

**The Gaya Island Youth Association: Intergenerational Partnership and Social Justice in a
Malaysian Fishing Community**

Steven Eric Krauss, Shepherd Zeldin and Dzuhailmi Dahalan

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Introduction

Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government both because of their ‘internal’ effects on individual members and their ‘external’ effects on the wider polity (Kwon 2004; Hyden, Court & Meese 2003). Within this framework of civil society, youth organizations have become prominent players in many developing countries. In addition to addressing the basic needs of large youth populations, there has also been a recognized need to develop future leadership and human capital, which are seen as essential to the future success of development efforts. In developing democracies like Malaysia, youth organisations are considered important stabilization agents that contribute to the socio-political development of younger citizens (Nga & King 2006). Toward this end, Malaysia has made substantial commitments to its youth sector, which boasts over 8,000 registered youth organizations ranging from international bodies such as Girl Scouts and St. John’s Ambulance to local sports, uniform and religious bodies, clubs and youth councils. This structure forms a strong foundation of youth involvement in civil society that began during the pre-independence period of the mid- 20th century. At that time, education and skills training-related groups were formed alongside the uniformed bodies, recreation, community service and religious organisations transplanted from colonial power, Great Britain (Nga 2009).

Through their roles as providers of non-formal education, recreation, leadership and community development programs, youth organizations have the potential to address development gaps arising from uneven wealth creation and distribution (Ginwright & James 2002; USAID 2012). Indeed, Malaysian youth organizations are often recognized for their efforts in providing valuable programs and services. Historically, they are also known for their role in the political activism of the 1970s where they were in the forefront of efforts protesting against poverty and inequality, especially among the Malay population (Nga 2009). Since then, however, few have portrayed Malaysian youth organizations in a social justice role. Do such organizations exist? If so, what are their strategies to bring about change? How do they use youth programs to address marginalization and economic inequality? How do they interact and engage with communities and adults to carry out such work? To address these questions, we present a case study of BESUGA -- the Youth and Sports Association of Gaya Island -- a Malaysian youth association that has been a catalyst for community-based economic and social development in the East Malaysia state of Sabah.

The chapter begins by describing Gaya Island and the many challenges confronting its low-income traditional fishing villages. We provide a brief overview of Malaysian youth associations, followed by a profile of BESUGA. We follow with the ‘BESUGA story’, a

discussion of the work and evolution of the organization; from how it went from a rather ordinary youth development program provider to an agent of social change within a span of only five years. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of challenges the organization still faces and offer a new way of thinking about youth-adult partnership across multiple generations as a result of the lessons learned on Gaya Island.

Gaya Island, Sabah

Ten minutes off the coast of Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital of the State of Sabah in East Malaysia, lies Gaya Island, the largest of the five-island Tuanku Abdul Rahman (TAR) Marine Park. With a total area of 12,185 acres, Gaya Island is home to several upscale beach resorts as well as marine park resources, tourism and coastal activities such as diving, snorkeling, island hopping, deep sea fishing and beach activities (Said 2011). With its pristine beauty and prime location, Gaya Island is a popular destination among tourists.

Despite the large numbers that visit Gaya each year, few pay much attention to the island's eastern and southern shores, where 11 low-income fishing villages span across the beachfront on a series of interlocking docks. These are the traditional communities of Kampongⁱ Lok Malom, Kampong Lok Urai, Kampong Lok Baru, Kampong Lobong, Kampong Kasuapan, Kampong Selamat, Kampong Ubian, Kampong Lok Parru, Kampong Simalak, Kampong Pondo and Kampong Pulau Gaya. Comprising a substantial population of approximately 10,000, the majority of the inhabitants of these villages are 'Bajau Laut', known by the locals as "sea gypsies" for their skills in seafaring (Said 2011). Gaya's Bajau are predominantly Muslim, having originally sailed from the Philippines in the mid-19th century. In addition to the Bajau, small minorities of Malays, Bisaya, Kagayan, Rungus and Chinese, as well as Suluks, Ubian and other Filipinos dwell among Gaya's 11 villages.

