

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Economic Activities of Orang Asli in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Orang Asli. Specifically, this study examined the impact of the pandemic on the economic activities of the Jahut tribe residing in Pahang, Malaysia. It used semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the Jahut tribe and found that the economic activities of the Orang Asli are still in the form of self-sufficiency and 'enough to live.' This study shows that the Orang Asli's economic activities were originally from finding agarwood, collecting bee honey, and weaving products from rattan. However, the economic activities of the Orang Asli gradually changed as they get more involved in commercial agricultural activities. This study also found that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their economic activities because they could not sell their harvested crops due to cross-border restrictions. In addition, some planned economic resources along with assistance from several government and non-government agencies had to be postponed since no demand is expected. This study contributes to the existing literature, where it can be used as a future reference related to the field of Orang Asli.

Keywords: Economic activities, Covid-19, Orang Asli, Jahut, Malaysia

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Introduction

Covid-19 has a major impact on the economy and the people across the world. Malaysia is not an exception to such an impact. The Movement Control Order (MCO) and the social distancing measures imposed by the Malaysian government and governments of countries led to the closure of many businesses, leading to an increase in unemployment (Bauer & Weber, 2020). To assist their people, the Malaysian government has quickly rolled out a number of stimulus packages to boost the economy, such as the announcement of a RM40 billion stimulus package, RM5 billions of which will be in the form of a direct fiscal stimulus by the government to soften the blow of the Covid-19 lockdown. In addition, to assist the individuals, The PEMERKASA stimulus package announced by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, included a number of cash assistance and subsidies. These packages include RM1.2 billion for 2.4 million people comprising RM500 one-off assistance for members of the B40 group who have lost their income and a single payment of RM500 for Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat (BPR) recipients who earn RM1,000 and below (Aziz, 2021). The aim is to assist the individuals who are already experiencing high levels of financial stress as they are the ones being hit the hardest by the pandemic and economic recession.

The aborigine community, known as the Orang Asli, is a community living in Peninsular Malaysia, with the majority of them living in forest areas. Most of them still practice a traditional way of life heavily influenced by the environment and the old practices left by their ancestors (Hooker, 1996). They are part of the Malaysian population that have inhabited the country since thousands of years ago, although they are still struggling to get on with their lives. The Orang Asli has survived hardships and challenges since the beginning of their migration to Peninsular Malaysia to this day. Being the earliest human to occupy the Peninsula land (Mat Jidin, 1994), they should naturally be more forward than the other races in Malaysia. However, in reality, what occurs is often the opposite (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020), which is attributed to their way of life. They make up less than 1% of the population, yet they have the highest poverty rate (Bedford, 2018). As reported in the Eighth Malaysia Plan, their poverty rate was 50.9% (Mohd Harun, Idris, Berma, & Shahadan, 2006), which is significantly higher than the poverty rate of other communities in Malaysia at 1.4%. In 2010, the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that 76.9% of the Orang Asli population remained beneath the poverty line. 35.2% of this group was still classified as living in hard-core poverty. This figure is consistent with Weier and Usher (2020, p.1) where they noted:

“What we are starting to see is the devastating impact of what we already knew about financial vulnerability among Indigenous people. The vast majority of the Indigenous population don’t have savings that would last beyond a month. In a time where jobs are being lost or hours significantly cut back, we are seeing this impact on the community. Even having enough funds to bridge the gap to receive the Government stimulus package is a challenge.”

One of the impacts of the pandemic is the moving of businesses and services to online-only to sustain in the economic environment. Weier and Usher (2020) suggested that financial and social services must consider what responsible alternatives are available to people who are at increased risk of financial insecurity and already experiencing low levels of digital inclusion. However, not all services that can be delivered online in metro or urban areas will be appropriate in rural and remote locations. In addition, the Orang Asli may have a disadvantage during the pandemic in terms of the lack of online facilities. This lack of facilities eventually would impact the Orang Asli’s quality way of life as they would be further left out, causing them to struggle to survive. Hence, this study aimed to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Orang Asli. Specifically, this study examined the impact of the pandemic on the economic activities of the Orang Asli. The findings in this study could assist the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), a department in the Prime Minister’s Office, to strategize ways to improve the lives of the Orang Asli. The next section, Section 2, presents the literature review relevant to this study. This section is followed by Section 3 that explains the research design used in this study. Section 4 presents the findings and the last section, Section 5, provides the conclusion of this study.

