

Absallom Retto: Investing for the Future

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Most indigenous peoples are dependent on their access to lands, territories and natural resources, particularly where they still engage in traditional livelihood strategies, such as pastoralism, hunting and gathering and rotational agriculture. Absallom Retto from Muara Tami District, Papua, was no difference. As a dedicated farmer for almost 25 years, his lands are his whole life.

Only a year ago, however, he was only able to harvest his 1.5 hectares watermelon farm four-five times a year. For each harvest, he only earned Rp 500 thousands, or equal to Rp. 2 – 2.5 million per year. Yet, this year, his fortune has changed and his earning has drastically jumped. Up to end of October, he has experienced 11 harvest times, earning a total of Rp 31 million.

Retto exclaimed that it is really beyond his expectation. "My life has been changed since I have been appointed as one of the ILO's facilitators for my district, Muara Tami. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to join agricultural production trainings conducted by the ILO," he said.

Before, he farmed his land traditionally by planting various agricultural commodities without any proper farming methods. "I also never tended my land. After planting the seeds, following the traditional customs, I leaved my land for two months. I just came to harvest and as you can imagine, the results are not satisfactory," he said.

From these series of trainings, he received various basic skills training on improved production techniques, covering such aspects as proper agricultural techniques, pest control, fermentation, and the use of certified seeds. "What I learnt the most is that you cannot mix the seeds and you have to tend your land regularly. Just like any other profession, you have to go to work every day. If you are a farmer, you have to tend your land every day. The changes that I have made are only as simple as that and the yields are incredible," he stated.

He also joined the ILO's entrepreneurship training, gaining practical knowledge on how to invest his savings and to expand the farms. "I used to spend all my income and have no savings. Now, I am a different person. I always save my income and I even have opened saving accounts for each of my six children," he said proudly, adding that all of his children go to school and the first three children went to college.

Preparing for the future, he invested some of this year's earning. He bought a new motorcycle and a new land of 1.5 hectares. "It is a blessing but I have to be ready for the future," he said wisely. The motorcycle, he said, not only opened better access to the city and the market, but also saved him money since the transportation was prohibitively expensive.

To make the best use of facilities and equipments provided by the ILO, Retto has set-up a common system to ensure that the facilities and equipments could be utilized equally by everybody in the area. "I have developed a rental system, and some of the rental fees will be saved to maintain and expand the equipments," explained Retto, who is also the Head of Farmers Group in Muara Tami with 24 group members. The equipments, consisting of a hand-tractor, a water pump, chain saws and grass cutters, are now nicely restored in storage, right next to the meeting hall—built by the local community itself with support from the ILO PIPE Project.

Learning from his success, other farmers have followed his steps. "I love sharing my knowledge and success. I keep telling others that they have to diligently tend their farms. No matter how busy you are with the church or other activities, you have to maintain your farm everyday. We just have to work hard to earn more," Retto said.

Not only to local farmers, he also shared his teaching skills to local children. When he learnt that some of third grade children were still illiterate, he could not let it happen. "They are the next generation. What kinds of lives they will be living on if they are not well-educated," he said. Every day, after farming, he spends his time to teach children from the surrounding area the alphabets so that they can read properly. "Knowledge is power, and I am the living example," he added.