

How to save the rainforest—build a health centre

November 21 2017, by Yao-Hua Law

The roosters were still asleep when Sri Wayunisih woke her daughter, Puteri. They could not afford to sleep till dawn. Wayunisih had taken a day off from working on the oil palm estates and Puteri had skipped school for this trip. They had to reach their destination before everyone else. Wayunisih pushed her motorcycle onto the road and her daughter climbed on behind her. The Mickey Mouse keychains on Puteri's school bag clinked crisply. The two of them were heading towards Sukadana, a coastal district in south-west Borneo and the capital city of North Kayong, home to the only clinic in the area, some 80 km away. Soon, the roosters were crowing, their calls joining the dawn prayers playing from the many suraus along the road, the buildings lit only by the waning moon.

An hour and a few wrong turns later, Wayunisih and Puteri reached the clinic. The one-storey rectangular complex shone like a beacon in the dark with its white-washed walls and zinc-plated roof. Wayunisih and Puteri removed their shoes and walked up the wide stairs to the rows of green plastic chairs on its verandah. It was just past 5am. In a few hours, patients would start to queue at the clinic, and Wayunisih and Puteri would be first in line.

By 8am, a small crowd of 15 adults and children were sat on the verandah. It was Friday, the least busy day of the week. Any other weekday would see all 40 chairs on the verandah filled. It was a September morning, the end of the dry season, and some T-shirts were already moist and sticky. Out in the yard, clucking chickens pecked for

food among the grass and newly planted tree seedlings. A small brown snake slithered into a bed of dry bamboo leaves. High-pitched insect humming hung in the air. On the TV, a tiger stalked its prey. Colouring books lay open on a low table. Everyone in the room sat facing the eastern wall featuring a large white sculpture of a tree growing out of dense undergrowth, hornbills flying out of its canopy, the letters ASRI carved on its trunk.

ASRI stands for Alam Sehat Lestari, Indonesian for 'healthy nature everlasting' or 'harmoniously balanced'. It's the name of an Indonesian non-profit organisation based here in North Kayong on the western border of Gunung Palung National Park. Part of West Kalimantan province, North Kayong is more than five times the area of New York City and boasts mountains, rainforests and dozens of islands. It is home to about 107,000 people, almost half of whom make a living on farms, plantations and fisheries. The monthly income averages around 2.45 million rupiah (US\$181), but one in ten residents make do with just 250,000 rupiah a month (

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