

## Mama Sorghum Peace Movement Maintains Biodiversity



She is known as Mama Sorghum, the mother of the local food community movement in East Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. For 17 years, Maria Loretha has advocated food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture, preserving local seeds, and working hard alongside women's communities on remote, barren islands.

The mother of five children consistently invites people to use set-aside land and preserve biodiversity. This way, our farmland does not solely rely on growing one type of crop over and over again in the same area, avoiding the employment of monoculture farming. She emphasized the significance of local food and biodiversity in safeguarding the traditions of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) while simultaneously mitigating climate change's effects on the overall well-being of all living things.

Noon on the first week of February 2024. From the thatch-roofed and partially open-walled kitchen veranda in Pajinian Village, West Adonara, East Flores, Maria Loretha was cooking sorghum porridge with her youngest child, Ily, and members of the Flores Sorghum Agro Foundation (Yasores). A sweet smell emanated from the chocolatey hot porridge. One glass of sorghum meets the needs of five people, two dogs and seven cats. "Sorghum is a healthy food rich in protein. It is beneficial for our well-being," remarked Mama Loretha.

Bogor Agricultural Institute research shows sorghum is a grain plant (cereal) that produces seeds with a carbohydrate content equivalent to rice but with various advantages that can make it a healthy carbohydrate. In comparison to rice, sorghum seeds boast elevated levels of protein, B vitamins, and iron. Sorghum has the potential to address malnutrition among certain individuals in Indonesia.

The sorghum starch contains a resistant portion, meaning it does not break down easily during digestion. This unique trait allows it to provide a lasting feeling of fullness without contributing extra calories. Sorghum also has a glycemic index between 50 and 60, which is lower than rice from rice so it does not cause a rapid spike in blood sugar levels.

Sorghum seeds, especially those with color, contain high phenolic compounds renowned for their antioxidant properties. Moreover, these seeds yield gluten-free carbohydrates, making them a practical option for crafting gluten-free meals tailored to individuals with autism. Sorghum seed flour offers versatility in the kitchen, allowing for the creation of an array of gluten-free and protein-rich treats like bread and pastries.

Farmers benefit from growing sorghum, as it contributes to soil conservation. Additionally, there is no need to reprocess the land for replanting purposes. Sorghum conserves water usage. In addition to human consumption, sorghum can also be used as animal feed.

Mama Loretha kept both milled sorghum grains and the whole sorghum stalks in the kitchen. Some of the grains that she filled the bamboo containers with were dried in the hot sun before being stored. The 55-year-old woman's journey into safeguarding local seeds started when she attended a gathering of farmers and fishermen organized by several non-governmental organizations in Hokeng Jaya village, Wulanggitang District, East Flores, back in 2010.

The gathering brought together cocoa, rice, and coffee farmers with conservation community members. During a discussion session, Father Petrus Nong Lewar also recognized as Father Piet Nong, a Catholic clergyman from the SVD, brought up indigenous cuisine in the forum. Maria Loretha recalls Father Piet Nong sharing stories about indigenous seeds rooted in the legend of Tonu Wujo. The tale originates from the Lamaholot tribe residing across East Flores, Adonara Island, Lembata, and Alor.

Legend has it that a woman made a selfless sacrifice to ensure her family members would not perish from starvation during the harsh dry season, which brought famine upon them. Tonu Wujo stepped forward willingly, offering to sacrifice herself to ensure the survival of her entire family during the famine. Before her sacrifice, Tonu Wujo declared that an abundance of food crops would flourish after her passing. Soon after, an array of food crops sprouted from her body lying in the field.

Her blood transformed into rice, her bones into sorghum, known in the Lamaholot language as Wata Belolong, for it grew tall like bones. Her intestines turned into foxtail millet, and her hair became corn. The blood transformed into rice, famously recognized as Besi Pare Tonu Wujo. Until now, Besi Pare Tonu Wujo has become the mainstay seed of the people of East Flores. In local communities, seeds native to the region offer greater resilience against pests and have a longer lifespan.

