

Promoting Work-life Balance for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Context of ASEAN Integration

Proceedings from the Rural Ambition Track

1st BREAKOUT SESSION: STEPPING UP

Revitalising the Rural Economy

The first breakout session set the context of the Rural ambition track. In this session, the speakers spoke about how rural men and women struggle to find a work-life balance. A number of reports have found that the pressures on the rural population are increasing, with women showing some of the worst effects.

Speaker: Ms. San Sophany

Ms. San Sophany, representing the Cambodian Organization for Research, Development and Education (CORDE), shared her research on the difference between gender roles in the fishing and fish processing industry on the floating villages around Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia. These villages were in Pursat and Battambang provinces.

She has previously conducted studies on street vendors in an informal economy; primary research and gender analysis on teenage pregnancy in Banna district, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand; and research on Myanmar migrant workers' rights at Mahachai, Samut Sakhon, Thailand.

The fisherfolk in the floating villages have learned to use ICT to have a larger customer base. The leaders of the groups were trained to teach others to use mobile phones to reach customers and negotiate directly for higher prices instead of going through middlemen. Some families due to direct negotiations were able to save money and send their children to school.

Since they do not have a cold storage system to collectively keep unsold catch, they were at the mercy of buyers. As well, fisherfolk were not able to expand their business by storing fish to be processed during the off-season. Thus, capacity building to manage collective work,

building unity, and reducing competition were an important aspect to be developed. Women and men needed to be trained on how to work collectively to gain more bargaining power.

Speaker: Ms. Nguyen Thi Thai Binh

Ms. Nguyen Thi Thai Binh spoke about her experience to build and implement sustainable projects. After qualifying with a Bachelor of International Relation Economics from the College of Economics and Laws from Ho Chi Minh National University, she struggled to achieve work-life balance with jobs in the city.

She found urban living challenging with the daily struggles with heavy traffic and work pressure. She founded One4One Co. Ltd. to initiate and implement sustainable livelihood projects. They offered consultancy services and ran corporate social responsibility programs for other corporations.

Urbanization, she felt, has led to farmers and educated youth rushing to cities to seek better opportunities in life. Urbanization caused many elders and children to be inadvertently abandoned by young parents working in the cities. One4one then focused on creating jobs in rural areas to prevent migration of the youth to the city. Through its programme, One4One invites young, educated labour force back to their hometowns and develop specialized products peculiar to the province—one that utilizes local resources to reduce rural poverty. In this way, it can conserve local goods and produce safe green products.

They help underdeveloped families; engage inhabitants according to their skills/ talents e.g. web design. They trained the youth and rural families through workshops to develop good designing skills. She shared that One4One builds value on simplicity to enhance the beauty of a simple way of life and harmony with its surrounding environment.

Speaker: Mr. Thongdam Phongphichith

Mr. Thongdam Phongphichith shared his experience as Co-Director of Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA) in Lao PDR. He has been working in

the field of food security and is active in the regional and national networks of community partnership for effective development.

His joy working in SAEDA comes from the support extended to vulnerable communities by promoting sustainable agriculture practices, and improving their capacity and awareness to safeguard the environment. The focus is on three main areas of intervention: Sustainable agriculture, chemical pesticide risk reduction, and biodiversity conservation.

By spreading good practices on sustainable agriculture practices and using appropriate technologies to improve productivity, health, and income, it is then possible to develop the capacity of farmers and support farmer to farmer extension and link them to fair markets.

The farmers were also trained to do bio-composting to ensure that their food is safe. He has worked with hill tribes to start new home gardens. The people voluntarily shared their seeds with non-members as well, so that the entire village could start home gardens. Women were especially interested in these gardens. It empowered the women economically.

Speaker: Ms. Joot Lo

Ms. Joot Lo shared the vision and objective of her company, Cocolatini, which makes coconut wine. She spoke about the journey of Cocolatini to innovate the product and branding. As coconut trees are available all over Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, this business can create job opportunities and provide value-added knowledge to the rural population, especially women who stand to gain from this opportunity economically.

She spoke of his search for global partnership and investors for the development of this business. She believes that coconut wine can be of high value in ASEAN and can contribute to eradicating extreme poverty by providing job opportunities.

