

## The Asian Farmers' Exchange Program

The Asian Farmers' Exchange Program is AsiaDHRRA's major initiative in sustaining the dialogue, sharing of knowledge, and building of linkages among farmers and NGO leaders in Asia. Specifically, the project aims to:

1. Facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights on local productivity systems development, rural enterprise development, and farmers' network building and strengthening;
2. Establish linkages between and among farmers' organizations and cooperatives from Asian nations; and
3. Initiate preliminary discussion on future united regional advocacy efforts on issues such as food security, sustainable agriculture, and farmers' cooperation.

Ultimately, the program's main success criterion is the formation of a strategic Asian rural alliance for greater advocacy and for the benefit of the poor Asian farmer.

## About AsiaDHRRA

The Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia or AsiaDHRRA is a regional partnership of eleven (11) social development networks and organizations from ten (10) Asian nations.

AsiaDHRRA envisions Asian rural communities that are just, free, prosperous, living in peace and working in solidarity towards self-reliance. To achieve this vision, AsiaDHRRA's mission is to be an effective

- a. Promoter and catalyst of partnership relations as we create opportunities for genuine people-to-people dialogue and exchange;
- b. Facilitator of human resource development processes in the rural areas; and
- c. Mobilizer of expertise & opportunities and facilitator of processes for the strengthening of solidarity and kinship among Asian rural communities.

These roles interplay as AsiaDHRRA pursues its two-pronged goals of:

1. Strengthening of members and network relations, and
2. Building of Asian rural solidarity.



# Asian Farmers Visit Malaysia

*A Chronicle of the Malaysian Leg of the Asian Farmers'  
Exchange Program*

21 April to 6 Malaysia 2002

**AsiaDHRRA**

Asia Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia



The Participants of the Malaysian Leg of the Asian Farmers' Exchange Program



## Foreword

This year, the fifth leg of the Asian Farmers' Exchange Visit was held in Malaysia, which is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of palm oil, rubber, cocoa and pepper. Not only this, Malaysia is home to active people's movements that represent the different sectors of agriculture - from rubber plantation workers to rural women's cooperatives. Through this exchange visit, the participants experienced how rural communities, which may be similar to theirs, develop and strengthen their ranks through programmatic and reality-based human resource development plans.



The exchange visit host, DHARRA Network Malaysia, is thankful for the opportunity to participate in this worthwhile program. The network sees the need to link circles of farmers' groups and rural communities through various initiatives at the local level. From one of the surveys it conducted, DHARRA Malaysia monitored households and communities with regard food security level and at the same time assessed whether their livelihood is sustainable in the light of economic integration and trade liberalization. Findings showed that small-scale producers are facing problems sustaining their farmlands and increasing their incomes. Many farmers have resorted to looking for jobs in cities and town proper to supplement household income.

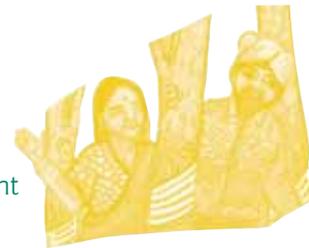
Most Malaysian farmers are concerned that they will be displaced due to land acquisition and direct involvement of the private sector in agriculture. The rapid industrialization of agriculture is leading to land being cultivated on a large scale and this poses a major problem since the land becomes vulnerable during pest attacks and extreme weather conditions. Thus there is wisdom in keeping and maintaining the small holders of food producers and organizing them into economic units.

Maintaining food security is one of our major concerns in this era of globalization and trade liberalization. Food security does not only mean access to safe and affordable food, but it also includes



availability. Policy makers in Malaysia have always argued that it is cheaper to buy food for its domestic consumption than produce its own food. This however changed during the crisis that hit Asia in 1997. The crisis showed how vulnerable a country could become if its people have no access to food to eat as graphically witnessed in the case of Indonesia. Food not reaching the urban areas along with rising unemployment led to political chaos in the archipelago. Thus, food security can be synonymous to national security. Self-sufficiency through a vibrant domestic food production is a vital component in ensuring a country's food security.

This is where we hope that civil society's efforts like ours will come into synergy with that of the governments in Asia to ensure food secured nations. We hope to actively engage both local and national government units in alleviating poverty in Asia's rural areas.



Meanwhile, we hope that this monograph manages to provide our partners effective glimpses into the experiences and insights from the Malaysia leg of the exchange visit. Our hopes include that inspiration will also be derived from the warmth and good will that the participating farmer-leaders and civil society workers generated throughout the program. May their solidarity be one of our sources of strength as we transform our societies into being truly humane and peaceful.



**Marimuthu Nadason**

*Vice Chairperson for Southeast Asia*

AsiaDHRR

# Selamat datang!

A large, stylized sun with many rays is positioned in the upper left. To its right, a teal-colored map of Malaysia is shown. Overlaid on the map are three golden figures: a man, a woman, and a child, all appearing to be in a celebratory or welcoming pose. The man is holding a large, golden, circular object, possibly a traditional instrument or a decorative item. The woman and child are also in similar poses, suggesting a warm and festive atmosphere.

With fond memories of the past exchange visits, I looked forward to participating in the last leg of this particular exchange program. Arriving in Kuala Lumpur late at night, I found the international airport awe-inspiring. I wondered out loud how could Malaysia, an industrialized country that I associate more with its cars and electronic gadgets, play host to an exchange program focusing on agriculture and the plight of Asian farmers? Since highly urbanized Japan offered its own pleasant surprises during the previous exchange visit, I looked forward to what Malaysia has to offer in terms of learning experiences and insights.

Besides, I also looked forward to seeing old friends like Parvathi, Chan, Ka Aning, Sang Jun, Kamnan, Nana, Biki, et al. These exchanges sure provided us not only learning opportunities but also solidarity building based on genuine friendship and camaraderie.

## Asian Farmers and Food Politics

From the emails we received from AsiaDHRRRA, I learned that the Malaysia leg of the Asian Farmers' Exchange visit would focus on the theme "Asian Farmers' Responses to the Effects of Globalization Amidst Global Debate on Food Security Concerns vis-à-vis Trade Liberalization." Recognizing the fact that food is increasingly becoming a political tool as the world continues to argue and debate on further trade liberalization, the program aimed to provide us with the opportunity to understand and appreciate the evolving trends and policies that affect farmers' livelihood and way of lives. It is however with



Cultures have been meeting and mixing in Malaysia since the very beginning of its history. More than fifteen hundred years ago a Malay kingdom in Bujang Valley welcomed traders from China and India. With the arrival of gold and silks, Buddhism and Hinduism also came to Malaysia. A thousand years later, Arab traders arrived in Malacca and brought with them the principles and practices of Islam. By the time the Portuguese arrived in Malaysia, the empire that they encountered was more cosmopolitan than their own.

