

THE PROBLEM AND CHALLENGES FACED BY SARAWAK HANDICRAFT ENTREPRENEURS

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Abstracts

This study briefly discussed about the problem and challenges faced by Sarawak handicraft entrepreneurs such as forest-based products, textile products, metal-based products, ceramic products and assorted crafts in the state. It is based on my research carried out in the year 2011 till 2012. Most entrepreneurs that are involved in this research were registered under PerbadananKemajuanKraftangan Sarawak and Sarawak Craft Council by making handicraftsas full-time or part-time jobs. Some of them have been identified actively producing handicrafts in a big and small scale. Nevertheless, to develop and expand their products in the market, they encounter several problems and challenges, relatively to the lack of raw materials. This has been a very common issue highlighted by the entrepreneurs during this research is conducted since 2011. Besides that, few of the handicraft entrepreneurs in Sarawak have been identified to face with the lack of capital, long time of product completion, inadequate of technological equipment, market and customer demand, and so forth.

Keywords: Problem and challenges, handicraft products, raw materials.

INRODUCTION

Handicraft entrepreneurs in Sarawak, like other producer in Peninsular and Sabahfaced some problem and challenges which affects them from developing and expanding their business and crafts production regardless of their involvementin forest-based products, textiles, ceramics, iron and assorted crafts. Due to thelack of effective solutions to solve their problems, most entrepreneurs became inactive, end up taking part in agriculture activities such as palm-oil plantation.

Based on the result of my research, which have been divided into five categories namely forest-based products, textiles, ceramics, metal-based products and assorted craft reveals out their problem and challenges faced in the industry.

FOREST-BASED PRODUCTS

Entrepreneurs involved in forest-based products are known with the lack of raw material, especially for those who'sproducts ismade from rattan and *bemban*. Few years ago, rattans were easily found in the jungle, but some entrepreneurs admit that it is unlikely today. Basically, rattan that aged 8 years and above is the best to produce a high quality product.Therefore, entrepreneurs have to wait for a long period of time especially for those

who participated in raw material replanting projects under the Sarawak Craft Council. To solve the problem, some of them bought the raw material from a supplier to produce their products continuously.

The entrepreneurs whom used *bemban* (mats) in Kampung Sungei Buloh (Samarahan) and Mayang Tea (Serian) stated that it is very difficult to find in their village neither elsewhere, while entrepreneurs from Kampung Mayang Tea (Serian) states that the location of *bemban* is rather far from their village and it is difficult to obtain due to high tides by the river. Therefore, their productivity is affected and they can't fulfill customers demand for months.

Other than the insufficiency of raw materials, some producers added that due to the increase of market demand, weak working skills became a huge barrier to increase their productivity. Working skills is referring to the efficiency of making handicraft designs, by both entrepreneurs and their employees. The product designs is very important to increase their market which also to fulfill their customer needs and at the same time to promote their products globally.

Compared with rattan products, *bemban* took 3-4 months to mature naturally before it can be used for handicrafts. Unfortunately, there weren't many entrepreneurs took the initiative to replant *bemban* for future use. Unused terrain around the entrepreneurs house can be used for *bemban* cultivation because its nearer and can be harvested easily. If this method is practiced by all entrepreneurs, problems related to the lack of raw material especially *bemban* can be reduced.

The entrepreneurs whom produced products from *pandan* didn't face any problem with raw materials since *pandan* can be easily obtained around the village or nearby their houses which enables them to acquire it anytime. Obviously raw material is not a main problem for them. In addition, another problem has been stated in producing their products.

According to one of SDSI (Satu Daerah Satu Industri) entrepreneur program in Kampung Rengawan, Samarahan, lacking of capital and expert workers is the main problem to them. It is because bags made from *pandan* needs other materials such as fabric, leather, dye, and thread. Hence they need sufficient capital to support all the stated materials. Besides that, entrepreneurs have identified some of their employees weren't interested on creating nor designing the products and it contributes to the loss of productivity. Consequently, the market productions interrupted.