Given their close proximity to KK, the residents of Gaya provide the city with a supply of cheap labor (Said 2011). The vast majority of Gaya's residents lack formal education beyond a basic primary level and thus work as laborers selling at the eateries and outdoor markets or in other unskilled jobs. Their main sources of supplementary income derive from fishing and harvesting marine resources such as sea cucumber, clams, shells, and others, as well as boat making and boat transport services. Others work at the hotels on the other side of the island. Most adult women are homemakers that do mat weaving and craft-making from shells and sea produce. Many sell their products at Tamu (farmer's markets) or the famous Pilipino market in Kota Kinabalu. For Gaya's young people, employment opportunities outside of fishing are limited on the Island, encouraging them to leave their villages to look for jobs outside (Said 2011).

Gaya's fishing villages sit along the Island's beach front. Their houses are traditional wooden homes built on pillars erected on the ocean floor. It is common for immediate and extended

families to stay together in one house, which can result in more than seven people living together (Said 2011). The arrangement of houses with their multiple docks jutting out into the South China Sea facilitates the island's fishing activities and the resident's transportation back and forth to the mainland. Water taxis running back and forth between the Island and KK are abundant and for just a few Ringgitⁱⁱ, provide the main source of transportation for those working on the mainland.

Marginalization of Gaya and its People

Gaya's traditional villages are mostly ignored by the tour companies and internationals that visit KK and the Marine Park. Their shanty coastal houses are viewed more as an eyesore than a tourist attraction. Mainland Sabahans often warn visitors to avoid Gaya Island due to alleged illegal immigration and drug smuggling. The negative perceptions of Gaya are largely based on the erroneous belief that many of the Island's residents reside there illegally. Although historians dispute the exact dates of the Bajau people's settling on the west coast of Borneo, their presence there has been well-documented since the mid-19th century (Miller 2011). In line with this history, our study participants contend that the Bajau have lived on Gaya Island for decades and that close to 80% of the residents reside there legally.

These negative perceptions have played a major role in shaping public opinion about Gaya. In fact, while in KK, when we asked several mainlanders about Gaya Island they immediately warned us against going there. Perceptions about the Island have only added to the geographic and economic marginalization experienced by the residents. Few private companies consider Gaya's traditional fishing villages as a worthwhile attraction for tourists. Political leaders have shied away from investing in Gaya because it is perceived as a bastion for illegal residents.

Gaya's Greatest Challenge

The greatest challenge for Gaya's residents has been their struggle to survive without basic infrastructure. For decades, the villages were denied running water and electricity despite being ten minutes from the state capital, sharing the island with world-renowned resort hotels and being unwavering supporters of the ruling government. Their ongoing pleas for support, however, have fallen on deaf ears. To survive, the villagers have relied on expensive potable water shipped from KK and stored in tanks behind their houses (it is noteworthy that most other Malaysians pay almost nothing for water) and expensive gasoline-powered generators for electricity. Most families struggled to meet their monthly financial responsibilities.^{iiiiiv} Furthermore, the island still lacks many other basic resources. For one, there are no doctors or medical clinics on the island; to get medical or dental treatment residents have to travel by boat to the mainland.

In brief, Gaya Island and its people have been systematically marginalized -- socially and

economically – for decades. Over the past six years, however, the situation has begun to change for the better. A string of events resulting from community advocacy has brought about substantial upgrades to the Island’s physical infrastructure, resulting in a wave of hope among the Island residents. These improvements are due in no small part to the work of an unexpected group of activists – the Island’s very own youth association.

Youth Associations in Malaysia

Youth associations in Malaysia are voluntary non-governmental organizations headed, administered and comprised of young people between the ages of 15 to 40, as stipulated in the country’s national Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (2007, Act 668, Section 2). Malaysia’s official definition of youth being 15 to 40 is considerably older than most other countries and international bodies^v. When youth organizations first started out in Malaysia prior to the country’s independence in 1957, there were no formal restrictions of age for members. Malaysian officials later felt that an age limit could be useful to encourage young people to contribute, and to expose potential talent and leadership. Others contend that the definition is designed to reduce intergenerational isolation by facilitating cooperation and interaction between adolescents and young adults (Nga 2009). The law has its share of critics, however, who claim that the definition marginalizes ‘real’ youth, namely those between the ages of 15 to 25, excluding them from important developmental experiences such as meaningful organizational roles and leadership responsibilities (Hamzah, Suandi & Tamam 2002).