Inspired by this, Maria Loretha, who had initially set out to preserve local seeds, found herself driven to expand her work with sorghum. It was in April 2007 when Maria Loretha paid a visit to her neighbor, Maria Helan. Maria served sorghum porridge, which tasted very delicious. Then, she asked Mary Helan for sorghum seeds to plant.

Loretha also hunted seeds to a number of villages in East Flores. It seems that finding sorghum seeds is quite challenging, and they are on the verge of disappearing. She received word from her husband's friend that sorghum seeds were available at Ile Boleng's place in Nobo Village. Maria was taken aback by the sight of a field covered in tall red sorghum that had reached the hard-dough stage. Afterwards, she approached a farmer in the area to request seeds. Initially, the farmer declined to provide any. Loretha did not give up. She continued to ask until she finally obtained the seeds. She made a promise to distribute seeds to farmers someday.

### **Support from the Larantuka Diocese and the Farmers Community**

The movement led by Loretha to conserve indigenous sorghum seeds caught the interest of the Larantuka Socio-Economic Development Foundation, also known as Yaspensel, a nonprofit organization operating under the Larantuka Diocese. Yaspensel is actively engaged in providing economic support to Catholics, a mission that has grown to encompass not just Catholics but people from all walks of life. Under the auspices of the Catholic church, the institution asked Loretha to help Yaspensel develop the people's economy by cultivating arid and unproductive lands. Loretha's broad connections with non-governmental organizations established her credibility as a program manager.

One day, Loretha encountered Bishop Monsignor Frans Kopong Kung Pr and sought his approval to journey to Solor Island. Instead, the bishop tasked Loretha with venturing into Likotuden village, situated in Kawalelo Village, Demon Pagong District, as part of his mission to develop remote regions. Back in those days, Likotuden was a barren village. The ground was strewn with rocky soil, making planting a challenge. Trembling, Loretha accepted the bishop's assignment. She then made a determination to socialize in Likotuden village.

The issue arose when Loretha faced opposition from locals who questioned whether sorghum could thrive in the area. The rejection unfolded during a community meeting she attended. She had to make multiple trips to the site to communicate with the local people. With determination in her voice, Loretha reassured the townsfolk about the potential growth of sorghum seeds. "I believe that moisture and water are stored behind the rocks. Sorghum only needs a small amount of water," Loretha remarked.

Today, Likotuden stands as a village where sorghum cultivation flourishes, serving as a pilot project. This isolated village was dry and barren. The arid soil was unsuitable for growing bananas, coconuts, corn, or other crops. The only plant that thrived in those conditions was the lead tree. Loretha successfully persuaded the locals to plant sorghum seeds on November 27, 2014, covering a vast area of seven hectares.

The story of the refusal to plant sorghum in Likotuden was corroborated by the director of Yaspensel, Father Benjamin Daud, who was 53 years old. Father Benya, as he is affectionately known, investigates the community's experiences with Sorghum during the meeting with the locals. This community communicates in Wata Blolong,

their native tongue. He learned the tale that elders had consumed sorghum. Nevertheless, sorghum eventually disappeared as a result of the Green Revolution initiated by President Suharto during his time in power in the New Order regime. The era of the Green Revolution placed significant emphasis on achieving food independence, particularly when it came to rice cultivation.

In the midst of investigating the story, the notion of sowing sorghum on infertile lands was met with a firm refusal. The villagers were convinced that sorghum had vanished from their midst, doubting whether it could thrive again. "They firmly refused," Father Benya said.

Father Benya persisted in persuading them with Loretha's assistance. Father took a seat as a priest and reached out to the townsfolk, who rejected his suggestions. Over time, they became willing to listen. Father Benya and Loretha then distributed sorghum seeds for planting. As a result, sorghum flourished without the need for any fertilizer. At the first harvest, they could yield 100 tons of sorghum. Each household harvested around two tons of sorghum on average. Not only was this grain consumed by the townsfolk, but Yaspensel also extended an offer to purchase their sorghum, hoping to ignite their passion for planting. Presently, Likotuden thrives as a region renowned for its flourishing sorghum cultivation. Townsfolk rely on sorghum for both human consumption and as feed for their livestock, particularly cattle and pigs.