Literature Review

The term ‘Orang Asli’ is relatively recent as it was only officially used in the early 1960s. They are considered the oldest people of Peninsular Malaysia. However, despite being the oldest inhabitants of the Peninsular, they still form the national minority in the country. The Orang Asli is distinct from the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and the aborigines in Sabah and Sarawak. As noted by Masron, Masami, and Ismail (2013, p.77), *“The ‘Orang Asli’ name is a Malay term which transliterates as ‘original peoples’ or ‘first peoples.’”* Thus, the term always refers to a group of people or a tribe. In addition, they mentioned that,

“Indigenous people hold their own diverse ideas of development, based on their traditional values, visions, needs and priorities. Indigenous peoples often have much in common with other neglected segments of societies, such as lack of political representation and participation, economic marginalization and poverty, lack of access to social services, and discrimination. Despite their cultural differences, the diverse indigenous peoples share common problems also related to the protection of their rights. They struggle for recognition of their identities, their ways of life, and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources’ (Masron et al., p.76).”

Under Act 134 of the Constitution of Malaysia, an individual is considered an Orang Asli when his father is a member of an Orang Asli who speaks the language of the Orang Asli and leads the way of life of the Orang Asli. The individual is also considered an Orang Asli when he is adopted as a child by the Orang Asli despite being of a non-Orang Asli race. The Act also noted that a child between an Orang Asli woman and a non-Orang Asli man is also considered an Orang Asli provided that the child often speaks in the language of the Orang Asli, leads the way of life of the Orang Asli, and has the beliefs and customs of the Orang Asli community (Ghani, Muhammad, & Hassan, 2020).

Among the Orang Asli community, there are three main umbrella groups of various tribes. The three groups are the Negriti tribe, who mostly reside in northern Malaysia; the Proto-Malays, who mostly reside in southern Malaysia; and the Senoi tribe, who mostly reside in central parts of Malaysia but have relocated themselves to Perak and Pahang (Bedford, 2018). Based on the JAKOA’s 2006 Annual Report, there were about 147,412 Orang Asli residing in Pahang and Perak (JHEOA, 2006). The Senoi tribe is the largest Orang Asli community in Peninsula Malaysia (Nicholas, 2000). They resemble the characteristics of the Mongoloid, although some believed that they are from the Australoid tribe of Australia and the Veddoid from South India (Lim, Ang, Mahani, Shahrom, & Md Zain, 2010). Under this tribe, there are sub-tribes, namely Semai, Temiar, Chewong, Semoq Beri, Mahmeri, and Jahut. Traditionally, the economy of the Senoi people was based on jungle resources, where they would engage in hunting, fishing, foraging, and logging. The Senoi people were often involved in trading and were the main suppliers of jungle produce in the region.

JAKOA has carried out several economic development programs for the Orang Asli, such as the Development State Economics, Course Development Program, Entrepreneur Guidance, Land Development Phase II State, Construction of Retail Space, and Tourism Village (Wee,

Mohamed, & Jamiran, 2013). Such programs are provided to ensure that the Orang Asli would not be left too far behind compared to the other non-Orang Asli communities. For example, the Development State Economics is a project involving the development of land outside the area designated for oil palm, and rubber crops implemented by the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (RISDA) and the Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA). The government has also gazetted a reserve land for the Orang Asli under the government gazette GN.229 at Kampung Simpang Arang. The land is used as a residential area where the Orang Asli is recognized and protected under Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (Act 134) (Wee et al., 2013). In terms of entrepreneurship, JAKOA provides assistance in the form of equipment, machinery, and deep entrepreneurship courses or training to create empowered Orang Asli entrepreneurs who are resilient and can progress in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Studies however, have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted businesses throughout the world, particularly the small business landscape. Social-distancing restrictions and health and economic driven demand shifts from Covid-19 are expected to shutter many small businesses and entrepreneurial ventures (Fairlie, 2020). Malaysia is not an exception to this scenario. The pandemic and the MCO have resulted in an unprecedented slump in economic activities (Tong & Gong, 2020). To avoid a further slump, the government has encouraged businesses to conduct their economic activities through the use of digital technologies, such as online platforms. However, as reported by the World Bank Group (2018), Malaysia only has few businesses with websites, particularly the small and medium-sized entrepreneurs (SMEs), despite them being the backbone of the country's business landscape. This situation is even direr for the Orang Asli since indigenous people are known to be historically under-served, under-resourced, and systemically kept out of the economy in many countries. They are often being sidelined in many aspects of life, including socio-economic and culture (Masron et al., 2013). This sidelining is due to, among other things, the lack of political representation and participation, economic marginalization, poverty, lack of access to social services, and discrimination (Ghani et al., 2020). Arguably, the Orang Asli community would also be affected by the pandemic, particularly in business activities.