Malaysia's cultural mosaic is marked by many different cultures, but several in particular have had especially lasting influence on the country. Chief among these is the ancient Malay culture, and the cultures of Malaysia's two most prominent trading partners throughout history--the Chinese, and the Indians. These three groups are joined by a dizzying array of indigenous tribes, many of which live in the forests and coastal areas of Borneo. Although each of these cultures has vigorously maintained its traditions and community structures, they have also blended together to create contemporary Malaysia's uniquely diverse heritage.

One example of the complexity with which Malaysia's immigrant populations have contributed to the nation's culture as a whole is the history of Chinese immigrants. The first Chinese to settle in the straits, primarily in and around Malacca, gradually adopted elements of Malaysian culture and intermarried with the Malaysian community. Known as babas and nonyas, they eventually produced a synthetic set of practices, beliefs, and arts, combining Malay and Chinese traditions in such a way as to create a new culture. Later Chinese, coming to exploit the tin and rubber booms, have preserved their

sadness and alarm that with both the WTO and AFTA providing the crucial tones in the future of agriculture in Asia, farmers continue to be in the dark regarding its implications while living its day-to-day consequences.

There were forty-five (45) of us, farmer-leaders and civil society members, availing the opportunity to learn of the salient points in the debate on trade liberalization and how food security and therefore agriculture figures in the discussions and consequent agreements under the WTO and ASEAN. The conference had the following objectives:

1. Discuss the role food plays in the current world trade liberalization debate, discussions and agreements (both in context of WTO and AFTA);
2. Share their concerns and proposed advocacy agenda vis-à-vis AoA and AFTA;
3. Engage in discussions with local Malaysian farming households on their understanding of the current government policies on agriculture and its impact on

#### **Images of Globalization: Some Varying Concepts from Different Sources**

"Globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual."

"Economic globalization means globe-spanning economic relationships. The interrelationships of markets, finance, goods and services, and the networks created by transnational corporations are the most important manifestations of this. Though the capitalist world-system has been international in essence for centuries, the extent and degree of trade and investment globalization has increased in recent decades."

"Globalization itself is a phenomenon of national economies and national states. It is impossible to make sense of it without taking account of competition among national economies, and national states carrying out policies to promote international 'competitiveness', to maintain or restore profitability to domestic capital, to promote the free movement of capital while confining labor within national boundaries and subjecting it to disciplines enforced by the state, to create and sustain global markets - not to mention national policies deliberately designed to forfeit national sovereignty."

- their everyday lives; and
4. Outline specific policy agenda points that can be shared and presented to both national governments and regional bodies for policy formulation.

However, in the midst of the serious matters to be discussed during the conference, we managed to exchange stories both personal and professional. After all, through these stories, bonds were created and relationships that cross barriers and borders were cemented. Here, kindly join us in reliving our sojourn in Malaysia and the stories that made it memorable.

### Of Big Terms and Small Farmers

Mind-boggling. As Ms. Sarojeni of PAN-AP discussed the basic concepts of globalization and its evolution, I was simply amazed at how big the world functions and how insignificantly small I felt. Although I appreciated the positive effects of a borderless society (especially for computer and internet dependents like me), I nevertheless found it unfair that major decisions on the flow of goods like those in agriculture are made to favor big and financial progressive corporations and countries. After spending more than a decade working with small and marginalized farmers who are still fighting for the most basic of rights (to own the lands they till), it was unthinkable how their livelihood would be decimated in the name of comparative advantage, economies of scale and efficiency.

From the presentations made on the two prevailing major trade agreements, the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) and ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), we developed the impression that Asian farmers will stand at the losing end. Not only will local markets be flooded with cheaper agricultural products produced from outside by more efficient big farmers and corporations and thereby making marketing of small farmers' produce a losing proposition, but the move towards land

culture much more meticulously. A city like Penang, for example, can often give one the impression of being in China rather than in Malaysia. Another example of Malaysia's extraordinary cultural exchange the Malay wedding ceremony, which incorporates elements of the Hindu traditions of southern India; the bride and groom dress in gorgeous brocades, sit in state, and feed each other yellow rice with hands painted with henna. Muslims have adapted the Chinese custom of giving little red packets of money (ang pau) at festivals to their own needs; the packets given on Muslim holidays are green and have Arab writing on them.

Perhaps the easiest way to begin to understand the highly complex cultural interaction which is Malaysia is to look at the open door policy maintained during religious festivals. Although Malaysia's different cultural traditions are frequently maintained by seemingly self-contained ethnic communities, all of Malaysia's communities open their doors to members of other cultures during a religious festival—to tourists as well as neighbors. Such inclusiveness is more than just a way to break down cultural barriers and foster understanding. It is a positive celebration of a tradition of tolerance that has for millennia formed the basis of Malaysia's progress.

#### Who are Malaysians?

The Malay are Malaysia's largest ethnic group, accounting for over half the population and the national language. With the oldest indigenous peoples they form a group called bumiputera, which translates as "sons" or "princes of the soil." Almost all Malays are Muslims, though Islam here is less extreme than in the Middle East. Traditional Malay culture centers around the kampung, or village, though today one is just as likely to find Malays in the cities.

The Chinese traded with Malaysia for centuries, then settled in number during the 19th century when word of riches in the Nanyang, or "South Seas," spread across China. Though perhaps a stereotype, the Chinese are regarded as Malaysia's businessmen, having succeeded in many industries. When they first arrived, however, Chinese often worked the most grueling jobs like tin mining and railway construction. Most Chinese are Tao Buddhist and retain strong ties to their ancestral homeland. They form about 35 percent of the population.

Indians had been visiting Malaysia for over 2,000 years, but did not settle en masse until the 19th century. Most came from South India, fleeing a poor economy. Arriving in Malaysia, many worked as rubber tappers, while others built the infrastructure or worked as administrators and small businessmen. Today ten percent of Malaysia is Indian. Their culture -- with its exquisite Hindu temples, cuisine, and colorful garments -- is visible throughout the land.

