





ENCOURAGING SMALLHOLDERS to operate sustainable farms

BY ELAINE BOEY

At 78, Dongkin Kaway no longer works on his oil palm farm. Now, his seven daughters manage everything — building the roads and planting and harvesting the oil palms.

Everything is done manually. Saplings are carried in each hand and on the head. Fresh fruit bunches are harvested using an oil palm harvesting sickle and are transported in wheelbarrows to the main road, where they are collected by a oil palm dealer who subsequently sells them to a mill.

“Each of us has a plot of land; all quite close to each other. We help each other out when there is a lot of work to be done on one plot, such as planting and harvesting,” says Kak Long, one of Dongkin’s daughters.

“Our children are encouraged to follow us to the farm and pick up loose oil palm fruit when we harvest. This way, they start learning about managing an oil palm farm from an early age and can stand on their own two feet in the future.

“This is the way of the Orang Asli. We want to be independent and provide for ourselves.”

Dongkin’s farm receives assistance from Wild Asia’s support programme for independent oil palm smallholders. The not-for-profit social enterprise addresses social and environmental issues.



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— Reza

Its support programme known as Wild Asia Group Scheme (WAGs) aims to build sustainable practices across the entire palm oil supply chain, starting by understanding the challenges faced by smallholders in meeting zero-deforestation commitments. The programme also looks for sustainable ways to enhance smallholders' productivity by incorporating better agricultural management practices.

LEARNING TO DO IT RIGHT

Dongkin and his daughters learnt how to manage their farm by observing the bigger plantations. Kak Long's husband works for a plantation company and has indirectly influenced the way she runs her farm.

According to Sheila Senathirajah, technical programme manager at Wild Asia, many smallholders learn by observing the agricultural practices of bigger plantations. "They learn many desirable (sustainable) agricultural practices from corporate planters. However, at times, due to a lack of technical understanding, they pick up unsustainable methods such as planting right up to the riparian. They are merely following practices seen elsewhere and lack the knowledge to understand why this may not be a good approach," she says.

"In this case, it is very hard to explain that it is not a desirable or sustainable act.

So, what we do is find an alternative while educating and supporting the smallholders to ensure that an alternative practice, one that is more sustainable, is adopted and maintained over the long term."

The WAGs team thinks the farm managed by the Dongkin sisters could meet the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil's (RSPO) certification criteria for sustainable palm oil next year. The RSPO is the most widely recognised international standard for certified sustainable palm oil. It is also the largest multi-stakeholder body in the industry.

Being certified by the RSPO generally means that the oil palm smallholder has stopped carrying out activities that negatively impact the



Suhaimi Yusoff/the edge

environment and has adopted sustainable agricultural practices that should translate into better yields. It also opens doors to new markets and better pricing as well as organises smallholders into groups with more bargaining power and easier access to credit facilities.

Meanwhile, the Dongkin sisters, who live near each other and eat together on weekends, are open to the idea of improving their practices, largely because of the technical assistance given by the WAGs team, who are based near their farm in Air Kuning, Perak. Over the years, the two parties have become friends and celebrate religious festivals together.

SMALL CHANGES, BIG GOALS

There are more than 2.2 million oil palm smallholders worldwide, who account for up to 40% of the total global production of palm oil while making up 40% of the land coverage used for oil palm cultivation.

The cultivation of oil palm is a lifeline for many farmers in developing countries. It can give them a stable income, which puts their children through



Patrick Goh/the edge



For smallholders, improved yields also means improved livelihoods

school. It also creates a small economy of businesses that support the smallholders and their community.

However, most smallholders — defined by the RSPO as farmers who grow oil palm on an area that is less than 50ha — face challenges in productivity, profitability and sustainability. They generally lack access to expertise, capacity building and infrastructure for sustainable practices.

The opportunity to improve yields from farms owned by smallholders has long been recognised by stakeholders in the global palm oil industry. By producing more oil while using the same (or less) amount of land, the industry can address the hard-hitting global environmental concerns of deforestation and the corresponding loss of biodiversity in palm oil-producing countries.

Improving yields also improves livelihoods. Besides sustaining farmers, sustainable agricultural practices are environmentally sound and socially supportive, meaning they are good for communities.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Plantation, Industries and Commodities requires all oil palm growers to

comply with the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) certification by 2019. A council has been established to oversee compliance and financial aid has been made available to smallholders to assist them in meeting the requirements.

“Responsible is actually a better term [for agricultural practices] than sustainability. The concept of sustainability is hard to grasp. A responsible smallholder is one who is keen to learn about all aspects of his farm and the production of palm oil,” says Reza Azmi, executive director and founder of Wild Asia.

“This includes trying out new ideas, changing his mode of operation and considering the environment when looking to improve profitability and working conditions for his employees, if any. This is the road towards sustainable production.”

The challenge is in getting smallholders to incorporate responsible practices that require a significant long-term change in the way they currently manage their farms. The concept of improving yields can be hard to fathom when they

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Above: Wild Asia employees and the media meet smallholders in Air Kuning, Perak

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are not aware of their current yields. Furthermore, some farmers are illiterate and are unable to record information such as the yield achieved or amount of fertiliser used.

As Reza notes, a one-off training session on sustainable and responsible agricultural practices held for smallholders is unlikely to be successful as a shift in the current mindset and in the way things are done over the long term are needed. “Farmers need to see a continuous improvement from the changes they have made. This can only be achieved if they know what to monitor, how to monitor it and what needs to be done based on the information gathered,” he says.

While the end goal is to certify farmers such as the Dongkin sisters, Reza does not think approaching smallholders with the idea of obtaining a sustainable palm oil certificate is the best way to earn their trust and cooperation. “The benefits of being certified is a hard concept to explain to smallholders who may have done things a certain way for decades. How do you give an example of an intangible concept such as improved market access or health and safety?

“For example, a farmer may see nothing wrong

with keeping pesticides at home. Our way of encouraging sustainable practices is by taking a long-term approach, starting with building relationships at the grassroots level. Once we learn about the problems they are facing, and this may be done over a coffee at the local mamak shop, we can make a recommendation that considers the three pillars of sustainability — profit, people and planet.”

The idea is that once the recommendation is adopted, the smallholders should start seeing better income on the back of better yields. This should make them more inclined to adopt other sustainable practices. Over time, their farm will start to comply with more requirements of sustainability standards.

“At the end of the day, we want them to be happy with the outcome of all the new practices that have been adopted. A piece of paper that says they have been certified as sustainable is only a formality,” says Reza.

“If genuine long-term sustainable practices have been incorporated, we have achieved our goal. We believe this is the way forward for smallholders around the world. Otherwise, the entire palm oil industry will continue to be criticised for environment damage or social abuse.” **REZA**