

River of life

A group of young volunteers has helped to give the people of Kampung Lumou, Sabah, immediate access to clean water for the first time in 30 years.

By JC LAM
alltherage@thestar.com.my

If you thought the recent water rationing in the Klang Valley was tough, the people of Kampung Lumou, Sabah, who depend on rainwater, have had it worse – since the late 1970s.

Ong Jing Shen, 19, from Kuala Lumpur, experienced it first-hand, having spent three weeks in the village recently. Without immediate access to water, everything in the village depended on when rain would come, and how well you managed your tank.

But now, thanks to the Clean Water For Communities project by Coca-Cola and Raleigh International, things are getting much better for the people of Kampung Lumou.

The project involves young volunteers from Malaysia and Britain building gravity-fed water systems (GFWS) in remote villages in Sabah. Initiated in 2006, the project has, to date, provided fresh water to 37 villages. Kampung Lumou was the latest recipient.

With the launch of the village's new water supply system on Aug 27, villagers now have immediate, sustainable access to clean water. And Ong was just one of the many young volunteers who (literally) lent a hand to the cause.

"We often take immediate access to water for granted, but not everyone has that, even in this day and age," said Coca-Cola Malaysia's public affairs and communications director, Kadri Taib. In fact, Kampung Lumou has been plagued by water crises for over 30 years now.

"(This project) has certainly transformed the way of life of the

people in Kampung Lumou," said Kadri

Living without water

With a population of over 500, Kampung Lumou used to rely on a nearby river for its water supply until it became polluted by the expansion of a plantation.

Then in the 1970s, a forest fire made things worse.

"It destroyed the pipes (built by the government) that gave us access to clean water," said local Petrus Idul, 60. "Since then, we've always had to pray for rain so we could harvest rainwater."

During long draughts, however, the villagers were forced to hike between five to six kilometres to retrieve clean water. Women and children were usually tasked to do this, as the men focused on agricultural activities.

"It was surprising to see the lack of access to clean water at Kampung Lumou, because the village is actually a lot more accessible than others we've been to," said Raleigh International deputy operations manager Jessica Vreeswijk.

Indeed, the village isn't as rural as it sounds. It might be a three-hour drive from Kota Kinabalu, but it's located not too far off a main road. Their town hall even has a karaoke system, with *Frozen's Let It Go* a particularly popular song choice.

"Without easy access to clean water, the villagers have been residing in very poor living conditions, putting their health at risk. That's why we felt the need to reach out to them," added Vreeswijk.

Local resident Juliana Saidau, 60, said the rainwater they collected

was used for everything from washing to cooking and drinking. "We used to fall sick very often – both children and adults – because the water would often get contaminated."

Ong admitted to being shocked at how tough life was in the village, particularly because of how scarce water was.

"Even keeping our own hygiene was difficult," he shared. "When there were water shortages, we had to bathe with only half a bucket and you can't clean your hands very often either."

Building the system

The new GFWS at Kampung Lumou and all the optimism it brings would not have been possible without the help of the Raleigh International volunteers involved, including Ong and Britons Oliver Roberts, 23, and Emma Clarke, 19.

It took a total of 10 weeks and three groups of volunteers over three phases to complete the water system and ensure its sustainability. And it sure wasn't easy – especially for the foreigners.

"The heat took a lot of getting used to," said Clarke. "Aside from that, Ong was the only Malaysian in our group, so communicating with the villagers was very difficult as we had only one translator."

The first phase of the project involved the volunteers building a dam at the top of the hill, where there's a clean water source. During the second phase, a new batch of volunteers took over to lay pipes from the dam to the village.

Ong, Roberts and Clarke came in during the third phase, and their task involved troubleshooting and fixing problems with the system.



Raleigh International volunteers built a 'gravity-fed water system' (GFWS) for the people of Kampung Lumou. They are pictured here building a dam at the water catchment area which feeds the GFWS.



The volunteers lived in this house for ten weeks while building the GFWS. Before that, Kampung Lumou relied on rain as their primary source of water.



The 'tippy tap' was introduced along with the new water system to help villagers better regulate their water usage when washing hands.



"We had to trek through the jungle to fix the pipes, and the journey can be quite dangerous," revealed Ong. "If we were to suffer any injuries, treatment would be two to three hours away. So, we had to be extra careful."

Aside from building the GFWS, volunteers also taught the village children English, gave hygiene lessons as well as introduced hand sanitizers and the "tippy-tap" – a simple contraption that allows the people in the village to wash their hands without wasting water. It's basically a plastic water bottle attached to a wooden frame that allows you to turn the bottle upside down.

They pierce a tiny hole on the top of the bottle, so when you tip the bottle over, you get a small stream of water coming out – just enough to wash your hands.

New hope: (2nd, 3rd and 4th from left) Emma Clarke, 19, Oliver Roberts, 23, and Ong Jing Shen, 19, were just some of the many Raleigh International volunteers who helped build a sustainable water system for Kampung Lumou. Raleigh International deputy operations manager Jessica Vreeswijk (in black) was at the village for the system launching ceremony.