

# ***Cross Sector Organizing - A Manual***



This Manual was the result of workshops conducted by AMRC and KPS with informal workers in plantations and farmers groups. The Indonesian Plantation Union (SPBI) has played a major role in sustaining the cross sectoral alliance. This manual is meant as a pointer for involving diverse groups and is a work in progress.

## ***The impact of plantation industry on peasants and community***

In North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, around 236,000 people work on the palm oil plantation estates. Around 80,000 palm oil plantation workers, 34% of the total workforce, are casual workers. Despite the fact that palm oil has been the primary commodity generating national income, permanent plantation workers only earn USD 103 a month which at the most covers only 60% of the basic needs. The casual workers have to survive on USD 15 per day. The absence of rights of freedom of association and other basic rights of workers have left plantation workers unprotected and vulnerable to various forms of violations.

As the government is determined to accelerate the growth of the industry, approximately 400,100 hectares of agricultural land and forests are being converted into palm oil plantations in North Sumatra. The conversion of agricultural land is often executed in an aggressive and violent manner leading to prolonged conflict between peasants and the plantation owners and the local authorities. More often than not, the peasants made landless by the land conversion are forced to survive by becoming casual workers in the plantations. The conversion of agriculture land has also threatened the food sustainability as rice production in North Sumatra province has decreased by around 20% per year.

Palm oil plantations have also absorbed much water creating water shortage for the remaining crops. The massive application of various herbicides and pesticides on palm oil trees creates hazardous impacts on workers, community and environment. Usually, women workers are assigned to spray around 22 liters of agrochemicals everyday. The daily exposure to the agrochemicals has caused occupational diseases ranging from minor irritation, respiratory infection to permanent blindness. Fertilizer shortage has been a concern for small scale and subsistent farmers. The fertilizer producers prefer to sell their products in large scale to the plantations. The clearance of forests to be converted into unsustainable plantations disrupts the balance of the ecosystem leading to environmental damage.

### ***Land dispute, changing cultivation pattern and dispute over water***

Land disputes still remain the main and protracted conflict between plantation and peasants in North Sumatra. In Langkat regency alone, there are 47 protracted land disputes involving 3000 families. PT Buana Estate has been in conflict with the peasant organization, KTMIM (Peasant Union) since 1985. PT Buana Estate grabbed 70.3 ha of land and converted it into palm oil plantation. At the instance of PT Buana Estate, the military was involved to repress the peasants' movement.<sup>1</sup> In June 2007, KTMIM reclaimed the land and started cultivating it. One year later, the plantation along with the military police attacked the peasants and their families, arrested 47 peasants and left one woman peasant in a coma.<sup>2</sup> Till 2009, there have been 238 cases of land occupation and reclaiming, out of which 226 cases are land disputes between State Owned Plantations and the peasants and the remaining are between private plantation estates and peasants. The involvement of military and local militia is still evident in plantation estates.

Another well known impact of monoculture tree planting in plantation industry is the competition between plantation trees and agriculture crops and the proliferation of pests. In Bahorok sub district, for instance, the narrowing of agriculture land due to plantation expansion has caused pest proliferation which is concentrated on small rice fields. This in turn, leads to another issue, food scarcity.

Plantation has also changed the value system of community. There is potential conflict in the society. Small peasants maintaining their agricultural land must compete with farmers converting their land into small plantations for water from the irrigation system. Moreover, the industrialization in rural area has eroded solidarity value among people.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.binadesa.or.id/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=67&Itemid=217](http://www.binadesa.or.id/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=67&Itemid=217) 2

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

***Informalization: How community is forced to contribute to plantation production system***



The plantation has become a centre, pushing communities to be part of its production process. The families of plantation workers are forced to earn additional income by becoming casual workers especially during harvesting season. Meanwhile, landless peasants are forced to be casual workers that they must work in more than one plantation to survive. Another informal work benefiting the plantation is small scale home based industry producing rib sweep using the midrib of palm oil leaves as raw material. This industry benefits the plantation as it “helps” the company to clean up the waste.

