

Final Report —Activity Report—

Follow up on Japanese Voluntary Project on Fire Disaster Prevention Programs in Rajang River, Sarawak

The Asia Volunteer Society (AVC) together with Sakai Inter Youth Group conducted a three years voluntary project at Rajang River from year 2006 until 2009. The project was initiated by Mr Arakawa Tomo, a fireman based in Osaka Sakai City. The local host was Society of Christian Service (SCS) led by Mr Fabian Ajah Anak Saging. Professor Soda of Osaka City University arranged the meeting with the intention of learning from a community based project about fire prevention awareness. The project was held for three consecutive years at 3 longhouses along Rajang River. Such project is an important platform for researchers to gauge the effectiveness of community based programs introduced by Japanese voluntary groups, especially in the case of Sarawak whereby Japanese NGO are seldom heard of. The discussion was held on 21st May 2018 at Sakai Tomioka Primary School with teacher Mr Yasukawa and Inter Youth Sakai City chairman, Mr Shiramoto and staff, Mr Takada.

Professor Soda and I were given a project overview on the participants, longhouses, activities conducted throughout the three years (Figure 1). The project took place at three longhouses which are located approximately 20-30 minutes by boat from Sibu town. Rumah Unjah is located along Rajang main river while Rumah Seli and Rumah Riyang are located on a tributary river named Sungai Lengan. All the three longhouses had a few encounters with fire in the last decade. The most severe fire disaster happened to Rumah Unjah in 2005 when all its 400 occupants were left homeless overnight. The project was carried out to assess the problems faced by the communities in the event of fire disasters. From the assessment conducted in the first year, the team came up with subsequent program to address the issues and to also provide the needs of the community to be better prepared during fire disasters.



Figure 1 : Overview of three years project at Rajang River by Inter Youth Sakai City chairman, Mr Shiramoto and Mr Yasukawa.



Figure 2 : Meeting session arranged by Professor Soda of Osaka City University at Sakai Tomioka Primary School

Among the activities conducted at the longhouses were the distribution of 20 fire extinguishers and hands-on practice in using the fire extinguisher. Almost every villager from children to women and men were taught the skills in handling fire extinguisher and to put out fire using the equipment (Figure 3). Since majority of longhouses in the area are located by the river, the youth group was testing out if ‘Bucket Drill’ is a good method for fire prevention. Villagers lined up from riverbank to longhouse with buckets filled with water. The last person splash out the water towards the area of fire. School children at the longhouses were also involved in preparing posters and tags that illustrate the danger of fire occurrences. The materials such as colour pencils, magic inks, cardboards were provided by the project and the illustrations and signage in Iban language was collaboratively prepared between project members from Japan and school children of the longhouses. It is an effective way in creating greater awareness among the younger generation of the longhouse community.



Figure 3: A hands-on session whereby villagers put out fire using fire extinguisher



Figure 4: “Bucket drill” with villagers passing buckets of water as a method to extinguish fire

The Inter Youth project at Rajang river has been carried out successfully. Mr Arakawa Tomo who spearheaded the project has since retired from the fire department and moved back to his hometown in Hiroshima. Mr Fabian Ajah has also retired from servicing the Christian Society NGO. Professor Soda and I were fortunate to meet Mr Fabian in Kuching on 2nd September 2018. We discussed about the present situation of the three longhouses and disaster prevention programs conducted by the government authorities. According to Mr Fabian, disaster awareness in the longhouses are better as compared to other places. Although it has been almost a decade, longhouse folks still have vivid and fond memories of the activities conducted together with the Japanese voluntary group. “It is actually not too much to say, our longhouse folks are better informed and prepared to tackle fire disaster” said Mr Fabian. He is grateful to Mr Arakawa for his unwavering support and advice. He is also thankful on behalf of the longhouse communities for the financial support from Asia Volunteer Society and Inter Youth Group. Such program proves to an effective approach for community capacity building in tackling fire disasters. While the authorities could initiate many programs for disaster mitigation purpose, activities that are engaging and hands-on which involved entire community prove to yield the best outcome. Disaster awareness is crucial in preparing community towards disasters. As the local saying goes, “Malang tidak berbau”. Disaster strikes at any time and without predication. The only way is to equip the community with the necessary awareness and knowledge. With awareness and knowledge, the community has gained confident in executing ways to extinguish fire themselves and not just relying for the fire brigade to arrive. Japanese government has learned from its many encounters with disasters that community that is able to help each other recovers the fastest and suffer the least effect. The disaster management authorities work towards enhancing the principle of “Self-help, Mutual help and Public help”. In Sarawak’s case, infrastructure such as roads, electricity is still not sufficient and especially for the case of riverine communities. If each community can be empowered with the basic knowledge and better awareness, the community can assist in each other in the event of disasters. Sarawak is a huge state and its population is sparsely located. The government authorities has limited resources and manpower to reach out to every community. The kind gesture of Japanese voluntary groups with such noble project has indeed benefited our people. Thank you to the voluntary groups.



Figure 5: With Mr Fabian Ajah discussing about Japanese voluntary project at Rajang River