

Malaysia firm says high-tech farms can help poor

November 8 2012, by Sean Yoong



In this photo taken Oct. 4, 2012, a worker checks plants in a plant nursery, which is used technology called the "autopot system," at a rural community in Pulau Manis village, Pahang state, Malaysia. Each plant is in its own pot that regulates the delivery of water and nutrients, using less water than other farming methods. Malaysian technology firm Iris Corp. built two years ago this rural community where villagers - 80 families in all - live for free in low-cost bungalows and work on a high-tech hydroponic farm, a setup the company hopes to replicate elsewhere. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian)

(AP)—For one Malaysian widow, moving to this experimental farming village represented hope for a brighter future for her seven children. Her new neighbor, also among the first to settle here, sought an easier life after years of low-paying, back-breaking plantation labor.

The corporation that built this rural community two years ago sees it as part charity, part test kitchen. The villagers—80 families in all—live for free in low-cost bungalows and work on a high-tech hydroponic [farm](#), a setup the company hopes to replicate elsewhere.

"We thought that we should do something different, instead of just donating money," said Tan Say Jim, managing director of Malaysian technology firm Iris Corp. "Even if we give you a little money, you'll still be poor. We wanted to really touch lives."

The government is now involved in a plan to build similar villages across this Southeast Asian country, where nearly one of 10 people in rural provinces lives below the official poverty line.

The idea for the village began at Iris, a company whose interests range from passport [computer chips](#) to agricultural equipment, much of which is in use at Kampung Pulau Manis and a second village set up this year.

Collaborating with a local Islamic bank for charity work, Iris executives brainstormed a plan to develop homes and a farm on 25 acres (10 hectares) of abandoned land that state authorities offered in Pulau Manis district, in eastern Pahang state.

Malaysia's government regularly encourages companies to conduct "[corporate social responsibility](#)" programs; in recent years, these ranged from oil-and-gas company BP helping to manage a sanctuary for

endangered turtles to toothpaste manufacturer Colgate providing oral care travel kits to Muslim pilgrims bound for Saudi Arabia.



In this photo taken on Oct. 4, 2012, Faizal Zulkifli leaves his house after lunch at a rural community in Pulau Manis village, Pahang state, Malaysia, Thursday, Nov. 8, 2012. Faizal Zulkifli, a father of three, is one of villagers living for free in low-cost bungalows and working on a high-tech hydroponic farm, a setup the Malaysian technology firm Iris Corp. hopes to replicate elsewhere. The government is now involved in a plan to build similar villages across this Southeast Asian country, where nearly one of 10 people in rural provinces lives below the official poverty line. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian)

By early last year, families selected by Pahang's welfare and religious authorities left behind their cramped wooden shacks to move into three-bedroom, brick-and-mortar houses built in neat rows on bare land surrounded by vestiges of palm oil plantations. Grocery shops and a

school are nearby, but it's nearly an hour's drive to the closest major town.

Iris also constructed plant nurseries where many villagers now tend to cabbage, tomatoes, rock melons, okra, lettuce and chili peppers. Iris sells the produce in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's largest city, as well as in neighboring Singapore.

Iris uses technology it calls the "autopot system." Each plant is in its own pot that regulates the delivery of water and nutrients, using less water than other farming methods. The company says it is "absolutely certain" the villages will be profitable from crop earnings and sustainable in the long term, though it was unable to provide specific projections.

Among the residents is Faizal Zulkifli, a thin, darkly tanned father of three. His bungalow is almost indistinguishable from his neighbors', with a rust-tainted motorcycle, papaya tree and a clothesline filled with sarongs and sweat pants in his front yard. His living room is sparsely furnished with a worn-out couch and a table topped with baby formula and fruits.

It's far from a luxurious existence, but it's better than what his family had when he worked on a palm oil plantation.

"I remember when we lived before in a house with no electricity, no tap water," he said, carrying his year-old son while taking a break from his work doing farm equipment maintenance.

He said his work is a cinch compared to his old job loading heavy bunches of palm oil fruits onto trucks.