As of 2010, there were approximately three million members of youth associations in Malaysia, out of a total youth population of nearly 12 million (Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development 2011). Youth associations have always been defined broadly to include local, grass roots as well as international organizations. Unlike their Western counterparts, the vast majority of Malaysian youth associations are not independent from government. Although informal or unregistered organizations exist, most associations register with the national Registrar of Youth (ROY) office under the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Registration with ROY ensures support from the government in the form of involvement in state-sponsored trainings, workshops and programs as well as operational funds. This support is vital to the start-up and survival of many grass-roots organizations, especially in the initial stages of their development. Registration with the ROY also allows associations representation in the state youth council, which is a leadership body comprised of representatives of all the registered youth associations in the state. Critics point out, however, that too much involvement by the government in the sector detracts from the ability of the associations to stand on their own and become self-sustaining. Hamzah et al. (2002) have pointed out that rather than devising creative ways of raising funds, many Malaysian youth organizations have failed due to an inability to sustain themselves.

Successful examples exist, however, that deserve attention not only for their size or popularity,

but for the impact they have had on their respective communities. Few such cases have been documented in Malaysia. To address this gap, we set out to study one such association, the Youth and Sports Association of Gaya Island (*Belia Sukan Gaya*), also known as BESUGA. The chapter focuses on key youth workers -- the organization's leaders led by the President and co-founder Sadja Nori Susulan and the other Executive Committee or 'Exco' members. Despite facing significant economic, political and social inequalities, BESUGA has successfully brought together three generations of Island residents for recreation, sports, instruction, and social action. Moreover, the association has successfully organized diverse stakeholders to bring electricity and fresh water infrastructures to the island. Through their work and leadership, we attempted to shed light on the organization's role in bringing social justice to Gaya Island.

Our story is presented in the form of an exploratory case study. We collected data through focus groups, interviews, phone conversations and emails. In addition, we interviewed adult residents from the Island, reviewed documents about the Island and BESUGA such as historical white papers, PowerPoint presentations made to government bodies and photographs of programs and activities, and made several trips to the Island for observation. Our trips to Gaya allowed us to meet with community leaders such as the Island's school headmaster.

The Youth and Sports Association of Gaya Island (BESUGA)

BESUGA was established in 2007 as a sports-based association. Founded by Sadja, the current President, and Alamin Abd. Rashid the organization started out with 17 members and has since grown to 414 youth. The organization is governed by a 15-member Executive Committee, of which members are elected each year. Seventy percent of the members are male. This is due mostly to the fact that a majority of the programs are still sports-based, however, there are several young women on the organization's Exco. These young women play vital roles in the work of the association, which are further discussed later in the chapter.

BESUGA's mission is to enhance the overall health and wellbeing of its members and by extension, the entire Gaya Island community. The main objective of the association's youth development work is "to educate the members in order to prepare them to contribute back to their community and the nation". Towards this end, BESUGA's activities are provided in two core programming areas referred to as 'general youth development' and 'sports'.

The youth development program consists of regular activities in the areas of education and public speaking, travel and tourism, expedition, culture, welfare, and religion designed to enhance members' mental, physical and spiritual competencies. In 2012, BESUGA ran over 40 programs, earning them recognition as one of the top youth associations in Sabah. The sports programming area consists of hosting regular sports tournaments in football, volleyball, netball, chess and others. The sports tournaments help to increase awareness and interest in the

association and the other activities it provides, with the goal of getting the members more engaged in the other educational and leadership activities. Sports, aside from being effective as a recruiting tool, also help to develop physical/health competencies and motivation among the BESUGA members.

To ensure that financial limitations are not a barrier to participation in the association, initial registration fees are kept at a minimum of only one Ringgit, and the same amount is charged as a monthly membership fee. To support the organization's programs and activities, as an officially registered association under the ROY office under the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the state government provides an annual subsidy of RM5,000 for operating expenses. This is in addition to entry fees collected from programs such as soccer and volleyball tournaments that the organization hosts several times per year. Occasional sponsorship from outside entities such as the local technical college also helps subsidize program costs.

