Meeting and talking with people that are experienced in their field is always enlightening. Mustafril, a 44-year-old man from South Aceh, is one of those enlightening persons. He was born and raised during the period of the rise and fall of the nutmeg commodity. Despite experiencing the golden era of nutmeg and its collapse, the people of South Aceh have never lost hope that this commodity will bring their district economic prosperity while helping to maintain its natural resources.

Upon finishing high school in Tapaktuan, the capital city of South Aceh, Mustafril moved to Banda Aceh in 1991 to continue his studies at Universitas Syiah Kuala (Unsyiah), the largest state university in the province of Nangroe Aceh Darussalam. Mustafril then pursued his masters and doctoral degrees at Bogor Agricultural University (IPB). Although having a doctoral degree, he is humble and open for discussion with respect for others, which is clearly evident when talking to him.

Just ask him about nutmeg and you will immediately see a twinkle in his eyes. He will pour out all of his knowledge about nutmeg. Mustafril certainly has a deep understanding about this specific plant of South Aceh. Ever since he was young, he would accompany his father, the late T. Bachtiar, to the nutmeg plantation owned by his family at Air Bubuih near
the watershed (DAS) of Krueng Sarullah, Jambo Apha Village. If you have ever visited this place, you would agree that this is one of the most beautiful places one could imagine. The rivers are pristine with huge rocks dotting the water, laced by the exotic tropical forest of Leuser that soothes the eyes. Mustafril remembers that every Sunday his family would visit the plantation to clean the plot or pick fruit. He still remembers that the planting method that his father would apply was the mixed crop planting method, in which they would plant Robusta coffee between the nutmeg plants.

He noticed that starting in 1987, the nutmeg crops were infested with branch-eating bugs (batocera hercules) and white root fungus. Since nutmeg was their main source of livelihood, the family's economy was devastated. The year 1993 was the end of their nutmeg plantation as all the trees suffered, became dry, and died. The plantation that was managed as a legacy of the family was no longer worthy to maintain.

As the days passed by, Mustafril almost forgot about nutmeg. One day, on December 8, 2010, UNDP and the Government of South Aceh District organized a workshop on establishing the Aceh Nutmeg Forum held at the Rumah Agam, Tapaktuan. The workshop gathered 150 participants consisting of farmers, nutmeg traders, nutmeg distillation owners, nutmeg oil middlemen, CSOs, academics, and the Government of South Aceh. The multi-stakeholder forum agreed to establish the Aceh Nutmeg Forum (FORNUTMEG), with Mustafril as the chairman. Ever since this appointment, Mustafril has been responsible for advancing the nutmeg industry of South Aceh in line with the strategic plans of FORNUTMEG.

The FORNUTMEG in South Aceh was established for particular reasons. One of the main reasons was to regain the golden age of the nutmeg commodity as a source of income for the region, as the potential capacity of Aceh nutmeg can reach 5,906 tons of dried nutmeg pits. In addition, South Aceh has 15,230 ha of nutmeg plantations (consisting of 7,010ha potentially productive crops/TBM, 7,356 Ha productive crops/TM, and 864 Ha of non-producing crops/TR) and with this, the Province of Aceh has become the largest production center for nutmeg. Nevertheless, threats towards this commodity are very real. Therefore, the establishment of this forum was also meant to foster collaboration with strategic partners of neighboring regions.

Mustafril and the nutmeg forum that he chairs understand the large potential problems associated with pests (Batocera hercules) attacking nutmeg plants. These pests have been slowly plaguing the nutmeg plants in South Aceh and neighboring districts in Aceh Barat Daya since the 1980s. In fact, the threat became more apparent since the 1990s when the nutmeg plants were also infested with
white root fungus (JAP) that destroyed the nutmeg crops of Mustafri’s family. The nutmeg industry was facing a gloomy period.

The simultaneous attack by the insects and white root fungus between 1990-2000 struck South Aceh’s economy. Various measures to seek pest-resistant nutmeg plants were endeavored. Many research studies were conducted by several universities in Indonesia to find a solution to eradicate the nutmeg pests, but there was no long term solution.

