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**FEATURE STORY****For immediate Release: November 6, 2020****Uladu village furnishes SDP homes with beautiful locally-made cane furniture**

The tranquil waterways around Balimo in the Western Province are the main transport corridors with dugout canoes and dinghies being the most popular vessel of choice. Uladu village is a 30-minute paddle by canoe (or 10-15 minutes in a motorised dinghy) to the landing area in town. This village is known for making beautiful cane furniture, but over recent years, they struggled to find a market for these products, other than the occasional one-off order from around the local area.

The man who keeps this skill alive within the village is Mr. Saida Stiggy Lalela. He learnt to make cane furniture from his father and brothers when he was 22 years old and continued to make furniture for the past 38 years.



*Cane chair maker, Saida Lalela.*

Earlier this year, PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (SDP) moved into Balimo working with the Kokoda Track Foundation to develop the Balimo campus with its start-up of the FODE program, and to also prepare for the launch of its proof-of-concept Aerial Health Patrols (AHP) that reaches out to remote communities serviced by rural airstrips.

SDP's Chief Program's Officer, Susan Allen came across a few old pieces of this carefully crafted cane furniture - a small stool here, a little table over there – whilst working on SDP Balimo-based projects. She asked where this furniture had come from; and if a message could be sent to the village so she could speak to the person in charge.

She was put in contact with Saida and from the first day a firm friendship was formed.

*“Saida is a lovely man. What he does in his community is amazing,” said Susan. “He is passing the skill to the younger generation and the regular SDP orders are providing a much-needed in-situ training opportunity, with many people in the village involved.”*

Saida's father, who has limited work capacity now, assists with the cleaning and lashing together parts of the process.

Women are also involved in making cane furniture,” said Saida. “Group of widows, women’s fellowship members and sports groups assist with the cleaning or ‘scratching’ (removing) of the black soot from the ‘cooking the cane’ (burning) process. They also collect the coconut leaves required to light the fires for this process. Each group is paid K20 to pay for some sugar and tea to eat with their sago meal during the time they work.”

Since that first meeting between Saida and Susan, the community has been making all the furniture for the five houses SDP occupies in Balimo. And there are plans to furnish another four houses which are being refurbished to accommodate SDP’s expanding presence in the town.



*SDP’s Susan Allen receiving a delivery from the Lalala family at the Landing Area.*

*“I could see he would need support to crank up production from a single occasional item, to fill our order and so, since March, I have split the complete order for all the houses into smaller monthly orders, and have supported him through the process i.e. cash advances to pay for the labour required to cut the cane, and for consumables such as nails and varnish etc.,” said Susan.*

Saida is very happy with this arrangement as SDP is providing the village with a steady income stream throughout the year.

Currently, he delivers the furniture to the landing area by dugout canoe, and is saving up to buy a motor.

He said the money from SDP’s orders is making a difference in the lives of many of the 500 or so population in his village.

*“I am very grateful for the support that SDP has given my village throughout this year,”* he said.

Saida and his community continue to work each day on the orders SDP has given them.

Saida also said that he was able to pay for his son’s school fees with the money from the first order, and has saved some of the money so that he can purchase a motor for his canoe.

He dreams of one day building a warehouse so that he can begin to stockpile the furniture and thereby respond to orders quickly. He is also working towards purchasing a motor so that he can get his furniture into Daru and Kamusi.

*“He is a man of vision, and it is a win-win for SDP and Uladu village that we have formed this partnership,”* said Susan. *“Who knows what the future may bring as SDP cranks up its development initiatives in Western Province.”*