



Interview with Bustar Maitar (EcoNusa)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

Mar 13, 2025

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Please start by introducing yourself and your organization.

Bustar Maitar: Thanks, Ambika. My name is Bustar. I'm the CEO of the eight-year-old foundation called EcoNusa. I started it in Indonesia in 2005. Previously, I worked for Greenpeace. I was born and grew up in Papua, my home island in the eastern part of Indonesia. We work in Papua and the Maluku Archipelago, home to almost 500 different languages of indigenous communities.

Almost 70% of the remaining forests in Indonesia and 70% of our remaining fish are in this region. In the context of marine resources, this is the heart of the Coral Triangle. I saw a lot of high-profile campaigns in my Greenpeace time. We challenged corporations and got a lot of victories, as we called it in Greenpeace when a corporation committed to zero deforestation, but on the community level, not much changed. The community remained poor and without access to their local economy.

In 2018, 2019, EcoNusa evaluated the land-based palm oil concession in Papua together with the government. 25% of this island is already occupied by large-scale concessions. We were worried about the palm oil concession because Sumatra and the Kalimantan area are already gone and the concession holders move to the remaining land in eastern Indonesia.

We worked with the government in West Papua province from 2019 until the end of 2021, and managed to revoke 17 concessions, an area covered two and a half times of Los Angeles, 360,000 hectares of palm oil.

At the same time, we work with the Indigenous community. In Indonesia, the forest and land belong to the state, not the indigenous community. We map their areas to get their rights recognized by the government. We mapped out about 500,000 hectares of Indigenous community land in Papua, some of which have already been recognized by the government. Rights recognition and forest protection cannot be stopped.

We need to think about the local economy and the livelihood of the Indigenous community. The forest and the coastal ecosystem are their natural resources which they



should utilize wisely to continue to improve their livelihood. In 2022, we created the social enterprise KOBUMI [Ekosistim Bumi Lestari], owned by 10 indigenous community cooperatives who are the shareholders. The company is professionally separate from EcoNusa, it has its own legal entity.

It has become an off-taker and marketing hub for the Indigenous community product. It's part of the solution we provide. It doesn't involve technology, although many people talk about technology. It's a very basic thing. It's common in developing countries to talk about technologies, but it's not reaching what the Indigenous communities need. KOBUMI is a trading company and logistics service.

We have two ships reaching out to Indigenous communities in the coastal area, to pick up their things on the ground. Transportation and market access are key to the economy; we provide logistic transportation to pick out the products, and buy those products in cash from the community.

We bring it to our warehouse in the major cities in Papua, and we're responsible for selling it to the market, providing a market solution. We do quality control and ensure the continuation of the supply of the product to the buyer which can be challenging. If there is no continuation buyers just find another supplier. For example, if they produce spices—nutmeg and cloves—we also reach out to the community that does wild-caught shrimp in the mangrove area and dry coconut.

We provide funding with our EcoFund program, a direct support mechanism for the indigenous community. Our team visits them to discuss what they need, so they don't need to write a proposal. Creating direct support for the Indigenous community can become complicated. We keep it simple. They tell us what they need, our team writes it down. The administrative part is done by us. We send the money to them afterward and provide technical assistance to manage it.

There is no problem with the accountability of the Indigenous community because our team is ready 24 hours a day to support them. These products are now called bioeconomy, or restorative economy, there is a lot of terminology but we just say community products. **The product the community produces is the reality.**

Last week, we had our third shareholders meeting in KOBUMI enterprise and the trading value of KOBUMI in 2024 almost reached \$2 million. It's giving us confidence like, wow, we sold \$2 million in community products last year! We can do more of this and reach out to more communities.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Did you sell \$2 million of the spices and the wild-caught shrimps, or are there other trading goods?



Bustar Maitar: The top products of last year were spices, then wild-caught shrimp, cacao, and dry coconut, those are the four key commodities products we traded last year.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Who are you selling them to?

Bustar Maitar: I often heard from international NGOs or consultants that when communities sustainably produce products, it's easy to get them to the market. In my reflection, it's not that easy. In the end, it's just business as usual; you have a quality product, you sell it, and there is a bargaining process.

