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▷ *Sustainable Smallholders*

Grouping independent smallholders into units enables them to be both sustainable and certifiable. A social enterprise is working to make this a standalone system.

Titi Bonsilon does not have much time to work on his smallholding in Kg Toniting, Beluran, Sabah. He has a fulltime job as field conductor at a larger oil palm estate and can focus on his own 5.3ha field only on weekends.

However, since embarking on a sustainability scheme for smallholders, he has found that he is more efficient and the yield has increased. He now has the tools and knowledge to open up another 4 ha on family land in Sugut, about four hours away.

Titi is an independent smallholder, one of about 4,700 in central Sabah, each owning less than 40 ha of land planted with oil palm.

Of Sungai ethnicity, Titi is among 42 indigenous farmers who has joined a smallholder sustainability programme.

The programme aims to improve livelihoods, instill sustainable practices and achieve certification to produce CSPO.

The programme is run by social enterprise Wild Asia with support from the MPOB Smallholder Palm Oil Cluster (SPOC) team.

It is called the Wild Asia Group Scheme (WAGS) and is an evolving programme. It is based on Wild Asia's experience working with Keresa Plantations in Sarawak, in developing the latter's sustainability scheme for independent associated smallholders.

"Based on the common perception at that time, getting independent smallholders to certification was seen as impossible," recalled Wild Asia executive director Reza Azmi.



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Byron Minnis/Wild Asia

Previous spread: Smallholders adhere to safe working practices such as locking their chemical stores, as part of their commitment to sustainability.

Left: Gaining trust and building relationships are at the core of the success of smallholder sustainability schemes.

Far left: Farmers learn how to map their plots from Wild Asia consultant Sheila Senathirajah.

Above, clockwise from left: WAGS training includes keeping proper documentation, something which Titi appreciates one year down the road.

After the success of Keresa, "the next step was to see if what would become WAGS, could be a standalone central management system".

Wild Asia wanted WAGS to be flexible enough to cover different geographic locations and include villagers and dealers as potential 'groups'.

Working with Titi's group, the team proved that the model worked. In 2013, the WAGS MPOB-SPOC Beluran farmers were group-certified as CSPO producers.

At the core of such group sustainability efforts is relationship building. In Beluran, MPOB already had some exposure to the communities and business stakeholders. Using this as an 'in', the Wild Asia team conducted

group meetings and feasibility studies through group and one-one interviews.

In addition, Wild Asia hired a local to lead the project on the ground and liaise with the farmers. The field office, which is in one of the villages, is also staffed by an assistant from within the community, a farmer's daughter.

"Relationship building requires time as there were many misconceptions about our intentions," said Reza. "For example, they thought we wanted to sell them something!"

"And although our ultimate goal is certification, we realised early on that it's good agronomic practices that these farmers are keen to learn. This will help them boost productivity and also get better income from palm oil."



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Left: Titi's chemical store is a model for the orderly and safe storage of chemicals and tools. Pesticides and fertilisers are stored in a separate, locked compartment within the larger shed while sharp tools have protective covering.

Below: Legible signs are placed in the field wherever spraying has been done.

Before the WAGS training, neither of them was properly storing fertilisers and pesticides. Fatimah used to indiscriminately pile everything in her shed. She now separates the toxic substances and is working to improve her storage.

Titi has gone a step further by building a cement floor in his store to prevent seepage into the soil should there be spills.

Both however, are careful to keep their stores locked.

The pair is also more aware of waste disposal. Plastics, bottles and fertiliser bags are separated. Herbicide bottles have their bottoms punctured, are washed three times and labelled before

being set aside. Wild Asia is still working with a mill to have that waste incorporated in its scheduled waste management programme.

For biodegradable materials, a specific disposal site is allocated and prepared. There, waste is layered with soil, fronds and empty fruit bunches.

Both farmers have also learned to maintain documentation of their activities and finances.

“These records help me keep track especially of the how much and when I do fertilisation and use pesticides. Otherwise, I might forget,” said Titi. “It’s also nice to see the figures increase when I check my yields and profits.”