The oldest inhabitants of Malaysia are its tribal peoples. They account for about 5 percent of the total population, and represent a majority in Sarawak and Sabah. Though Malaysia's tribal people prefer to be categorized by their individual tribes, peninsular Malaysia blankets them under the term Orang Asli, or "Original People." In Sarawak, the dominant tribal groups are the Dayak, who typically live in longhouses and are either Iban (Sea Dayak) or Bidayuh (land Dayak). In Sabah, most tribes fall under the term Kadazan. All of Malaysia's tribal people generally share a strong spiritual tie to the rain forest.

*Source: [www.interknowledge.com/malaysia](http://www.interknowledge.com/malaysia)*

consolidation for greater efficiency and efficacy endangers the very fundamentals of farmers' right to land.

In spite of the argument that industrial agriculture is more efficient than traditional farming and that it has better chances to feed a hungry world, the farmers in the group cited how these industries heavily rely on chemical inputs for food production and therefore undermine efforts to protect the environment and endanger the future of food security. Besides, the farmers clarified that most of these agribusinesses avail of big loans from government and rely on it for subsidies and bailout. In the end, pursuing this track further aggravates rural poverty because governments provide limited resources and much-needed support to corporations instead of small farmers sustaining community-based agricultural systems.

One concern that we all shared pertained to the reality that as developing nations with scarce resources, most of our countries are not exactly in a position to compete with the developed economies of the US and European Union which mobilize millions of resources to prop up their agricultural sector in ways acceptable under the WTO trade rules.

At the end of the session, with our minds full of

### The AFTA

The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is a regional agreement that aims to eliminate trade barriers and gain greater access to markets of ASEAN member-countries. Among the trade barriers the agreement seeks to remove include subsidies, quotas, and standards. Its projected benefits include bigger markets (more buyers and consumers), cheaper imports (due to lower tariffs), more investments, greater efficiency (induced by the competition), and cheaper goods for the consumers.

Originally with a target period of 15 years (to end in 2007), the AFTA however was overtaken by other major regional trade agreements and events such as the WTO and the APEC commitments. For AFTA to be still relevant, the ASEAN agreed to fast track the process and the new target year for completion were moved to 2002.

never-been-heard-of-terms before, one of the women farmer-leaders remarked that she feels so lucky that her small and struggling country is not a member of WTO and can hardly comply with the AFTA provisions. I looked at her in envy. My thoughts went back to the farmers I work with at home. Are they aware of these policies that affect their lives and the future of their families and communities? Will our government leaders ever give preferential option for the poor landless farmers? What can be done?



As we made a collective sigh, not of relief, but of awe on the massiveness of the challenges being faced by the Asian farmers, we turned our attention to reports prepared by national farmers' organizations on how peasants fare in this era of integrated economy.

## A Harvest of Doubts and Challenges

In comparison to the earlier discourses on globalization, trade liberalization, and trade agreements, the reports on the situations of farmers in Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam provided concrete examples of their experiences with the effects of these policies.

According to the report of API (Alliance of Indonesian Peasants), farmers in Indonesia, in the midst of struggling for land rights and with a battered economy, faced major setbacks in sugar and rice production. With the Indonesian government forced to comply with its WTO commitments, the elimination of tariffs on imported rice and sugar virtually killed the livelihood of sugar and rice farmers. The onslaught of cheap imported rice and sugar in the local market caused many Indonesian farmers to shift to other sources of livelihood. In some areas like Kalimantan and South Sulawesi, food scarcity was experienced.

To make matters worst, some of Indonesia's indigenous agricultural products (e.g. pasak bumi) were subjected to bio-piracy when a big corporation based in Malaysia claimed the plant's commercial patent. Companies like Shiseido of Japan also patented other traditional agricultural products. For generations, these plants were considered significant parts of Indonesia's heritage and therefore communal

### The Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)

The AoA is one of the most significant agreements from the Uruguay Round, which came into effect in 1995 under the World Trade Organization (WTO). The agreement regulates the liberalization of agricultural products and is deemed important since many people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. On the surface, the agreement is about opening up markets, cutting domestic supports that are trade distorting, and getting rid of supports which enable countries to dump their products overseas. The implementation period is from January 1, 1995 to December 31, 2000 for developed countries while developing nations were given ten years to undertake the reduction commitments.



property. With the advent of intellectual property rights under the WTO, local agricultural communities began losing some of its heritage handed down by several farming generations.

A not too different situation exists in the Philippines, PAKISAMA (National Confederation of Farmers' Organizations) reported. While the Philippine government registered almost full compliance to its trade commitments, its local

farming and fishery sectors remained in the center of national poverty with 75% of the nation's poor found in the rural areas. With small farmers forced to abandon farming due to the unfair competition from cheap imported agricultural products in the market (i.e. rice, sugar, coconut), urban migration went on an all-time high worsening the already bloated urban-poor population. Meanwhile, land conversion became the norm as farmers began to consider farming a losing proposition.

Recently Philippine mango farmers experienced how unfair the playing field was. Australia, citing AoA provisions on the application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (SPS) to protect its citizens from products possibly infected, delayed the importation of Philippine mangoes citing possible presence of fruit flies. Meanwhile, Australian agricultural products ranging from butter to beef flooded the Philippine market. Even with strong protestations from the Philippine government on the foot-dragging of their "scientific" process, the Australian government was too pressured from the lobby of its own mango farmers to be covered into complying with the trade agreement.

Although economically better off, South Korean farmers are not exactly spared from the negative effects of the trade agreements. BFA (Best Farmers' Association) shared that after decades of active and heavy support from the government in terms of subsidies and support services, Korean farmers currently face diminishing assistance and a market inundated with cheaper imported agricultural products. An aging farming population worsens the situation. The rural youth looks at farming as a dying industry unsupported by government and incapable of great financial rewards.

Under the WTO, South Korea has a developing country status. This is a source of concern for its farmers especially if such categorization is changed to a developed status that entails faster degree of implementation of the trade policies on tariff reduction, expansion of market access, and cutbacks on domestic support to farmers.

