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**THE WINDS OF CHANGE: HOW GOVERNMENT-LED
PROGRAMS ARE TRANSFORMING THE ORANG
ASLI COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

The Orang Asli community, Orang Asli Malaysia, has long faced socioeconomic challenges due to being marginalized and isolated from mainstream society. However, the government's efforts to implement socioeconomic development programs have brought significant positive changes to their communities. This paper examines the impact of the government-led program on the Orang Asli community, particularly in settlement, economy, and social. This study focuses on the Organized Settlement Program, Economic Development

Program and Social Development Program. This study uses data from government reports, academic publications, and interviews with members of the Orang Asli community. Findings show that government-led programs have increased access to education, better economic opportunities, and better health care services for Aboriginal people. The study also highlighted the challenges that remain in trying to fully address the socioeconomic gap the Orang Asli community faces. Overall, this paper provides insight into the transformative power of government-led programs in addressing the socioeconomic challenges faced by marginalized communities and the importance of continued efforts to promote equitable and sustainable development.

Keywords: Orang Asli, Socioeconomic, Government Program, Transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli, an indigenous group in Peninsular Malaysia, live primarily in forested areas. Their way of life is strongly established in tradition, influenced by the environment and ancestral rituals. Despite being a part of Malaysian society for thousands of years, they continue to confront difficulties in their daily life. Poverty among the Orang Asli is mostly owing to their reliance on economic activities related to forest products, and traditional agriculture has become less viable, particularly because of the displacement of their residence regions due to a variety of economic and non-economic issues. As a result, the Orang Asli have been forced to shift their concentration to alternate economic activities, which has contributed to an increase in poverty rates. Peninsular Malaysia's indigenous people, the Orang Asli, with a population of 178,000 people. Based on their language and cultural practises, they are classified into three major groupings. The Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. The Negrito, thought to be the region's first occupants, are a group of hunter-gatherers who historically lived in the forests and mountains. The Senoi are an agricultural civilization who reside in the hills and valleys and practise swidden agriculture, whereas the Proto-Malay are a coastal and riverine people who engage in fishing, trading, and boat-making.

Table 1

Indigenous People in Peninsular Malaysia

Negrito	Senoi	Proto-Malay
Kensiu	Temiar	Kuala
Kintak	Semai	Kanaq
Lanoh	Semoq Beri	Seletar
Jahai	Jahut	Jakun
Mendriq	Mah Meri	Semelai
Bateq	Che Wong	Temuan

Traditional Orang Asli civilizations are distinguished by a close connection to the natural world, with beliefs and practises reflecting a deep regard for the environment and its resources. The Negrito, for example, have always held that their survival is dependent on preserving a peaceful relationship with the forest and its spirits. Their hunting methods are centred on the philosophy of minimal interference, with only what is required for survival being removed from the forest (Lye, 2013).

During the colonial era, the Orang Asli faced enormous obstacles as the British gradually took over their territories and resources for commercial exploitation (Kamal & Lim, 2019). The British implemented policies that favoured forest exploitation and fostered large-scale agriculture, mining, and logging, endangering the traditional lands and livelihoods of Orang Asli. Many Orangs Asli were forced to migrate or convert to Christianity, while their traditional practices and beliefs were vilified as barbaric and superstitious.

The obstacles faced by the Orang Asli have persisted in the post-colonial age, with government initiatives aimed at modernization, development, and assimilation. These policies have frequently resulted in the eviction of Orang Asli populations from their ancestral lands, as well as the destruction of their traditional traditions and languages. The majority of ethnic groups in Malaysia have also discriminated against and marginalised the Orang Asli, viewing them as backward and primitive (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006).

Despite these obstacles, the Orang Asli have maintained their claim to their territories, culture, and identity. Recent initiatives to enhance Orang Asli's rights and autonomy have included the founding of the

Department of Orang Asli Development and the acknowledgement of Orang Asli customary lands. Much more must be done, however, to assist the Orang Asli in their quest for cultural survival and well-being.

Therefore, this study will focus on three programs that are transforming the Orang Asli communities, the impact of the program was changing the Orang Asli after the program and the effectiveness of the development program to Orang Asli. These changes are increasing assistance, education level, employment opportunities and transportation. Effectiveness is successful in business, successful poverty reduction and successfully improving living conditions for greater comfort. Hopefully this study can be used as a guide and reference to other researchers in dealing with issues related to Orang Asli in Malaysia.