Cocolatini is also environment-friendly as it treats all wastes with care. These waste materials are turned into fertilizers, pesticides, and repellents for insects and rodents. It also enables severely affected plants to fight diseases and recuperate. The company also promotes a gender equality policy by engaging more women in the business.

2nd BREAKOUT SESSION: LOCKING IN

Back to Basics: Caring for a common good

Drawing on detailed interviews with mothers and fathers from different social, economic and occupational backgrounds, this session investigates how families living in rural areas are combining paid work with raising children.

Speaker: Ms. Rita Mustikasari

Ms. Rita Mustikasari spoke of her love for rural life. Though born in Jakarta, she spent her childhood with her grandparents in a small village in West Java. She currently lives in the village of Prambanan.

She has dedicated herself to fighting against illegal logging. She started a unique business, Martani, which belonged to an NGO, KRKP (People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty). It aims to use economic instruments to increase the farmers' sovereignty. The strategy was to build a strong market for the healthy organic food produced by their farmers. They began small and hoped to build it up slowly city-by-city.

She hopes that she can economically empower women in the informal sector to set up organic food warung (stall) and also store for food as well as create handicraft products beginning from Yogyakarta, Bogor, and Jakarta.

Speaker: Dr. Welyne Jeffrey Jehom

Dr. Welyne Jehom was driven to excel in the academic world to prove to her community that tertiary education is achievable for a woman despite limited resources. Her research in these recent years focused on challenges that hinder development in remote native regions. She spoke of the need to use local resources to develop the community from within without any external interference.

The video on the Iban Weavers of Rumah Gare was on the engagement of the community in one of the longhouses in Sarawak. It is a project about the production and marketing of the

traditional textile, pua kumbu. This beautiful textile was made by women from natural resources from the jungle.

Before the project, these women were able to weave pua kumbu but did not know how to market and get a fair price. This project assisted them to sell the textiles at a better price. The money was reinvested to train the youth to become weavers and preserve their culture. Now, there are regular workshops, and the project is being replicated to benefit other long houses. They also learned about the culture and stories behind the patterns.

The textile is now created into other beautiful products such as jackets, skirts, shoes, bags, and lampshades. These women are now able to get regular income.

Speaker: Mr. Arturo Alvarez

As the National Programme Director, for 'Let's Do It, Philippines' Mr. Arturo Alvarez spoke passionately about this nationwide civic-led mass movement to clean the entire country in one day during the World Clean Up Challenge on September 20, 2015. It mobilized five million Filipinos across the nation to unite and move the grassroots to action in combating illegally disposed solid waste. The movement started in Estonia in 2008 when 50,000 people gathered to clean up their entire country in just five hours. It is now an international movement with 113 countries working together, engaging over 11 million participants.

He spoke about the power of mass movement and how infectious it could be as it grows. The movement initially aimed at five percent of the entire population but through educational advocacy, it has grown from year to year. It is manifested in their green actions and provided economic value to those who practice it, but most of all it fosters community-based enterprise.

The activities included information, education, and communication campaigns to support RA 9003 or the Solid Waste Act, waste mapping, establishing ecology centers or Material Recovery Facilities and inventory of recyclers or junk shops, LGU and industry partners for solid waste collection for proper disposal and recycling/up-cycling.

There is much for the work-life balance movement to learn from this initiative on the strategies and management of a growing mobilization of people locally and internationally.

3rd BREAKOUT SESSION: THINKING OUT

Eyes on Change: Making Farming Sexy

Farmers will tell you they enjoy the lifestyle; they live right where they work, and they are at one with nature. Most farmers never want to retire, they are (or were) a central part of the community, and they get great satisfaction from high-quality production. But at the same time, it gets tough to balance the separate home and work spheres, and many have accepted hard work and long hours as part and parcel of life. This session examines the changing cultural norms and how farmers can also achieve work-life balance.

Speaker: Ms. Helen Gemma R.Vallejos

Ms. Helen Gemma R.Vallejos is the co-founder of Akyat Nueva Vizcaya, a civic group that worked with communities in Nueva Vizcaya, one of the provinces in the Philippines. Currently, she is the Social Program Director of AGREA (AGRICULTURE+GAEA [environment]), an agri-social enterprise that works on developing Marinduque as a replicable One-Island Economy Model.

