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## Sustainability Stories of the Lives We Touched

### The Cacao Campaigner: Economic Empowerment and Forest Amelioration Go Hand-in-Hand

Sumber Tani Cacao Demplot Farm  
Nangatayap, Ketapang

Jones Piter Amran Sinaga adjusts his cap as he squints at the distance. We are seated cross-legged in his stilt hut, spared from the midday sun that pierces through the departing rainclouds. Our vantage point affords us a scenic view of rolling hills. Patches of wet earth mingle with tall, wild grass and banana trees. Far away, bigger trees clump in groups, ringed by row after neat row of oil palm trees.



*Sumber Tani Cacao Demplot Farm*

Sinaga is no madman. But since his arrival in 2003 to Simpang Tiga Sembelangan, a place he now calls home, he has been branded one by those around him, more than once. The man who prefers to be addressed by his family name—a large clan in Batak culture—hails

from Simalungun, North Sumatra. Following the stories of success told by his friends who had moved earlier to better their lives in Kalimantan, he came to Ketapang with little means, but a lot of ideas. Ideas that, for some, are just either too bold, or too impractical.

Planting cacao is one of them. It is in this regard that he has failed three times. Years ago, he brought cacao seedlings in polybags from his homeland, where cacao-growing was commonplace, to Sembelangaan. None grew. That was the first time. Some time later, he saw his friend in downtown Ketapang successfully grow cacao seedlings, and asked him for some. Taken to Sembelangaan, only around 100 km from Ketapang town, those seedlings did not sprout.

“I suspected it had something to do with the climate here,” Sinaga reasoned. “Sembelangaan isn’t far from Ketapang, but the climate here is somehow different from there.” Believing that he was going in the right direction, he tried for the third time. Seeking a worthwhile diversion from monotonous market chatter that almost always revolved around oil palm cultivation—which, he is also engaged in, he resolved to find some other alternative crops “to play with”.

Sinaga’s determination to grow his crop of choice was to some extent empowered by a sense of nostalgia. As he spent his childhood years in Simalungun, cacao was a plant he would become deeply familiar with. Having learnt about the cacao tree’s whims and predilections in his youth, he had believed he could take it with him to the new life he was going to build in Kalimantan.

Visiting a neighbouring settlement, peopled by transmigrants, he noticed cacao plants and other fruit trees grow healthily on their front yards and on the mosque’s grounds. But few paid attention to their presence. He rallied some people there to take this cacao business more seriously, convincing them of the financial benefits once they harvest the fruits. His group of ten men went all out at first, but then their energy and attention “The charm of the oil palm remains very potent,” Sinaga notes. “It is hard to change one’s habit and mindset. Most of the people here tend to stick to oil palm, not bothered to look into other crops.”

It is curious to note that Sinaga was among the first in his community to start oil palm cultivation back in 2009. He promoted it passionately, certain that oil palm would take off,



*Jones Piter Amran Sinaga*

if the successes of his friends in Sumatra and other towns in West Kalimantan were anything to go by. But people back then mainly grew rubber, and were wary of the new crop. “Even when I gave two palm seedlings each to my neighbours, only one in ten accepted them and planted them in their back yard,” Sinaga reminisces. “Only when they realised how lucrative that was, well, the rest is history.”

## The Fourth Attempt

In mid-2021, at a relative’s event Sinaga met Janrahman, an employee of Bumitama, to whom he told the story of his multiple failures to grow cacao. It was met with an offer, wrapped in a challenge.

“Say we at Bumitama get you some high quality cacao seedlings—” Janrahman proposed. Sinaga cut him midsentence. “I will form a farmers’ collective dedicated to cacao farming,” he replied, assured.



