



PADDY & CULTURAL REVIVAL





OVERVIEW

This publication shares conversations, reflections and highlights following Forever Sabah Institute's (FSI) Valley Immersion (VI) at the site of Forever Sabah's (FS) Projek Padi: Kg Tinuhan, Kg Lapasan, Kg Timbou & Kg Wangkod, Tenghilan on the 21st-23rd June 2022.

In the previous year 2021, Projek Padi hosted a VI on the 17th-19th February. Back then, Projek Padi only engaged with two villages that were Kg Tinuhan & Kg Lapasan.

Paddy being somewhat seasonal, and happening in two to three cycles per year, the project offers different activities when planned at various times of the year. Last year, participants experienced the end of rice making which involved harvesting using a

*sabit*¹ or *linggaman*², and processing the crop to yield rice grains. Continuing from last year, participants at this immersion got to experience the start of the paddy planting season and the process of planting rice, while living with community members to learn from them.

The programme focuses on issues of food sovereignty and livelihoods in connection with culture, customary landscapes and local economies, while grounding in the micro experience, imagining the big picture future, and seeing the complexity and potential therein.

1 Sabit refers to a crescent-shaped sickle, while linggaman is a small knife with a semi-circle blade held between the fingers to cut paddy stalks.

2 See above.

Acknowledgements

FS | Forever Sabah is a 25 year programme to support Sabah's transition to a diversified, equitable, circular economy. As a civil society entity, FS serves as a collaborative social movement rather than a bureaucracy or NGO. We are an initiative rooted in local aspirations, built by an enthusiastic team who believe we can make our state better by utilising Sabahan knowledge and experience and working with others and across sectors.

FSI | Forever Sabah Institute is an integral part of Forever Sabah (FS): the transition towards a diversified, equitable circular economy in the Malaysian Borneo state of Sabah. A significant suite of activities for FSI is "Forever Sabah Institute For Forever Sabah" (FSI4FS), under which FSI designs and offers learning activities for staff, teams and partners from the Forever Sabah web. Other programs are generated through formal and informal partnerships, requests or relevance for specific learning and offers of teaching/sharing.

While "Paddy & Cultural Revival" was an activity designed to connect the experiences, challenges and needs across the Forever Sabah web, we hope this publication can spark conversations, as well as inform larger discussions about sustainability, community and livelihoods.

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Projek Padi: Paddy & Cultural Revival

How Did We Get Here?

The Paddy & Cultural Revival Valley Immersion was designed for participants to deeply understand the landscape and communities within “Projek Padi”, a paddy revitalisation

themselves, while at the same time experiencing a day in their lives.

Over the past two years, Projek Padi has been engaging with the community under a grant



Project Coordinator Chiper giving a presentation on Projek Padi 2.0 and its background.

project within Forever Sabah’s ecology. The programme strived to allow participants the opportunity to get down on-the-ground and learn about paddy cultivation directly from farmers

from Yayasan Hasanah. The project started when Sabah was hit by the first wave of COVID-19. At that time, the government had instituted a food rationing policy—shopping markets were to limit the purchase

of rice to one 5kg bag per family. Access to basic food needs became a concern.

Communities longed for food security and sought to become self-sufficient in rice production, thus birthing the project. However, planting proved difficult to start as some have not worked the fields in years, while pests could easily attack crops, amongst other factors that affect harvest. Moreover, non-commercial paddy planting is community agriculture making yields typically low and only enough for the size of one family. Projek Padi began their engagement with only 43 families.

But the success from an initial run of the project

was unprecedented: the 43 families managed to yield 28 tonnes of rice from 34 heirloom varieties generating an average family income of RM8,485. Now, the team has increased their capacity and engagement to 118 families, growing a total of 45 paddy varieties.

As we trekked down to the fields, we were offered a guiding question: “What does rice mean to you?” Onwards, we expanded our knowledge and experienced the value of paddy planting as we communed, convened and connected with the lifelong paddy farmers who adopted us into their lives.

 **watch**

► **Get to Know Team**

Paddy:

<https://youtu.be/hrywuRladH4>

► **More on Projek Padi:**

https://youtu.be/6K7_998708U



Participants having a “gotong-royong”, or working together to clear the paddy fields for a new cycle of planting.

What does rice mean to you?

As children growing up in Sabah, we would learn from elders to finish our plate of rice “or the rice grains would cry.” Rice, pearl-like grains encased in golden packets grows from a grass looking plant. It is a primary source of food for Sabahans, and its significance is embedded in indigenous Kadazan-Dusun-Murut (KDM) culture, beliefs, spirituality and psyche. In the local creation myth, the story of Huminodun tells of the sacrifice of a young woman to make the once infertile lands fertile—her spirit transmuted to create the first grain of rice.