She spoke about her passion and work-life balance. To her, work-life balance begins with herself integrating with her service with AGREA and the communities. There were, of course, many challenges along the journey. She advised the participants that when one thought about quitting, one should stop and reflect on the reason for starting the project in the first place. That would help rekindle the vision and give meaning to work and life.

Community building is about creating resilient communities in all aspects - economic, physical, social, emotional/spiritual, and intellectual. It will contribute to work-life balance for all its inhabitants.

She spoke passionately of AGREA's efforts to complement urban living with agriculture and being in touch with nature beginning with the soil and the earth. Green living can be encouraged through basic backyard farming. Workshops on core competencies for backyard farming are conducted to create city farmers.

“Being sexy is all about how one carries himself/herself with pride and dignity, and there is no greater pride and dignity than being part of an industry that feeds and nourishes people. Farming is definitely sexy,” she said.

Speaker: Ms. Salwati Mohd. Ariffin

Ms. Salwati Mohd Ariffin adopted the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a climate-smart, an agro-ecological methodology for increasing the productivity of rice. She innovated and fine-tuned the system over eight cropping. She used organic fertilizers and insect repellents. She helped local farmers to understand the principles of sustainable agriculture, applied it in accordance with their social, cultural, and environmental conditions. Together they built on best practices in farm management. She often organises workshops to build the capacity of local farmers to make compost creatively.

She collaborated with the Malaysian Agroecology Society (SRI-Mas) to set up Kumpulan Organik Kelantan (Organic Group of Kelantan, K.O.K). Using smartphone Apps, K.O.K. members stay in touch, share experiences and creative solutions to common problems they face in farming. This builds solidarity among the farmers and extends assistance to each other by strengthening the local tradition of cooperation and reciprocity or “gotong-royong”.

She also shared with them ways to reuse rice straw and husks to minimise labour, avoid pollution and enhance soil quality. This form of knowledge sharing enriches community life and in turn, empowers community members to sustain positive changes. Salwati’s work certainly contributed to the wellbeing of her family, community, and the environment.

Farming has helped her to touch many lives. Salwati lives a meaningful life, and her work lets her share her knowledge on sustainable agriculture with other farmers as well as researchers. She hopes that by making the farm safe, she can bring children to the field to let them see, smell, touch, and care for the plants that feed them. She created a program for children called ‘Smart Farmers.’ She also encouraged city folks to be weekend farmers. Salwati’s dream is to preserve nature through organic farming - by growing food that does not rob the soil of its vitality producing food that nourishes body and mind.

Speaker: Anukool Saibejra

Mr. Anukool Saibejra shared the concern in Thailand where the population increased to 70 million, but the number of agriculturists decreased to 3.5 million, an alarming ratio of 1: 20. This led to the question of food security and the shrinking role of agriculture production in the economy. The small farmers were not directly benefiting from improved agricultural productivity and quality because of middlemen and corporations.

In response, Folk rice, an App, was developed to reduce the dependency of farmers on middlemen in Thailand. The farmers are connected to each other and the buyers of their produce by Folk chat. The farmers in the network can interact with each other using a smartphone for knowledge sharing.

Farmers shared with each other information and creative ways of overcoming common challenges including pest management. They consulted each other about the best time for planting and harvesting. They shared larger customer database so they can demand higher prices to maximize profits.

Through capacity workshops and online courses, farmers learned to manage accounts/sales by themselves. Their customers, too, can have direct access to information on the yield of the farmers. They will be able to know the type and varieties of rice as well as the methods the farmers use to produce rice. They can track and check all processes and information given by farmers to ensure the quality of the rice to be harvested.

Benefits for all customers resulted in fresh and good food available 24/7 through the online store; discount by application user; discount by farmers and agriculturists selling and buying their products.

4th BREAKOUT SESSION: BREAKING OUT

Harvesters of Life: Planting the Seeds of Change

We know that taking regular breaks is an important part of running any business or enjoyable, sustainable job. But for farmers, you live where you work and getting time off can be a challenge. Even when a farmer decides to do nothing, there are always more mouths to feed or repair jobs waiting for you or an entirely new task staring you in the face. In this session,

speakers share their experiences with farmers. Often the farmers would be great at looking after equipment and livestock, but not as good when it comes to their wellbeing.

