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Sustainability Stories of the Lives We Touched

Lessons from the Field, for Future Yields

Agus & Kelompok Tani Makmur
Tumbang Titi, Ketapang

Settling down on a wooden bench, Agus throws his glance towards the rows of planting mound, bald and covered with plastic sheeting. The watermelon harvesting season was just over. Above us, the midday sky hangs heavy with white-grey clouds.

“The harvest was a tough one,” Agus laments. “In my six years in the business, I haven’t seen it this bad. Last month, he and his watermelon farmers’ collective, Kelompok Tani Makmur, could only manage to collect less than 30 tonnes of watermelon out of their 9.2-hectare plot. Such a yield was exceedingly low: on average, a well-planted hectare yields 25 to 35 tonnes.



Tani Makmur's farm at Belaban Rayak

At first, Agus blames the weather. “It’s been raining almost every day, torrential rains, as you know,” he says. Indeed, rain has been pouring down for the past weeks, even months, causing flashfloods in many areas across Ketapang Regency. “With the rain, comes the disease. The plants got sick, and we failed to give them the right leaf medicine and nutrient supplements in time.”

Agus knows full well this was preventable. Many watermelon farms he knows also experienced this rain-triggered blight. But comparing notes with fellow growers, he found some smaller-scale farmers could harvest about 23 tonnes of the red-fleshed fruit per hectare from their plots.



A trial: intercropping watermelon and crystal guava

Lack of manpower to work on the fields has been a long-standing factor in Ketapang. Whether due to their overfamiliarity with oil palm plantations, or their reluctance to try new crops that would require them to learn more farming skills, or a combination of the two, people in Ketapang seem content sticking to growing oil palm. The hardest thing for Agus is recruiting people—even when he has offered a considerably higher daily rate than for working on oil palm trees.

“We the watermelon farmers want to enhance the economic value from areas designated for foodsource, under the social forestry programme”

A fellow farmer, a Central Javanese who moved here in 1993, nods in agreement from his bench right across Agus. With Bumitama’s assistance, they secured their right to work on the fields, adjacent to the forest, under partnership with their local Village Forest Management Unit two years ago. Based on their years of experience with various crops, they decided on the watermelon. To improve soil productivity, they also practice intercropping on their plots, using chilli plants.



Chilli and watermelon intercropping

“Chilli is fairly easy to grow, and it fetches a handsome price,” says Agus. A 100-gr packet of red chillies in the local market costs around 15,000 rupiahs. “But we cannot produce too much of it. All of Ketapang can only absorb maybe three hundred kilogrammes each day, tops. And it’s hard to get the chillies out of Ketapang, with the state of the roads and all.”



Tani Makmur's watermelon nursery



Apart from helping Agus administratively with Belaban Rayak Village Forest Management Unit, Bumitama is supporting his field research on soil transformation.

Bumitama regularly supplies Agus with composted empty oil palm fruit bunches, which the farmers apply as organic fertiliser. And ever relentless in spreading his interest in watermelon, Agus has been sharing his farming know-how with other farmers from various regions in West Kalimantan, gathered and supported by Bumitama's social forestry initiatives.

Despite last month's poor harvest, for Agus, the prospect of watermelon farming remains bright. He has been in the business for six years. "I've known firsthand what a splendid harvest is like. One time, we took in more than 170 tonnes from only 2.4 hectares, over three harvesting rotations. At 6,000 rupiahs per kg, that's a good sum. Surely we can do even better."

Plans are already lined up to make sure this time—the second rotation in the current planting period—the plants get their proper care. To add to the 14 local workers he now leads in the collective, Agus has recruited even more people. With their help, we will sow an additional 6 hectares, bringing the total planted area to roughly 15 hectares.

So there won't be any mistimings in medicine and nutrient application, he will not simply oversee them, but work together with them. "When we have the sense of camaraderie, that everyone of us is equal, eating the same food, getting our arms and legs caked with the same soil, we will feel increasingly invested in the collective," Agus says. "All of us will want to see the fruit of our work."



Discussing harvest quantity with Bumitama's CSR Specialist