

The Impossibility of Subud Enterprises

By Ragnar Lystad

On various occasions Bapak explained the meaning and goals of Subud enterprises. In essence he said that a Subud enterprise is simply an enterprise owned and run by Subud members and expected to give 25% of its net profit to Subud. Although it's possible to regard an enterprise run by only one or two members as a Subud enterprise, Bapak consistently recommended large enterprises, where, by uniting our efforts (*gotong-royong*), we would also learn to work together.

The goals were manifold:

- by giving part of their profits to Subud, the enterprises would finance national and international Subud administration and charitable Subud activities, thereby ensuring a sufficient and stable source of income;
- they would make Subud known and respected for its contribution to society;
- they would give job opportunities to Subud members who would otherwise go unemployed;
- they would give Subud members the possibility of experiencing inner guidance while working to provide a living for themselves and their family.

These ideas seem, at first sight, quite reasonable. They have, however, produced little in the way of positive results, while associated on the other hand with large personal losses and misfortunes. If we look for the reason, we will find that what is described here has intrinsic, essential flaws. There is something wrong with the concept of a Subud enterprise in itself.

The idea that a Subud enterprise should give jobs to out-of-work members is impossible to practise for simple business reasons. Unemployed people are usually less qualified than those who are already in the workforce. Having to appoint unqualified people will lay a heavy burden on the company and lessen its prospects of success. Another difficulty is that giving preference to Subud members is questionable and will in any case make us look even more sectarian. And in the case of Subud and non-Subud people working together in the same enterprise, the non-Subud can never be sure that there isn't a form of nepotism being practised by the 'brothers and sisters', even if it is not done consciously or not at all.

The rule of 25% to Subud is another difficulty. Today, only a minority of larger companies pay dividends. Any surplus usually goes to re-investment, as this is often badly needed in order to keep competition at bay. Gifts to charitable and cultural projects are decided on the basis of profits in the current year. If a company feels an obligation to regularly donate large sums to support Subud administration, it will again be a heavy burden and a serious disadvantage in the fight for survival. The stable support envisaged is unrealistic, and the Subud organization may be subject to the vicissitudes of business cycles.

That we should learn to feel guidance through our work is not easily compatible with the vision of many members working together in a big enterprise. Somebody will have to make the important decisions and set the direction. The subordinates just have to follow, no matter how stupid the decisions from above (of which we have had ample examples). There are many other ways to achieve some freedom in life; it doesn't have to be in business. In any

case it cannot be right to press the issue through advocating unrealistic ideals.

A difficult problem, both in theory and practice, is that of ownership. Contrary to what we might like to believe, there are people who leave Subud, even after many years. Moreover, unfortunately, one day we have to die and we may have heirs who are not in Subud. In the case of small enterprises owned by a few people, Subud ownership may therefore be quite a temporary affair. In the case of a corporation with many shareholders, it is impossible to avoid having some shareholders who are not Subud members, and this percentage will steadily go up. When there is a non-Subud majority, they may unite and throw out the Subud management. Exit Subud. But what about when they are still a minority? Do we have a moral right to donate to Subud part of the profit that otherwise would have gone to non-Subud people? Personally I would say no.

One possibility here is that shareholders bequeath their shares to a Subud organization, e.g. Muhammad Subuh Foundation or a Subud national organization. If many do that, the reduction of Subud ownership will be delayed, but one cannot expect everyone to disregard their own children, especially if the value is substantial. Moreover, a significant death duty may ensue. The only theoretically realistic possibility is, in my opinion, that Subud organizations have full ownership from the beginning, i.e. those buying shares register them in the name of a Subud organization. This means that they renounce, right from the start, all possible profit or income.

We cannot, however, expect people to invest without any possibility of a return on their investment. This may not matter so much now that we know the fate of the big Subud enterprises, but the argument is still appropriate. Another problem, especially relevant in the case of smaller enterprises, is that the founders will want to be sure that they can lead the company in the future, and not have to compete with other members for the leadership.

We have also to consider that a Subud national organization, or even MSF, may not be prepared to exercise ownership of a commercial enterprise. We might, as was once tried, establish a Subud holding company with the necessary professional qualifications, and the Subud holding company could then be owned by a national organization. This has not worked either, and it seems that the idea is unrealistic, owing to some of the same reasons discussed above.

The idea of having a group of consultants to help members start enterprises is just an example of how crooked thinking can become when motivated by wishful thinking rather than reality. The advice such consultants can give will only in exceptional cases be relevant to the actual country and area of business. If you want to start a business in Poland, for example, you need experts who are familiar with how to conduct that kind of business in Poland. General advice is usually irrelevant and may even lead us astray, especially if it is tainted with enthusiasm for 'Subud enterprises'.

We have looked at some formal problems. They may, however, just be the outer manifestations of a deeper, more fundamental flaw that could be the real reason why so many 'Subud enterprises' have not really been blessed with good fortune. If we go back to the list of goals above, we see that the two first embody the idea that we should impress the world and contribute to society by financial means. This cannot be the way. The world will simply not be impressed. Our contribution must be on a different level, through passing the latihan on to other people, one after another, according to their spiritual need.

It is a good thing to do an enterprise, if it accords with that person's qualifications and talent. If his talent is to be a mathematician, he should be a professor at the university and not do business. If his talent is to lead a big manufacturing company, he should do that, even if it is not a 'Subud enterprise'. It may, in general, be better to be in a position where it is possible to make one's own decisions instead of having to follow the whims of an incompetent boss. But it is certainly wrong to try to start an enterprise just to have that kind of experience, if it is not actually in accordance with one's real talent.

A person starting an enterprise should do it on the basis of a personal, individual evaluation. And then he or she should do it for his/her own sake, not for the sake of Subud. Subud does not really need enterprises. The single member might need one for his own benefit, but the Subud organization has no need for anything except members who are able to contribute what is necessary to keep the basic functions going, including facilities for the latihan. And it seems that it is an often repeated experience that it is good if the members contribute to that themselves, instead of being given a Subud house.

To do a Subud enterprise is impossible, because there should not be any Subud enterprises. The idea of a 'Subud enterprise' is simply wrong. There may be enterprises owned by Subud members, but they should not be called 'Subud enterprises'. There is nothing that can or should be called 'Subud enterprise'. We should not try to do an enterprise because we think that it is somehow good for the development of Subud. We might do it if we think it is good for ourselves, as individuals. An enterprise may even be an important part of the spiritual life of a person, if, and only if, it is based on his individual, inner guidance. And then it should be in his own name only.

I have had some personal experience with this. Subject to what I now regard as psychological pressure, I was involved with setting up a Subud enterprise. It cost me some money, a tremendous amount of work and almost my marriage before I was able to withdraw and the company was liquidated. Some time later, I got a very clear indication that I should embark on a new direction in life. This was a success all the way, resulting in a one-man business which gave me a very satisfactory income for many years until a new indication told me that this period in my life was over.

It is high time that we free ourselves from ideas that have troubled the Subud movement and thwarted its development for about forty years now. If the concept of Subud enterprises is buried once and for all, it will be reason for all of us to heave a sigh of relief.