On the bright side, the entrepreneurs in Kampung Semera Ulu, Samarahan, didn't face any problems regarding to the lack of raw materials and the customer demand (local and overseas) of the products are higher compared with the other entrepreneurs and rather encouraging. However, to complete one unit of product (known as Begerang mats) is very time consuming which took months to produce. Due to that matter, they were unable to support customer demand in a huge number.

Lacking of raw materials can also be seen to affect the woodcarving entrepreneurs, especially the Belian wood which is very difficult to find. According to a producer in Kampung Stunggang Melayu, Lundu, the Belian wood isn't only very difficult to find, but they also have the difficulty entering the jungle, which needs them to go uphill and to transfer those woods, they must be physically strong to move it onto their vehicle to the workshop. Knowing that the price of Belian wood is very expensive, they must have sufficient capital to pay for wood suppliers. In addition, the entrepreneurs have inadequate technological equipment to produce good products because the price of the machinery tools is expensive.

The same thing happened to many woodcarving entrepreneurs in Sarawak, which according to them, the equipment to carve woods is limited because they have insufficient capital to buy it. They claimed that it is difficult to get loans from the government; bank or other agencies to support their business, hence forcing them to use their existing facilities without much help of technological support or with the latest equipment.

TEXTILE PRODUCTS

If the forest-based product confronted with the lack of raw material, the same thing happened to textile entrepreneurs in Sarawak such as Songket, Batik and Keringkam weavers. Most of textile entrepreneurs said that they are lacking of raw material, especially gold, silver and silk thread.

Entrepreneurs who made Songket Sarawak in Kampung Mang and Kampung Gedong, faced with the lack of raw material and in addition, the market demand from local society weren't so good. Based on research results, to get raw materials such as silk and gold thread is from a supplier in Terengganu and some other state in Peninsular because those threads are not available in the local market (Sarawak). To overcome the unavailability of local supply, the government agencies namely Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak have supplied the raw material (gold and silver thread) so that they can produce Sarawak Songket continuously. The initiative of government agencies helped them to solve problems related with raw materials. Nevertheless, they can't continuously depend on government support because in order to be successful in their business, they must be independent.

Normally, the Songket produced in Kampung Mang have been bought by some government agencies such as SALCRA, who have been helping them to prepare some of their needs in terms of raw materials and workshop facilities. For the local society, Songket made from gold, silver or silk thread costs more than the customer's own monthly income because the price is about thousands of Malaysian Ringgits (RM) and on top of the income factor, promotion-wise causes customers from local neither overseas doesn't acknowledge the location to get their hands on the product (especially in countryside area).

Besides that, some of Songket producers faced the same problem with their wholesaler to market the products. The wholesaler took quite some time to pay them back since they can only give them their payment if the specific item is sold to a customer. Sometimes, they have to wait for few months to get the money from the wholesaler. Their business runs slowly because to produce a new product, they have to have their capital to start. Nevertheless, that is the only easy way to bring their products to the market without much effort and at the same time, the entrepreneurs find their own customer to sell their products.

The entrepreneur that produces Batik encounters the same problems as other entrepreneurs. The basic material is Cotton, Satin, Linen and other fabrics, colouring dye and Sodium Silicate can only be ordered from Kuala Lumpur and Kelantan. Since they don't have their own shop to sell their products, they just sell it by the streets around Waterfront Kuching, especially during weekend.

Batik entrepreneurs in Sarawak added that they got less attention from government agencies to expand their business, which is actually a small scale product within the state. The related agencies gave more attention to other entrepreneurs while ignoring them running their business without lending a hand. In this case, the entrepreneur that have the

governments attention became more successful, and have participated in many promotional programs. In other words, the government guidance can be quite handy to enable an entrepreneur to achieve better success.