Yaspensel has a variety of community economic development programs, one of which is promoting local food. As Easter approaches, the Catholic Church adopts a special focus on embracing locally sourced food. Father Benya has consistently provided support to Loretha throughout her struggle since before she became the Director of Yaspensel. In 2011, Father Benya took up a role in the Justice and Peace Commission of Larantuka Diocese, where he dedicated his efforts to serving the community. In 2011, he first met Loretha in Watowiti village, East Flores. At that time, Father Benya was asked to offer a blessing for the seed.

In 2014, the Diocese appointed Father Benya as the Director of Yaspensel, entrusting him with the responsibility of locating community representatives involved in promoting local food. From then on, Father Benya asked Loretha to assist Yaspensel. Loretha serves as the program manager. Father Benya remarked, 'Mama Loretha possesses the power to accompany the community.'



Loretha's assistance area is now expanding. She assisted the farming community, where the majority of its members were women. They are spread out across Bajawa and Mbay Districts in Flores, Lembor, West Manggarai, Nangapanda, Ende, Lembata, East Sumba, and Sabu Island. Loretha traveled to each remote community, one by one. These were areas where access to water was challenging, electric lighting was scarce, and the roads were rough.

In the Flores tradition, the Lamaholot tribe holds women in high regard, valuing their role as significant and essential. Women in the Lamaholot tradition are known as Lera Wulan Tana Ekan, which translates to the supreme creator. Women not only bear children and attend to their needs but also foster the growth and well-being of all living beings. They get everything ready for the house: food, water, and all the essentials. In different customary ceremonies, like funerals, women hold a significant role.

Women are depicted as Besi pare Tonu Wujo, embodying the essence of life or Mother Earth in the narrative. As mothers of the earth, women bring forth the gift of life. Women have power or make decisions when farming in the fields or gardening. The strength of women shines through in various tasks, like beginning with seed preparation, planting, seed storage, tending to the garden, harvesting, grinding, selling produce at the market, and finally, serving meals at the dinner table. "Not just anyone is allowed." Loretha asserts, "Women hold power when it comes to food."

"Even though women stand as powerful symbols, in their everyday lives, they must confront a series of challenges within the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture still prevalent in NTT." Sylvia Walby, in her book titled 'Theorizing Patriarchy,' describes patriarchy as a system of social structure and practices where men exert greater dominance, oppression, and exploitation over women." Patriarchy comprises six structures: the patriarchal mode of reproduction, patriarchal relations in waged work, patriarchal relations within the family, male violence, patriarchal relations regarding sexuality, and patriarchal relations within cultural institutions.

Loretha illustrates the enduring patriarchal culture in Flores, where, for instance, male children are often prioritized over female children when it comes to continuing their education. Furthermore, patriarchy is evident in various traditional customs and practices. In traditional marriage customs, the requirement of presenting ivory as a dowry for the bride who is at stake is well-known. Several customary rituals exclude women from participating in decision-making processes. The unfair circumstances forced them to engage in negotiations. "It seems like there is a contradiction that tradition recognizes women as equal to men. However, in reality, women are not in the forefront," said Loretha.

She observed the situation when she was invited to a number of traditional ritual events, for example, the ritual of opening a garden, calling for rain, and thanksgiving to townsfolk who bought a ship. Loretha, who is a descendant of the Dayak tribe, said that she was never inferior when seated among male traditional leaders. As a descendant of the Dayak Tribe, Loretha has never had a problem with the people of the Lamaholot Tribe. According to her, the Flores people were open to people from other tribes.