*Planning the land preparation for cacao demplot back in 2021 with Bumitama*

That was October 2021. Aware of Sembelangaan’s high potential for cacao cultivation, Bumitama swiftly took Sinaga’s proposition into action. Coordinating with Puslikoka (Indonesian Coffee and Cocoa Research Institute—ICCRI) in Jember, East Java, Bumitama secured thousands of cacao seedlings and set up a demonstration plot on one hectare of land that had been ravaged by forest fire several years ago. Together with Bumitama, Sinaga joined the Sembelangaan’s LPHD and with it obtained the right to cultivate forest crops on this land, set within the village forest that is off-limits to oil palm plantations, under the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry’s Social Forestry scheme.

Bumitama also hired a cacao farming expert from Puslikoka to provide technical training to Sinaga and members of his local farmers’ collective. That was when they learnt how to

sow the seedlings properly. One key technique, Sinaga noticed, was to mix the planting soil with rice husks. Since then, about 5,000 cacao seedlings have been planted on the demonstration plot and beyond. “There are roughly seven hectares that we can plant them on,” Sinaga says. “Right now we have covered not even half of that.”

**“More than 80 percent of the planted seedlings are now thriving.”**

As they mature, they are shielded from extreme weather and temperatures by several types of protective trees, such as quickstick (*Gliricidia sepium*) and the very same banana trees we can easily spot from our sheltered space. Eventually we get to see these budding cacao plants, their tips reaching up to the waist, their leaves glazed with rain droplets.

The cacao trees will be ready to harvest in three years’ time. “Initially, we can expect to get about 500 kg per hectare per year,” says Amin, an expert in coffee and cacao now working at Bumitama. Once they get to their fourth year, the trees can yield about two tonnes per hectare annually. “We have brought a potential buyer here not long ago,” Amin adds, “and they are ready to take whatever we can come up with, as long as the quality is up to their standards.” Said buyer is a Pontianak-based company that engages in the sourcing and marketing of artisanal farm products from Kalimantan, with outlets including several airports in Indonesia, and is in a partnership with large cacao suppliers in the Philippines.



“Conservatively I think we can get about one tonne per hectare when we do our first harvest in 2025,” Sinaga says with confidence. He has big reasons to want his fourth attempt to finally succeed. “I want to prove it to myself, and to others, that cacao cultivation is worth your time. Look at the market price of cacao. It is more stable over the years, compared to that of palm oil.”

Sinaga believes that cultivating cacao and other crops such as fruits—of which he has a variety in his “garden”, from banana and guava to durian and lemon—can provide a cushion for oil palm farmers when CPO prices get volatile, which they tend to do. “Moreover, many people, especially those now retired, have asked me whether I’ve a job for them,” Sinaga admits. “I think cacao can be a solution to today’s many problems. Planting it using the agroforestry methods, we protect the soil health and stabilise the fresh water supply for the village below, while areas formerly burnt by forest fires are now being replanted using this technique. It also encourages locals to protect the forest areas, which were under pressure from deforestation due to land scarcity for community livelihoods and foodsource areas.

Even now, seeing how robustly the seedlings have grown, some of his friends and neighbours have expressed their interest in cacao farming. “Both the trees and the people’s reaction have been very encouraging. It’s boosting our morale,” he says.

A bounteous cacao harvest three years from now will galvanise the interest of the people in Sinaga’s village and the surroundings. Much of that rests on giving the trees the proper care they need. “We must build a strong collaboration with Bumitama, as we need the expertise and assistance. I wish our good relationship will not only be maintained, but improved and expanded in coming years.”



*Cacao seedling from Bumitama to farmers collective*

## The Draw of Cacao

Agroforestry partnerships with the local village’s business units are Bumitama’s chosen method to augment the forest coverage in the village of Simpang Tiga Sembelangaan. Based on satellite images taken in 2020, a large portion of the Sembelangaan Village Forest was deforested, consisting of bushes and underbrush as well as open land. This portion requires rehabilitation, but previous attempts at it, undertaken by the government, had been far from successful.

These mostly focussed on rehabilitating the forest by donating native forest tree seedlings to the locals to plant in the forest, however the villagers did not consider these economically valuable. Bumitama’s investigation suggests that providing locals with alternative commodities through agroforestry initiatives can bring in substantial benefits to both the environment and the community. These crops need to be those that do not require daily care, relatively simple to cultivate, economically viable, and add to the floral diversity in the forest.



