



INVISIBLE PEOPLE

POVERTY AND EMPOWERMENT
IN INDONESIA

presented by PNPM Mandiri —
Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment

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Sarimukti, Garut, West Java

THE AGRICULTURAL LABORERS' SCHOOL

Most of the villagers in the hillside hamlet of Sarimukti in Garut, West Java, are small landholders or landless day-laborers, growing and harvesting cabbages, potatoes, and tomatoes on land belonging to someone else. Depending on their age and gender, they are paid between Rp 8,000 to Rp 15,000 for a day's work in the fields – less than two dollars a day.

Cultivation of the dry, rocky land in the hills is both labor- and capital-intensive. In the area around Sarimukti, vegetable production employs almost 300 workers per day per hectare. The cultivation of land requires significant outlays for fertilizer and pesticides. The price of the day-laborers' crops is extremely unstable. In 2003, the first year that the Sururon School opened, the price of tomatoes fell from Rp 4,500 per kilo in January to Rp 200 per kilo in July.

The distribution of land in the area is uneven, with a small number of larger land holders and state and private companies owning large patches of production and protected forest. In Sarimukti, one family alone owns 56 hectares of land, in a plantation employing 160 workers. On the border of the village are huge stretches of forest claimed by the State Forest Corporation (SFC). Ownership of this land is hotly debated. Since 2000, villages have cleared and cultivated more than 300 hectares of it, claiming traditional and customary rights of ownership, which has brought them into protracted conflict with the corporation.

The dispute reached a climax in August and September of 2003. At this time, the West Java regional police, a mobile brigade unit, the Garut police, the SFC officials, and officials of the Regional Natural Resource Conservation Bureau conducted a joint operation to evict day-laborers from production forests, protected forests, and conservation areas that they had occupied for years. On August 12, 2003, officials armed with rifles, pistols, and local maps set up tents in the areas around Sarimukti. In the evictions and protests that followed, more than 600 local residents were detained.

During the conflict with the SFC, the residents of the areas had organized themselves into local farmers' groups with the support of the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union, an organization advocating land reform and redistribution on large plantations and state forests. In many of the union meetings involving both the farmers from the district and activists from across Garut, an issue that was constantly raised was that local farmers simply didn't have the education and knowledge they needed to organize themselves. They didn't understand legal and official procedures and couldn't read or write official letters. Many were unable to read and write at all.

Before 2003, less than 10% of villagers received a high school education. Sarimukti is located in a relatively remote district, at least half an hour by motorbike from the town where, until 2003, the closest high schools were located. The cost of transportation, books, and uniforms meant attendance at these schools was limited to the richest children in the village. In addition to these obstacles, there were strong social expectations that after puberty, children should start working to earn money for their families. In many cases, the income provided by child agricultural laborers was vital to a family's survival.

At union meetings during the conflict, villagers asked activists to lobby the government to establish more accessible high schools so that poor children could attend school. When this approach seemed unlikely to succeed, the activists suggested that the village establish its own school, in facilities provided by the local pesantren. In 2003, the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union and the villagers established the Madrasah Tsanawiah Sururon.

In 2003, during a conflict over land rights, the small landholders and landless day-laborers in Sarimukti decided they needed a school. Without government support or funding, they worked with a day-laborers' union to establish their own.

Initially, the school occupied ramshackle buildings, with no chairs or tables and virtually no books. Teachers used materials provided by the education department for home study. Many of the teachers at the school were union activists without formal qualifications. Many themselves had only high school or junior high school certificates. In the first few years of operation, some of the volunteer teachers were completing senior school certification through a home study program while they taught students in the junior school.

Established in the context of the land dispute and taught by land-rights activists, the school places a strong emphasis on developing students' abilities to organize themselves and advocate their political rights. Students are encouraged to work together in groups to solve school problems together. They conduct self-evaluations in peer groups. They are encouraged to present complaints and suggestions to their teachers and discuss them frankly.

The Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union unapologetically admits that creating such cadres is a major goal of the school. As head teacher Ridwan Syaefuddin, known as Pak Inceu, says, "The goal of the union is to produce a generation of students who can provide leadership in the village. We don't want the students who graduate to move away to the cities to find jobs. We want them to study and then work to build up their own village." This message is strongly indoctrinated during classes.

Many of the students have responded. The first class graduated from junior high school in 2006. With the support of the union, many went on to attend senior high school in Garut. Most of these students return to Sarimukti to serve as volunteer teachers, even while they are completing their own studies. Others are active in union and land-rights activities. Some have developed plans to create cooperatives and collectives to improve the position of other villagers.

In 2008, following the success of the Madrasah Tsanawiah Sururon, an alternative Agricultural High School was established by the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union and local villagers to allow children to complete senior high school without traveling to Garut.







Siti Halimah

My Last Day of School

I still remember clearly, three years ago
 We poor, naïve farmer kids started our days of learning.
 Our teachers guide us when we study.
 We learn with compassion, commitment, and patience.

Not long after, a storm of violence struck Sarimukti village
 The Wanalaga Lodaya Operation.
 Half of us stopped going to school
 To help lift our parents' economic burden.
 A lot of us became laborers,
 Scraping for food.
 Some went to the city to take care of their younger siblings.
 They didn't get to enjoy being at school.
 Their future was formless,
 Which broke our hearts.
 The government didn't care about their future.
 They didn't even ask about it.
 We, the third grade students, are grateful that we survived
 Until now, moments before we say goodbye at this school.

We learned and were introduced to discussion.
 We learned to be open-minded and democratic.
 In this school we are familiar with evaluation.
 When there's a problem we learn how to solve it.
 It's priceless for our future.
 We still remember how three years ago,
 Together with our teachers, we carried sand and rocks
 from the Cipandai River to build the basketball court.

We held it on our shoulders, above our laughter.
 Our teachers mixed the cement.
 With teamwork, our basketball court was finally finished.
 At the same time,
 We, together with the community, carried sand and rocks from the river
 To build roads.

It is even harder to say goodbye when we think about
 what will become of us.
 Three years ago, if this school weren't here,
 maybe we'd have become laborers,
 Or gone to the city or gotten married.
 Maybe the primary school graduates among us
 who couldn't read still wouldn't be able to read today.
 If this school weren't here,
 we would have to pay a lot of money
 To attend the nearest high school –
 If we could afford it.
 We, our parents, and the community were really helped.
 I cannot help but shed a tear
 On this farewell night....



With no chairs and few tables, the children of the Sarimukti school sit on the floor while they study.

Ai Anti Srimayanti

I'm proud of my school. Even though the classrooms are flimsy and makeshift, and we have more than fifty students in each class, we have our own school now. We can show the world that even though we are just poor village children, we can finish school and win our certificates. Before this school was built, practically no one went past primary school.

The teachers all come from Garut or from this village. The first generation of students from this school graduated last year. Every single one of them passed their national examinations. Some of them have gone on to study at the Agricultural College in Tasik.

They all come back here to teach on their holidays or when they have free time. The teachers always tell us that no one else is going to make this village a better place for us if we don't do it ourselves. They say that even though it may be hard for us to finish school, we can do it if we try. They know it's difficult. When we tell them we need to leave school to earn money for our families, they understand. They just tell us that we'll be able to do more for our families if we finish school first. If we finish school, we'll be able to come back and help bring the whole village forward. We make a promise that when we graduate, we won't just forget about the village, we'll come back and help the ones who are still left here. That's why the graduates who are going on with their education come back to teach us. They made a promise.

My two favorite subjects are moral education and organizational skills. Pak Inceu teaches organizational skills. He's a very good teacher. I like the way he tells us stories about when he played in a band. He tells us how he organized a group of musicians to get the government to build a hall. He always tells us that if we try to do something by ourselves, we'll never succeed, but if we work together as a group we can accomplish anything we want. If people work together as a group, they are much stronger than if they just work by themselves.