There are two dimension of informalization triggered by the plantation industry. The first dimension is the marginalization of peasants as they become landless and are forced to sell their labour to plantation. The second dimension is the casualization of work. To earn sufficient income, casual workers often involve their families in doing work such as clearing up a circle area around the tree and harvesting the fresh fruit bunch (FFB). The labour of the families is not considered as paid labour. Contract system is also an issue

inside the plantation. Most of contract workers have worked for 15-20 years. Similar working period also applies to many casual workers.

The next question is when the plantation has been a centrality of the community in which all people are forced to contribute their labour then how to improve their bargaining power against the excessive authority of plantation over lives of people?

## Power Mapping

In the rural context, the activity of power mapping consist of “assessing power within” encompassing the assessment of farmers group and plantation workers groups. The common issues identified then became the basis to initiate the formation of cross sector alliance. Another activity of power mapping was to identify what we refer as “power over”. At the practical level, “power over” refers to the authority, State and plantations.

## Method:

1. Participants are asked to group themselves based on their sectors to exercise power mapping
2. Participants have discussion to identify common interests



## ***Creating Democratic Space and Sustaining Cross Sectoral Alliance***

### **Objectives:**

1. Exploring strategy to consolidate groups
2. Exploring process to maintain the alliance

**Method:** Mapping power within and identify groups that can support the struggle of the alliance

### ***Examples of problems posed by each sector***

#### **Sectoral based issues**

#### **Plantation Workers**

1. Nonexistence of Freedom of Association
2. Underpayment — wages only cover 40-60% of their basic needs
3. Casualization of workforce
4. Family labour — workload is allocated on the basis of the household but only the husband gets the wage. Due to the traditional notion of gender, the work of wives, who assist their husbands to meet the target during harvesting season, is unpaid
5. Occupational accidents and diseases due to the application of agrochemical and hazardous working tools
6. “Socializing of the production cost” obliges the casual workers to equip themselves with working equipment

#### ***Organizing Strategy***

Organizing is carried out in a secretive manner. Activities conducted are discussions on labour law and workers’ basic rights. Once the group is strong enough, then bargaining strategy will be formulated as the next step. Women workers group is set up to encourage women to be active in the discussions and also to discuss women’s issues in the plantation such as reproductive rights.

## **Small-scale Farmers**

1. Unparalleled cultivation pattern. The farming method is forced to be changed since more land is used for plantation. Shortage of irrigation water, as most of the available water is used by plantations.
2. Declining production of arable crops which threaten food security
3. The massive application of pesticide contaminates agricultural land
4. The waste from the milling/processing factory contaminates rice fields
5. Proliferation of insects due to monoculture system
6. Land grabbing



## ***Organizing Strategy***

Setting up farmers' groups which act as sharing platforms. Exchanging information on the production process, for eg., the manner in which to tackle the issue of fertilizer shortage. The group also encourages the involvement of farmers in public fora held in villages to voice their interests.

## **Landless peasants and informal economy workers**

1. Landless peasants are absorbed into informal work in the plantation. As a result, they become unprotected casual workers



2. Food hawkers complain about the increasing price of food as their customers are mostly workers and low income villagers
3. Plantation has strictly prohibited villagers to collect the usable waste such as the midrib of palm oil leaves. Many villagers use the midrib to produce brooms. They produce it in small scale home based industry
4. Many women, due to land grabbing and scarcity of employment, work as domestic workers in foreign countries

### **Organizing Strategy**

Landless peasants are involved in the farmer groups.

### **Initiating Cross Sectoral Alliance**

*“During the land clearing, the foreman instructed us to destroy the peasants’ crops. If you ask whether I still have my conscience then the answer is yes. Yet, I do not have any choice. Before, there was a road established during Japanese occupation connecting some villages. Then the plantation blocked that road. People then spontaneously demolished the blockade. Then the police came and arrested many people. Again, this upset me so much. And where was the government? Why didn’t they do something about this situation? Why did they let us divided and suffer?”*

*In my opinion, if (plantation) workers want to fight for their rights then they must organize other workers. The same thing applies to peasants and other communities. Then if here, in this meeting, we commit to fight together then workers must support peasants and vice versa...*

*We need to build up a communication and expand workers - farmers network.*

*Basically we (workers and peasants) share common problems; those of the impoverished and the oppressed*

### **Discussion:**

How to build strategies based on the problems above.