Early 2002, Thailand figured in a high profile campaign against prominent US-based groups and personalities it accused of bio-piracy. At the center of this controversy is Thailand's prized agricultural jewel, the Thai jasmine rice, which was patented without the awareness of its originators and stewards, the Thai farmers. Civil society went on an active campaign with the Thai government making vigorous attempts to protect its heritage. Although highly integrated into the globally economy, Thailand proved to be a staunch defender of its agricultural heritage too. This is evident in the efforts of the Thai farmers as reported

by the Northern Farmer's Federations' Association for Development (NFAD). As one of the world's biggest rice exporters, Thailand is home to self-reliant communities committed to maintaining its agricultural way of life and heritage.



On the other side of the Mekong River, Vietnam is still studying the virtues of a WTO-membership. As one of the five biggest rice and coffee exporters in the world, Vietnam is interested how membership in the trade body will fast track its economic development through a larger market for its products. To the credit of the Vietnamese government, various discussions, both with pro and anti trade liberalization groups, were initiated to study the merits and demerits of WTO membership. The Vietnam National Farmers' Union (VNFU), as the main representative of the farmers, reported some of its concerns related to the possible integration of its country in the trade body.

Foremost of these concerns is related to the competitiveness of the farmers' local products. Given international standards, which will be applied to WTO-integrated economies, VNFU believes that although its agricultural products may be cheap but these are not necessarily at par with the approved quality levels. Agricultural production in Vietnam is still predominantly traditional, small-scale and community-based and most of the farmers are not technologically advanced in knowledge and skills. These factors might further complicate the already low level of competitiveness of Vietnam's agricultural products. While questioning its country's readiness to compete with far more advanced countries, the farmers' also realize that it needs to strengthen its capacity to improve its local products even without WTO membership.

As the reports from the five countries were concluded, the rest of the participants had a distinct feeling of being like unwilling pawns in a game played by unseen hands. While there are concrete names to the organizations involved, these are largely faceless entities that otherwise dictate the rise or downfall of an industry or a cultural heritage. Meanwhile, farmers in Asia are being reduced to the same facelessness. Poverty however will always have a face for the farmers and most refuse that it be that of their children.

## Malaysia and its Lessons

Joining the Malaysia leg of the Asian Farmers' Exchange Program had been meaningful to me both as an advocate of sustainable rural development and as a student of economics. The agricultural transformation experiences of Malaysia reaffirm most of what literature claims to be the normal economic process of industrialization and at the same time provide a concrete case for the civil society claims against globalization.

One important lesson from the agricultural transformation process of Malaysia is that a country cannot rely on its export earnings as source for food security. The revenues they have been getting from its car exports are not enough to cover the increasing cost of food imports.

### Development trends in agriculture in Malaysia

The biggest challenge for agriculture in Malaysia is the presence of highly competitive market and investment introduced by the globalization process. Food import for the last five years have increased from 7.8 billion in 1995 to 13.0 billion in year 2000 which represent a 10.7 % increase per annum.

The government thrust for year 2001 to 2010 is the creation of wealth by promoting growth in the sectors of manufacturing, services as well as the agricultural sector. Towards this end, Malaysia intends to restructure and modernize the agricultural sector by increasing the industrial crop, food production and introducing new agricultural activities.

These thrusts shall be guided by the third national agricultural policy which espouses the use of market driven product based approach and the agro-forestry approach. Concretely, the government of Malaysia designed various package of incentives and support services to farmers ranging from marketing, extension, training, credit, storage, transportation, and including infrastructure development. Research and development shall also be pursued to improve productivity, efficiency, reduce cost of production while increasing product quality.

The inputs as well as the community integration activities showed that even in the early stages of its development, the agricultural policy of Malaysia is biased towards its commercial crop (e.g. rubber, palm, rattan etc.), which made it vulnerable in terms of food security. Both equity and environmental sustainability concerns are threatened by the proliferation of commercial plantation farms that use heavy fertilizers and require large tracks of land giving more reasons for land concentration, which endanger the potentials for genuine agrarian reform in Malaysia.

Although largely an agricultural nation, the aggressive modernization policies of the country's current Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, have in the last two decades been rapidly changing the face of Malaysia to that of an industrial one. Once famous for its natural rubber and tin, Malaysia's major exports today comprise of electrical and electronic products, textiles and apparel, etc.

However, the world food crisis in 1972-73 and the more recent financial debacle that hit Asian economies pushed the Malaysian government to seriously reconsider its agricultural policies. From 90% self-sufficiency in paddy target, the government raised it to 100%. Attention was also given to the provision and improvement of irrigation facilities. Between 1996 and 1998, paddy production increased by 0.9% a year. However, the import bill for rice has also been increasing, from RM527.52 million in 1996 to RM701.31 million in 1997 and RM910.52 million in 1998. Today, more and more food items (both fresh and processed) are being imported. Based on government records, the food import bill for the year 2001 exceeded RM13 billion.

Most Asian countries would like to follow Malaysia in its efforts towards being an NIC (new industrialized country). Serious evaluation of the impact of aggressive modernization of agriculture catering to the demands of the global market should be studied carefully particularly in the light of the plight of the small farmers. The case of Malaysia is a good example upon which Asian farmers can draw many valuable lessons. The stories told by farmers in the communities we visited highlighted the negative impact of globalization particularly on its influence over their farm practices. Similar to the experiences of the Mangyans in Mindoro, Philippines, the farmers in Malaysia were also forced to change their preference on what crop to plant based on the demands of the market. Concretely, in the past, farmers grew the traditional tomato variety, which is smaller yet, juicier than the big ones. However, with the coming of the new big

tomato variety, which captivated the attention of consumers, they then shifted to this.

There is a growing need for both the consumers and the producers to come into dialogue to ensure long-term food security. In the short run, the consumer may benefit from cheap imported food products but this will also kill the local food production and later result to dependence on big multi-national corporations (MNC) that control the supply of the seed and fertilizers for the production of food.

During a visit to a tomato farm, we felt extremely sad when we saw rows of rotten tomatoes. The farmer told us that the influx of imported cheap tomatoes made it too difficult to compete. He said it is better to allow the tomatoes to fall on the ground than spend money for harvesting. The farmers cannot even sell it in a price enough to cover the harvesting cost, not to mention the input and labor costs.