As with many Malaysian youth associations, the age range of 15 to 40 translates into different roles and expectations of the members. All youth 15 to 40 from the Island are eligible to join the association. Within this larger group, however, three core sub-groups with different responsibilities and expectations coincide. The first consists of adolescents -- those 15 to 18 years old who comprise the majority of the general membership. This group is predominantly comprised of secondary school-age program participants. The second group consists of emerging adults -- those 18 to 30 years old. The emerging adults in BESUGA are the most active members of the organization comprising much of the Exco. This group also acts as a bridge between the adolescent members and adults, both within and outside of Gaya. Those 30 to 40 are the smallest group in number and tend to take on more adult roles acting in advisory and supportive capacities as organizers and intermediaries. This group also plays a vital role in the association's leadership development and outreach work. Once an Exco member has completed his or her term, they become an organizational 'ambassador' in their respective village and work with the adult community leaders in that village to recruit youth to join BESUGA.

From Youth Club to Intermediary: The Evolution of BESUGA as an Agent of Social Change

The majority of Malaysian youth associations focus on their primary role as providers of youth programs. Like similar associations found elsewhere, they often play peripheral or supportive roles in social change efforts (Camino & Zeldin 2002). In the case of Gaya Island, however, BESUGA was the main driver in bringing about essential improvements to Gaya Island's residents, specifically water and electricity. Our analysis indicates that this social justice-oriented work, initiated in 2006, occurred in four phases: (1) youth development program provider, (2) organizer of community stakeholders, (3) intermediary linking the needs of Gaya's villages to important resources outside the Island, and (4) community educator.

Phase 1: Start-up -- providing education and sports programs

In 2006, following their successful hosting of the Sayo Nara I-Team soccer tournament, 17 youth from Gaya Island decided to form BESUGA. The tournament, which brought together 25 teams from Gaya and nearby Kota Kinabalu, was one of several hosted by the group. Attempting to capitalize on the Gaya youths' intense interest in sports, the organization initially registered with the State as a sports-based association. From the beginning, however, the association's mission was education and positive youth development. BESUGA leaders set out to utilize sports as the main vehicle to engage youth in Island-based activities in an attempt to contribute to enhance their physical wellbeing, motivation, teamwork and leadership competencies.

As a poor community there are few facilities on the island. Prior to BESUGA, young people had to travel to the mainland for organized activities and were afforded little in the way of organized programs. Well aware of these challenges, BESUGA's leaders decided to host regular competitive sports tournaments that did not require expensive equipment or facilities (e.g., soccer, netball, volleyball). To increase association membership, the tournament registration fees were also counted as membership fees, making it easy for the young people to join the association. This approach allowed BESUGA's membership to grow with each program held.

Building on their initial success, the leaders of BESUGA began to recognize other opportunities for providing knowledge, skills and competencies to the youth of Gaya. By utilizing the talents and abilities of those within the association, BESUGA began to expand their programming by offering classes and trainings in areas including sewing, cooking and English. The common theme cross-cutting all of the programs was the development of competency, connectedness, and preparedness for adult roles.

Within only a few years, BESUGA's activities steadily increased. By 2012 they were running 30 organized activities annually in addition to the other informal services they were providing such as community programs on environmental awareness and vocational/technical education with nearby colleges. BESUGA's membership and reputation grew with each program. One adult resident, Mohd. Badri, commented:

Since the existence of BESUGA there have been a lot of changes on the island. Other than the electricity supply, what I see is the movement and cooperation amongst the youth. As an example, before this from this area until to that end of Lok Kurai village, there were tons of trash everywhere. But because of the Youth Association, he (i.e. Sadja) introduced BESUGA here and spread the environmental issue throughout Gaya Island.

These efforts and early successes helped BESUGA achieve the honor of being named the fourth

best youth association of 2012 by the state Ministry of Youth and Sports. It was a significant achievement for an organization only five years old and gave the entire Island a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment.

