

Palm-Juice Tappers Trapped by Loans

Agus Maryono , The Jakarta Post , Purwokerto | Fri, 06/13/2008 10:04 AM | Java Brew

Kirno climbed up the coconut tree with little difficulty, his muscular legs moving agilely.

A short while later he was perched at the top of the tree and then used his knife to cut off the tips of the coconut flowers found atop.

Kirno's family relies on the tips of these coconut flowers, called Maggar in the local Banyumas dialect, in which drops of coconut palm juice can be made into brown sugar.

Kirno, 35, comes from Cilongok village, Cilongok district, Banyumas regency, in Central Java. He is one of some 15,000 brown sugar makers in Cilongok district, which is the center of the brown sugar industry in Banyumas regency.

Kirno said he climbed coconut trees twice a day to tap for sugar palm juice.

"In the morning I start climbing trees at 6 a.m. and in the afternoon about 5 p.m. This is the daily task of a coconut palm-juice tapper. The most important thing is that I can feed my family," Kirno told *The Jakarta Post* recently.



Kirno, a resident of Cilongok village in Banyumas regency, climbs at least 30 coconut trees every morning and afternoon to collect coconut palm juice, the raw material used to make brown sugar. (JP/Agus Maryono)

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Kirno added he climbed some 40 coconut trees in the morning and around about the same number in the afternoon.

Every time they climb a coconut tree, Kirno and his fellow tappers do two things: They collect coconut palm juice using a 25-centimeter-long bamboo tube and then put in place an empty bamboo tube.

"In the morning, we collect the bamboo tubes put in place the day before, and in the afternoon we collect the bamboo tubes put in place in the morning," Kirno said.

Kirno added that 3 to 4 bamboo tubes could be placed in one coconut tree. After 12 hours, each bamboo tube can be half full of coconut palm juice.

He also said he could make 10 kilograms of brown sugar from his 30 coconut trees.

"I sell 1 kg of brown sugar at Rp 3,500. Thank God, it is enough to feed my family and send my children to school," Kirno said.

Another tapper, Basirun, 50, said after the coconut palm juice was collected from the trees, it would later be boiled.

"Generally, it takes eight hours. If you start boiling the juice at 7 a.m., it will be ready at 2 p.m. and then you pour it into the brown sugar molds," Basirun said, referring to the molds made of pieces of bamboo.

"Leave the sugar in the molds until it is cold and then the sugar is ready to sell," Basirun added.

Kirno and thousands of coconut palm-juice tappers in his area sell their brown sugar to sugar brokers. They cannot sell the sugar freely because, as one tapper put it, nearly all coconut palm-juice tappers take loans from the brokers.

These loans will later be used by the sugar brokers to trap the coconut palm-juice tappers.

"Luckily, we can borrow some money from these brokers to meet our needs or even to buy a motorcycle," Kirno said. As a result, however, he cannot fix the price of his brown sugar. Only the brokers determine the price of the sugar.

"As soon as we finish making the sugar, we will take it to the boss and then we will get some money. The boss will put on record our outstanding debts," said Basirun.

Brown sugar made in Banyumas is sold in various cities including Jakarta and Surabaya.

"Yes, every three days we send an average of 1 truck of sugar to Jakarta," said Ahmad, 40, one of the brown sugar collectors in Cilongok.

"It is often the tapper himself that asks for a loan. So, we give him a loan as long as he is productive in making the sugar," Ahmad told the *Post*. Ahmad said there were about 20 brown sugar bosses in Cilongok district.

The Jakarta Post observed that all brown sugar bosses enjoyed a comfortable life and all owned at least one automobile. Unfortunately, almost all the tappers live in poverty. The bosses sell the sugar at prices far greater than that which they pay the tappers.

Meanwhile, the data collected by the Industry and Trade Service of Banyumas regency indicated there were 28,856 brown sugar makers in the regency, some 80 percent of which are found in Cilongok district. The brown sugar home industry in Banyumas employs more than 62,000 people.

"The brown sugar home industry produces an average of 36,358 tons of brown sugar a year worth more than Rp 127 billion," Indrawati, head of the agroindustry division of the Industry and Trade Service of Banyumas regency, told the *Post*.

She said there was a wide gap between brown sugar makers and brown sugar brokers because of the *ijon* system, or the "loan" system.

"It is almost impossible for the local administration to overcome this problem. To free the brown sugar makers from the debt trap of the brokers, we will need more than Rp 100 billion.

"This is impossible for the local administration because it also has a lot of needs to meet," Indrawati said.