However, the farmers of the FORNUTMEG were able to find the solution themselves. One of them is Hamdani, a role model nutmeg farmer from Tapaktuan Subdistrict, who is also the chair of the Tapaktuan Nutmeg Forum. Hamdani applied the method of grafting wild nutmeg trees with cultivated nutmeg trees, and the results were amazing!

The grafting method is done by transplanting the lower branch of the wild nutmeg (Myristica argantea Warb) with the branch from highly productive nutmeg (Myristica fragrant Houtt), resulting in a new clone that is resistant to white root fungus. It is named Sambutan Nutmeg.

After going through several trials, the Sambutan Nutmeg was concluded to be resistant to pests and more productive. The FORNUTMEG was trusted and supported by the USAID Indonesia Forest and Climate Support (IFACS) Project through a grant to provide training for the farmers to develop the seedlings of Sambutan Nutmeg.

Having innovated Sambutan Nutmeg, the District of South Aceh was recognized as one of the Top 25 Public Service Innovation of 2015 and was awarded by the Ministry of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucracy Reform as stipulated in the Minister Decree No. 100 of 2015.

Mustafri’s enthusiasm to bring back prosperity to the nutmeg farmers in South Aceh also received recognition. The Aceh Nutmeg Forum was acknowledged for its success in innovating Sambutan Nutmeg and through the training programs on cultivating Sambutan Nutmeg seedlings in 11 sub-districts under the District of South Aceh. There were as many as 618 nutmeg farmers that have been trained in 11 batches. Mustafri was able to convince many people of the advantage of Sambutan Nutmeg that was innovated by the members of his forum.

His persistence also gained attention from the Mayor of Pagar Alam, South Sumatra Province. The mayor visited the Field School of the Aceh Nutmeg Forum on August 1-2, 2015 in Tapaktuan. After directly observing the superiority of Sambutan Nutmeg in South Aceh, in January 2016, the Mayor from South Sumatra placed an order for 2,850 seedlings to be sent to Pagar Alam City. Another partner convinced by Mustafri was the District Government of Siaw Tagulandang Biaro Islands (SITARO), North Sulawesi Province. The delegation from North Sulawesi conducted a comparative study and visited FORNUTMEG on December 20, 2015. They were very interested to develop Sambutan Nutmeg for the regeneration of the nutmeg commodity on their island.

Now under the leadership of Mustafri, the FORNUTMEG is a well-respected forum that is competent in managing and empowering nutmeg production. Mustafri travels around the country to share best practices.
his knowhow and experience in cultivating quality nutmeg through various seminars, workshops, or training from Maluku Utara to Papua. In fact, he has been trusted by the Indonesian Aetheric Oil Council and the Government of Aceh to be the Chairperson of the Organizing Committee of the National Conference on Aetheric Oil (KNMA) held in Banda Aceh in October 2016. Mustafril has one more goal in life, namely to have Sambutan Nutmeg certified as a superior seedling clone from the Ministry of Agriculture. With such certification, Sambutan Nutmeg would be able to be developed with an even wider scope.

The USAID LESTARI project, building upon USAID IFACS, appreciates what Mustafril and FORNUTMEG are doing in cultivating quality nutmeg - a very important agro-forestry product. Besides its high economic value through mixed planting with shee- rea wood, pule, teak, jabon and sengon, the life expectancy of nutmeg is relatively high. It can reach 60-100 years, significantly increasing carbon stocks through its biomass growth. Nutmeg trees can also function as non-timber forest plants that have deep roots within the soil and rocks, which may prevent landslides.

Although his achievements have been acknowledged by many, Mustafril is still not yet satisfied. He and the farmers collaborating with other stakeholders still continue to seek innovations. Mustafril apparently never runs out of energy to share and synergize with other key stakeholders to make nutmeg as both a high-economic and high-value crop for conservation. For Mustafril, this is one of the solutions to support sustainable development oriented towards the welfare of the people and conservation of natural resources.