SOCIOECONOMIC PROGRAM

Resettlement Program

The main goal of the Organized Settlement Program is to provide settlement facilities to the Orang Asli community, ensuring a more organized, comfortable, and secure life for them, free from communist threats. The Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) also carries out survey work to identify boundaries and land ownership of the Orang Asli. The PPT provides facilities such as participant houses, clean and well-maintained water supply, electricity supply, tarred village roads, economic projects, surau (prayer facilities), and schools for the comfort of the Orang Asli residents. The government allocation to JAKOA in 2018 for the Housing Assistance Program amounted to RM6,260,000.00, with an expenditure of RM1,717,000.00, covering 99 houses, including 89 houses repaired and 10 newly constructed houses (Ministry of Rural Development, 2018). The PPT is divided into two methods: the first method involves relocating residents to new settlements, while the second method entails restructuring existing villages and equipping them with basic amenities and economic programs.

Economic Development Program

The goal of the Economic Development Program is to increase income and reduce the poverty rate among the Orang Asli while

introducing indigenous economic resources. There are four main projects implemented under this program, which are cash crop projects (vegetables), livestock projects (goats, cows, sheep, and fish), rubber and oil palm plantation projects, and Orang Asli entrepreneurial development projects.

Social Development Program

The main goal of the Social Development Program is to improve the quality of life for the Orang Asli residing in rural and peri-urban areas, helping them adapt to changes in their daily lives and undergo mindset transformation. Additionally, PPS provides various forms of assistance covering aspects such as education, housing for the poorest communities, social infrastructure and amenities, mental development support, family development, and healthcare development.

Effectiveness of Development Program for Orang Asli

Effectiveness of Development Programs for the Orang Asli Community is estimated that there are around 300 million indigenous peoples (United Nations) representing 5,000 ethnic groups from over 90 countries worldwide (Bank Negara, 2018). Studies indicate that indigenous peoples worldwide, whether in Asia, America, Australia, or Europe, are significantly poorer compared to other communities (Walter, 2004). This trend was also examined by the World Bank in 2005, revealing that indigenous populations have the highest poverty rates (Hall, 2012).

Considering this, the government has made efforts to implement economic development programs, improve infrastructure facilities, and enhance the living standards of the Orang Asli. A total allocation of RM352 million was provided through the 2015 Budget, RM300 million (2016 Budget), RM110 million (2017 Budget), RM50 million (2018 Budget), and RM100 million (2019 Budget), demonstrating the government's ongoing commitment to uplift the living standards of the Orang Asli. In general, most Orang Asli individuals no longer rely solely on traditional economic activities such as forest products. They have gradually entered the industrial economy, thereby improving their economic livelihoods. However, this transition often becomes a subject of debate as they strive to enhance their living standards while preserving their traditional customs and cultural heritage, which have been increasingly affected by development (Mohd Nur Syufaat

Jamiran et al., 2015), alongside the occurrence of social issues within their communities (Seow et al., 2013).

As development reaches the Orang Asli, especially the younger generation, they begin to migrate to new areas, particularly nearby towns and industrial zones, which offer more job opportunities in sectors such as manufacturing, hospitality, restaurant work, domestic assistance, and others, in order to improve their family's economic situation. Traditional occupations such as gathering forest products and hunting are no longer attractive due to the unpredictable income derived from such sources, which is considered inadequate in proportion to the effort exerted (Mohd Nur Syufaat Jamiran et al., 2015). Apart from leaving their hometowns, the younger generation also commutes to nearby towns, engaging in low-paying jobs such as construction labor, factory work, restaurant assistance, and gardening (Khairul Hisyam & Ibrahim Ngah, 2007). Their migration to urban areas is influenced by uncertain economic and social conditions, as well as the desire for a more secure life and better economic prospects in urban settings (Mohd Nur Syufaat Jamiran et al., 2015). Other contributing factors to this migration include land encroachment, poverty, natural disasters, lack of job opportunities, decline in traditional ways of life, and better prospects and opportunities in urban areas.

However, the socioeconomic status of the Orang Asli is still far behind that of other communities (Mohd Nur Syufaat Jamiran et al., 2015), and this situation presents a challenge for the government in developing the Orang Asli community. According to Mohd Nur Syufaat Jamiran et al. (2015), there are four main challenges in improving their socioeconomic status: (i) limited job opportunities, (ii) seasonal influx of tourists, (iii) exploitation by middlemen, and (iv) low self-identity among the Orang Asli. Furthermore, the Orang Asli community generally does not hold a positive view of the government's efforts to bring about change in their lives, as some still harbor negative perceptions about potential negative consequences and outside influences associated with development (Er et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this research were the Orang Asli community residing in Perak, Malaysia. Pahang was chosen as the study area