As we unpack the meaning of rice to us, we learned of the blood, sweat and sacrifices of the paddy farmers in Kg Tinuhan, Kg Lapasan, Kg Timbou and Kg Wangkod in tending to their fields. At the same time, we came to witness their ambition to expand Projek Padi as a way to improve livelihoods and the socio-economic conditions of their respective villages.

Rice farming is generational. Most of the residents within the four kampungs grew up as children of farmers, took

on the labour of their parents and inherited the knowledge and wisdom of paddy planting. Some have been disheartened by the loss of succession as younger generations move on to other professions, while others strived to continue learning and enhancing their skills in the art of planting paddy.

Being a part of the knowing process, some questions that emerged were:

- What are the challenges of paddy farmers in this day and age?
- What kind of lineages are lost if and when the younger generation stops traditional paddy planting? What kinds of succession take place?
- What does it mean to achieve food sovereignty as we depend more and more on food imports?

watch

- ▶ **Introduction & Intention**
Setting: <https://youtu.be/FmAzHFoL8SI>



During the Immersion, we watched a short film “*Petani Bukan Pemalas*” (“Farmers are not Lazy”) with the communities from the four *kampungs*. The film was screened as a resource to provide a national context on issues of food sovereignty.

Watch: [Petani Bukan Pemalas](https://youtu.be/FmAzHFoL8SI)

Colonisation, Rice and Food Sovereignty

Sabah has been importing rice from overseas beginning in the 1890s, shortly after the arrival of British colonialists. The import of rice was part of a colonial strategy to reduce local food production, such that native labour could be directed to other cash-making crops and agriculture.

Up until World War 2 (WW2), rice was imported from Southeast Asian countries including Thailand. By 2016, Sabah's rice self-sufficiency levels (SSL) had declined to 25% from 60% in the 1960s³, and will be in continual decline as Sabah and the larger Malaysia depend on other markets for rice.

Wars fought throughout the history of Sabah have directly put a dent on Sabah's food security. During World War I⁴, big shipping companies owned by Germany would not have shipped to the British colonies. Similarly, the British imposed trade sanctions on the Japanese during World War II⁵ as a wartime strategy becoming one of the factors of mass starvation in Sabah.

In present day, policy that allows, for example, Malaysia to broker trade agreements with India for Malaysia to import Indian rice in exchange for palm oil⁶ can be a huge profit-making success, except for every time there was a disaster.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ensued in 2020, Sabah was again left in the lurches of food insecurity even as rice is embedded in our social and cultural history. We could no longer be in charge of our own nutrition and nourishment.

All of the above is to say that the inability on our part to grow our own food is by design. Present-day food and agricultural system is a largely a by-product of colonial past that leaves us vulnerable to a diet of processed sugars and fat, such that Malaysia will continue to be the most obese country⁷ in Asia.

watch

- ▶ **History of Rice in Sabah by Dr Ken Wilson: <https://youtu.be/2E1StN2Hul4>**

³ Idris, Rafiq. (2018). Food Security in Sabah: An Overview for Rice Self Sufficient Target. Scholars Journal of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences (SJA VS). 5. 23-26. 10.21276/sjavs.2018.5.1.5.

⁴ See: Sea transport and supply; maritime warfare WW1 (1914–1918)

⁵ See: Embargoes and sanctions; Blockade of Germany WW2 (1939–1945)

⁶ *Malaysia signs record rice import deal with India: exporters - Reuters*

⁷ *In Asia's Fattest Country, Nutritionists Take Money From Food Giants - The New York Times*

Learning From Our Farmers

Participants were introduced to the farmers engaged with Projek Padi. Adopting a community organising perspective, Learning From Our Farmers was a series of activities to give participants space to experience the community's livelihood activities and learn at the same time.

We began to understand the paddy cultivation process including seed selection and germination, and prepared the fields for planting. With the intention

to have fun, participants were also required to pitch their talents and skills to become adopted into a farmer's household.

There was also a quest for participants to complete, which was to document their time with the community while answering a few stakeholder questions.



Community member Agang sharing her reflections regarding a recent Projek Padi workshop on community aspirations and goals for Projek Padi 3.0. Valley Immersion participants used content from the workshop to form discussions with other community members and to help Projek Padi formulate strategies for the next phase of their project.

Community Adoption Quest

1. Participants pitch their skills, talents and what they can offer to the community farmers, in exchange for accommodation.
2. The farming community gets to choose from the pool of participants who they want at their home, according to the space that they have.
3. As part of the quest, participants are given a list of questions that they'll have to ask their respective adopted families. The process involves documenting the interviews and putting together a short 3-5 minute film using their mobile phones. The guiding questions are:
 - When did you start planting paddy?
 - Where do you get the paddy seed?
 - Did you grow up eating the same rice?
 - What methods do you use to plant rice?
 - Are there government/ corporate incentives to planting rice?
 - How has your journey been so far with Projek Padi?
4. Participants are required to work with the farmers in the field, *gotong-royong*, or communal, style while learning about paddy planting.