The face-to-face interaction between the producer and consumer had been slowly eroded and replaced by cold market forces that reduced them to being faceless players in the global market. I remember when I was still a child, my mother used to bring me to our neighbor who sew my school uniforms for me. As I grew-up, she made not only my uniform but also my Sunday dresses. She knew what color and styles I liked and she designed unique clothes that matched my preferences. Now, with the cheap ready-to-wear dresses in the shopping mall, her tailoring shop was forced to close. She became a faceless factory worker. The market has divided us - me as mere buyer of clothes and she just a worker in a company which is able to compete in the market.

Perhaps only when producers and consumers learn to re-cultivate such interactions can we mitigate the negative impact of globalization. Indeed small is beautiful and small is possible.

In one of our visits to an Orang Asli community on our way to Perak, one of its young leaders made clear to me that agriculture indeed has an important function more than its economic contribution to the gross national product (GNP). He narrated to us that for them agriculture is a way of life. For them the forest is their "shopping mall" where they can get everything from food to medicine to flowers for a loved one. He said they do not have refrigerators, but they consider the forest as their natural refrigerator. They raise chickens but they cannot afford to kill them for they consider these as part of their household. These





behaviors defy some basic economic assumptions of the market.

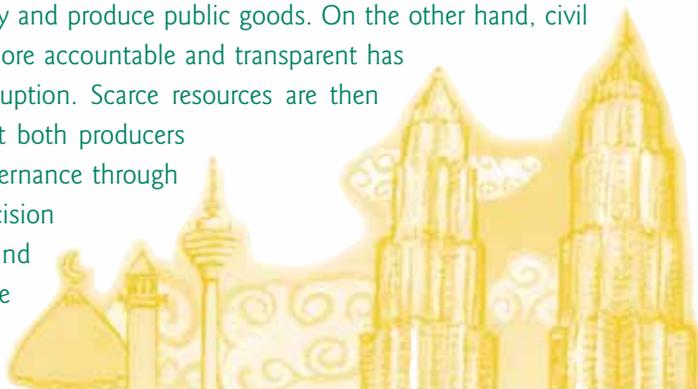
Farmers are not mere producers of food but are also vanguards of simple lifestyle. The farmer participants themselves in the exchange visit are living models of this. They speak different languages but there is a common thread that binds them - it is their intimate relationship with the soil and nature which make them understand each

other. I was completely awed as I watched Sang Jun, a South Korean farmer, and Kamnan, a Thai farmer, laughed and shared stories using their own native languages. It is their capacity to listen beyond words that made them understand each other. This attitude of listening, waiting and nurturing are perhaps the results of their regular communing with nature. Killing the local agriculture sector is also like killing the ground upon which these values and lifestyles are rooted.

Tasaka , a young farmer from Japan and a participant in the Malaysia leg is a source of hope for me. He has the vigor and passion found in most of young people yet he has his heart grounded on the values and lifestyles of a farmer. His commitment to stay in the rural area of Japan amidst opportunities to be in the city is a source of inspiration for us who believe in the beauty and simplicity of lifestyle, which is the distinguishing characteristic of a farming community. I hope more young people will follow the footsteps of young Tasaka.

In most of the discussions during the workshop, it was made clear that indeed there are market failures and that is why the government regulates the market. However, many economists claim that government failure is worst than market failure thus cementing the argument to allow the market forces to take its own course. On the other hand, the recent Asian financial crisis once again brings forth the Keynesian thought calling for the intervention of government. This time the difference lies in the presence of the civil society that could address not perhaps the market failure but more importantly the government failure.

Government exact taxes to finance one of its major functions of regulating the market. Taxes are being used to pump prime the economy and produce public goods. On the other hand, civil society's role of making the government more accountable and transparent has been significant in curbing graft and corruption. Scarce resources are then utilized on productive projects that benefit both producers and consumers. Efforts towards good governance through effective participation of the people in decision making over socio-economic projects and policies lead to greater efficiency in the use of scarce resources. However, these empowerment and facilitation roles of



civil society remain to be financially unsupported.

In one of the discussions during the exchange visit, a question was raised who then should pay the cost of the development interventions done by civil society to address the government failure as well as the market failure. There was no definite answer made but I did find consolation in the wisdom of Mr. Paul Sinnappan, one of the DHRRA founders. He said, in the past, people ruled by cruel leaders never thought that they would ever live in freedom. However, there were those who persistently struggled and endured amidst difficulties. Now their children are enjoying the democratic space they fought for.



Similarly, Paul said, our quest for a just, free, happy and sustainable society will come only if we hold on to our vision and allow our small efforts to slowly come into synergy and later become formidable forces that would restore balance and harmony in the world.

### **Moving to Alternatives: Pursuing Farmers' Solidarity**

With this one bright thought, the participants of the exchange visit turned to discussions on possible alternatives. After all, most of us are farmers used to thinking of creative indigenous means to solve pest problems. Years of organizing challenges developed certain grit especially when faced with seemingly insurmountable social problems.

For advocates of economic globalization, one of its most basic tenets is the integration of the economic activities of all countries within a single centralized system. For us, to pursue solidarity and unity is a noble motivation. This however is not equivalent to the creation of a homogenized body wherein the different parts are subject to the decisions of a central decision-making structure. Such a concept also runs counter to some of our prized beliefs like respect for diversity and subsidiarity.

Asia as a region is a very diverse one - from the languages its people speak to the faiths they practice. Yet even in the midst of such diversity, people generally learned to understand each other and develop mutual respect. The exchange program witnessed this and most of us are quite sure such process is replicated in other crossings of paths and dialogues on life. We recognize the contributions of this diversity to the enriching process of learning and to life in general. For decades also we have been organizing rural communities to become empowered so as to participate in its effective governance. Thus, if homogenized bodies committed to centralized procedures like the WTO will pursue the paths it plan to take, these will be an opposing force to the community empowerment processes we have been taking.

### Asian Farmer's Responses to Globalization

The Asian Farmer's Alliance for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA) is a coming together of five national farmer's federations and alliances from the countries of Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. The birth of the alliance was ushered by the Asian Farmer's Exchange Visit (FEV) program.