due to the larger population of Orang Asli in northern Malaysia. According to the Annual Report of the Department of Orang Asli (JAKOA), there were approximately 209,575 Orang Asli in Malaysia, with 61,225 of them living in Perak (JAKOA, 2023). Thirty Orang Asli individuals involved in socioeconomic development were selected to assist in achieving the research objectives. For this study, a qualitative methodology was employed, and a semi-structured interview questionnaire was designed. The semi-structured survey format was used to allow a problem-focused approach and encourage personalized dialogue with the participants. Conducting face-to-face interviews provided the researchers with flexibility to modify and clarify questions while gaining insights from the participants' perspectives. Participants were given the freedom to respond in a way that they deemed suitable, allowing for the collection of additional relevant data. The interviews also provided an opportunity for the interviewees to express their opinions and highlight their areas of expertise and interest. The interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participants, often in the evenings. Each interview lasted between one to two hours, during which the participants were asked the prepared questions. After completing the data collection, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The textual results were then categorized and grouped into major themes, and specific coding techniques were employed to organize and guide the data analysis process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To achieve the study's objectives, document analysis was used to explain the socio-economic development programs implemented in the Orang Asli community in the state of Perak. As mentioned earlier, this study focuses on socio-economic development programs. Generally, the programs planned under this program aim to enhance the Orang Asli community (Abdullah, 2014). Activities or projects under this program include educational assistance, housing aid for the poorest, infrastructure and social facilities, mental development, family development, and health facilities. Furthermore, Seow et al. (2013) added more detailed information about family and community development projects, health and medical facilities, and community leaders' housing. The social development programs implemented on the Orang Asli community in Perak include the Resettlement Scheme (RPS) Legap, RPS Ulu Kinta, and Air Banun, which include the

Organized Development Program (PPT), Economic Development Program (PPT), and Social Development Program (PPS). The changes that occur after participating in these programs include increased assistance, educational level, employment opportunities, and transportation. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the program includes being successful in business, reducing poverty, and improving living conditions for greater comfort.

Changes to the Orang Asli After Participating in the Program

The study's findings can be divided into five types of changes that occur among the Orang Asli, namely increased assistance, educational level, employment opportunities, health, and acceptance.

Increase Assistance

The term increased assistance in this study refers to the assistance received by the Orang Asli after participating in the socioeconomic development program. Each Orang Asli household head who participated in this program is provided with housing assistance. They are also given land and crops such as oil palm and rubber for cultivation, in addition to being placed in the Organized Settlement Program (PPT). The following are the interview findings addressing this change:

We provide housing assistance to ensure a more comfortable living for the Orang Asli. For those living near the lake, we provide boats to facilitate their movement. Additionally, educational assistance is given to the children of the Orang Asli to support their continuation of studies at the primary and secondary school levels.

Tok Batin and the Orang Asli have conveyed that the assistance provided by the government is in the form of housing, education, land, and crops. However, the Village Head has expressed that this assistance is still insufficient.

We still lack houses, and the married children are still living together with their parents due to the lack of housing. So, there are many people in one house. I have already applied for housing assistance for the Orang Asli in need, but it has not been approved yet.

Educational Level

The educational changes in this study refer to the aspects of awareness, facilities, and assistance provided to Orang Asli students. Among the educational changes mentioned are the accessibility of Orang Asli students to schools and the availability of educational opportunities. However, the level of education among the Orang Asli is still low. The following study informants stated that the government assists in improving the education of Orang Asli students:

The government strives to assist in improving education among Orang Asli students by providing scholarships for further studies at the secondary level. In this Air Banun resettlement scheme, the highest educational achievement among students is having the STPM qualification.

The following is the feedback from the study informant regarding the assistance received from JAKOA and the school authorities:

In this RPS (Rancangan Penempatan Tersusun), we are provided with educational assistance for our children by JAKOA. Additionally, the teachers also offer their support. We don't have to pay any fees.

Employment Opportunities

The changes experienced by the Orang Asli after participating in government-sponsored programs are primarily related to their employment. Their original occupation, which involved gathering forest resources, has transformed into various jobs offered by the government, private sector, individuals, or working in plantations. After completing the program, JAKOA provides numerous job opportunities for the Orang Asli, including offers to manage rubber and oil palm plantations. Additionally, private companies also offer employment opportunities to them. The results of the interview with JAKOA representative are as follows:

Many Orang Asli children in this resettlement scheme work in factories and eateries in Penang. There is also Orang Asli who work as gardeners in schools.

Tok Batin also agrees and states that there are more job opportunities for the Orang Asli after they participate in this program, especially through the Economic Development Program. For example, the Orang Asli can work as entrepreneurs or regular workers on plantations. If the Orang Asli hand over their oil palm plantations to private companies for management, they will receive monthly dividends. Additionally, Tok Batin, who assists JAKOA in managing the Orang Asli in the village, receives a monthly allowance of RM900. This was expressed by the following informant:

There have been changes, besides housing assistance, we can work on plantations. Here, I become a Tok Batin and receive a salary of RM900 per month. Then, I also earn income from my own work. My savings increase every month in the bank.