*Native fruit seedlings at Bumitama’s nursery*



Some of the crops Bumitama has chosen for its agroforestry programmes include native fruits (bitter bean, candlenut, matoa), high-yielding fruit trees (durian, avocado, guava, tangerine), as well as cacao.

Globally, there is a high demand for cacao. And this demand is growing at around 4% per year to reach an estimated market value of nearly USD 17 billion by 2028. Indonesia—the world’s sixth and Asia’s largest cacao producer—has a total processing capacity of around 659,000 tonnes per year, but total annual production barely exceeds 200,000 tonnes. Such a wide gap means lucrative opportunities for aspiring cacao growers in rural West Kalimantan. Furthermore, Kalimantan offers a prime location for growing cacao.

*“Cacao cultivation in Kalimantan is predicted to be among the least adversely affected by climate change up until 2050.”*

This is based on the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture’s study on cacao climate suitability and climate change impact in Indonesia, including Sulawesi and other islands in Indonesia where cacao is intensively farmed.

With its Non-Oil Palm Income Generating Activities (“IGA Non-Sawit”) in cacao cultivation, Bumitama aims to develop resilient community-based cacao businesses that are integrated, both on- and off-farm, as well as up- and downstream. This is to be achieved via a public-private partnership (PPP) scheme. Through it, Bumitama will help farmers’ collectives determine the soil suitability of their plot, obtain superior seedlings (from ICCRI), harvest the fruits, and manage the subsequent steps of production. It will be an integrated value chain: from seed financing to final product marketing. In tandem, Bumitama strives to strengthen these community-based institutions and ensures that the cacao farms are established in a “clean and clear” manner, abiding by the prevailing provisions surrounding designated forest areas.



*Benchmarking programme with farmers’ collectives in Lampung*

Up to end of 2022, Bumitama had collaborated with eight farmers’ collectives across Ketapang. The total cacao-planted area now stands at 10 hectares. In total, there are 14,800 seeds and seedlings currently being nurtured in its nurseries and the farmers’. The plan is to disseminate them to more farmers in the near future, bringing the total planted area to 20 hectares by end of 2023.

## Farmers Against Forest Fires

Forest fires are seasonally encountered in Simpang Tiga Sembelangaan, as in many other forested areas in Kalimantan. While the fires tend to occur in years where droughts are more severe, almost all of them have been perpetrated by certain parties who are engaged in irresponsible clearing of land or hunting practices.

Committed to the NDPE (No Deforestation, No Peat, and No Exploitation) policy in oil palm production practices, Bumitama has banned the use of fire for any purposes on its own and third-party suppliers plantations. It is also working with a variety of stakeholders to protect the integrity of forests in and around its concessions. This means preventing the occurrences of forest fire at all costs.

The practice of controlled burning has a long tradition among villagers, and thus has local wisdom and beliefs embedded into it. Mindful of this, Bumitama keeps on educating and assisting locals who live in areas adjacent to forests so that they can gradually understand the damages this practice may bring, in the changing climate, to human health and to the already-vulnerable state of the forest and its biodiversity.



*Sembelangaan Village Forest before (2021) and after rehabilitation (2023)*

Bumitama is working together with the Village Forest Management Units (LPHD) of Sembelangaan and 2 other units in West Kalimantan and 3 units in Central Kalimantan with a total area of nearly 15,000 hectares and 38 more villages directly neighboring with its plantations, to reduce such practice and collaboratively find ways to improve the sustainability of locals' farming practices.

In February 2021, Bumitama signed a cooperation agreement with the LPHD unit of Sembelangaan for a period of 25 years. Through this agreement, Bumitama will assist the village farmers with conserving forest and biodiversity, rehabilitating fire-affected areas, and enhancing local economic resilience by developing non-timber forest products and introducing non-oil palm annual crops.