Norlailawati Yusof feels much the same way. She used to work as a housemaid in another Pahang province, earning 15 ringgit (\$5) a day. Now she makes three times that much working on Iris' farm.

Norlailawati, whose husband died of pneumonia several years ago, prunes vegetables planted neatly in mechanically irrigated pots inside a plastic-shaded, nylon-walled nursery. She says the morning heat and the menial chores rarely faze her, since she considers it a blessing to be earning a steady salary.



In this photo taken Oct. 4, 2012, a worker walks in a plant nursery, which is used technology called the "autopot system," at a rural community in Pulau Manis village, Pahang state, Malaysia. Each plant is in its own pot that regulates the delivery of water and nutrients, using less water than other farming methods. Malaysian technology firm Iris Corp. built two years ago this rural community where villagers - 80 families in all - live for free in low-cost bungalows and work on a high-tech hydroponic farm, a setup the company hopes to replicate elsewhere. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian)

And her present working hours—seven hours a day, six days a week—feel less demanding, enabling her to devote more time to her children.

"I don't worry so much anymore," says Norlailawati, who wears a flowing Muslim headscarf and a loose-fitting dress while working. "I can afford to send my seven children to school."

A few months after the Pulau Manis village was completed, Iris began building a similar village about a half-hour drive away. Early this year, another 50 families moved into the second village, which features space for raising chickens and water tanks where thousands of freshwater fish are now bred.

It wasn't long before Malaysia's federal government took notice of both villages, which Iris says cost a total of 16 million ringgit (\$5.2 million) to develop. Tan, the Iris executive, gave Prime Minister Najib Razak a tour of one of the villages.

Subsequently, government officials agreed to fund the construction of at least five more villages by Iris in various Malaysian states, each costing about 25 million ringgit (\$8.2 million). The project is known in the Malay language as "Rimbunan Kasih," loosely translated as "Canopies of Love."

Each upcoming village will contain 100 houses and wide-ranging farm facilities, as well as community halls, places of worship and computer laboratories.

There will be other upgrades: The 1,000-square-foot (100-square-meter) houses will be better insulated and can be constructed faster, within 10

days instead of four weeks, with Iris using its own building panels made of Styrofoam and mineral compounds. Tan said it is "not unlike making a house out of Lego blocks."

Iris says the "Rimbunan Kasih" villages are environmentally friendly. It says construction of the houses requires no timber or concrete, and that its farm technology cuts waste. Water is recycled from fish tanks to the mechanically irrigated vegetable pots.

Najib is expected to launch the first village before the end of the year as part of efforts to bring better wages to rural regions, where official data show about 8.5 percent of Malaysians live in poverty. In rural parts of peninsular Malaysia, the government considers families earning less than 743 ringgit (\$242) a month to be living in poverty.

The poverty rate is far lower than the 58 percent in 1970, but there has been little improvement since the 1990s. So far, villagers in the project have comprised the country's majority ethnic Malay Muslims as well as a small number of indigenous tribal people, all of whom make up the bulk of the country's rural poor.

Some see the project as a model for how the corporate sector can become more closely involved in Malaysia's anti-poverty efforts.

Tan hopes he can also drum up interest in other countries in Asia and Africa for such villages, as well as potentially build integrated farms in refugee camps.

Mohd Khanif Yusop, a professor specializing in agriculture and land management at Malaysia's Putra University, said the project must strike a balance between being cost-effective and producing lucrative crops.

"In spite of the costs of the hydroponic system, it's possible for you to market high-value crops at a high price," he said. "But then, if your lettuce is more expensive than the lettuce imported from China, then it won't be sustainable."

Tan acknowledges there have been problems: A few villagers were reprimanded for failing to show up for work, while another struggled with a drug addiction.

But residents of Pulau Manis and the second village in nearby Padang Rumbia district told The Associated Press they are happy with their new homes and feel safe. Villagers in Padang Rumbia are nurturing a sense of community by organizing soccer games and get-togethers to spruce up the neighborhood.

Asked how long he hopes to stay, Padang Rumbia resident Hanif Abdul Hamid grins and replies: "Until they kick me out. Why should I go anywhere else?"

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