

Stories from the Field



“We can’t wait to go into full production. After nine years of trying I may get to make my living out of seaweed after all.”

- *Lukas, seaweed farmer*



Lukas Piran says the intervention has given him new hopes of making his living out of seaweed. (Photo: PRISMA/Nina FitzSimons)

Green Gold

Support to seaweed farmers in Flores expected to increase incomes

Lukas Puri Piran, a 41 year-old seaweed farmer from the Halakodanuan village in Flores Timur talks enthusiastically as he and members of his farmer group, *Bintang Laut*, attach seaweed cuttings to a long line.

“It’s been a while since we’ve been enthusiastic about seaweed cultivation,” admits Lukas, “but after I was invited to attend a series of Training of Trainer (ToT) workshops in Larantuka we have new hope for our business.”

Lukas is one of 58 farmers from 26 villages in Flores Timur to receive a series of ToT workshops in seaweed cultivation facilitated by the international non-government organisation (NGO) Mercy Corps.

“We’ve actually been cultivating seaweed in our village since 2006 after receiving a government grant,” explains Lukas. “Seaweed farming was getting big in Indonesia at that time and the district government was keen to support it. But after the first harvest we discovered there were no buyers for our crop in Larantuka nor from other areas because of transport costs.

There was also no technical support in cultivation methods and after the first crop we were never successful

at growing any of the cuttings on a commercial scale again.”

A similar story is told by Muhamad Nur Hidayat, a 45 year-old farmer from the Wai Bao village of the same district. “We still have dried seaweed from 3 years ago that we can’t sell because there are no collectors,” says Nur. “We can actually produce 2,500 kg of seaweed a month but what’s the use if we just end up feeding it to the pigs?”

Both farmers are members of farmer groups that previously sold their seaweed crops to a collector from Maumere. “The problem was the collector was actually a doctor who got into seaweed as an additional income,” explains Nur, “and when he was transferred from NTT to a hospital on a different island he stopped his seaweed business and our access to the market vanished. Now we have to rely on income from our other crops.”

Most households in Flores Timur are multi-crop farmers. Both Nur and Lukas grow dryland rice and corn but their main income is from cashew nuts. “I only have 50 cashew trees,” says Lukas, “whereas other farmers have up to 400 trees. This is because when we were relocated to Halakodanuan village after the eruption of Mount Mandiri 25 years ago, my focus



Nur Hidayat with the new net and pipe technology
(Photo: PRISMA/Nina FitzSimons)

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- Lukas, seaweed farmer

was on seaweed. In my twenties I even went to Makassar to work in a factory, making seaweed crackers and came back to the village in the late '90s to start my own seaweed cultivation.”

Lukas is not a rich man. He says that the rice and corn he grows is only enough to feed his family and he gets roughly Rp 7,5 million (approximately \$750) a year from his cashew crop. “Seaweed is actually more profitable than my other farming enterprises,” says Lukas. “But the key is having a commercial market to sell it to. That’s not something we gave much thought to when we started the seaweed business.”

This is what Mercy Corps, with support from PRISMA, is looking to address using a Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) approach. This approach is based on the premise that the poor are dependent on the market system for their livelihood. In instances such as this, the lack of access to the market can be identified and changes made to improve the chain from farmer to the buyers, guaranteeing the income of the farmers.

Mercy Corps has partnered with a seaweed processing and export company, CV Evadian (Evadian) based in Makassar. The company has agreed to invest in a Seaweed Support Centre (SSC) which will be built in Halakodanuan village.

“The SSC will service four districts in Flores,” explains Bambang Witjaksana, the Mercy Corps representative. “The SSC will provide a nursery centre, post-harvesting facilities and a warehouse. Evadian will be training a number of farmers, including Lukas and Nur, to become seaweed collectors.

“The seaweed collectors will source and dry the seaweed from neighbouring villages. Based on training they receive from Evadian they will also propagate and sell quality seedlings to other farmers in the area and pass on technical information on good seaweed cultivation practices.”

“We already know so much more than we previously did after attending the ToT in Larantuka,” enthuses Lukas. “My group Bintang Laut pooled together some funds and bought one sack (25 kg) of good cuttings from Pak Nur’s group in Tanjung Bunga district in November 2014. This was enough to successfully distribute enough seedlings to sell to the four other farmer groups in our village.”

The five farmer groups in Halakodanuan village will continue with their cutting propagation for another 2 months by which time they estimate they will have sufficient cuttings to produce 20 tonnes for fresh seaweed. “Because seaweed has a 45-day growth cycle, we anticipate that we can supply commercial quantities of seaweed to CV Evadian in a few months’ time,” exclaims Lukas. “In the meantime we are now selling up to 5 sacks (125 kg) of fresh seaweed to the local market for domestic consumption for a modest Rp 80,000 (approximately AU\$8) a sack”, says Lukas.

Nur’s group, on the other hand, is waiting for CV Evadian. “Even though we are only 40km from Larantuka, the bad roads means it takes more than 2 hours to get to the market and transport is expensive. It is not worth it just to sell a few sacks. But we are ready to produce quality seaweed as soon as the processing facility is ready. In the meantime we are preparing a trial plot using new techniques taught by Evadian.”

It is anticipated that once the SSC is up and running it will process 1,700 metric tonnes of seaweed from 2,000 farmers in Flores Timur district within the first year. By the end of the program this will increase to 5,100 metric tonnes a year from all 4 target districts. On average it will improve the income of approximately 8,000 farmers from seaweed production by 42% to approximately AU\$912 per annum.

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The Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Promoting Rural Income through Support for Markets in Agriculture (PRISMA) is a multi-year program that is part of the Indonesian Government’s long term strategy to encourage economic growth. With the support of the Australian Government, the program aims to achieve a 30% increase in the net incomes of 300,000 male and female eastern Indonesian farmers by the program’s end by providing innovative solutions to increase productivity and market access.

PRISMA focuses on agriculture sectors that are the main source of income for a large number of smallholder farmers and have strong growth potential in areas of East Java, West Nusa Tenggara, East Nusa Tenggara, Papua and West Papua. Partnering with key market stakeholders, the program help spur growth along the value chain by reducing barriers and constraints within the agriculture sector.