Paddy Cultivation

Paddy planting is an involved process that begins with selecting and germinating the seeds, preparing the land and finally planting.

Seed Selection

The farmers learned to pick good grains from the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) methodology. The first step is to make a saltwater solution that can float a fresh egg. Then, a bag of seeds is poured into the solution. The seeds that float to the top are removed from the mix and the saltwater is drained. Rinse the remaining seeds to make it ready for sowing.

Land preparation begins with clearing last harvests' fields by pulling weeds, flattening the soil, and creating drainage and irrigation. At the same time, farmers are able to forage for wild edible plants that grow in and around the fields.

Land Preparation

Germination & Planting

Soil from below a bamboo tree is specifically used for paddy germination because of its fertile composition. Also, the loose and well-draining soil is better for growing roots and makes it easy to transplant the seedlings in the field after 10-15 days.

Paddy Planting Methods

We were introduced to three types of rice planting methods:

1

Monugal

It takes two to tango. In this method, the first person will poke holes on the ground using a tall, sharpened stick, while the second person is responsible for planting the paddy seedlings where the holes are. Sometimes the monugal can be a one-person job, although this takes much more time and energy.

2

Raraan

This method is specific to the paddy planting community in Tenghilan. As planting paddy can be strenuous on the lower back, the women paddy farmers cleverly thought to shape a bamboo stick like a fork to use as a tool. Carrying one-month old seedlings in a sling bag, the women would pick up the juvenile plants using the fork and plant it on the ground using a poke-and-push motion.

3

System of Rice Intensification (SRI)

Kivatu Nature Farm (KNF) introduced the SRI method to the community sometime at the start of Projek Padi in 2020. It uses less water and eliminates the need for pesticides and chemical fertilisers. However, the community has yet to widely practice this method since it is a more involved process.



Learn more about System of Rice Intensification (SRI):

- [The value chain of System of Rice Intensification \(SRI\) organic rice of rural farm in Kedah](#)
- [Kivatu Nature Farm by Siung Films](#)

watch

- ▶ Paddy Field Immersion: <https://youtu.be/aGsfX39mNSU>

Image to the left:
Participants experiencing paddy planting the “monugal” way.

Women and Paddy

As far as oral history can remember, women played a very important role in paddy fields, not just as farmers. Sharing intimate ties with and of the paddy fields, women were also cultural keepers and bearers of knowledge. Planting paddy was a ritual of communion as women sang songs, shared *sundait*⁸ and stories, and danced in the rice fields.

Each song and story passes from woman to woman, family to family, beginning with the first “woman of the paddy”, Huminodun. She sacrificed her body for her spirit became Bambarayon or Bambaazon. The spirit swayed with stalks of paddy to give birth to the first grain of rice. Meanwhile, Bambarayon whispered the knowledge of rituals to

the next female kin, the Bobohizan or high priestesses who were protectors and healers of the community. Thus, the perennial rice is also a symbol of birth and creation, the traditional domain of womanhood.

The women’s role because of paddy diminishes as paddy fields become slowly cleared away for development and/ or cash crops like palm oil plantations. When monocrops take over the landscape, it simultaneously blankets a woman’s status and the landscape’s ecological diversity—women, so connected with paddy, no longer share the same agricultural roles, nor importance as their forebears.

8 Sundait can be loosely translated as riddles in English. Culturally, sundait can only be shared during the time of paddy harvest because of the belief that the paddy field as a place inhabited by spirits. Sharing sundait outside of harvest time is considered bad luck and taboo.



*Image to the right:
Aunty Soima is a third generation paddy farmer. She inherited her paddy fields from her parents, and grandparents before that. She continues to use traditional methods to tend to her fields.*

Wagas Dati, Our Livelihoods

Our Rice, Our Livelihoods



Participants getting an overview of Projek Padi.

On the last day of our Immersion, we met with our host families and community members in a dialogue session to discuss the future of Projek Padi that's about to enter its third cycle. In the session, we discussed the vision and mission, goals, strategies and new terms of engagement for the project moving forward.

The conversations generated discussions about farmers' quality of life and a path toward building local resilient economies. Meanwhile, community members emphasised their aspirations to honour land, local knowledge, experiences, traditions and language, which they've come to view as becoming endangered.

Older community members struggle with the absence of youth involvement in paddy planting activities as youths leave their homes for opportunities elsewhere.

Soimah, in her 50s, said that her children are no longer interested in carrying on paddy planting.