We expected to get a good quality export market, the niche market in NGO language, but it's not easy to find. We're using traditional social media like Facebook to sell our product. We're mostly selling to the national market and it's not always the end buyer.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You sell to distributors?

Bustar Maitar: Yes, we're looking for end buyers, the Skoll World Forum can help us with that, so we can get a good price for the community product and increase the price at the community level.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you handle competition and politics amongst Indigenous communities?

Bustar Maitar: Since 2021 up until today, Indigenous communities map out their territories among each other. They have their own way of solving issues. If there are issues among them, they sort it out, and tell us when they're ready. It's their process.

For the local economy, if they want to get the money, the individual community should go into the water or to the forest to produce their product. If they're not going to the forest, there is no product. That's something they agree with.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Has the relationship between West Papua and Papua New Guinea become an issue with your work?

Bustar Maitar: At the moment, no. There is the Free Papua Movement in Papua but for me, it's already gone. I support it, but the politics of Indonesia are strong. There was one Papua province until 15 or 20 years ago, they created two provinces in Indonesia, Papua, and West Papua.

In 2022, the national government divided Papua into six provinces. The political constraints have been reduced a lot. The Indonesian government doesn't worry about Papua New Guinea.



Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Going back to what you said about Greenpeace. Why doesn't a high-profile campaign that saves the forest then trickle down to affecting local economies?

Bustar Maitar: NGOs don't collaborate or coordinate. It's difficult to implement because each organization has its focus and goals, the things they believe in. It's the same with the donors and funders community, everyone has their own priorities.

Sitting down together among the NGOs is difficult. I've been playing that role for many years, connecting organizations, giving tasks to each other and sharing the information. When the organization on the ground wants to stop for a while, the one campaigning should also stop, that's difficult.

Greenpeace doesn't have the expertise to organize a community on the ground to discuss what's next after a high-profile campaign. It should be another organization. Something in the middle is needed to connect it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: But if a big campaign organization has eliminated one area of deforestation or helps save the forest, who benefits?

Bustar Maitar: First, of course, the local community, the people, and the ecosystem. In organizations like Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund or Conservation International, the ecosystem comes first, and the people second.

A local Indigenous community who wants a couple of hectares of forest for livelihood won't be prioritized because it will impact climate change. Social organizations who put people first, won't think it's a problem. They see a long-term benefit for livelihood. It can get complicated.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Does the local community tie it to livelihood because of the money that comes in from bringing down the forest, from the timber and the palm oil?

Bustar Maitar: Some independent smallholders in Sumatra and Kalimantan rely on palm oil and have up to 10 hectares of plantation. If you have a 10-hectare plantation, you have a car, and a nice house, and other Indigenous communities want the same. It's human.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is your response to that?

Bustar Maitar: They have the potential. Many organizations talk about environmental payment, carbon [credits] if the community has a forest, and finding the market for their carbon or non-timber forest products. But the carbon money is not here and no one is



sourcing products from the indigenous community. That's why we created KOBUMI to tell the community to look at what they have inside the forest and identify what we can convert into money for them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You explained your work as a direct service approach, but you're changing the system. How do you see that?

Bustar Maitar: For example, our organization organized technical assistance for the six provinces from Maluku and Papua, and 14 sub-provinces or districts in Papua and Maluku to discuss a midterm development plan together. It's a five-year plan for each province and each sub-province in Indonesia.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Who was in that meeting besides you?

Bustar Maitar: The local and the national government. We create technical assistance for the local government on how they develop the sustainable planning process document and they submit it to the national government to get the budget. We insert how to recognize Indigenous community rights, support the Indigenous community economy, and reduce the logging and the impact of mining.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some of the main things to reduce logging and support Indigenous communities that governments can do?

Bustar Maitar: For example, many carbon companies are going around in Papua. The first thing we suggest is to build safeguards for the Indigenous community in the context of the carbon market to protect the Indigenous community's rights and let them get their direct benefit. Secondly, a safeguard limiting land-based companies from coming to Papua. Thirdly, a budget supporting the Indigenous community's local production.

Those things can come from the local government. Many local governments in developing countries have to visualize how to make things happen on the ground.