For Keringkam embroidery, an expert craftsman and active entrepreneurs is living within the minorities of Sarawak hence less products is produced. Furthermore, the embroidery products are known for how long it takes to produce it and the complicated process. The raw materials itself are costly because it requires silver and gold thread. The government agencies didn't support them with any capital or raw material, but only for an exhibition or promotion activities organized by related agencies like PerbadananKemajuanKraftangan Sarawak.

CERAMIC PRODUCTS

Some of ceramic producers in Sarawak have been identified to face with finishing product materials, rarity in Sarawak and the price increases along the time. According to Fuad Ariffin, Head of Research and Development Department PKKM, ceramic entrepreneurs under PKKM and SIRIM mostly ordered glaze from Klang because those kinds of material aren't available locally. Consequently, the entrepreneurs support their own shipping costs and have to wait for few weeks as the products are delivered by ship.

The ceramic entrepreneurs are also at risk with broken products during or after burning, or when those ceramics arrived at the buyer's doorstep. It is normal for some entrepreneurs who produce ceramics because ceramics are quite fragile. Consequently, the ceramics will be having a crack or be broken, which then became a less quality product. It has been affecting the entrepreneur's income and their time to reproduce it.



Plate 1: The ceramics must be handled carefully to avoid cracking or broken after burning process.

For long distance products delivery by using plane or ships, the products must be packed carefully to avoid from crack or worse, broken before it reached to its destination. Normally, a huge number of ceramics is delivered when the entrepreneurs joined any exhibition or promotion programs organized by PerbadananKemajuanKraftangan Malaysia or related agencies. Long distance journey from Sarawak to Peninsular is time consuming by sea, hence the percentage of the products to be damaged is higher. The air transportation

aren't entrepreneurs favourite since it costs more than other transportations available but less prone to problems of damaged goods.

Alongside with the other entrepreneurs, they are having problems with capitals and hoped that government agencies would financially provide them to ease their difficulties. Most of ceramic entrepreneurs under SIRIM and Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak didn't have their own burning machine to produce ceramics. They fully depended on the facilities provided by SIRIM and PKKM. The machinery tools are quite expensive and the entrepreneurs couldn't buy it due to insufficient capital.

METAL-BASED PRODUCTS

In this research, most craftsman of the metal-based product produces Parang Melayu, Parang Ilang and Parang Limbang. Based on Strategic Development of Sarawak Bumiputera Entrepreneurs (2012) reports, not even one have ever registered under Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak whom produced products from silver and copper. Therefore, research are mainly on the blade or *Parang* made by Sarawak handicraft entrepreneurs.

Based on my interview with *Parang* entrepreneurs, most of them faced with the lack of raw material, especially wood to make hilt and sheath. According to the Parang Melayu entrepreneurs in Samarahan, the supplier couldn't supply appropriate woods continuously because it was hard to find in the jungle. Furthermore, the forest near the village mostly cultivated with palm-oil plantation and it caused the number of woods to decrease.

Some of the *Parang* entrepreneurs made hilt and sheath from the type of wood that can't be found in Sarawak forest namely Cendana woods. According to entrepreneurs, that kind of wood is obtained from Brunei castle area and has been bought with high price. Price of Cendana seed is worth over than thousands of Ringgit. To fulfill customers and market demands, entrepreneurs bought that kind of wood from outside suppliers.



Plate 2: Parang Limbang uses beautiful vein and colored woods to make hilt and sheath.

Besides that, the entrepreneurs are known with the lack of appropriate technological equipment to produce their products. They are in need of the latest technological machinery equipments to facilitate them in the workshop, but the price is too expensive and they couldn't afford it. Inadequate of technological equipment in their workshop caused the

process of product making became slow and couldn't fulfill their customer demands. Consequently, most of them that have been interviewed didn't advertise their products on the internet because they're worried that they couldn't fulfill their customers order on time.

ASSORTED CRAFTS

Another handicrafts entrepreneur in this research was made which is assorted crafts, such as beads and snails. Compared to forest-based products, ceramic, iron and textile entrepreneurs, most of them didn't face with any lack of raw materials. Nevertheless, we found another problem faced by the entrepreneurs.