Phase 2: Forging key community partnerships

BESUGA's focus on education and program provision facilitated their growth into the realm of community engagement and organizing. Following a successful start-up period where they increased their membership through sports and education programs, they began to broaden their scope of work building on the visibility and legitimacy they had gained in the eyes of adult community leaders. Various parties in the community such as school officials, parents and Village Leaders began to look up to BESUGA. Even adult residents with no ties to the organization began to notice that BESUGA was sparking greater cohesion among the Island residents. One resident shared his observation:

From the cultural perspective, for one year I lived in Kesuapan village. I noticed that with BESUGA's existence in the community, cooperation among the villagers was stronger... Before, our culture was based on our race. We are Bajau. Bajau tend to keep to themselves. However, after BESUGA came along, there was greater cooperation among the people (Mohd. Badri).

As alumni of the Island's only primary and secondary schools (which serve over 2,000 students), BESUGA's leaders' popularity helped them develop strong working relations with the headmaster of the secondary school. This has allowed Azman, as the head of BESUGA's education programs, to work closely with parents of problematic students. Like other low-income communities throughout the world, many Gaya adults lack formal education. Many parents do not see the value of their children's education, especially when the children are old enough to work and support their families. Azman and the other youth leaders work to emphasize the importance of education using themselves as examples and pointing out the many career opportunities that exist for children who complete school. As a result of this work, the school started inviting BESUGA's leaders to provide regular motivational programs for the students, encouraging them to study hard and describing explaining the different opportunities available to them once they complete their studies. Through these efforts, BESUGA began to earn the respect of school leaders and parents, and was able to facilitate stronger linkages between the two parties.

As BESUGA becomes more influential, it now faces the challenge of serving a large population spread across 11 villages. This means that all of the villages are represented in BESUGA programs. It also means that there are many more community leaders with whom to network and forge relationships. In rural Malaysian culture, the role of the Village Head (also known as

'*ketua kampung*') is particularly significant, and it is vital to get his permission to conduct any activity within his respective village. Garnering the Village Head's support essentially ensures the subsequent support of the village residents. Culturally, Village Heads retain significant status in the eyes of their residents who put their trust in the Head to manage village affairs. To run programs in the different villages on Gaya, BESUGA requires each Village Head's approval. Some Heads are more supportive to youth-led programs than others, however. For this reason, Sadja and the other leaders go out of their way to include the Village Heads in the planning and execution of programs. In most cases, their efforts at garnering support have been successful. Sadja recalled BESUGA's special working relationship with Abdul Hashim, Village Head of Kampong Kasuapan and others:

So, we help him (Village Head) from the procedural aspects of the water and electricity projects. He is very proud because there are still a group of young people who are concerned about what is happening in the village.

Through collaboration and partnership, BESUGA has been able to overcome many of the challenges that often derail the efforts of other Malaysian youth associations. Such challenges often include getting – and keeping -- adult community members involved, and finding meaningful roles for them. When we talked to adult residents on Gaya, there was a strong desire to support what the association was doing. Several of the residents mentioned that much of the adult support for BESUGA comes in the form of energy and manpower. For example, one Exco member gave the example of how the adult residents helped the association meet its need for a stage to conduct its cultural programs:

We [BESUGA] have a lot of programs but don't have a stage. Every time we have a program, we have to set up a makeshift stage. The people involved in doing this are mostly the older people. Every time, they will build a new stage for us, and help us lift the timber. They don't ask for money. They are volunteers; they help with everything. It is a big sacrifice by the older people for BESUGA.

The BESUGA youth leaders recognize the sacrifice and support of the adults in the community, and the partnership that the two groups have. As poor fishermen with little formal education, many of the adult residents help in relatively simple ways that are proportionate with their resources and abilities. This often takes the form of physical labor as illustrated in the above quote. For example, Mr. Ghani and Mr. Alawi, older Gaya residents, offered their time and money to take the lead on building a volley ball court in their village knowing that volleyball is a popular activity among the Island's youth.

In brief, BESUGA's building of relationships with the Village Heads, parents and other adults

effectively made them partners in the organization's work. This proved to be a critical strategy that later paid huge dividends in the effort to bring water and electricity to the villages.

