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## Plantation Schools Offer Hope for Malaysia's Stateless Children

Lisa Schlein | Sabah, Borneo



Photo: Reuters

Workers arrive at a plantation in Kinabatangan in Malaysia's state of Sabah on the Borneo island. (File Photo)

Sabah, a Malaysian state of great beauty and natural resources on the island of Borneo, is home to a vast population of immigrant labor - both legal and illegal. Tens of thousands of children born to Indonesian and Filipino parents who are in the country illegally are stateless. They have no right to basic services, including education. Thousands of deprived children now are attending school on palm oil plantations thanks to the work of non-governmental organizations, with the support of the [U.N. Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF).

Schlein report

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For these youngsters, going to school is a joy.

“Before they came here, they had no schooling at all. They actually started here. So, this is their first experience to school,” said Torben Venning, the Project Director for Borneo Humana Child Aid Society, a non-governmental organization that provides education for underprivileged children. The school at the Cepat Wawasan plantation, is one of 120 learning centers the group runs for more than 10,000 children.

He says about 50 students were enrolled in the school when it began two years ago. Now, more than twice that number attend.

“All the children you see in the yellow and green here,” added Venning. “They are all plantation children. Some from small farms around, some from the company here. Most of them are from Indonesian parents, but, they are considered stateless because they are born in Sabah.”

## Stateless



Reuters

Arfaisal Marsaleh, 2, a stateless child, holds on to his mother as he plays with his friends in a slum village in Kinarut, in Malaysia's Sabah state on the Borneo island. (file photo)

The children are stateless. Because they have no birth certificates or other documents to prove their nationality, they live in a legal limbo. Without documents, they cannot access government services, including education. Venning says this becomes a huge problem for the Plantation children.

“If you do not provide an education for them, there is absolutely no doubt that the majority will go with their parents into the field and become child laborers from the age of 9, 10 years,” he said. “So, it is about education first of all. At the same time it is also keeping them away from child labor.”

In many cases, he says these underprivileged children end up living on the streets.

“That would be a course of trouble definitely-sniffing glue and getting into bad habits,” said Venning. “So, by giving them a basic education, then you keep them away from this. Many of these plantation children, if they were to grow up without any education at all, there is no doubt that they would end up in towns.

## Choices

The school premises are large, bright and well equipped. It is a showcase compared to the usual sub-

standard, primitive structures found in most plantation schools.

Factory Manager of the Cepat Wawasan plantation, Gan Heng Kok, says he is very impressed by what the company is doing for the children.

"I have been to so many estates working and so many places and not many companies have such a good facility to offer to the little children on the estates," said Gan Heng Kok. "And, I can clearly say that this is one of the best places that I have been where the company is actually so committed to offering education to little children in their estates. I am amazed at what is being done in this place here."

Monitoring and Education Officer for the U.N. Children's Fund, Nur Anuar Muthalib says large plantation owners tend to welcome education for their migrant workers' children. Owners of small and medium-sized plantations are more resistant to the idea.

He agrees families can make more money if their children do not go to school and work on the plantations. But, he says this is a very shortsighted view.

"It is an opportunity lost for the kids because what they can become, what they can do with their lives with an education would probably make a bigger impact on the family," said Nur Anuar Muthalib. "We have seen that many of the children who have become successful, they go back to their communities. They do help their parents."

## Goals

The Malaysian and Indonesian governments signed an agreement in 2006, allowing more than 100 teachers from Indonesia to come to the Plantation schools to instruct children in their language. Torben Venning says the idea is to make the students fluent in their native language so they can continue their education, without problem, in Indonesia after they complete primary school.

"When they pass the Indonesian government exam, they can go straight to secondary school in Indonesia," said Venning. "So, that is sort of the master plan-that they are able to go back and continue their schooling in Indonesia and thereby, they are no more stateless. They become Indonesian citizens. If they then opt to come back here, that would be as legalized employees."

Several mothers are beaming as they watch their children perform traditional songs and dances. One mother, 29-year-old Amirasaa, says she is very proud to see what her daughter is learning.

Amirasaa is young and pretty. But, she looks very care worn.

She says she works on the plantation and worries that her children too will have to work on the plantation. She says she wants a better life for her three children. And, believes this is possible if they get an education. She adds her oldest child, her daughter, who is attending school, told her she wants to become a teacher one day.

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