One of the school projects involves a block of land in front of the school. We are using it to try to grow different crops. My father laughs at me and says that I don't have to go to school to learn how to plant vegetables, but it's different. We try crops that no one around here has tried yet, just to see if they grow or not. Maybe we'll be able to use the project to discover new crops that make more money than tomatoes and potatoes. Maybe we'll be able to help the village by teaching them something new. I don't know. We've only just started the project and haven't got anything to show for it yet.

It doesn't cost anything to study here. Still, it's difficult, particularly for girls. I'm lucky. My mother encourages me to go to school. She says if I graduate, at least we'll have one person in the family with a high school certificate. Neither she nor my father finished primary school.

Some of the girls in my class have trouble. Around here, people say there's no point in a girl getting lots of education, as she's just going to end up in the kitchen anyway. I'm fourteen years old now. Almost all the girls that I studied with at primary school are married now. A lot of them already have a baby. Some have two babies. I'm practically the only one that isn't married yet.

I've got six brothers and sisters. I'm often late coming to school because I have to do all the washing and cleaning at home before I come. Sometimes my mother isn't well, so I have to help her. If I'm late, the teachers don't get angry. I tell them why I can't come on time, and they understand.

The teachers here aren't like those at other schools. There isn't a huge difference between them and us. Some of them used to be our seniors in the

"Don't look down on us just because we are poor people from the village. We can achieve just as much as people in the city if you give us the chance."

Ai Anti Srimayanti takes the lead role in a class, teaching students how to write a formal letter to government authorities and other bodies.



same school. If we tell them about our problems, they understand. The ones who are studying at college in Tasik tell us about life in the big town. When I listen to them, I want to go to college, too. I want to grow up to be like them. I want to go to college and come back here to be a teacher.

I'm not in a hurry to get married or have a family. I want to be a career woman. When I finish my studies, I want to come back to the village to help organize the farmers into cooperatives. I think small farmers in my village are the victims of capitalism. They can't defend themselves because they aren't united. They don't have any bargaining power in the face of capital. At the moment, the small farmers here are completely passive in the face of price fluctuations. If the price of tomatoes goes down, then their income for a whole year may drop to practically nothing. Sometimes, the tomatoes go rotten in the garden because they are hardly worth picking and taking down to the market.

You said you're going to put my story into a book. I'd just like to say one thing to the people who read the book: Don't look down on us just because we are poor people from the village. We can achieve just as much as people in the city if you give us the chance.

In rural areas of West Java most women, including Ai Anti Srimayanti and her classmates, wear headscarves.



Heri Ridwani

“Even though school is free, it’s still very difficult. It’s really difficult for me. I want to finish school, but I don’t want to be a burden on my family.”

I’m fifteen years old. I’m in the third class of junior high school. I’ve got two older brothers and one older sister. None of them went to high school. When they were younger, the Sururon School didn’t exist, so they didn’t have a chance to go to school. Before this school was here, if you wanted to go on to high school, you had to go to Garut. It costs Rp 14,000 to pay someone to take you there and back on a motorbike. That was more than my family could afford.

One of my brothers tried to do the government’s “Packet B” home-study program to get a junior high school equivalency, but he didn’t finish it. He tried to study in the primary school building. One or two of the primary school teachers tried to help him, but they didn’t have much time to spare. In the end, he dropped out. Before the Sururon School, practically no one went on from primary to secondary school. Out of sixty kids in primary school, maybe just two or three went on to high school.

I want to finish school if I can. It’s still really difficult, even though there are no fees now. This school is different from other schools: if we can’t afford to buy a uniform, the teachers tell us not to worry. Pak Inceu told us not to feel ashamed if we aren’t wearing shoes or if our uniform is old and torn. He says what’s in our heads is more important than what we are wearing. The buttons have come off my school shirt, so I came to school in a T-shirt today.

