

A heart of gold and a green thumb

Former lawyer dedicated to improving orang asli lives with organic farming

Profitable produce: Kon (right) plans to expand the organic farm in Pahang to improve the orang asli's revenue. Their vegetables (inset) will soon be sold at major supermarkets.



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KUALA LUMPUR: A visit to an orang asli kampung in 1992 changed Kon Onn Sein's life

Now he's helping them to change theirs, through the Foundation for Community Studies and Development (YKPM).

Their OA Organics project is one of the 10 winners of the 2017 Star Golden Hearts Award.

The lawyer had a partnership in Muar, Johor and had been providing free legal aid for the orang asli in Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Johor.

"Many face land rights issues," he explained.

He estimated that 80% of them live on land which has not been gazetted.

Kon had also been helping them to get proper wells, set up literacy programmes (which his wife, Dr Ho Sook Wah, a teacher with Universiti Putra Malaysia's language proficiency centre, volunteers with) and help them create income-generation projects such as growing long beans.

But he was shocked when he visited Kampung Wawah, which is situated by the roadside between Kuantan and Muadzam Shah in Pahang.

They had no proper water supply and got their water from a hole about three to four feet in diameter.

"Dogs lapped at it," he remembered.

Some of their houses had walls but some didn't. They had no education and few clothes.

"They were malnourished, with bloated stomachs and skin diseases.

He thought to himself, "How can we in Malaysia live in comfort when people are left so far behind?"

And he decided to join YKPM as an honorary director, the following year.

In 2000, Kon gave up his legal career to become the full-time executive director of YKPM.

Since then, he has worked with 15 villages in Pahang (including Kampung Wawah) - on more literacy programmes and building houses.

"Not all are receptive," he admitted.

"It has not been a story of success, but a learning process for us."

But by December 2015, he saw that one village - Kampung Orang Asli Ulu Gumum, near Tasik Chini - was ready.

He gave them some seeds and discovered that one of them had green thumbs.

Kon helped them market their produce to get the best prices.

After a few months, the price for their mustard greens went up from RM2 to RM4 per kg.

"When they got good prices, others began to show interest," he recalled.

He suggested that they farm collectively so that they could get better prices.

"I asked them to set up a committee and choose one acre to farm," he said.

Kon helped them to set up OA Organics, an initiative under YKPM, and is now its general manager.

A group of volunteers provides



technical and marketing support. "OA Organics is the trading name and partnership between the orang asli farmers and the marketing cooperative," he explained.

They started out selling about 300kg of vegetables per month and now it's reached 900kg.

"We formed partnerships with retail outlets to sell the produce," he said.

"Some took commissions and some, like The Hive and Baba Low restaurant, allowed them to do it for free.

Baba Low's owner Victor Low endorses the concept.

"It's an excellent way to empower the indigenous community and not to destroy the land, unlike modern farming," he said.

"They are providing a service, for this fragile community to start up. It is run by the people, unlike the privately owned companies."

Through their Facebook account, OA Organics were able to reach out to the Malaysian public.

But without economies of scale, transport costs were high. OA Organics also had to subsidise the cost of seeds and fertilisers.

They plan to expand to five acres within six months.

A major supermarket chain has adopted OA Organics as part of its corporate social responsibility and plans to sell the produce at its outlets around the country.

Gamuda has also sent 30 engineers and staff to help the community build greenhouses to boost production, and CIMB has provided a grant to set up a chicken farm.

The project has already made an impact on the farmers' lives. In the past, their income ranged from RM300 to RM800.

Some were tapping rubber, some were harvesting oil palm and some had their own small-holdings.

With OA Organics, they're now getting RM800 per person per month.

Kon hopes they will be able to raise their incomes to between RM1,000 to RM2,000 each within a year.

And he hopes this fair-trade community enterprise can give hope to other orang asli communities.

Some of them, including some Penan from Sarawak, have visited the farm on a study tour.

The former lawyer counts it a privilege to work with the orang asli.

"I now see the holistic nature of it all and the contributions they bring to society," he stressed.

"They are important not just as fellow human beings and citizens, but they have a global significance in reducing climate change."

Watch the video
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