Research Method

Participants

This study selected the participants from the Senoi tribe of the Orang Asli community located in Pahang, Malaysia. Specifically, this study chose the Jahut sub-tribe. There are about 5618 Jahut people (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020), often residing in Kuala Krau and Temerloh, Pahang. This study approached three Orang Asli individuals from the Jahut tribe to assist in achieving its research objectives. The three individuals, Mr. A, Mr. R, and Mr. J are currently entrepreneurs based in Taman Negara, Pahang. Two of the individuals are involved in commercial agriculture, and the other owns a convenience store. These individuals were chosen as all of them are involved in business activities and therefore are believed to have some financial knowledge. They have been involved in business activities for more than ten years.

Research Instrument

This study relied on the qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow a problem-focused approach and more personalized discussions. The face-to-face interview also allows the researchers to obtain better viewpoints of the participants since there is the flexibility to adjust and explain the questions (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). The list of questions for the interviews was developed based on prior literature. It comprised two types of questions. The first type consisted of personal questions about the participants and the types of business they are involved in. The second type covers their opinion on the impact of the pandemic on their business activities.

Data Collection

The participants were approached at their convenient time, often during lunchtime, to allow them to explain their thoughts and provide other relevant information (Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004). An appointment was set beforehand with the individuals to meet for the interview. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was recorded with permission. Upon the completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. The text results were then structured and categorized according to major themes, followed by a specific coding, which was subsequently used to structure and guide the data evaluation process. Thematic coding was used to provide information on the current economic activities,

planned activities, and impact of COVID-19 on the current and planned economy sectors of the Orang Asli, specifically the Jahuts in Kampung Pian, Temerloh, Pahang.

Findings

Economic Activities of the Orang Asli

The findings of this study show that the economic activities of the Orang Asli community in Kampung Pian are still in the form of self-sufficiency and 'enough to live.' Scouring for forest resources was originally the main activities of the locals, including looking for agarwood, collecting bee honey, and weaving products from rattan. The sale of these products provides income to them. However, in recent decades, the economic activities of Orang Asli have changed. They are also now involved in commercial agricultural activities and working in the public and private sectors. This change is in line with the improvement in the standard of education among them, especially through the efforts of the JAKOA which had raised their awareness of the importance of education.

Based on the interviews, the economic activities of the Orang Asli community in Kampung Pian have shifted from selling forest products to running grocery stores, operating oil palm and rubber plantations, and commercial agriculture. During the fruit season, they sell durians and rambutans. One of the economic activities seen as having high commercial potential is planting vegetables in groups. This activity involves many members from among the young people in Kampung Pian. They have been growing vegetables commercially for the past few years, and it has proven to bring lucrative results. From time to time, they would open up new areas by involving new members who then become partners and employees. The start-up capital for each new site is funded from the profits of the existing sites. As noted by Mr. R:

“With the desire to help my own people, I started my agricultural project in Kampung Pian. We plan to continue opening new sites and now we have 5 sites. Planning for the future, with the surplus profit of this existing project, we will allocate partly to open new sites.”

Another participant, Mr. A provided the same response as Mr. R:

“In our planning, if successful, we will find other areas so that later, each participant will have their own site. Profits from existing sites will be used to open other sites. That is how we want to develop this agricultural project. We also plan to expand it to other nearby villages. That was the initial planning for the start of this project. So far, we have had five agricultural sites run by five different people.”

This study also finds that the Jahut tribe, like many other tribes, is a diligent community, where many of them will do two or three different jobs a day to make their living. For example, Mr. A does other work in his daily schedule. He noted that:

“For this grocery store business, I have no employees. If I am not there, the store will close. I opened this grocery store at 7 am. About 8 am, I will go tapping. Then I go to the agricultural project site, and in the afternoon or evening, I will reopen this grocery store.”