Speaker: Ms. Lilla Raja

Ms. Lilla Raja is currently working as the managing director of Bario Development Corporation Sdn. Bhd. To her, work-life balance is integration between her and her family, community, and the environment, with work at the centre. This represents her work with the Kelabit community in the development of Bario.

Bario is rich with mountains, rivers, and the beautiful ecology of the jungle to be cared for as common good. Her role is to organize events that can bring the local community together with unity of spirit.

The Kelabit community is closely knit and live in communal harmony. Lilla spoke about the role of women passing down the culture and knowledge through generations. Happiness is a key to longevity as proven by her grandmother who is over 100 years old. Her mother, who is her role model, collects and preserves biodiversity through planting these seeds. She shared it generously with others to propagate these species.

Kelabit women were the keepers of tradition. Virtues that are high on the agenda for the Kelabit women do'o rema (generosity/ sacrifice/ hospitality) as are often incorporated into the lyrics of their songs. Another is do'o berian meaning being gracious.

The women also took pride in being do'o sikal, Do'o gai' (hardworking). It is the women who are mostly involved in paddy farming which requires tedious, backbreaking labour. Early in the morning, they rise to prepare the food for the day and again in the late evening to feed their families.

They have great endurance, travelling by foot or along the rivers to traditional sacred grounds or for ceremonies. Another sign of endurance is seen in the tattoos on the women. The darker tattoo is regarded as more beautiful and to get this effect, a woman has to endure the needle pricks many times. Another sign of beauty is the elongated ear lobes bearing heavy weights.

While women are the traditional keepers of tradition, they are also the most effective in planting the seeds of change. Educating the women has contributed to bringing about change in the community. It is an integration of modern facilities without sacrificing their traditions.

Bario is a model of this integration where ICT has enhanced their economic capabilities while enriching their culture. Initially, a community radio was set up. Bario now has a communication centre and Internet hub that links this remote community with the outside world. It gained access to information and knowledge as well as markets. The eBario Innovation Village won Malaysia its First Global Telecentre Award for Best Telecentre Innovation in 2013.

Sustainable livelihood to her is a local action for conservation, protection, and preservation of the environment coupled with global recognition.

Speaker: Mr. Matthias Gerber

Mr. Matthias Gerber was voted the ‘Greenest Person on the Planet’ in an online competition by 3rdWhale in Canada. He prefers to be known as Greenman.

He passionately shared his views that human beings cannot continue living at the expense of the planet’s natural ecosystems. Progress can still continue to be achieved but has to be through a more mindful approach towards consumption habits, lifestyles, and the way business is done. This will make the difference.

He advocated that human beings have to make a choice at this juncture to be agents of change. They can simply choose a pro-environmental way of living and working by taking one small action at a time.

He shared his experience living in Malaysia without a car and a monthly electricity bill of less than RM50. He connected with Malaysians who wanted to be change agents and together started [Eco Warriors Malaysia](#); a community movement focused on taking positive action to combat climate change. With the worsening traffic jams and increasingly dense concrete structures contributing to increasing heat and climate changes, he advocated a call for action. His suggestion is for Malaysians to make efforts to reduce electricity consumption by 10% of households. He called for living from healing the planet instead of destroying it.

5th BREAKOUT SESSION: CARRYING ON

Balancing Work Life in a Raging Climate

The session was chaired by Ms. Yasmin Rasyid, a marine biologist by profession and an environmentalist by passion. She was part of the “Forest for Water, Water for Life” project in which she heads the water quality research effort of the Selangor river basin. She analyzed the condition of the river based on land use patterns and provided reports, documentation, and recommendations to advocate for an integrated river basin management system.

Speaker: Ms. Salinee Tavarán

Ms. Salinee Tavarán, an engineer and social entrepreneur, is founder and CEO of SunSawang Co. She is among BBC's prestigious list of 100 Women of 2014. She discovered a sustainable way for rural people to access solar-powered electricity via a hybrid business module.

The change from a foundation to a company, at first, drew objections, but villagers softened to the idea when she explained that the Bt7,500 annual fee covered the equipment plus regular maintenance. For the equivalent of Bt200-300 a month on candles, a home could run three lights, a water pump, a rice cooker, and TV set. Those who could not afford that could opt for a solar-powered lantern that has a USB slot to charge a cell phone.