During those meetings, she frequently witnessed the prevalent perception that women were primarily confined to kitchen duties rather than participating in decision-making processes. During traditional festivals, it is customary for men to be served food first, with women following afterward. According to Loretha, it is not easy for women to break the patriarchal order that causes inequality. In every meeting in a number of women farmer communities, Loretha consistently emphasizes the significance of sharing responsibilities with her husband or life partner.

Loretha and her husband, Yeri, work together to divide responsibilities, ensuring that neither of them carries the entire burden alone. In between taking care of the Yaspensel program and Yasores activities, Loretha continued to take care of the kitchen. She cooks and serves healthy food for her family.

This strict woman is also responsible for looking after her children. Yeri, her husband, takes care of cleaning the house, doing laundry, and weeding the garden. "Collaboration and sharing roles, that is the key," she said convincingly.

She also encourages every woman to radiate confidence, broaden their knowledge, put in the effort, strive for independence, and grow their professional networks. Loretha epitomizes the role of a local food guardian, including for some young people. Young people are now exploring economic opportunities from cultivating sorghum. In 2021, for instance, a bunch of young folks showed up at Yaspensel's office in Larantuka, seeking seeds. They process sorghum flour into a variety of foods, mixing it with other commodities like different fruits.

### **Assistance to Farmer Women Community**

In assisting the community, Loretha showcased various sorghum varieties and shared folktales centered around this resilient crop. When the tale of Besipare Tonu Wujo was recounted, a few middle-aged women recollected it and shed tears. The primary mission of the assistance is to preserve sorghum, encourage communities to fulfill their nutritional requirements and address economic necessities.

Loretha's assistance materialized as it gave rise to women's leadership in a number of sorghum farmer groups. In Tapobali Village, Wulandoni District, Lembata Regency, for example, there existed the Gebetan community or Gebetan Crew of Tapobali Village led by Ambrosia Ero, 43 years old. Additionally, there was Vibronia Peni, who served as the head of the Ile Nogo sorghum farmer group in Wuakerong Village, located in Lembata.

They often get invitations from NGOs and local governments to participate in various forums. These gatherings boost women's knowledge, giving them assurance to voice their thoughts with confidence.

In Likotuden, female farmers without formal education find themselves empowered as well. A few even took on the role of treasurer within their farming communities. Over in Ratulodong Village, within the Tanjung Bunga District of East Flores, single mothers stepped up as the primary pillars supporting their families finances.

They now have local food knowledge, such as sorghum cultivation techniques. They practice how to grow sorghum properly. They are learning that just a single hole of soil can accommodate two or three sorghum seeds. In addition, they are also adept at harvesting sorghum, processing sorghum grains into good food, and are able to argue that sorghum saves water and is suitable for growing in climate change situations.

Moms in the Loretha and Yaspensel assisted area also managed to explain to the village head the importance of improving children's nutrition with locally sourced food. It happened in Kawalelo Village, Nuhalolon, West Solor, Nurabelen. Loretha and Yaspensel are also involved in helping to connect sorghum sellers with buyers in the communities they visit. Every year, they have to prepare IDR200 million to purchase sorghum.

The head of the Tapobali Village Gebetan Crew community, Ambrosia Ero, said Loretha had an important role in the movement to preserve local food so that it would not become extinct. To draw in young folks and spark their curiosity in locally sourced food, Loretha organized a lineup of workshops. These included sessions on transforming sorghum into coffee, making animal feed from leftover sorghum, and processing other local delicacies to boost earnings, like turning foxtail millet into pudding. "We could stand independently because Mama Loretha passed down her knowledge and experience," Ambrosia explained.

She respects Loretha's movement to promote local food as a source of inspiration for the younger generation. Ambrosia observes the ups and downs of Loretha, who is not a descendant of the Lamaholot Tribe, in safeguarding sorghum seeds from becoming extinct.

According to her, many young people are not familiar with sorghum. Loretha coming into the scene has been a real blessing for the community, sparking a drive to really safeguard those local food traditions. She is optimistic that Loretha will keep up the good work with local food and stick around to guide the younger generation. She emphasized the critical need for support from various institutions to facilitate assistance activities. Ambrosia dreams of the youth in her village being self-reliant, running their own stands or small shops offering locally sourced goods and homemade treats.

