

Asia/ Indonesia**Getting together**

A profile of Kopus, a new organization for shrimp peelers of Sei Bilah village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province

By Noor Aida, Co-ordinator of the Women's Division of JALA, North Sumatra

It takes two to three hours by road to reach Sei Bilah village located in Pangkalan Brandan municipality, Regency of Langkat, North Sumatra Province. Most people in this village are Malays, who live in poor conditions. The fishers in the village cannot increase their catches due to competition from local trawlers as well as trawlers from Thailand. Besides this, destructive fishing practices and poaching affect their livelihoods too, driving many fishers into unemployment. So dependent are they on the sea that they cannot work other jobs.

Most of the women of the village are engaged in domestic household work. When their husbands return from the sea with shells, shrimp and crab, they help process the products. Shrimp peeling is the main activity of the women in Sei Bilah. Shelling crab is the second activity of choice. Two kinds of shrimp are caught here—white shrimp and *kurik* shrimp. These fetch different prices in the market. The *kurik* shrimp, which is larger, is more expensive. Two kilos of raw shrimp yield one kg of peeled shrimp. The women source the shrimp individually from fishermen or from a *taukay* (shrimp collector), to whom they also sell the shelled shrimp. Women also shell the shrimp for the *taukay* for wages. Their incomes vary with the shrimp catches, which, in turn, are affected by the operations of trawlers in inshore areas.

In order to tackle some of their problems, the women shrimp peelers of Sei Bilah got together to form a group called 'Kopus', with Zainab as their leader. Though the group is very new, the women hope it will inspire other women fishworkers in the village to join up or form similar groups. Now there are 30 members in the group, which is trying to raise money through loans to buy shrimp and build a place for storage and processing.

As a new organization, Kopus is seeking the support of other organizations. JALA, the advocacy network for North Sumatra fisherfolk, has pledged to support the group by sharing information, introducing it to a

larger network of organizations and involving it in any discussions and meetings. Among the most important imperatives now is to raise the awareness of women on the need to organize themselves into associations and groups. Only through organization, sharing and solidarity can the bargaining position of women fishers be strengthened, especially in a rural setting, where women have been traditionally subordinate to the men. With experience, Kopus can expect to mature into a strong and purposeful organization.

Noor Aida can be contacted at jalanet@indosat.net.id