Phase 3: Organizing to bring resources and change to the community

Despite years of neglect, the residents of Gaya Island have been unbridled supporters of the ruling Barisan National (BN) government. Prior to 2008, they had unsuccessfully tried to capitalize on this support by lobbying their representatives at both the federal and state levels, focusing on their most pressing needs of running water and electricity. Slowly, an infrastructure was funded, most notably a school and a police station. Nonetheless, progress on water and electricity was slight.

The political context changed in 2008, however. For the first time in Malaysia's history, the ruling government experienced a near-defeat in the country's general election. Popularly called the 'political tsunami of 2008', the upheaval put every BN representative on notice and gave the residents and community leaders the courage to make unprecedented demands of their political leaders. In Sabah, although the BN won the state elections, its representatives knew that they had to change the way they governed. The support of community groups and their loyal patrons could no longer be taken for granted.

Things began to change. Realizing that the time was ripe for action, the leaders of BESUGA, motivated by their own growing popularity and string of recent successes, took the lead in lobbying their representatives. This time, however, they decided on a different approach that would go beyond a mere request. Using an organizing and partnership approach, BESUGA enlisted the support of influential members from the Kota Kinabalu area to help in the lobbying efforts. These included academic leaders from nearby University of Malaysia-Sabah (UMS), representatives from Kota Kinabalu City Hall, and those from the state electric company among others. BESUGA then called for a program inviting the different parties and local politicians to attend. Sadjia explains:

We set up a program and invited the Village Heads, the YB (local political representative), the Kota Kinabalu City Hall (DBKK) and the school leaders in addition to all the local community members. During the program we asked the leader (i.e. YB) why electricity and water supply is not provided here. We gave our opinion and together put pressure on him (the YB).

After listening to the different viewpoints from community, academic and business leaders, the government finally agreed to provide electricity and running water to the Island. This was a major victory for Gaya's residents as well as BESUGA. It also marked an important step in the organization's evolution, that of becoming an intermediary agent capable of linking the Gaya

community with outside resources.

According to our participants, the association's advocacy efforts had a transformational effect on the adults in the community, resulting in more positive perceptions of the youth as well as a stronger desire to contribute their own time and energy. One of the adult residents commented:

A meeting was held to bring electricity to Gaya; I still remember young people and adults sitting together. We have no problem with it, we are always willing to see what problems they face (BESUGA/youth) and we are always ready to give them help.

While many of the adults in the community became more inclined to play active, supportive roles in BESUGA's programs, others began to see young people in a different light. Sadja elaborated:

The youth are now going into Kampong Lok Kurai and Kampong Lok Baru. They go in with Mr. Muslim (older Exco member). So the people there see something different, because the ones managing the electricity installation project are the young people. The contractor is named Amin. As a young person he is helping the village to get their electricity supply.... So, it's like that -- the community's perception on Gaya Island is anchored to the youth.

Phase 4: Educating the community

After the agreement by the State government to provide running water and electricity to Gaya, BESUGA, at the request of the community leaders, took the lead in coordinating the transition effort. As a youth association, this was a role they were not prepared for. They knew little about the process and what it would take to make the transition to a more sophisticated infrastructure.

The young leaders of BESUGA soon realized that first and foremost, community education was needed to help the villagers understand what having electricity meant. For most, it was the first time in their lives that they had centralized power in their homes and there was much that they needed to learn. To meet this need, BESUGA created a special Exco position for Zuraidah, a 21 year-old female leader who volunteered to head the electrification transition project. One of her first tasks was to make sure that the residents understood what was required of them during the transition process. For this, she had to go door-to-door in every village answering residents' questions and explaining about monthly costs, fees for installation and how to fill out the necessary paperwork. She said:

First, there is a form that I made for them about how many lights and how many socket plugs that they want to use for the house. And then I give them a reasonable price. The

price is from the contractor. I had to negotiate with the contractor for a cheaper price, so now the villagers get the cheapest prices! If it was more expensive they probably would not be able to afford it. The second issue, in terms of the meter application, they cannot understand. So, the villagers will ask, “What is the procedure? What about the meter? How about the wiring?” What I tell them is that we do the wiring first and then after the meter is in we will proceed with the wiring. That’s my way to help them understand.