We don’t have any chairs and desks in our classroom. We just sit on the floor.



We have a very large class. There are fifty students in my class and only one teacher. Instead of sitting in rows facing the teacher and the blackboard, we sit in small groups. We are allowed to talk to each other and help each other do our schoolwork. If there's one kid in a group who is good in one subject, then he or she helps the others. My favorite subject is biology. If the other kids in my class are having trouble with their biology lessons, then I go through the problem with them. If a teacher comes late or doesn't turn up, then we usually study by ourselves from our books, with the stronger kids leading the weaker ones.

I really like the biology teacher. He doesn't just come into the classroom and start writing on the whiteboard. He talks to us and encourages us. If we're having problems with school, we can tell him about it. Even if we're having a personal problem, we can talk to him about it. If kids can't come to school because they have to work in the fields or don't have money to buy books, they can talk about it with the teachers. They're like older brothers and sisters.

If we think that a teacher has done something wrong, we can tell them straight to their faces. If a teacher doesn't come to a class, we can raise our hands and ask why they didn't come. If students are embarrassed to put up their hands, they can write down their criticisms on a piece of paper and put it into the suggestion box. Usually, the criticisms are put up on the public notice board. The teachers always talk to us when we make criticisms. The teachers don't give us grades or a ranking, as that makes some students think they're better than the others. In our classes, the smart kids are deliberately separated and mixed in with all the others so that we can all help each other.

We don't get grades, but we do a lot of evaluations by ourselves. The students in each class have monthly evaluations. It's just the students by themselves, without the teacher. We talk about which students are having problems and why. Each class has a chairperson, a treasurer, and a secretary. Then there are section heads: there is an equipment section, a security section, an education section, and a cleaning section. I used to be the class chair, but I'm concentrating on my final exams now. I'm still the head of the educational section, though. We set up that class organization ourselves. The teachers told us to decide for ourselves how we wanted to do it, and to talk about it with them afterwards.

We just did an evaluation yesterday. There is one student who is having trouble. He often doesn't come to school, and when the teacher doesn't come to class, he always goes straight home. Everyone else stays and goes on studying. But if one student goes home, then all the others want to go home, too. It's not good for the class morale. So a few of the students went to his home to talk to him. He says he has a lot of family problems at the moment. He says he's having trouble paying for his books and that his parents don't want him to go to school. I think he's just lazy.

We can borrow books from the school library. I manage to pay for my own uniform and my own books with the money I earn working in the fields. If I have any money left over, I give it to my mother. On Sundays and on other holidays, I work in the fields for Rp 12,000 per day. Sometimes I work after school too, if I have time.

My family supports me, but it's difficult for them. My family has a small patch of land. We grow cauliflower, tomatoes, potatoes, and chilies. Most of the time my mother and father work on our land, but sometimes they work for other people for wages. Women get paid Rp 10,000 a day for working in the fields. Men get paid Rp 15,000. My family doesn't have a lot of extra money.



Dani

I started studying at the Sururon School in 2003, the year that it opened. In 2006, 35 of us sat for the national junior high school examinations. Every single one of us passed. When I graduated, the senior school hadn't opened yet. Together with six other students from my year, I went on to study at the Senior Agricultural High School in Garut. Some of the other students in my year studied elsewhere. Some went to *pesantren*, others got married.

The Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union paid some of my school fees in the first year. My family paid the rest. My father works for a Chevron reforestation project, so our family is a little bit better off than some of the others. Even so, neither of my parents finished high school. They both work on the land. In Garut, I slept on the floor of the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union secretariat with the other students. We usually ate at the secretariat. When we weren't studying, we were involved in union activities, advocacy actions, and land disputes. Sometimes we went to demonstrations and meetings.