### **Defying Rice Field Expansion with Military Assistance (*Cetak Sawah Tentara*) through Peaceful Means**

Loretha vividly recalls the military bulldozer that flattened the sorghum fields of local farmers in Kampung Raminara, Tangge Village, Lembor District, West Manggarai Regency, Flores, just three weeks before harvest time. The machine was crushing sorghum plants with its red grains.

Yaspensel accompanied the farmer in the village. Loretha and the Lembor Farmers Alliance protested against the eviction. She made a petition or open letter addressed to Jokowi about the imposition of rice field expansion by the military personnel. She and the Director of Yaspensel, Father Benjamin David, were even called upon by the military.

The petition prompted the Department of Agriculture to visit the site. Loretha, the farmer, and Father Benjamin managed to pull off a successful resistance. The government pulled troops from the area to prevent them from aiding in the rice field expansion with military assistance. Lembor is one of the rice barns in West Manggarai to East Manggarai.

Loretha emphasized that her resistance was not about stopping people from planting rice. She only encourages people to preserve biodiversity, specifically focusing on sorghum. "Our action was peaceful and managed to call off the rice field expansion with military assistance program", she remarked.

The expansion of rice fields with military assistance (*Cetak Sawah Tentara*) program aligns with President Joko Widodo's campaign pledge to engage the military back in 2015. A number of environmental activists criticized the rice field expansion with military assistance (*Cetak Sawah Tentara*) programs that displaced townspeople and damaged local food.

Despite limited government support, Loretha, Yaspensel, and their supported communities persist in preserving local food and safeguarding biodiversity. According to her, the only way to preserve local seeds in the midst of the onslaught of imported seeds is by planting them. He urged the government not to merely glance over sorghum, which has shown resilience against harsh weather conditions.

In 2019, Loretha appreciated the regent who enacted a regent regulation on local food. Back then, every Integrated Health Service, known as Posyandu, had to supply extra food, specifically sorghum, for toddlers. However, as she sees it, government assistance has been inconsistent. One day, the local government authorities pledged to purchase sorghum seeds from the farmers. Yaspensel has provided a large number of seeds in the office. However, the government decided to cancel the seed purchase, citing a need to refocus the budget. "The government should seriously pay attention to sorghum," she remarked.

### **Establishing Yasores**

Loretha has a desire to establish an independent institution that she has been managing for six years as part of advancing sorghum development. Encouraged by the Samdhana Institute, Loretha founded the Argo Sorghum Flores Foundation. One day, activists from the Samdhana Institute offered guidance to Loretha, suggesting she establish her own foundation. This way, she could manage it independently and empower young people. Samdhana supports Yasores members in bolstering their capabilities, such as learning how to effectively run their organization, identifying organizational requirements, structuring their operations, ensuring legal compliance, securing funding, and envisioning future organizational goals.

In March 2023, Yasores was established. Loretha brought together seven young people, ranging in age from 23 to 33 years old. The goal is to ensure that there is a regeneration, allowing the ongoing struggle by Loretha's to be carried on by the younger generation. Among them, some have completed their bachelor's degrees. She has a special requirement that anyone who joins Yasores must be prepared to dive right into gardening or farming. Loretha distributed the responsibilities among the members of the Yasores team. Some handle finances, others oversee activity records, and there are those in charge of tending to the gardens.

The recipient of the Ashoka Award is optimistic that the youth will develop a deep affection for his village, its surroundings, and the food it offers. In Yasores' kitchen, guests are introduced to sorghum through various activities such as planting and expanding its capacity. Loretha aspires that Yasores will be able to develop a more resilient sorghum for conservation purposes. According to Loretha, as a newly established institution with a focus on empowering indigenous communities to uphold their autonomy, it is imperative for Yasores to consistently receive support for capacity building.

