



The Challenge of Adaptation

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I was given the opportunity to participate in the 2016 ProSPER.Net Leadership Programme, held in Labuan and Sabah, Malaysia from 7-14 August, 2016. Throughout the programme, we had a number of fieldwork visits that addressed different challenges, including housing and urban poverty, small-scale tourism, waste management, flood management, and other. When we visited the different villages, we saw different situations and different challenges that were hindering people's well-being. However, one common problem that I personally observed was the challenge of *"behavioral adaptation"*.

Our visit to the village Bankalalak made me further consider the importance of changing people's attitudes and behaviors. Bankalalak village, a small village in Beaufort, Sabah, faces serious flood issues every year since its founding 60 years ago. It has a population of around 500 and more than 380 people of the village are affected by the yearly flooding. The majority of the population relies on farming (especially the oil palm industry) as their primary source of income. The flood level reaches the windows of the houses and the flood conditions could last up to 2-3 weeks or even a month. During the flood, the villagers' income source gets disrupted and they have to rely on the government's one time support of 500 MYR to replace this lost income. However, the government fails to regularly provide the subsidy, as promised. The Chinese community of Beaufort helps the people in this village and actually their support often comes faster than government support. In order to protect themselves from floods, many of the families have lifted their houses using a type of native hard wood that is water resistant. This is one of many actions that community has taken to adapt to the effects of natural disasters – but are these enough?



Photo 1: Bankalalak Village, Aug 12, 2016

In my view, these types of support are only one-off solutions and do not tackle the root of the problem. No matter the number of preventative actions taken, there is no way to fully prevent a flood disaster – only to minimize its risk before it strikes. As the years pass by, the frequency and the duration of the floods are gradually increasing along with the population of the village. Therefore, the best solution for their families’ safety and well-being is to resettle to another land. They have tried to discuss this issue with the government a long time ago, but the issue was kept silent and no practical actions were taken. Some of the villagers are willing to resettle if the government supports them, whereas some of them do not want to leave their land due to reluctance to leave their homes. These people are afraid of losing their land, businesses, homes, friends and neighbors. But by continuing to live and accept this situation, they are also risking the education, safety, health and well-being of their children and families.

People adapt – they get used to their environment and their lifestyle. They can live in places that might seem very harsh to us. Different communities around the world practice a variety of different lifestyles. One of the reasons for this is because of the very different environments and climates in which people live. So people must adapt to their environment and climate, in order to survive. But, could “behavioral adaptation” restrict people from having a better life when other options are available? By adapting to your environment and situation, you may lose your will and hope to strive for a brighter future not only for yourself, but the family and friends

surrounding you. I wondered if this situation could be happening not only in Bankalalak village, but in many other communities as well.

A similar situation was observed in Ranca Ranca Laut, a small fisherman village that faces critical domestic waste management issues. Looking at the large amount of waste that was accumulated throughout the village, the first thing that came to my mind was to blame the irresponsibility of the government or private contractors. However, after talking to and interviewing a couple of villagers, I realized that the main issue came with the resident's adaptation to their environment and situation. The villagers seemed to be "okay" with living in such condition.



Photo 2: Ranca Ranca Laut Village, Aug 9, 2016

Adaptation is critical since we are facing the challenge of mitigating climate change effects and natural disasters. However, we may need to distinguish necessary adaptation from "behavioral adaptation", which may limit people in their aspirations for better lives. A mega clean-up of Ranca Ranca Laut might be easy, but changing the villagers' attitude and awareness towards littering might be a bigger challenge that the government should focus. However, we can not only wait for the government to come and help to resolve the problem. We, communities and local leaders, have to act and advocate for mindset changes throughout our communities for a better future.