Some of the teachers in Garut really looked down on students in the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union. One woman teacher told me that I was still too young to get involved in politics. She told me that I should concentrate on my studies. When I asked for permission to take half a day off to attend a union meeting in the first year, she cried in front of the class. She told all the other teachers I was a troublemaker. It was just like the New Order, when students weren't allowed to organize on campuses. The teachers at the high school in Garut wanted to be treated like gods. They hated the union students for talking back to them. It was like they thought we were getting above ourselves. After the school in the village, we had to adapt to a new way of dealing with teachers.

The teachers' attitudes began to change when we showed them we could achieve good results. At the end of the first year, four of the union students were in the top ten for the year, which meant that they got a full scholarship for the next year's school fees. Ami, who was in the same year as me, came in at the top of the year. The teachers started treating her better after that. In that year, I was elected by the other students to be the chair of the inter-school students committee. I often had to deal with the head of the school and the senior teachers. They were mostly OK with us; it was just a few of the teachers who had a problem. But when they saw that we were being productive, their attitudes changed.

Their attitudes really changed in 2007, after the competition in Kalimantan. Earlier that year, the school head selected a team to take part in an Environmentally Friendly Agriculture competition. Most of the union students were on the team. We prepared a presentation on the use of multiple crops to reduce damage without pesticide. The team from the Garut school won the competition at the district level. We went on to take part in the same competition at the provincial level and then at the national level in Kalimantan. Our school won.

After that, the teachers accepted us completely. Our winning the competition made the school look good.

As part of our presentation, we did a small pilot study in a garden in Garut, but the system has never been implemented in our village. Farmers tend to be scared of new ideas unless they really believe that they'll work. In the future, I'd like to set up a garden for pilot studies in the village. If we could demonstrate that the idea worked, the farmers might try it on their own land.

"One woman teacher told me that I was still too young to get involved in politics. The teachers at the high school hated the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union students for talking back to them."

Dani often sleeps at the local Sundanese Day-Laborers' office. The union advocates for the rights of poor farmers and landless laborers in the West Java region.



Inceu

I never thought I was going to be a teacher. My father was a primary school teacher. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but I always told him I wanted to be an entertainer in a band. And now I'm a teacher, just like he was. When I finished high school, I joined a band. I enrolled in university, but I never attended. I just wanted to play music.

I was a singer in a band in Garut. We never had anywhere to play. Even if people wanted to hold a party and hire a band, the meeting halls were too expensive for anyone here. I joined with a bunch of other musicians to lobby the local government to build a place where bands could practice and play. That was the first time I got involved in organizing people to work together to get what they wanted.

In Garut I got involved with other activists. I became involved in social issues as an advocate for poor farmers. They grew vegetables on their own small plots of land or worked as agricultural day-laborers. Most of them never went past primary school. With other activists, I got involved as an advocate in land disputes. A lot of land titles around here aren't clear, so some small farmers hold an uncertain right to their land. Sometimes land is owned by the government, but it's been farmed for generations.

I worked with an organization of poor farmers called the Sundanese Day-Laborers' Union. One of the issues that always came up at union meetings was education. At meetings, the farmers often felt frustrated that they couldn't read official documents and didn't know how to deal with the government. People felt that their lack of education was an obstacle to moving forward, and they wanted something better for their children. Their lack of education made it difficult for them to organize themselves. There was hardly anyone who could play a leadership role. A few years ago, the position of village head became vacant. It stayed vacant for three years, because there's a regulation that a village head has to have a high school certificate, and there wasn't anyone available with that qualification.

The villagers felt their lack of education as a burden. At the same time, they couldn't afford to send their children to school in town. It was too far away, and transport cost too much. They didn't have the money to buy their children school uniforms. They couldn't afford to lose a strong young member of the family working on their land.

