

17/06/1998

Right on the money

Hisham Harun

IT'S been over a month since Amanah Saham Wanita, a.k.a. Asnita, was launched. Already, the unit trust is poised to breach its target collection of RM200 million within the year.

"We have approval for only RM200 million from the Securities Commission, or 400 million units, but this is being snapped up.

"I can't tell you how much we have collected but I won't be surprised if we reach our limit before the year ends," says Hanita Ramly, senior manager of Hijrah Unit Trust Management Berhad.

Hijrah, the management company for Asnita, is behind the booths set up to collect monies from investors. It also collates investor particulars.

The overwhelming response to Asnita, initiated for women by Wanita Um-no head Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, defies logic.

From the start, the benefits of Asnita were unclear and the confusion it caused in the initial months of its introduction was mind-boggling (see accompanying story).

True, insurance and death benefits were discussed, and the terms "dividends", "loans for businesses" and "scholarships" were bandied about. But returns and the amount of financing for Asnita unit trust holders were not made known.

"Many are still unclear about the benefits of this unit trust. And there are those who don't even know of its existence," Hanita confirms.

But this hasn't stopped the money from pouring in. During a recent road show organised by Hijrah, for example, RM70,000 was collected within a few hours.

Much of the support has come from rural areas, from people who want to help the government. Besides flocking to Asnita booths with cash, many would sell their jewellery over the counter to valuers Habib Jewels, then pick up Asnita shares.

Since the May 5 launch of Asnita by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Hijrah has been working hard to clear the air and disseminate information to the public via road shows around the country manned by 10 staff-members working seven days a week.

Things look good.

This unit trust - if properly managed - shows promise for Malaysian women across the board, in terms of upgrading their livelihood.

"By next May, we hope to start executing our plans, which include giving out interest-free loans of between RM1,000 and RM2,000, and professional advice to our women trust holders who want to start small businesses.

"We will also assist those gearing their companies for listing on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, by providing loans of between RM1 million and RM2 million," Hanita explains.

Men can also be trust holders, but in the event of death, the benefit will go to their wives. But they need to open joint accounts with a female partner to qualify for a loan.

As with any business loan application, applicants must prepare a comprehensive working paper. Metrowangsa Asset Management Sdn Bhd, Asnita's external fund managers, will then go through their accounts and evaluate the performance of their company.

"Metrowangsa then makes a profit forecast and decides how much it can charge the company. Subsequent profits will be pumped back into the fund," says Hanita.

Other benefits include an attractive insurance scheme. "For the insurance plan, in the event of death, if you have RM100 worth of unit trust, Hijrah management gives your beneficiaries RM100.

"You get another RM100 from the insurance firm (MNI Takaful) and an additional RM500 for your death benevolent fund (Tabung Khairat)," explains Hanita.

On its part, the management derives income from the five per cent service fee it levies on collection of the monies, and 1.5 per cent from the profits generated by the fund at the end of each year. It shares the latter with Metrowangsa.

In the pipeline are scholarship schemes for children of lower-income unit holders and provisions to charities and non-governmental organisations that reach out to single mothers, abused women and the like.

Hijrah will also organise twice-yearly financial seminars for their unit trust holders, to educate women on business and finance.

To qualify for these benefits, the first step a person needs to take is buy a minimum of 200 units at 50 sen each.

As the stock market is currently volatile and rather unpredictable, Hanita explains that only 10 per cent of the fund is in the form of stocks.

"We have invested much of the rest in the money market," she says, adding that PNB's assistant general manager and head of investment operations, Idris Kecut, is an independent member of Asnita's investment committee.

Things look rosy for Asnita, which kicked off with RM350,000 from the Tabung Ehsan Wanita. (Tabung Ehsan Wanita account-holders have automatically become Asnita account holders.)

However, one of the main flaws of this project lies in the promoters' failure to clearly explain the mechanics of the unit trust. For this reason, many who have invested in Asnita say they are still in the dark.

In their enthusiasm to help the government overcome economic problems, investors have no doubt come forward. But they are worried about how funds are being managed.

Wanita executive councillor Dr Norraesah Mohammed says: "Logically, the basic rule of playing the market is buying when it is cheap and selling when stocks are high. With the yen falling, we fear our stock market will go lower.

"If this happens, as it has in the last few days, there is a big chance we may lose. I would stop at savings. When you save, you may not earn a lot but you won't lose anything."

Based on net asset value, Asnita units are at 45 sen. Still, Hanita says Asnita is performing much better than many other unit trusts. And the collection remains strong.

"Due to the bad market, we have not been able to make as much money as when we launched Tabung Ehsan Wanita.

Then, account-holders were given returns of 13 per cent after two months.

But as I said, most of our investment is in the money market. We cannot guarantee great returns, but our investment here looks good."

(END)