Throughout the month of February, while coronavirus stormclouds were gathering in China and beginning to spread, folks in Tompotika were celebrating. AlTo’s biennial Tompotika International Maleo and Sea Turtle Festival is a celebration of Sulawesi’s natural heritage, sustainable living, the Arts, and community. It’s a demonstration and a celebration of many of the kinds of activities and relationships that we want to build and affirm as we work toward a healthier future for all living beings.

Festival 2020, AlTo’s fifth ever, was a day-long event held in each of six different Tompotika villages and the gateway city, Luwuk. The first half of each day is devoted to games, booths, and workshops: a juggling workshop, with balls shaped like baby sea turtles; a display of nature photography; large-group physical games; information on Sulawesi wildlife; maleo-por-trait selfie booths, and much more. The entire village is invited—all ages, all comers, all for free. Then, in the evening, audiences are entertained with conservation-themed music (see Jackoustick, p. 2) and drama. Performed by a company of Tompotika high school students whom AlTo has assembled in the weeks prior, and led by a

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COVID-19 in Tompotika: AlTo’s response (continued from p.1)

free to all staff. All staff were also provided with cloth masks, and instructed to start practicing social distancing, even before the coronavirus was recorded in the region.

Prevent the Spread

AlTo staff come from several Tompotika villages as well as the gateway city, Luwuk, so we immediately partitioned our teams geographically to prevent asymptomatic carriers from unwittingly bringing the virus from one part of the region to another. In some AlTo projects, such as sea turtle patrols, villagers carry out the work independently in their own villages; these have been allowed to carry on relatively unchanged. However, in locations where villagers would have been working alongside team members from other regions, they’ve been asked to stay home for now, while still collecting their wages. Tasks have been adjusted, and AlTo’s dedicated staff are receiving a hardship pay increase.

Relieve the Suffering

As of this writing, no COVID-19 cases have yet been reported from the Tompotika area, and the government has pledged to help any who fall sick at no charge. But the economic consequences of the virus have already been devastating, with farmers and fisherfolk unable to market their products, as well as many other effects. As part of the community, AlTo wants to help. So, in addition to continuing to pay villager wages, AlTo is obtaining and delivering free rice for any who need it in our partner villages.

Work for Long-term Change

As devastating as the COVID-19 pandemic is, it was not unexpected to those paying attention to the effects of human activities such as accelerating destruction of natural areas and growing wildlife trafficking. Even as we work in a small way to soften the effects of the pandemic, AlTo will continue to work even harder to heal the broken relationship between humans and the rest of nature, aiming to help to change destructive human practices and to prevent disasters like this from happening in the first place.

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Ipan Djano

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team of Indonesian and international coaches, each Festival year has a different specific conservation theme around which the drama is created; this year’s theme was human overpopulation. The Indonesian government has long had an active campaign to slow human population growth in the country—the Keluarga Berencanaan (Family Planning) or “KB” program—and AlTo’s goal this year was to spotlight the program and the many environmental and social benefits to be gained from fewer human numbers and smaller families. The government slogan for the program, seen on stickers and billboards across the country, is "Dua Anak Cukup.”

**Dua Anak Cukup — Two Children is Enough**

This year, the drama company opted to explore the overpopulation theme through a series of short dramatic sketches. In one sketch, an aging farmer ponders how to divide his land amongst several children; in another, a sick “Earth” goes to the doctor to get a prescription for wellness. In another sketch, shadow-puppets depict what happened when the world changed from few-people-many-animals to few-animals-many-people; and in another, the audience participated in a demonstration of what exponential population growth looks like. For another sketch, the high school actresses interviewed village women about their lives and families, and told their stories onstage. “Yes, two children is enough,” remarked one woman, nodding vigorously while watching the show.

For hundreds of festival-goers of all stripes, —schoolkids and grandparents, policemen and housewives, teenagers and bigwigs—the day was pure enjoyment. Said Rino, (8), “Can we do this again tomorrow?” Said Dasi (50), “Very entertaining! And also educates the kids! Entertainment that’s so educational. This is good, this AlTo...Thank you.”

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All photos by Acca
"I wanted to go to middle school, but both my parents got sick, and I had to stay home to take care of them. When I got older, I married my first love, and he wanted us to have lots of children. So we had eleven." Thus Ina, 61, a resident in one of AlTo’s partner villages, described her life. "Two of my children died. Nowadays I am always sick, but my daughter takes care of me."

Human overpopulation and overconsumption are the twin drivers of much of the degradation of our planet; the Indonesian government’s "KB" (family planning) program has also long aimed at reducing overpopulation to improve social wellbeing. But around the world, it’s well-documented that a key to slowing human population growth is educating and empowering women and girls; when given the opportunity, women generally choose smaller families. In AlTo’s Festival 2020, girls and women were front and center, forming a majority of the high school actors, Festival facilitators, and audience members. Thus, the educational messages of Festival, though aimed at all community members, were focused on, shaped, and delivered largely by girls and women. "Until now, I never understood the connection between big families, human population growth and environmental destruction," said one teen, "and I never realized how hard it was for our mothers and grandmothers."

"We can have education and careers, as well as marriage and families," said a chorus of girls in a self-created drama. "We just need the opportunity."~