Meanwhile, Junita, in her 50s, takes care of her 6-month-old grandchild while her own daughter works abroad. Some younger men leave their wives for weeks or months at a time while they earn a living outside the villages. Economic migration, driven by a lack of sustainable socio-economic opportunities, separates families and displaces community members from culture and traditions. The question of succession becomes ever more urgent.

Aldenny, who's also village chief, grounded our discussions back to kampung reality. While participants at the Immersion had lofty expectations for Projek Padi 3.0, Aldenny said the work

is unlikely to materialise in the hands of community members that lack the capacity and training. “The work that you propose may seem feasible to university graduates, but not us,” said Aldenny.

The conversations we had with the community members fed us with insight and much food for thought as we circled around ideas for Projek Padi 3.0.

watch

► **Projek Padi Roadmap Review:**

<https://youtu.be/O541IveE7ys>

► **Projek Padi 3.0 Marketplace:**

<https://youtu.be/SXkccpVSQvo>



Kg Tinuhan Village Chief Uncle Aldenny sharing his experience.

Susuyon Mantad Karanahan Stories from the Paddy Fields



Community members and participants engaged in a “Watch” session.

From the Community Quest, we compiled video recordings and interviews of our time with the community members and made it into a short film. The interview process gave participants the

opportunity to expand on their adoption experience and get to know their foster families on a deeper level, through the lens of storytelling.

The anthology was a chorus of different voices

and revealed intimate perspectives of life within Kg Tinuhan, Kg Wangkod, Kg Lapasan and Kg Timbou, with clips of their day-to-day activities interspersed with thoughts and insights from the communities regarding their livelihoods, struggles, and future possibilities.

The film was screened back to the community as *Susuyan Mantad Karanahan*, or “Stories from the Paddy Field.”

watch

► **Watch the film:** <https://youtu.be/o1d0FMjicQM>

Seeing From a New Perspective



At the end of the Immersion, we collected some final thoughts by asking ourselves:

After the Valley Immersion, what does rice mean to you? Have you any changes in thought?

Rice is something valuable and priceless. Speaking from the community's perspective, rice is both a source of food and income. Personally, I want to explore the deeper meaning of rice, so much that I have joined this year's paddy planting season. I became excited because I went back to a time in childhood when I got to witness the vast fields of golden paddy.

[Nasi itu] sesuatu yang berharga dan bernilai. Dari sudut pandangan saya untuk masyarakat, nasi sebagai sumber makanan utama dan sumber pendapatan. Bagi diri saya sendiri pula, saya ingin mendalami lagi erti dan nilai nasi itu sehingga saya sendiri turut serta dalam menanam padi pada tahun ini. Keterujaan kembali pada saat saya masih kanak-kanak apabila melihat sawah padi yg terbentang luas penuh dengan keemasan padi.

— Joe Nick Fradeo, Projek Padi

After joining this Valley Immersion, rice to me is like a lifeline that continues without an end. Even though rice is not my daily source of income, yet without rice life seems to have no meaning. It is with rice that we learn the meaning of blood, sweat and tears, and love from the farmers.

Selepas mengikuti Valley Immersion baru-baru ini, maksud beras yang saya dapat adalah beras umpama penerus kehidupan yg tiada penamat. Walaupun beras bukan punca pendapatan sehari-harian, namun tanpa beras tiada makna dalam kehidupan. Dengan adanya beras, di sanalah kita mengenal erti penat lelah, erti kasih sayang yang sebenar dengan hasil titik peluh petani.

— Agang, Projek Padi

“Rice is... in one word, ‘life.’ ‘Life’ not just for humans, but shared with other more-than-human beings in this world.”

“[Nasi] dengan satu perkataan... ‘kehidupan.’ Kehidupan bukan untuk manusia sahaja, maka berkongsi kehidupan dengan makhluk lain di alam ini.

— Aldenny, Kg Tinuhan

“Staying with the community gave me the opportunity to get to know and understand deeply what it means to be a farmer in a particular area. All other activities [during the Immersion] became smooth sailing after we began to trust each other.”

“Aktiviti seperti stay bersama keluarga angkat dapat memberi peluang untuk mengenali dan mendalami kehidupan sebenar petani di sesuatu kawasan. Bila kita sudah kenal dan rapat, maka segala aktiviti projek mendapat sambutan dengan baik.”

— Chiper, Projek Padi

Seeing the overall process of harvesting rice from the fields, to the processing of the grains, and even learning about composting. It made clear to me that it takes a collaborative effort from different groups of people to produce rice.

This has completely changed the way I see rice (especially the kind you find in supermarkets).

Having the opportunity to stay with a family who grows their own rice, while also taking part in the traditional (and more sustainable) ways of processing rice has given me a new found appreciation towards all the communities who are involved.

In a time where we import most of our rice from outside countries, I strongly believe that the work these rice farmers are putting in will play an important role in the future of food security for our communities.

— Jan, Third Rice Culture Media





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