



Ready, Get Set, Go!

NEEC Conference 2018

A personal reflection on
Community Empowerment

"As we journey with communities that we are helping, we shall take the approach of 'walking alongside' with them."

"Empowering Indigenous Communities, Strengthening Faith"

Such is the tagline that very concisely spells out the agenda of the NEEC 2018 conference in Kuching in August. As I sat down to write this reflection, I could not help but contemplate again the three keywords—"Empowering", "Strengthening" and "Faith". Amidst a sense of hope for a new Malaysia, the conference served as a timely reminder for me in understanding the change in our nation this year.

For those of us who have not known or heard about the National Economic Empowerment Coalition (NEEC), it is a platform for Christians to network and collaborate to strategise and formulate plans for the empowerment of impoverished indigenous Christian

communities of Malaysia. The conference goals were to work towards indigenous communities regaining control over factors, decisions and opportunities that affect their lives and assets.

The Road to Emmaus—Walking Alongside as the Empowerment Model

A few keynote speakers gave crucial insights on empowering communities. NEEC has many stories of individuals, groups, organisations and churches doing good work. Above all these, discipleship and reliance on God should not be neglected in these empowerment efforts, as Bishop Rev. Hwa Yung shared in his speech. As we journey with communities that we are helping, we should take the approach of "walking alongside" them, in the context of city churches reaching out



Bah Saluji's book about Yeok Luat reached a new audience in Kuching

to rural communities. The intention is to teach them how to fish, which is more difficult. Bishop Rev. James Wong from the Basel Church puts it into perspective: “The wealth of the rich continues to imprison the poor in their poverty and perpetuates a dependency mentality.” The pitfalls of empowerment would be to see the communities getting rich but discarding faith in God and thereafter, neglecting their families or getting involved in negative activities.

Highlights of NEEC—NEEC is Innovative and Changing

This was my fourth time attending NEEC since 2015. Four years on, NEEC 2018 has taken a whole new structure by focusing on three key strategic areas that I believe any individual, church, or group that wants to work with indigenous communities can adapt because these areas are crucial needs.

Strategic key areas of NEEC:

- **Economic Empowerment** which covers aspects of income generation, taking a new perspective on farming and agriculture as a way of life, empowering indigenous entrepreneurial and business developments, online marketing and digital media platforms to market produce effectively to consumers.
- **Empowerment in Community Rights** which comprises the aspects of empowering communities in the areas of land rights, basic infrastructure, sustainable livelihoods and the right to religious freedom, aligning with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.
- **Next Generation Initiatives.** The initiatives are about developing people to be more holistic persons in the aspects of Family, Education, Sports, Arts, Media and Life Skills.

Voices of the Youth

One significant phenomenon of NEEC I realised over the years was that the majority of participants are in the older category; some could even be considered elderly. Someone jokingly said, “There are more men, in fact more elderly men, as I see a sea of white and grey hair, or bald heads.” I believe the older generations have achieved a different stage of maturity and gained many experiences in life. Understandably, the lower turnout



Malaysian Care staff shared about economic and community rights empowerment and next-generation initiatives among the Orang Asli

of youth in such a conference, perhaps, is because they would have been busy with career, climbing corporate ladders, marriage and children commitments, etc.

This year, a panel of young, vibrant and passionate youth in a forum was an inspiration to many as they shared their ideas, thoughts and heart towards empowering indigenous communities. One fellow colleague commented, “I feel inspired when I see more young people take the stage, where younger generations speak their passion and their heart for the people.” Another commented, “The way forward is working together with youth, listening to their voices and concerns. It is great to have so many of them share this year!”

Moving Forward

As we approach the last quarter of the year, I continue to keep this hope that there will be a better Malaysia and the transformation of this nation. NEEC has given me the assurance that many are involved in the work of uplifting our most marginalised groups out of poverty, and the momentum is growing. The greatest assurance would be to see that God as our Help, God as our Hope, will bless all people of our beloved nation, Malaysia. See you at NEEC 2020! ■

For more information about NEEC,
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■ Joelin Lim is a staff in Miri, Sarawak, who has grown to love kampung food, especially terung assam cooked with ikan semah.