Since the government wasn't responding to the people's needs, the union agreed to work with the community to set up a junior high school and a senior high school. In Sarimukti, the people in the community had worked with the union before. The land uphill from the village belongs to the forestry department, but people from the village have been farming it for generations. They've put a lot of hard work and resources into their farms, but the title to the land is unclear. The union was involved with advocacy for the rights of the farmers on that land. During the process, the union activists got to be close to the managers of the village *pesantren*. The *pesantren* asked the union to help set up a school so that children could get their high school certificates, and offered the use of the *pesantren* buildings and other basic facilities.

Like I said, I never thought I'd be a teacher. I don't have any formal training in education. I wasn't sure that I was suited to it or that I could even do it. We didn't have any books or chairs or tables when we started. There was no money for salaries, so all the teachers were volunteers. Most of us have a high school education at most. At the beginning, in 2003, we used material from the education department's correspondence courses. Later, we acquired a small library of

"Formal qualifications aren't the most important thing. It's far more important that teachers have a passion to help their students."

books and some blackboards. We got accredited as an educational institution so we could conduct national exams here.

When I began, I realized that formal qualifications aren't the most important thing. It's far more important that teachers have a passion to help their students. They have to work with them to encourage and inspire them. They have to be able to understand where they come from and what their problems are. The volunteers all come from the same background as the students themselves, so there's no distance between the students and the teachers. They know we're just the same as them.

Students here feel that they can criticize their teachers. They do it respectfully, but if they have a complaint, they can bring it up at the school. We encourage the students to complain and argue with the teachers, if they have a good reason. Those are the skills we want to encourage. We want students to be able to work together to organize themselves, so if they have a problem with the school, they can present their case collectively.

The goal of the union is to produce a generation of students who can provide leadership in the village. We don't want the students who graduate to move away to the cities to find jobs. If that happened, the only people left in the village would be babies and old men. We want them to study and then work to build up their own village. The school opened the first grade of junior high school in 2003, so the first generation of students has just made its way through to the end of senior high school. Six of them have gone on to study at agricultural colleges and other institutions, most on full scholarships. They all come back to the village when they can. They all help teach in the school.



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This book was sponsored by the PNPM Mandiri program. The goal of PNPM Mandiri, Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment, is to reduce poverty. PNPM Mandiri was established by the Indonesian government in 2007 to act as an umbrella for a number of pre-existing community-driven development programs, including the Urban Poverty Program and the Kecamatan Development Program, as well as a number of other community-based programs that were managed by nineteen technical ministries. By 2009, PNPM Mandiri was operating in every subdistrict in Indonesia.

PNPM Mandiri is committed to increasing the participation of all community members in the development process, including the poor, women's groups, indigenous communities, and other groups that have not been fully involved in the development process. *Invisible People* is one way that PNPM Mandiri can reflect on ways to better include marginalized and excluded groups in development.

Bilateral and multilateral assistance for the PNPM Mandiri program has been forthcoming from a number of donor agencies. The PNPM Support Facility (PSF) was established by the Indonesian government as a means of facilitating the contributions of international donors that support PNPM Mandiri. Contributors to the PSF currently include Australia, Denmark, the European Community, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. PSF provided financial and other support for the publication of *Invisible People*, in order to raise awareness of the special needs and aspirations of marginalized and excluded groups.

We would like to thank the people who sat down to tell their stories and put their lives on public display for the publication of this book. Across the country, the people who were approached were amazingly open about the most personal details of their lives, their problems, their hopes, and their aspirations.

When they collected these stories, Irfan Kortschak and Poriaman Sitanggang explained the purpose of the project and sought the consent of all subjects. The subjects told their stories, often over several days and during several meetings, after which Irfan attempted to recreate their words in a first-person account that conveyed the individual's ideas, feelings, and voice. In a few cases, subjects wrote their own stories in their own words, which were then edited with the subject and translated. When possible, Irfan provided a written account to the subject so that he or she could check and reconfirm that the account was an accurate representation. Otherwise, he discussed it with them. Subjects were reminded that their accounts would be published and asked to be certain that they had no objection to this. Irfan apologizes if despite this process, inaccuracies or misrepresentations have slipped into the text.

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