



The **Noken Women** of Jayapura

Tuesday, January 31, 2017

ROCK FM is one of the most popular FM radio stations in Jayapura. It's not a music radio station, as it might seem at a first glance, even though music is an important part of the daily programming. ROCK stands instead for Representative Of Christ Kingdom, which makes sense as one walks around

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the city, where churches are more frequently to be seen than food stalls and shops.

Written by Dessi Damianova

Ully Taliwongso is a young and energetic journalist and works as producer, reporter and presenter at ROCK FM. She is one of the eight fellows that was selected for the 6-month Fellowship for Women Journalists, implemented by the Indonesian Association for Media Development (PPMN), a partner of Free Press Unlimited.

After a highly successful (and award-winning) Fellowship Program for Women Journalists in Bangladesh, which was designed by Free Press Unlimited and run in the last 4 years, the idea was exported to Indonesia in partnership with Free Press Unlimited's local partner PPMN. The first batch of fellows, Ully among them, was trained and coached for 2 months between October and December 2014 by senior journalists from national and local media. In the following months the fellows produced each a number of stories for print, online, radio and social media, focusing on problems of marginalised women in different regions – from North Sumatra to East Nusa Tenggara, and from West Java to Central Papua.

Ully decided to make a number of programs for ROCK FM focusing on the production of Noken bags by local poor women.

Noken is a woven bag handmade from wood fibre or leaves, produced only by communities in Papua and West Papua. It is used for carrying plantation products, catch from the sea or lake, firewood, babies or small animals as well as for shopping and for storing things in the home. To make a Noken bag, branches or stems of certain small trees are cut, heated over a fire and soaked in water. The remaining wood fibre is dried then spun to make a strong thread or string, which is sometimes coloured using natural dyes. This string is knotted by hand to make net bags of various patterns and sizes.

The process requires great manual skill, care and artistic sense, and takes several months to master. The number of people making and using Noken is diminishing, however. Factors threatening its survival include lack of awareness, weakening of traditional transmission, decreasing numbers of craftspeople, competition from factory-made bags, problems in easily and quickly

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obtaining traditional raw materials, and shifts in the cultural values of Noken. In 2012, UNESCO included the Noken woven bags making in the list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent protection and safeguarding.

A couple of weeks before the deadline to send her ideas for the Fellowships Program project, Ully met one of her best friends – a local environmental activist, who was doing his weekly shopping using a Noken bag. Ully liked the bag so much, as well as its environmental benefit (as alternative to plastic), that she decided to make a series of radio programs. With the help of her activist friend, she first traced a community of six women, housewives struggling to make both ends meet for their families, that lived in the village of Matto Pay, in Jayapura province, and that she understood produced such bags. She invited two of the women, Mama Sara and Mama Christen, to her studio at ROCK FM and made a number of talk shows promoting their self-organized Noken community and the beautiful bags.

The talkshows of Ully quickly gained increasing interest. Within several weeks of her programs, the women were receiving more orders for making Noken bags. Having in mind the laboursome process, Mama Christie and Mama Sara had to ask other women to join them in the cooperative and start making Noken bags.

But Ully didn't stop when her fellowship and her assignment within the project ended. She kept in close contact with her environmental activist friend, and they both decided to take a step further.

They started producing more reports and programs together, promoting Noken as environmental friendly product and one preserving an endangered local tradition, on the one hand, and women entrepreneurship and ways to escape poverty for local marginalised women, on the other hand.

Towards the end of spring 2015, the radio programs of Free Press Unlimited and PPMN fellow caught the attention of Jayapura's Mayor, Benhur Tommy Mano. He invited Uly and her activist friend to his office and discussed ways to work together. The result was that the Mayor adopted a local regulation, obliging all government employees, civil servants and school children in Jayapura and region to wear Noken bags every Thursday.



Photo: The Noken Women with the Noken bags.

Suddenly, the cooperative of Mama Christen and Mama Sara had to ask even more women from their village to join. In the months to follow, new cooperatives sprung out in villages around Jayapura, as the demand for Noken bags was constantly increasing.

After visiting the ROCK FM, I had the privilege to be able to meet Mama Christen and Mama Sara in their village. They proudly showed me the local community space, recently assigned for their Noken production cooperative. On the way back to Jayapura, we also passed by the stall at the new market place, assigned by the mayor for selling Noken bags. "We never imagined something like that, we are so grateful to Ully and Rock FM, it is like a dream. Now we have job and some money. We can also send our children to school again", says Mama Christen.

It is a heartwarming example of how the enthusiasm and energy of Ully, the persistence of the environmental activist, and the commitment and vision of the mayor combine to promote women entrepreneurship and income generation, preserve an endangered and unique local handicraft and protect the environment by providing a beautiful and colorful alternative to plastic.

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