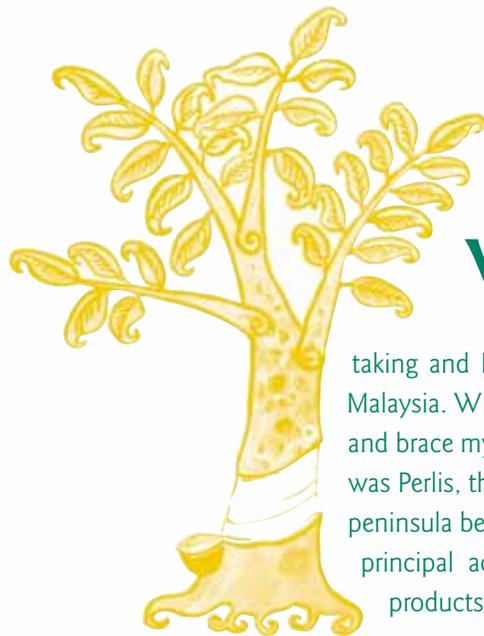
Leaders of these five national organizations along with farmers and civil society leaders from Cambodia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Taiwan ROC have realized the potential threats arising from the growing trade liberalization of agriculture. The alliance then outlined the following strategic responses to the challenges of globalization:

- a. Forging and enhancing ties with strategic alliances at the regional and international levels;
- b. Building and strengthening of people's organizations' capacities geared towards developing skills and knowledge through exchanges and dialogue; and
- c. Advocacy and information sharing including campaigns for local products, research and documentation highlighting various farmer initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of trade liberalization in agriculture.

During the concluding part of the exchange program, a short presentation was made on the different members of the civil society advocating for alternatives to unbridled economic globalization. Summoning past lessons and insights from advocacy experiences, most of us shared the sentiments of Ms. Susan George, which was presented to us by Ms. Sarojeni. According to Ms. George, "we have the numbers on our side, because there are far more losers than winners in the neo-liberal game. We have ideas, whereas theirs are finally coming into question because of repeated crisis. What we lack, so far, is the organization and the unity which in this age of advanced technology we can overcome. The threat is clearly transnational so the response must also be transnational. Solidarity no longer means aid, or not just aid, but finding the hidden synergies in each other's struggles so that our numerical force and the power of our ideas become overwhelming."

Taking the cue, we came up with three important resolutions that will be used as the basis of future actions. Since an alliance among the farmers' organizations involved in the past exchanges have been formed with the support of countries without nationally organized groups, we tasked AFA, the regional formation, to take the lead. So far, we committed to forging and enhancing ties with strategic alliances at the regional and international levels; building and strengthening of people's organizations' capacities geared towards developing skills and knowledge through exchanges and dialogue; and advocate and do information sharing including campaigns for local products, research and documentation highlighting various farmer initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of trade liberalization in agriculture.

As each country ponders on how to best translate these commitments into national plans of action. Although the effective responses will be transnational, most of us also believe that we need to face these challenges from our own backyards too. We need to encourage our own governments to protect its own future first and exercise autonomy as any self-respecting nations do. Meanwhile, vigilance is called for as we pursue building ties with each other and coming up with a solidarity that truly befits its noble intentions.



## THE KEDAH AND PERLIS JOURNAL: Glimpses of the community integration

With heavy-lidded eyes, I reluctantly looked out of the plane's window to take a peek at one of the states we are visiting. From above, Kedah's green landscape was breath taking and I was beginning to understand why it is one of the rice bowls of Malaysia. With my sleepiness quickly forgotten, I scrambled to fasten my seatbelt and brace myself for an eventful week in the states of Kedah and Perlis. First stop was Perlis, the smallest state in Malaysia. It lies at the northwestern corner of the peninsula between the state of Kedah and Thailand. Although rice farming is the principal activity in Perlis, there is a growing interest in other agricultural products such as mangoes, sugar and vegetables.

Our host community was Kampung Padang Siding, a quaint village quite famous among tourists as a home-stay option. With its adherence to traditional Malay culture, we were exposed to the warm welcoming smiles of the local people. Most of the families who hosted our stay in the village were farming households benefiting from benevolent support from the government. Although facing financial hardships due to lower prices and stiffer competition from cheap agricultural imports from neighboring Thailand (especially rice and vegetables), most of our foster families were confident that government support would still be forthcoming.

Some of us explained that due to the trade agreements our respective governments signed, most of the subsidies and protective measures being extended to local farmers would be lessened and eventually stopped. Although the local farmers in the kampung were familiar with AFTA and the AoA, very few understood its full impact on their livelihood. However, inspite of the challenges thrown their way, the members of the kampung were typically Asians - hopeful, resilient and hospitable. Not forgetting their manners, a local family celebration turned into a community gathering that made us (foreigners to their land and culture) feel at home and very much welcomed. We got a dose of local culture through presentations of the silat (an indigenous martial arts) and traditional music played with ethnic instruments. The rich variety of food - from the famous nasi lemak served with ikan bilis, peanuts and cucumber to the red-hot noodles called laksa-filled our churning stomachs to its delight.

After a short stay in Perlis, we drove to





neighboring Kedah. Vast stretches of rice fields dominate the state's panoramic landscape. Home to the current Prime Minister, Kedah is a picturesque province bustling with economic activities. Still, rice farming remains its backbone. For our sojourn in the state, we first stayed with foster families in Kampung Raga and then moved to Kampung Kepala Parit Dalam.

Both communities are typical Malay villages with a predominantly farming population. Kampung Raga is nationally renowned because it has been a recipient of several awards for its home stay program. The villagers are so used to playing hosts to foreigners and this was evident in their confidence in approaching us and making conversations. Upon arrival in the kampung, we were greeted with a colorful parade complete with musical accompaniment and gifts of bunga telur (a local souvenir made up of paper flowers and egg/s). In contrast was Kampung Kepala Parit Dalam whose host families confessed to being first timers in receiving foreign guests into their homes. They were shy and reticent and yet ever so eager to welcome us into their humble abodes. Just like our experiences in Perlis, our foster families in both kampungs were charming hosts and we felt quite at home.

The story in Kedah is not so different from that of Perlis. Local farmers are slowly feeling the crunch since there were large cuts made in the subsidies they enjoyed the past years. Support services however are still going strong since the local agriculture agencies continue to provide training and capacity building to the farmers' organizations in the state. One of the participant-Malaysian farmers from Perak remarked that rice farmers in Kedah and Perlis are actually in a more advantageous position because of the generous support from their states. This was an observation shared by all of us. We do however worry about the future of the farming families we met. Heavily dependent on the government, the local farmers need to realize that when the trade agreements take full effect, the state will have no option but to comply with its requirements especially those pertaining to the lifting of trade restrictions and subsidies. What then will happen to the local farmers who relied on such support and whose products cannot compete with the cheaper imports flooding their markets?