Much of Zuraidah’s work targeted changing false perceptions, which proved challenging. For example, many of the villagers thought that once the electricity was installed, it would be free every month. Others did not realize that they had to pay extra depending on the number of lights and sockets they wanted installed. When told what these would cost, many accused BESUGA and the contractors of trying to make money off them:

Most of the residents didn’t understand anything about electricity management, at least in the beginning. Some of them thought that it was free, whereas before they had to pay for the gasoline generator, and others thought that somebody wanted to run a business with it. I need to tell them how it works, get their cooperation and give them the consent form in order to have it installed (Zuraidah).

Through helping the residents understand what was required to properly manage their new resource, Zuraidah became a well-known figure in the Gaya community. Moreover, many Island youth who did not know BESUGA before the project became aware of the organization through Zuraidah’s work.

The establishment of strong community relationships by BESUGA has been important during the transition period to new electric and water supplies. To date, electricity has been installed in several of the villages, with the rest expected to be completed within the next year. The water infrastructure is still being installed and is also near completion. These are major projects that take time, especially given the size of the population, the area being served, and the type of non-traditional housing in which the residents live. The length of the process has resulted in complaints from residents, to which BESUGA, and Zuraidah in particular, have had to respond through massive education efforts about the magnitude of the projects.

Conclusion

BESUGA’s challenges

Despite BESUGA’s successes, the organization faces critical challenges that must be addressed to realize their vision of becoming a full-fledged education provider for the Gaya community. A key strategy toward fulfilling their goal centers around plans to establish the GITC (Gaya Island Training Center) for training community members in computer literacy (and other programs),

and a homestay (bed and breakfast) to be run by the association.

To expand their work and make the GITC a reality, the leaders identified four core challenges. The first is the ongoing struggle to spread awareness about the importance of the association. Despite their accomplishments, the leaders insist on the need for greater awareness among the Island youth about the importance of the association. The leaders feel that many youth cannot yet appreciate BESUGA's role in the community beyond their sports programs. This has led to difficulty in recruiting and grooming new leaders. With several of the Exco members being close to 30 years old, there is a need to develop the leadership capacities of the younger members, particularly those 15 to 20.

According to Sadjja, developing new leaders has been challenging for several reasons. Although the organization has had little difficulty mobilizing the Island's youth for programs, they have had less success attracting younger members to play substantive leadership roles in the association. While youth participation is often emphasized as a main ingredient for successful community organizations, the challenge of recruiting young people into such roles gets less attention. Research shows, however, that this is a concern shared by many youth-serving organizations, not only in Malaysia (Larson & Walker 2010).

Despite support from village leaders, BESUGA has faced what they describe as instances of 'turf' issues with Village Heads that have arisen following their successful penetration into the villages. According to Rani, former BESUGA President, Village Heads often feel threatened when 'outside' groups like BESUGA are embraced by their residents. BESUGA has attempted to address this issue by emphasizing their desire to have strong relationships with all village leadership. They have repeatedly emphasized their desire to serve the villages and help the Heads in any matters relating to the youth. Most Heads have responded positively yet a small number remain distrustful of BESUGA's intentions.

Funding remains a challenge for BESUGA. Working in and on behalf of low-income communities has proven difficult in terms of fundraising for programs. They often conduct programs on shoestring budgets, covered mostly by the RM5,000 provided by the State Ministry of Youth and Sports each year, and occasional sponsorship from outside groups. They commented that finding long-term sponsors is a major challenge, as many do not want to support programs on Gaya out of fear of negative publicity.

Lastly, the demands on Exco members have resulted in a significant amount of stress. Role diffusion among Exco members who are also full-time employees, parents and spouses has taken its toll on many of the organization's leaders. Despite their love for the community and passion for BESUGA, the responsibilities seem endless. Furthermore, their successes have raised the bar

of expectations amounting to a growing scope of work. Therefore, the need to involve more BESUGA members – especially the younger ones -- in the running of the organization has become a priority.