## **DOCUMENTING ORGANIZING AND STRUGGLES**

For us to document our organizing process and struggles, we need to be able to write. Writing is not all that difficult; it is basically putting our thoughts and words on paper.

*What does it take to become a writer?*

### **Critical Thinking**

To put our thoughts onto paper, we need to be first able to think. And because we are involved in organizing and struggling, we need to question a number of things – government policies, corporate greed. What we need to do therefore, is to think and question. This is what is called Critical Thinking.

Critical thinking is not something fancy. We might have done it all the time. In a simple way, to be critical is never stopping questioning. As we know, organizers are people with critical consciousness. When we start questioning, then we start being critical.

Here are some examples of us having critical thinking

- We questioned management because of bad working conditions.
- We have argument in village meeting.
- We question why our friends have occupational accidents.
- We insist that local MPs hear us because many employers still pay workers less than the minimum wage.
- When our friend passed away, we went to the management to make sure that the family could be compensated.
- In a very difficult circumstance to build an independent union, we set up a committee - union embryo. Through the committee, we decide on strategies to persuade workers to join us.

Those are examples of us having critical thinking. When we do our organizing work, we

rely on our instinct. We do not read any books to organize workers yet we force ourselves to have reason, justification, argument and explanation in organizing.

Example:

- Why do I want to write about my life as a plantation worker?  
I write about my life and working condition because it is still the core issue in our organizing work.
- Why do we learn to write?  
We learn to write because we can share our stories.

Every minute, we actually have to make decision for ourselves. We have to decide what to do, how to do it, why I choose this over that etc. What we do not realize is that we always try to figure out reasons and justification to do many things in this life.

## **Reason and Justification in Critical Thinking**

***Why are you eating? I am eating because I am hungry***

The answer to that question is our reason for eating. We do something for a reason. It is the same thing we do in writing. We also have purpose in writing something. It is to communicate our thoughts and ideas; to convey a message.

## **Identify your Readers**

***How to identify our readers?***

We write for adults. Who are these adults? They are workers, people living in surrounding communities, and unidentified mass (this is our target when we distribute flyers in public transportation, market and street just like what we usually do one week before May Day or whenever we have strike).

**Some Clues About Our Dear Readers:**

Our readers are workers who if they are lucky then they can work “only” eight hours a day to earn the minimum wage. Most of them must work more than eight hours, even 15 hours per day just to earn minimum wage especially piece-rate workers. When they go home, their minds are preoccupied with how to survive on their wages while the prices of basic needs keep going up. We are lucky if they spare their 5-10 minutes to read what we write.

**But DON'T WORRY!!!**

We have tricks to make them read what we write. Remember always the principle of adult critical education: organizing and educating are two inseparable actions. Writing as part of organizing work requires writer to be creative in finding writing topic. Our readers **ONLY** want to read something **CLOSELY CONNECTED TO THEIR REALITY**. That's the principle of adult critical education, how to educate people and create awareness about their reality, improve their spontaneous actions into critical ones.

***What do we do after identifying our readers?***

Since we write for adults as we have identified above, then we must understand the principle of writing for that type of readers. If we want to be read, then we must feed our readers something they want or need to know.

We need to find the most appealing issue, feed our readers with useful information and elicit feedback from readers.

Examples:

- In plantation industry where most of the workers are women, one of the issues that we can start with is reproductive rights.
- For workers working during the harvesting season, the issue of unpaid family workers can be taken up.
- Contract system is the one issue which will have appeal with most workers, as it affects them directly

Our writing is not an intellectual exercise so we do not have to be intimidated by the fact

that we cannot afford to read books, browse internet and buy good magazines. All we need to do are to dig out workers' problems and share our experiences so that they can be applicable to other workers. In doing this, we must find something catchy, an appealing issue that encourages them to read.

As organizers we are obliged to be responsible for any information that we share with workers. We can have a reading group activity. This reading group activity can be conducted during lunch time at factory or at homes of workers. In this activity, organizers can elicit feedback from workers about any kind of information or reading materials that have been shared with them. Writers, organizers in this context, are also responsible for explaining or clarifying information that can't be understood by workers.

These tools can be used to document our struggles and strategies and reach many workers.