Leaving the communities with a lot of questions on my mind regarding the future of agriculture in Malaysia, I cannot help but think of the other small farmers in Asia struggling with the same situation and dilemma. While competition for markets slowly being dominated by large agribusiness is a serious problem, some of them are still struggling with basic issues like access to and ownership of land. As we flew out, I got a glimpse of the panoramic green landscape again. Maybe the future can still be greener. At least that's what I hope for all those kind people who took us in.



## THE KELANTAN JOURNAL: Glimpses of the community integration

**S**elamat datang ke Kelantan! Hot and humid air greeted us as we stepped out of the plane. We came early for lunch so we made an unscheduled visit to a family-owned tobacco farm, which earns 500 ringgit per hectare. A large multinational cigarette firm that pre-selects the seeds contracts this farm. The government is also giving subsidy. While we were there, we were shown how the tobacco leaves were dried and stored. After the brief interview, we headed out to a floating restaurant, to have our first taste of kelantanese food.

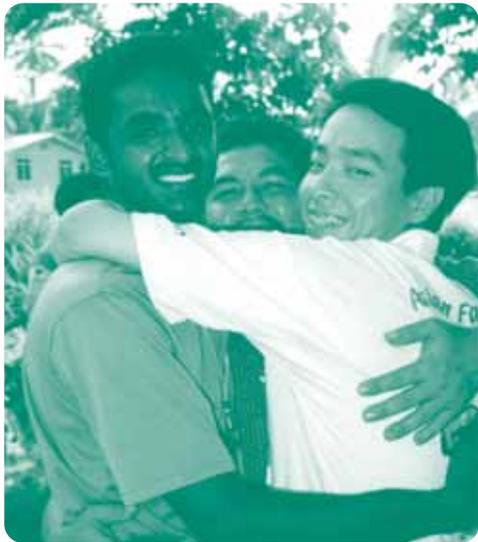
Kelantan, which means "Land of Lightning" is located on the eastern corner of Peninsular Malaysia and shares a common border with Thailand in the north. The state is a veritable treasure trove of delights - rustic fishing villages, palm-fringed beaches, lush rice fields and traditional pastimes such as kite-flying and top spinning. The people here have managed to preserve their age-old customs and traditions. Thus Kelantan is aptly dubbed the "Cradle of Malay Culture."



It is a unique state with its rustic setting of picturesque kampungs (villages) amidst padi-fields and unspoilt stretches of beach. Although multi-racial, with a population of almost a little over one million, most of whom are found in the fertile plains in the northern half of the state, the state is predominantly Malay with a small number of Thais, Chinese, Indians, as well as the Orang Asli or indigenous people. Kelantan has always been, and still is a largely agricultural community. The sea also provides livelihood to a large section of the population and tourism is fast becoming a significant industry.



Home for us was Kampung Peringat where we spent three days and three nights with our home stay families. As our van approached, we could hear the drums and the different instruments being played for our welcome. Dinner was a homely affair with the rest of the host families present to welcome us. We



ate on the wooden floor, at ease even on the first night of arrival because of the warm welcome and smiling faces of our foster parents and families.

The next few days of the community integration was like a blur of activities comprising of farm visits. We visited a coconut farm, a fish farm, and a bee farm. Discussions with the local farmers focused on the operations of their farms as well as the different challenges being faced. Problems and issues that arose in the discussions centered on productivity and how to compete in the context of globalization and how to cope with AFTA considering the local production is 40 to 60% compared to the yield in neighboring Thailand. One of the leaders answered that to increase the yield to a potential competitive level, the application of fertilizer was recommended so as to lower the production cost. This got a strong reaction from us since most of us are advocates for sustainable agriculture wherein organic farming is a fundamental.

Perhaps one of the more striking experiences involved our integration with the Siamese farming community. The Thais are predominantly found around Tumpat, which is close to the Thai border. Most of them settled in Kelantan when it was under the sphere of the influence of Thailand. The Kelantanese Thais (or commonly called the Siamese community) are mainly involved in rice and tobacco farming. They have assimilated extremely well in the Kelantanese way of life. Their contributions towards Kelantanese culture can be seen in the arts (i.e. Menora and Wayang Kulit) and cultural performances (i.e. Siamese boxing). However in spite of these contributions, the Siamese farming communities remain to be largely marginalized and suffering from extreme poverty.

On the journey back to Shah Alam for the main conference, members of our group closely clutched our souvenir waw (local kite) as if in doing so, our significant days in Kelantan will go on. It was difficult to believe that goodbyes were exchanged. We will miss our warm foster families as much as we will miss Kelantan's rich quiet charms. Just like during our arrival a few days ago, hot and humid air bid us adieu. Selamat jalan!



## THE PERAK JOURNAL: Glimpses of the community integration

The group arrived in Bidor at around 10:00 AM and went to an Orang Asli village. An orientation about the village was given by one of its young leaders together with two elder women members. He guided us around the community. The village is predominantly planted to palm oil. The village people told us that it was originally a rubber plantation but with the decline in the world price of rubber, the community shifted to palm oil.

We were all amazed when they told us that they raise chicken but cannot afford to kill them. They instead sell the chicken alive at a low price and later buy it as dressed chicken at a higher price. We realized that indeed there are cultural practices beyond the logic and forces of economics. These cultural practices perhaps later would balance the materialistic tendencies as promoted by globalization. We also realized that indigenous practices tend to be eroded by mass media and thus leaders should be grounded on the cultural practices of its people so that they will be capable of embracing and articulating the beauty and uniqueness of their culture



In the afternoon, we proceeded to Cameron Highland. The vegetable farmer's group served a delicious meal. After a short introduction of the participants, the host organization gave a brief orientation about the community. Host families were asked to accompany the group to their respective homes.

The next day, we visited the farms of our foster families. Most of the farms were planted to vegetables and flowers. As advocates of sustainable agriculture, we felt sad seeing the farmers heavily dependent on chemicals and fertilizer. Most of the vegetable farmers complained of the proliferation of imported vegetables that make their local vegetable production highly vulnerable due to the low price of the imports. We were also very sad upon the sight of rows of rotten tomatoes. Farmers said that they decided not to harvest the tomato since its price is very low. They will incur more losses if they still spend for harvesting. In the afternoon, we visited the beautiful cactus valley where hundreds of different species of flowers and cactus are exhibited. We also visited the strawberry farm and the tea estate. In the evening, a farewell dinner was prepared and a debriefing session with the community leaders was held. We all expressed our gratitude to our host families. The vegetable farmers also asked some impressions and recommendations from our group. Among the suggestions presented by the group was the possible shifting to organic farming and food processing of tomato to gain additional value and competitiveness.