One of the capacity-building events participated in by Loretha and Yasores members that made her determined to continue propelling the community forward was the forum that brought together women from eight countries in Southeast Asia on May 20-26, 2023. The Samdhana Institute organized a gathering called the Southeast Asia Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) Summit 2023 in Pajinian Village. This is a gathering of women defenders of Human Rights and the environment. They talked about safeguarding the ecosystem, ensuring food security, and upholding sovereignty, all with a focus on acknowledging and safeguarding the rights of communities.

Women human rights defenders encompass women working on any human rights matter, as well as individuals of all genders dedicated to promoting women's rights and gender equality. Human rights defenders encompass individuals from various sectors of society, some of whom may not even recognize themselves as human rights defenders or those who work in non-traditional human rights fields. These include journalists, healthcare professionals, environmental advocates, peace promoters, private individuals, as well as those involved in development and humanitarian efforts.

Women human rights defenders are crucial agents of social change, wielding significant influence through both personal endeavors and group efforts to combat discrimination and inequality. They champion civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, especially amidst conflict prevention, peacekeeping, security initiatives, and sustainable development pursuits.

Loretha, nestled in her home along the lush Adonara coastline adorned with abundant cocoa trees and a variety of fruits, including coconuts, sorghum, bananas, mangoes, star fruit, guava, and more, expressed her dedication to persistently supporting the community of women farmers. "Lifelong assistance," Loretha remarked.

Source:

1. Maria Loretha Interview, Sunday, February 4-6, 2024, in Pajinian Village, West Adonara, East Flores
2. Interview with Director of Yaspensel, Benjamin Daud,
3. Interview with the Head of Gebetan Community, Tapobali Village Crew, Ambrosia Ero
4. The Samdhana Institute (2023), Story Sharing at the Sorghum Field
5. Sylvia Walby (1990), *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, UK.
6. United Nations Human Rights, *Who Are Women Human Rights Defenders?*
7. Direktorat Riset dan Inovasi Institut Pertanian Bogor (2022), *IPB Sorice: Beras Sorgum Kaya Manfaat, Bantu Atasi Masalah Gizi Ganda (MGG) di Indonesia, Bogor*

### **Maria Loretha's Bio**

Born on May 28, 1969, in West Kalimantan, she finished elementary school at Ketapang Elementary School. Continuing her education, she attended Mater Alma Junior High School in Ambarawa, Central Java, followed by graduation from Saint Francis High School in Central Jakarta. Pursuing higher studies, she enrolled in the Faculty of Law at Universitas Merdeka in Malang, East Java.

Career History:

Program Manager of the Socio-Economic Development Foundation or Yaspensel of the Diocese of Larantuka, East Nusa Tenggara, August 2014 until present.

Founder of the Sorghum Farmers Association or P2SKP Nusa Tenggara Timur in February 2014-present.

Awards and Achievements:

Environmental pioneer award for coastal restoration, sorghum and sandalwood from the Ministry of Environment in 2021.

Icon of appreciation of Pancasila's achievements in the field of social entrepreneurship from the Pancasila Ideology Development Agency in 2019.

Asian Social Impact from Ashoka Award Singapore in 2018.

Pioneer, sorghum promoter, and honored farmer of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2016.

Women Advocates for Early Childhood Education Environment from the Ministry of Culture and Education in 2016.

Nominee of Women as Food Security Agent from Caritas Internationalis, Rome, Italy, in 2015.

Education Field of Tupperware "She Can!" Award in 2015.

Community service field from Anugrah Seputar Indonesia RCTI in 2015.

Inspirational women in environmental conservation from Nova Award in 2014.

Innovators for the Public 2013, Global Washington DC from Ashoka Award 2013.

Inspirational women in the environmental field from the 2012 Kartini Award.

Field of Sustainable Biodiversity Initiative from Kehati Award 2012.

Science & Engineering Field "*Sorgum bergizi, sorgum berduit*" from Academia NTT Award 2011.

Svarna Bhumi from Kick Andy, MetroTV and Pupuk Indonesia 2023.

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