

Migrants as Social Entrepreneurs in Papua New Guinea Smallholder Oil Palm Industry – by Emmanuel Germis

The escalating demand in the agriculturally based economic development of commercial perennial tree crop production in Papua New Guinea (PNG), and across the Pacific have pushed their traditional customary land regimes beyond their boundaries. This was done over a transition time-frame from traditional concepts of short-term annual cropping, of mainly food crops to semi-permanent farming of cash crops of oil palm, cocoa, coconut and coffee. This was done by outsiders on customary land belonging to others. Landowners perceived their customary land as inalienable and their main concern is, they may lose their land via the permanent cultivation of cash crops and settlement of migrants and their generations.

However, that was not the case with the migrant farmers in Gaungo and Morokea. These site specific farmers were the first migrants to access and settle on customary land to cultivate oil palm outside the state's recognized smallholder nucleus estates of Land Settlement scheme (LSS) and Village Oil Palm (VOP). This increasing group of farmers are social entrepreneurs and innovators that challenge risks in maintaining their access to customary land whilst building their livelihoods.

It is known that 97% of land in PNG is customarily owned and there is no such thing as "vacant or ownerless land" in PNG societies. People who are in desire to develop their livelihoods on customary land belonging to others have to seek approval and consent from individual and communal authorities. The semi-permanent cultivation of cash crops particularly oil palm in this case is no exception. Migrants take out land parcels via negotiations with landowners to establish smallholder oil palm blocks. The landowners grant user-rights to migrants with a common understanding based on embedded norm that their land is inalienable. The user-rights and security to maintain a secure livelihood is not fixed but is a continuous process. This process is anchored in highly flexible social relationships that are generally the same in most cases, whilst some are site specific. Figure 1 shows an adopted brotherhood relationship between a migrant farmer and his landowner brothers in Morokea maintaining their social relationship via regular discussions.

Other migrant farmers realised the need for basic community services and provided these services. This was to make their stance in maintaining social commitments

through providing these public goods and services. Some farmers remove part of their oil palm stands to build schools and churches, utilising their former work experience in providing leadership role, advice, knowledge and skills, and services to benefit landowners. They maintain good crop management practices as an opportunity to gain community recognition, respect and maintain a sustainable livelihood.



Figure 1. An East Sepik migrant farmer having discussion with his landowner brothers from Morokea.

The migrant farmer (Figure 2) is a retired health extension worker in Morokea. He identified the community need for health services, therefore, he used his former work experience to erect a semi-permanent Aid-post on his block to attend to sick children and adults before they are referred to a nearby clinic or health centre.



Figure 2. Migrant farmer (former health worker) providing basic health services to farmers and landowners.

In both Gaungo and Morokea, few farmers have portions of their oil palm stands removed and replaced with primary and elementary school classrooms (Figure 3). It is too distant for students from these areas to reach neighbouring primary or elementary schools. Therefore, establishing a school on the block secures the migrant farmer's livelihood and meets the community need.



Figure 3. Primary school built on suspended part of a migrant farmer's block at Gaungo

This is similar for other farmers who provide for Christian spiritual faiths. Part of their oil palm stands were taken off and replaced with church building for followers to come together and worship (Figure 4). This serves the mutual benefits amongst the community.



Figure 4. Church building built on suspended part of a migrant farmer's block at Gaungo

Others with business oriented perspectives identified the need for store goods, therefore, establish trade stores that sells a variety of goods that are mostly demanded by the surrounding community (Figure 5). Both migrant farmer (trade store business owners/operators) and the whole community benefited by; cutting down on travelling time and cost to and from Kimbe town. Furthermore, these trade store businesses serve landowners via contributing cash or goods to their ceremonial activities such as "*haus cries*" during death of someone.



Figure 5. Trade store established on portion of a migrant farmer's block

Several migrant farmers were model farmers who have acquired and maintained the best management practices of oil palm. They were eager to attend agronomic trainings, farmer extension field days and other smallholder sustainable livelihood trainings and workshops targeted towards a higher standard of oil palm production. Consequently, they generate adequate income to improve and increase their living standard and gain recognition and respect from other migrant farmers and the landowner community as a whole. Figure 6 shows a Best Management Practice Block (BMP) in Gaungo area.



Figure 6. Model BMP demonstration block at Gaungo

Therefore, apart from acquiring customary land for oil palm development, some migrant farmers ventured ahead of the rest by identifying the needs and wants of the migrant and landowner communities. These farmers innovatively created social and economic infrastructures to cater for and sustain the livelihood of migrant farmers.

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