Kampung Kepayang was our next destination the next day and we arrived there at around lunch. The community cancelled the afternoon classes just to welcome the group. It was the first time in the history of the village that visitors from other countries came to their place. All the village leaders welcomed us with warmth and enthusiasm. The women's group in the kampung demonstrated to us how to make chili sauce. We also visited a family who showed us how to cook rice in bamboo. They also guided us to a cave, which is one of their local tourist attractions. In the evening, a bountiful dinner featuring local delicacies was served. Silat, local martial arts, was also presented. We found out that the kampung with the help of the local agriculture department have initiated efforts to preserve the agricultural portion of the village for vegetable production



After a long teary farewell with the members of Kampung Kepayang, the group proceeded to Kampung Titi Gantung. An orientation from the local Ministry of Agriculture was done. The group visited some paddy farms supported by the ministry through provision of seed and irrigation facilities.

In the afternoon, the highly modern rice complex at the Bernas Farm impressed us. The farm is around 8,000 hectares planted to paddy. Approximately, a 15-kilometer radius of paddy farm surrounds the complex. The operation is computerized thus requiring minimal labor. Drying and milling is fully automated. By-products from rice milling are processed into energy for electricity.

In the evening, we had a dinner meeting with leaders of Jawatankuasa Kecil (meaning Small Village Committee). They informed us of their concerns and plans. We also shared to them AsiaDHRRA's programs and plans particularly on rural community development.

The last place we visited was a small fishing community. The village chief guided us to the prawn farm as well as the bird nest farm. Telaga Nenas is a very small yet serene fishing village. The community provided the group a very good place to calm down and reflect on the eventful days of our community integration.



## SELANGOR JOURNAL:

### Glimpses of the community integration

**H**ave you seen or heard that advertisement on Malaysia? It says "Malaysia truly Asia." I never did really realized how much colorful Malaysia was until we visited the farming communities in the state of Selangor. Not only did we experienced Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures, we also got a good sampling of the political, social, economic and cultural influences that matter to small rural communities in a country as diverse as Malaysia.

In Bukit Tinggi, the Chinese Vegetable Farmers group showed their resilience against possible negative impact of trade liberalization on their livelihood. Proximity to the market, a strong Chinese business community that supports their products, a close knit membership-oriented organization and a hard working culture were four factors they noted that helped them overcome both economic and political challenges. Bukit Tinggi has an interesting land issue (farmers until now don't have tenurial security over the lands they till) that makes the farmers vulnerable not just to the impact of globalization but to the political dynamics in the area.

The very short stopover in an Orang Asli community in Kuala Kubu Baru gave a snap shot of the difficult lives led by the indigenous people. The farmlands they are allowed to cultivate are far from their homestead and off-season work and livelihood opportunities are few and still in the hands of rich entrepreneurs. Displacement is obviously present. Meanwhile, the fisherfolks cooperative in Tanjung Karang is an example of a seemingly successful Malay community organization. It is quasi government with key local officials assigned to hold top posts. It obviously then is a well-supported organization by the government. The leaders showed foresight and business acumen to keep up with the challenges of the new economies locally and outside. The involvement of and concern for their youth sector was noted as a key social element in the cooperative. The leadership dynamics of the cooperative as a people's initiative is however an interesting area to think about given the presence of government people at its helm.



The Agro Tourism homestay with the Malay community in Sungai Sireh in Tanjung Karang was most helpful perhaps at the individual level, i.e., whatever unique experience each participant got from their short stay with their host families. For me, it allowed for some cultural understanding and observations and fostered friendship among people of diverse background and aspirations.

The visit to projects and initiatives under the Ministry of Agriculture substantiated the conference



discussions about the government's agricultural policies and priorities. The much talked about benefits for the bumiputera were obviously seen in the generous assistance given to Malay families for start-up livelihood. It is good while it lasted, but even the Malay participants themselves raised the culture of over-dependence of most Malays to government subsidies.



However, a seed of hope was felt by us with the expressed openness among government people to interact with NGOs as shown by their warm accommodation during the visits. They also see the need for communities to be organized, especially small farmers that will be most affected by agricultural policy changes in the near future.

The People's Credit Cooperative Society in Taman Sri Berjuntai is a classic case of a successful people's initiative. It is very local yet with high standard qualities of leadership, including gender equity, and a clear development paradigm. This socio-economic alternative is a key contribution to uplift the lives of many marginalized members of the Malaysian Indian community. It has clear impact on the lives especially of estate-based people, given the insufficient attention and support they get from their government.

The People's Credit Cooperative Society in Taman Sri Berjuntai is a classic case of a successful people's initiative. It is very local yet with high standard qualities of leadership, including gender equity, and a clear development paradigm. This

The home stay in the Tennamaram Community in Batang Berjuntai though very short was different. An overnight stay barely provided opportunity for people to really interact but the physical presence in an estate community was already an experience for most. The early morning movements of people - children boarding school buses, elderly and middle-age people getting ready for plantation work, young workers and professionals off to office work in nearby town centers or the city - was a feeling and a sight that was enriching for those who managed to be up at dawn.

The visit also provided for us cultural, historical, and countryside experiences -- fireflies resort, bukit Fraser, Wildlife Park and reservation, and a Hindu festival. In effect it was also an alternative tourism experience, making us realize that Malaysia is not just Petronas Towers but a country of sceneries pleasing to the eyes and soul, of people warm to the spirit, and of cultural interplay enriching one's understanding.





"Building partnerships to develop leaders and communities in rural Asia"

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**Acknowledgement:**

The Malaysia leg of the Asian Farmers' Exchange Visit and the production of this monograph were made possible with the support of the ASEAN Foundation and countless generous local agricultural agencies, private enterprises, cooperatives and farmers' organizations in Malaysia. We would also like to extend our deepest gratitude to the members, staff and volunteers of ERA Consumer, FOMCA and DHRRA Network Malaysia.

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