

Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Papua GET Ahead

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Despite being one of the richest regions in Indonesia, 41.8 per cent of the population in Papua is living below the poverty line. Many of them are indigenous Papuans who constitute two-thirds of the region's population of 2.3 million. With their traditionally low status in society, indigenous women are the most affected by poverty and underdevelopment. Gita F. Lingga, Communications Officer in the ILO Office in Jakarta, reports about a recent ILO project which trained hundreds of indigenous Papuans, mostly women, in basic entrepreneurship skills.

Like many other women who live in a patriarchal society, the indigenous women of Papua do not have many opportunities to take part in the development process. Their traditionally low status in the tribal hierarchy and poor education make them second-class members of society who have to occupy themselves with food and children, and serve their husbands.

While some indigenous women have engaged in agricultural business, their poor educational levels hinder them from improving their businesses and generating income. Most women, for example, do not even know the value of the vegetables they sell from their gardens and are thus unable to set reasonable prices.

As part of a poverty reduction programme in Papua, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the ILO have implemented the Entrepreneurship Skills Development (ESD) programme with specific attention to women in the three regencies of Jayawijaya, Lani Jaya and Yahukimo in the Papua highlands, one of the poorest regions in Papua. The project aimed to develop community entrepreneurship skills, primarily among indigenous Papuan women.

Why women? "Because women are very productive. They are at the core of the family's economic livelihood in the Papua highlands," explains Tauvik Muhamad, the ILO Programme Officer responsible.

Between January 2009 and September 2010 the project trained hundreds of indigenous people in basic entrepreneurship skills using the principles of the ILO's training package Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead). The GET Ahead module not only focuses on administration, finance and marketing, but also gives women a voice.

Indigenous women empowered for the first time

"We can see major changes in this respect," confirms Christian Sohilait, Head of the Provincial Planning and Development Agency of Lani Jaya. "Anyone in the region can now hear women talk about how they knit wool using machines. Women from the Papuan highlands living in a patriarchal society have been empowered for the first time."

Progress can be seen in many places. In Jayawijaya, for example, women increasingly engage in paid business activities. They are breaking the traditional barriers, and as Wempi Wetipo, Head of Jayawijaya regency, puts it, people have started "to change their mindset in order to make a better living".

This is confirmed by Serlina Wenda, a coffee-milling entrepreneur: "The programme not only gave me the necessary knowledge, but also a chance to expand my business by helping me with a loan and giving me access to the financial system."

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Before her business took off, Serlina was constantly frustrated by not being able to fulfil her family’s basic needs. She has to feed a large number of dependants, including her husband, grandmother, sister and six children. She still remembers her long journey to becoming a successful entrepreneur: “Every day, I went to see my new neighbours. I told them that I wanted to start a coffee business, but I did not know how to go about it. They only told me that they pitied me.”

Yulia Waliho, a honeybee entrepreneur in Lani Jaya, has also become a different person. Today, she is more confident in her ability to run her enterprise as she gained the financial and management skills needed to advance her business.

Before getting into the honey business, Yulia experienced many ups and downs in her entrepreneurial activities. She used to run a small stall, selling candy, soap, cooking oil, and so on. However, few buyers paid in cash and her business went bankrupt. She tried to reopen the same business but it only lasted for three weeks. Now, Yulia is able to meet her family’s daily needs. She was even able to save some money, not only for her children’s education but also for her own. “I went back to college, continuing my studies and I graduated,” she says, her eyes shining.

Significant achievements

Given the challenges and gender inequality that exist in the central highlands of Papua, the project has made significant achievements. With some 625 entrepreneurs trained, the number of target beneficiaries exceeded the original plan, which was to reach 250 people. The training programme has also successfully met the gender-specific targets, as 70 per cent of participants (437) were women, while 137 people were trained as trainers.

“To ensure sustainability, the project provided hands-on entrepreneurship training, with special attention to marketing and coaching both for new entrepreneurs and for relevant NGOs, including Yasumat and Ekonomus, which serve as business development service providers,” explains Tauvik, adding that the independent evaluator found that the project is relevant to community needs and interests and fits within current government priorities.

Women like Serlina and Yulia can only confirm this. “I am grateful for this programme – it was really helpful,” concludes Serlina, recalling an old local proverb: *Nyeki Awa Loh Halok, Nyape Awalok Hat* (If the hand does nothing, the mouth will not be chewing).