Many NGOs and donors keep telling us to create evidence-based policy advocacy. That cannot be done by a workshop in developing a concept, plan, or document. In KOBUMI, we develop evidence-based policy advocacy. How we provide logistic transportation for the local economies Indigenous community products is evidence-based.

This is how to unlock potential bioeconomy for the Indigenous community, providing logistics for them including cold chains for fees, a stream, a warehouse hub to collect the product, and then processing it with quality control before sending it to the market. That's another evidence-based policy advocacy.



Connecting to the market to get a good buyer is also evidence-based policy advocacy. This year, we are thinking about how to build the processing facility to produce a secondary product of coconut. We can produce cooking oil and send it to the market, which is another effort-based policy. We showcase it to the government to challenge them and copy it to other places.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Part of it is technical assistance, and part of it is scaling. Do they need partners?

Bustar Maitar: Yes, we offer to become their partners. In Papua and Maluku, there aren't many NGOs that combine Indigenous rights, environmental protection, and economic development into a scalable process.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where are you going to be in five years?

Bustar Maitar: In five years, the local economy will be our main thing, and we let other organizations do what is needed. We're still doing the rights recognition process, the mapping, and the policy advocacy, but we just want to focus on the local economy. We would like to become an aggregator of the Indigenous community product.

When other organizations do the rights recognition, we can ask them to identify what an Indigenous community has produced, buy from them and sell it to the market. Offering an economic solution will be our dream in five years. A funding or donor grant will be a bonus, but we will cover our organizational costs from this economic activity.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Will you stop doing more of the policy change?

Bustar Maitar: Yes, because many organizations have that expertise, and they should play that role. We want to work together as an ecosystem with the other organizations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What major learnings have you had? If somebody was going to replicate what you're doing, let's say in Brazil or South Asia, what are the insights, or feedback that you have?

Bustar Maitar: Access to market is key. When we started the social enterprise, I thought people would come to us saying we were doing a great job and they would like to buy everything we had. It doesn't work like that in reality.

After three years, we still struggle to find the best quality market. Once we find a good quality market, we can share it with others outside of Indonesia.

For example, there are a lot of big corporations at the global level. Let's say Unilever, they're buying everything, once we get them in their supply chains, we can showcase



that we can produce a good quality product from the Indigenous community. We can tell them about our friend in Brazil who produces products Unilever already has on their shopping list. We can support each other.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Aside from funding, what else do you need to fill in the gap?

Bustar Maitar: To bring this Indigenous community product to the next level and get the public to know that it's good quality. I'm part of the Mulagos Fellowship and talk to other fellows producing Indigenous community products. We imagine an outlet in the center of New York, for example, a promotion hub.

We build the brand of the Indigenous community product that attracts big supply chain companies like Unilever, Nestle, or whoever would like to buy up or pay a premium for this Indigenous community product.

We need support because donors will say they can't support us anymore if it's becoming a business. They'll tell us to connect with the impact investors. I've been talking with many impact investors who are willing to support the process but at the end of the conversation, it's still business as usual, they want low risk and high return. What is the impact you're talking about? We will return your money, but not as fast as the regular loan. This is also still a gap.

It's not easy to directly shift from the grant to the loan. We might need more time to be ready for a loan, and need support from philanthropy in the meantime.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I want to end with two questions. Having land tenure is important because if it's not your land, you can't make the spices. It's not just about land rights, it's also about keeping the traditions and way of life. There's a political element.

From the cultural element of it, how has your organization and your trading model been able to work with that?

Bustar Maitar: It's still in our plan. Bringing new elements from outside that are in line with the tradition is very important.

If you convert two resources into money, then that's the new resource. When we take the community product, we also want to bring a bank for the Indigenous community to manage their money wisely. From 100, they can save 75 and use 25. It's in line with the tradition of managing resources wisely.



They've implemented their tradition of Sasi on the community level; when they harvest enough, they will agree according to the tradition, to not touch that land for five to seven years to bring back nature. They've practiced this for many generations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: If you don't touch an area for five to seven years, you limit the amount of output.

Bustar Maitar: They'll produce in other areas. We discuss this a lot with the community, how to keep the old traditions and adjust them to the current situation.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*