According to one entrepreneur whom produces snail craft in Sematan, the problem was inadequate of appropriate equipment to make more of their products to be designed. Their purpose is to diversify more designs and inventions based on the availability of raw materials, except for previously designed products which is to attract customers and to increase the market demands. Few years ago, Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak sent their officer and staff into certain villages to help them create more designs of snail crafts to make it more interesting, valuable and also to increase the quality of the products. The observation has been executed at the entrepreneur's house, which they discovered that they weren't much using technological equipment to make such products, but they are more to handling skills to arrange, to form, and to design their products.

According to Zaidi Mat, a staff of Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak (R&D Department), he said that the entrepreneurs of snail crafting previously uses the good shell of a snail to produce handicraft products, while those with cracks or even broken shells have been disposed because it isn't suitable for the use of handicraft. The R&D staff from PKKM introduced them the new technique to be used as it turns the broken and cracked shells to be as useful as the good ones, which is to turn it into a decoration around the snail crafts. It was important to avoid raw materials wastage, at the same time to add values of the products.



Plate 3: Broken snails placed together around the good snail.

Besides that, some entrepreneurs are informed to have problems related with their capitals to expand and develop their business. They need some capitals to buy raw materials and other equipment to diversify snail craft designed. For other entrepreneurs, they collected the shells along the beach by themselves and brought it to their workshop by motorcycle. The initiative reduces the purchase of raw material and retailer services.

The snail crafts entrepreneurs have also been identified to face with the marketing problems. Based on my observation, some of them have never participated in any promotional activities held by the government or non-government agencies in the state or abroad. In fact, some of them have been given irrational reason such as illiterate if their customers asked to write something in transactions. Previously, the entrepreneurs sold their products to the Chinese shops or several regular customers. Lack of promotion caused their products can't be recognized by customers and the market demands have also decreased. The Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak informed them to join the Malaysian Craft Promotion in May 2013 at Miri. For the first time to them, the market demand have been claimed to be one good action made and many products have been sold.

The assorted craft entrepreneurs bought the raw materials (beads for example) from retailers and created their own designs based on their desire and creativity. For example, they bought pearls from Sabah because they manufactured a lot of pearl in the state. If they bought in the high quantity, shipped or brought by their own, the cost was quite expensive. The needs of experts are very important to make the best product, and at the same time they have their own creativity to improve products quality.

Some of them highlighted that the transportation and lodging as a problem in the industry. They considered about the costs if they wanted to participate in any promotions organized by the government or non-government agencies in the state (Sarawak) or peninsular, especially transportation and lodging costs. For example, the entrepreneurs who joined crafting promotional event in Miri, they considered about the costs of transportation, lodging, lunch, dinner and other things. They supported all the stated cost by themselves depending on how long the promotion is held. If their business runs smoothly and got much profit, it was fine to them or otherwise it will only ruin their business.

CONCLUSION

Handicraft making existed in Sarawak for a long time ago. Certain ethnics involved in the activity as a part of their life, leisure activity or part-time jobs. At the time, the government didn't give much attention to handicrafts as the economic aspect for the community, but as a cultural products or cultural value. In 1979, the government was the founder of Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia and it held many programs and activities to develop handicraft as a cultural product and economical aspect. Sarawak government has two agencies to develop handicrafts in the state, namely Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Sarawak and Sarawak Craft Council. Based on the report of Strategic Development of Sarawak Bumiputera Entrepreneurs (2012), there are about 1470 handicraft entrepreneurs registered in the state. Nevertheless, the numbers of active entrepreneurs that are still making handicrafts as their main source of income is still in the circle of the minorities of Sarawak. In fact, some of them didn't produce more handicrafts products after they got involved and got much profit in palm-oil plantation, besides the issues mentioned above. Therefore, the government and non-government agencies have to find out another solution to develop handicraft industry in Sarawak, at the same time to preserve our cultural products.

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