Social change on Gaya: Programs, partnerships and intermediary work

Youth are both products and agents of the settings in which they engage, and these reciprocal processes provide a basis for development – both their own and that of others (Brandtstader 1999; Zeldin 2004). Less emphasis has been placed on youth development programs as foundations for social action that result in concrete community change and social justice, particularly in traditional societies.

From the BESUGA experience, we identified three processes through which the youth brought social change to Gaya. The first is the provision of high quality, well-attended sports and education programs that are conducted regularly, are well-promoted and managed, and meet the needs and interests of the youth. Second, the successful and regular implementation of BESUGA programs garners support from adult residents as well as Village Heads, leading to stronger working relations. This has strengthened a sense of community cohesion and ownership for youth programming and for the next generation of young people. Third, the establishment of strong community partnerships opens up greater opportunities for leveraging key resources from outside the community that not only strengthens their youth development efforts, but brings valuable resources to the community as well.

BESUGA continues to evolve. After leading the effort to obtain electricity and water, the association is now overseeing the transition process, and is actively teaching the community about these new resources. The association has therefore extended its role beyond that of program provider to community organizer, intermediary organization, and community educator. All of these roles are critical to their success in bringing about social change to Gaya Island.

Conceptualizing youth-adult partnership in traditional societies through multi-generational partnership

We found that, in the case of BESUGA, it is the emerging adult group – those between 18 and 30 – who play a crucial bridging role in fostering inter-generational connectivity between adults and adolescents in the community. Because they are closer in age to the secondary school youth – they play sports and share similar interests -- it is easier for them to connect with adolescents. This helps motivate the adolescent members to be more engaged in the organization and play meaningful roles; they have more in common with leaders who are closer to them in age (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2007). At the same time, because emerging adults are older and have begun to embrace adult roles in terms of post-secondary education, employment and family, they are also able to relate to and garner the respect of adult residents. This has helped to

forge effective working relationships between all three groups, which is a key ingredient for bringing vital services and benefits to communities (Zeldin et al. 2005).

This differentiation of roles fits Malaysian culture. In this context, youth-adult partnership is not a dichotomous construct but one involving three generations. The emerging adults are at the center; they provide programming to the adolescents and organize support from (and with) older adult residents and community leaders. In Malaysia, it is uncommon for adolescents to play formal leadership roles in youth organizations as the secondary school years are mainly devoted to academic pursuits for most students. These developmental and vocational expectations limit adolescents' leadership involvement. This is in contrast with Western culture, where youth tend to take on leadership opportunities by the time they are in high school, and often earlier (Camino 2000; Mitra 2008).

For youth associations to be effective partners with adults in traditional societies, culture dictates deference to adult leaders (Tyson et al. 2011). As organizational leaders, the emerging adults in BESUGA must find a balance in both sharing power with, and leading, older adults. BESUGA recognizes this by requesting permission of Village Heads and soliciting their ongoing feedback. Similarly, BESUGA must find a proper balance in partnering with adult residents. While the adults seem comfortable with BESUGA taking the lead in change efforts, their tacit support and willingness to pitch in (build stages, construct playing fields) is vital to the work.

The lessons from BESUGA's work highlight the potential that youth associations have in bringing greater social justice to traditional, underserved communities, and the key role that youth-adult partnership across generations can play as a strategy for mobilizing for change. Given the social, ecological, and political challenges that face our world today, the next generation cannot wait until they are full-fledged adults to begin the work of building a more cooperative and sustainable world (Ginwright & James 2002). In organizations like BESUGA, young leaders are not just being taught about leadership; they are taking leadership and learning by doing—thus making their communities more accountable and effective. In response to reports of decreasing participation in youth organizations, the BESUGA example offers initial insight into how youth organizations can become relevant again, and how youth and adults working together can respond to a wide array of community needs.

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ⁱ 'Kampong' means village in Malay language

ⁱⁱ Currency of Malaysia, equal to approximately .32 USD

ⁱⁱⁱ The average household income of an average Gaya Island family is approximately RM500 per month.

^{iv} At the time of writing, the villages had electricity but the water system was still in the process of being installed in the villages and they were still relying on holding tanks.

^v The United Nations define youth as those between the ages of 15 to 24 years; the Commonwealth Youth Program uses 16 to 24 years as its official youth age (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1998).