamatan* (harvest festival) center around rice and *Bambarayon* (rice spirit). We treasure memories of growing rice in reverence for soil and life with parents and grandparents. Yet despite all this, and the fact that we are a vast agricultural state, Sabah now produces only a quarter of its rice. We have beautiful rices, but we rely on those from Thailand, Vietnam and Pakistan.

Agricultural land in Sabah is mostly taken over by rubber and oil palm as cash crops, and not just by huge plantations but also by Indigenous and local smallholders. Most of our smallholders no longer grow or wild harvest their own food, squeezed as they are between declining forests and polluted rivers. Roads eat up padi lands as they take advantage of our valley floors; everywhere low-lying padi land is filled with decomposite rock from “hill cutting” as foundation for housing and peri-urban development. How we lost food sovereignty to live in suburbs and become producers of 10% of global oil palm production is a long story. So too is how our public and private sectors—since colonial times—both caused the problem through promoting the extractive economy model, and tried in vain to turn it around through subsidies.

Crises reveal vulnerabilities. Just as we were panicked by (and then forgot) the rice export bans from our key suppliers (Thailand and Vietnam) in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, so have these COVID-19 times again revealed our dependence. Vietnam banned rice exports last month, and while the state has several months’ rice supplies stockpiled, communities have been unable to sell their rubber and palm

for the cash to buy rice and other essentials from the super-markets upon which they are now reliant for subsistence.

Forever Sabah with its partners like PACOS and Kivatu Nature Farm, have well-established work with 35 villages across Sabah on issues around livelihoods, sustainable palm oil, fisheries, organic farming, water and the circular economy. In the first weeks of the Government’s Movement Control Order (MCO) it became immediately clear how fragile our whole food system had become. We and many other organizations mobilized to ensure the rural and urban poor – now almost fully dependent on cash economies—were not bereft of basic needs. Aid for our most vulnerable communities is necessary but we must go deeper.

New conversations are emerging from the ground in this chaos and confusion. People are asking: “how can we be more self-sufficient, and re-value traditional practices of planting food crops and farm produce, exchanges of planting materials, remembering how the ancestors prepared for unforeseen difficulties (like keeping salt in jars)?”.

Tagal is a traditional fisheries management practice in Sabah, in which communities swear oaths to nurture wild fisheries until they teem with river carp, and then open them, by agreement, for communal consumption at special times. During COVID-19 the power of tagal has therefore also become a key topic: how communities who have reinvigorated their culture of river stewardship have been able to access their own protein resources in their places.

Seeing the energy in many communities to re-balance their local village economies by restoring their food sovereignty, Forever Sabah has decided to redirect resources towards a Rice Revitalization Project. We work through facilitation of initiative, readiness and collaboration, rather than top-down one-size-fits all solutions and we value all kinds of knowledge, including indigenous and experiential. Our approach will be to work with our network within various landscapes to organize, listen to needs and aspirations, and then to co-develop plans and mobilize around prototypes.

This full circle movement will see us encountering fundamental obstacles such as industrial agriculture, large

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

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infrastructure development, fortress conservation—all the pillars of an entrenched linear and extractive economy.

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