Transportation

The next change that occurs for the Orang Asli who participate in the socio-economic development program is the change in vehicle ownership. Vehicle ownership refers to the ability to own motorcycles and cars after participating in the program. The result of the interview with JAKOA regarding this change is as follows:

The Orang Asli here goes to the city using cars. They have their own vehicles. They also give rides to their friends, but for a fee, like a taxi service. Any friends who want to go to the city will pay them a fare.

Tok Batin also stated that the Orang Asli can own their own vehicles after participating in the socio-economic development program. The monthly dividend received from the oil palm plantation has provided them with the ability to own their own vehicles such as motorcycles and cars.

The Orang Asli here can buy motorcycles or cars because they receive dividends every month. The Orang Asli who are self-employed or receive a salary, combined with the dividends they receive, can afford the monthly payments for their cars and motorcycles.

Effectiveness of Program

The study's findings can be divided into five types of changes that occur among the Orang Asli, namely Successful in business, Successful poverty reduction and successfully improving living conditions for greater comfort.

Successful in Business

Success in business refers to the informants directly involved in businesses such as grocery stores, kelulut honey production, as well as participating in entrepreneurship courses and demonstrating successful outcomes in their respective fields. The socio-economic development program has been successful as it has enabled the Orang Asli to engage in business activities within the village, such as opening grocery stores within the RPS. They are provided with assistance, business courses, and financial training to enhance their businesses. JAKOA also monitors the progress of their businesses over time. The interview findings regarding this matter are as follows:

At RPS Banun, there are also grocery stores owned by the Orang Asli. There are two successful grocery stores managed by the Orang Asli themselves.

The interview with the representatives of the Orang Asli involved in the entrepreneurship program is as follows:

Like my wife and I, we run a grocery store in this village. I also have my own job. It really helps us, and our economic situation is Alhamdulillah (praise be to God). The youth in this village work in the state park, some work in serving and transporting tourists. It means they work with the government, private sector, and NGOs.

In addition to being involved in grocery store sales, the Orang Asli are also engaged in commercial kelulut honey production conducted in RPS Ulu Kinta. This enterprise is seen as successful due to the results achieved from the kelulut honey business. Below is an interview with the representative of Tok Batin and the Orang Asli involved in the kelulut honey production:

We are grateful and thankful to the government for giving us the opportunity to carry out this kelulut honey production. We were taught how to run a business, such as registering with SSM (Companies Commission of Malaysia) and managing company accounts, but it was quite easy. Capital was also provided.

Successful Poverty Reduction

Successful poverty reduction in this study refers to the Orang Asli who have achieved a steady monthly income and improved their economy after participating in the government-provided development programs. The interview findings in the study also revealed that these programs have helped reduce the level of poverty by engaging in the Economic Development Program (EDP). This success is attributed to government assistance such as providing plants, organizing courses, and distributing monthly dividends to the participants. The government has also not overlooked the Orang Asli in the nation's economic development. The following are the interview findings with representatives from JAKOA and Tok Batin, stating that the EDP has successfully reduced poverty among the Orang Asli due to their receipt of assistance and involvement in business projects.

If we look at the programs organized by the government for the Orang Asli here, it can be considered successful. Houses are provided, facilities are complete, only the telephone network is a bit challenging. The economy in RPS can be considered successful. We have the kelulut honey enterprise and receive monthly dividends from oil palm.

I am grateful to the government for not neglecting the Orang Asli. We are assisted by the government. The Economic Development Program implemented here provides us with rubber plants, oil palm, and kelulut honey, which truly helps to improve the economy of the Orang Asli in RPS.

Successfully Improving Living Conditions for Greater Comfort

A more comfortable life refers to the housing provided by the government, infrastructure facilities such as roads, surau (prayer halls), schools, community halls, and mobility options. The success of the socio-economic development program is evaluated when the

Orang Asli can transform their lives towards a more comfortable state. The impact of Orang Asli poverty is not only due to low income but also a low quality of life. Here is an interview with a representative of the Orang Asli:

In our village, many of us work in the oil palm plantation. We work half-day until noon and get paid RM40 per day. It has been helpful for us after participating in the program and relocating here. This program has helped me achieve a more comfortable life and improve our living standards.

CONCLUSION

In the future, studies should evaluate the entrepreneurial aspects of the Orang Asli. As of April 2018, there were a total of 66 entrepreneurs among the Orang Asli in the state of Perak. This number not only indicates a significant number of entrepreneurs among the Orang Asli but also highlights those who have successfully engaged in this field and have shown positive economic progress. The success can be attributed to the Orang Asli participants who have received appropriate business-related courses and the provision of capital assistance to support entrepreneurial projects. Entrepreneurship courses are provided for interested Orang Asli individuals to venture into the field of entrepreneurship. The Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) also provides funding to ensure the success of proposed projects. The Orang Asli has the potential to produce various products such as crafts made from bamboo and rattan, medicinal root extracts, traditional customs and culture including sewing, dance performances, traditional foods, and more.

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