Like Titi, Fatimah Abdul Jalal is part of the Beluran pilot group that achieved certification in 2013. She is one of the few female farmers in the group.

While Titi is progressing steadily in continuously improving his sustainability practices, Fatimah is a little slower. With a smaller farmed area of about 1.4ha, Fatimah's lower income means that the related additional expenditure – while beneficial in the long term – has to be spent more judiciously.

Nonetheless, the lessons from WAGS have made an impact.

“Before, when we use pesticides, we used it everywhere – you wouldn't

see any undergrowth at all,” said Fatimah. “But now, I have learned to cut the grass first and use a parang to slash saplings. I also learned not to clear everything until it was bare. It is important to leave some green to retain moisture.”

Both she and Titi have replaced Paraquat with less toxic options such as glyphosate even though the latter costs over RM100 per container more.

“I didn't bother using anything but Paraquat before because it was cheap and effective,” said Titi. “But now I know that using less toxic chemicals and less chemicals is actually better for the soil.”



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My land was first cleared by my parents in 1982. I helped them out over the years. Then I moved to Sandakan. About 6 years ago, after my husband retired, we moved back here from Sandakan.

We replanted the land and have been managing it since then. I also work as a casual labourer at another plantation.

I got to know about the WAGS program in 2012 when Wild Asia gave a briefing session in the Kg Toniting village hall.

Before I joined WAGS, I never did any of the things they taught. But I wanted to know more, get more knowledge, gain wider experience. I wanted to learn how to work in the industry so that it is sustainable.

After I joined the programme, one of the main things I learned was that it was not necessary to use fertilisers and pesticides all the time.

In fact, I learned to plan my fertiliser use. Now I only use it twice a year.

Wild Asia also taught me how to use waste decanter cakes from the mills as fertiliser. I put these in piles near the trees but not too close, and they fertilise the plants as they slowly decompose.

I think this is actually better than using empty fruit bunch and fronds, which is what I used to do. Those only had localised effects. But the decanter cakes are semi-solid. When it rains, the fertiliser from the cakes flows to a wider area. That's more effective.

After joining WAGS, I now have more awareness, more knowledge. The high cost is my biggest challenge, but the yield is also higher and my income has increased.

– Fatimah Abdul Jalal, 53
Kadazan smallholder, Kg Ulu Sapi

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Above (top to bottom):

To reduce pesticide use, Fatimah clears longer growth by hand.

Fatimah no longer kills every weed in sight; in this section of her plot, the greenery is starting to regrow. In the background is her neighbour's plot (not a WAGS member), which is overgrown with weeds.

Having locals on the team helps Wild Asia ensure success for the programme; here, Fatimah gets a reminder on pruning from field assistant Diana Guriana, whose mother is a WAGS farmer.

In the meantime, Wild Asia continues innovating. One area it is doing this is ICT. WAGS will eventually sit on a large dataset which will include farmer information, farm location and production data. The team is working with a technology company on an electronic solution, which will be more efficient than conventional formats.

For the longer term, Wild Asia is developing new data-sharing models for farmers and dealers/millers, perhaps using smartphones.

The biggest challenges for the WAGS team are to make the certification process easy for farmers and to demonstrate that this project has real value for them.

“These are the two areas we have worked consistently on but we know we can do better,” said Reza. “It is encouraging that we have been hearing farmers talk about savings through reduced pesticide use or that they value working as a group within the community. These are all positive signs that we are on the right track.”

Wild Asia is now looking to expand the programme by scaling up membership with MPOB and reaching out to the local mills. They are currently sourcing more seed funding but want to ultimately show that the schemes are self-financing, perhaps from trade-derived income.

“This will lay the foundation for analysing the information to feed back more precisely to farmers on improving agronomic practices, or to provide more assurance to buyers of the traceability of their certified products.”

This will only benefit farmers such as Titi and Fatimah. At the moment, they both plan to continue working on other estates as well as their own because the price of palm oil fluctuates too much.

Still, Fatimah is working to improve her farm management skill to generate better yields. Titi's new challenge is to apply what he has learned to his brand new estate. An important component of this is to train locals whom he will hire to implement the sustainability practices he has learned.