Salinee, who was also among three Asia-Pacific finalists for Cartier Women's Initiative Awards 2014, summed up a life lesson with this quotation:

"If you want to succeed in something, you don't always have to be good at it. You have to be patient with what you are trying to do and accept the consequences. If you fail, you have to admit the failure and learn from it to begin again."

Speaker: Dr. Benjamina Paula Gonzalez-Flor

Dr. Benjamina Paula Gonzalez-Flor's insights showed clearly her rich and insightful experiences working not only in the Philippines as an Associate Professor of the University of the Philippines Los Baños-College of Development Communication but the region as a team

leader in World Bank projects in Pakistan, Lao PDR, and the Philippines, and program coordinator of the AusAID-funded Philippines-Australia Short Term Training Program.

She told the participants of the suffering of the people in many recent disasters and calamities. The Philippines is one of the most vulnerable countries to disasters because it sits along a typhoon belt as well as Ring of Fire where many of the Earth's earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur. Coupled with its low coastlines elevation, it is prone to storm surge and tsunamis.

From her many research papers and academic studies, she presented the many challenges faced by Filipinos regarding low agricultural productivity, scarce water resources and crop losses due to typhoons or extreme weather conditions. These disasters with inadequate emergency responses and evacuation centers increase the incidence of poverty. This has led to increasing numbers of overseas Filipino workers.

In this regard, the Philippine Climate Change Adaptation Project (PhilCCAP) forwarded various adaptation strategies. Some of these strategies include Climate Smart Field School, decision support system, weather-index-based crop insurance as well as a protected area management plan. Monitoring and knowledge management system are both tacit and explicit measures against these challenges.

Some of the recommendations forwarded were to:

- Provide alternative livelihood for adult and children of farm households which can be done offline or online;
- Encourage the idea of eEntrepreneurship or offline transactions by nurturing local product development for distribution;
- The trade department to identify potential local products for possible IGP or packaging surplus fruits in season into energy bars readily stocked in well-equipped evacuation centres;
- For offices both public and private to consider telecommuting as an alternative delivery mode especially if work is output-based to save on water consumption, energy use, transportation cost, and time wasted for travelling to and from the workplace;

- For LGUs to establish mechanisms for home-based livelihood opportunities so that workers can work from home; train women farmers to engage in other livelihood or IGPs in the locality; provide cheap Internet access for business transactions.

Speaker: Ms. Sunitha Bisan

Ms. Sunitha Bisan shared her over 20 years of experience as a gender and development specialist. Her field is on integrating gender and community participation into issues of integrity, gender mainstreaming, and good governance.

She highlighted the work of WOCAN (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management). WOCAN is a women-led international membership network of women and men professionals. It provides expertise to assist agriculture and natural resource management organizations, which strengthen women's leadership and mainstream gender into their internal structures, programs, projects, and policies.

WOCAN recognizes the need to measure the impact of women's empowerment and to accelerate investments in women—, particularly women's groups—to address persistent gaps in their access to resources and capital, and thus scale up solutions to climate change, food security, and poverty. WOCAN has over ten years of experience partnering with women's groups and agriculture/environment organizations in 15 countries of Asia and Africa to build capacities and knowledge for gender integration and women's leadership. Its membership with expertise in technical issues of agriculture and natural resource management, as well as gender/women's empowerment, make it unique. Its partners include the Government of Norway, UN agencies and numerous International NGOs and foundations.

WOCAN and partners in women's empowerment and finance developed the W+ Standard and Units in 2013-2014. W+ Standard: W+ provides metrics for measuring women's empowerment within existing and new projects. This platform enables governments, companies, and individuals to achieve transparency and effectiveness using a results-based framework to ensure progress. It tracks women's empowerment in six areas: time, income/assets, health, leadership, education and food security.

One of the projects of WOCAN is the Biogas Digester Program in Nepal - measured and verified increase in women's discretionary time of 2.26 hours/day for 7200 women (over 11 million hours) who replaced their fuel wood generated stoves with those generated by biogas. Similarly, the Biogas Digester Program in Indonesia showed that over 16 million hours for women, thereby increasing their income and assets. The improved Cook-stove project in Honduras increased in women's discretionary time and health benefits.