This study also finds that the Jahut tribe is also interested in preserving and continuing the cultural treasures of their ancestral heritage apart from pursuing agricultural and business activities for a living. Among the cultural aspects that still remain are the retention and use of customary halls. The customary hall is a public hall for the community members to gather and hold discussions and meetings. The design of the customary hall still retains the characteristics of their tribal identity. The construction cost of the hall was borne by an international non-governmental organization (NGO). This study finds that efforts have been made to carve statues characterized by the Jahut culture, and such efforts are still ongoing on a small scale due to the lack of demand. However, one of the participants, Mr. J, is optimistic that handicrafts can be developed and rediscovered if the plan to develop eco-tourism in the Orang Asli village of Kampung Pian becomes a reality. He noted that:

“The community there, together with PERHILITAN, is planning to introduce their village as a tourist destination like the Kuala Gandah National Elephant Conservation Center. The community here, together with PERHILITAN, proposes to make this village a tourist destination like what has been worked on by the village next to our village, Kuala Gandah. Here, we plan to start a tourism product that can attract tourists, such as a visit to a nearby Cave and also a visit to a sculpture site that has been our tribal

art since time immemorial. And this statue can be used as a handicraft for tourists as a token of remembrance that they once visited our village.”

Kampung Pian, located in the Temerloh district, has long been one of the tourist destinations in Malaysia. Tourists would visit Temerloh to eat a variety of dishes based on river fish, such as catfish, Jelawat, Baung, and Tapah. These fish are abundant in Pahang, making the cities in Pahang famous for various river fish-based dishes, including the town of Termerloh, which is famous for its *tempoyak* catfish cuisine. Apart from that, in the Temerloh district, there are also several tourist areas that offer various forest and wildlife experiences, such as Kuala Krau Wildlife Reserve, GunungSenyum Recreational Forest, and Deerland Park. The Kuala Krau Wildlife Reserve is a virgin forest reserve with untouched flora and fauna. Within this reserve is the Elephant and Seladang Conservation Center. The GunungSenyum Recreational Forest is ideal for tourists who love nature and extreme activities, where there are various species of plants rarely found in other places. The Deerland Park, on the other hand, offers tourists an experience to learn about deers and feed and touch them. The existence of various tourist destinations in Temerloh directly opens up opportunities for the Orang Asli, including those from Kampung Pian, to venture as tourist guides or climbing guides to tourists interested in climbing GunungSenyum. They may also be employees at the animal conservation centers and Deerland Park. In addition, they could also open food and beverage stalls or stalls selling forest products (e.g., honey) or handicrafts based on forest products, such as rattan and resin.

Impact of Covid-19 on Economic Activities of Orang Asli

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, some sectors of the Orang Asli economy have come to a halt due to a lack of demand. Prior to the pandemic, crops from the vegetable planting projects worked with the local residents could be sold at reasonable market prices. The sale provides a stable weekly income to the participants. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they faced a negative impact from the lockdown announced by the Malaysian government in the early days. During the curfew, the agricultural produce could not be sold because the wholesalers from Selayang and Kuantan could not come to their location due to cross-border restrictions. As a result, harvested crops had to be sold at very low prices

because wholesalers were not allowed to come and buy their harvests. At one time, they had to distribute the crops to the villagers for free. Mr. R stated:

“During COVID, business is down a bit because travel to Selayang and Kuantan wholesale markets is limited. The market price dropped sharply, from RM2 per kilo to only RM0.50 per kilo.”

Similarly, Mr. J noted that:

“During COVID time that day, the agricultural yield was considered a loss and give for free to villagers.”

Mr. A's grocery business was also affected. The grocery store experienced a significant reduction in stock and sales as the suppliers were unable to deliver stock due to cross-border restrictions. Mr. A noted that:

“The grocery store business is very slow during COVID due to the lack of sales items. Suppliers do not come to deliver goods.”

Before COVID-19 hit the whole world, young people in this aboriginal village offered to serve as guides to tourists who wanted to climb the nearby Senyum Mountain. This service is a source of income for some residents. However, there has been no more income from this source since early 2020. Food stalls and the production of handicraft products and souvenirs from forest products, such as rattan-based products, also had to be stopped as they are closely linked to the arrival of tourists. In addition, some economic activities planned together with government and non-government agencies had to be postponed as no demand was expected. Furthermore, the activities involved a relatively high start-up cost. Mr. A provided a view that:

“Since the startup cost is high and with current COVID 19 situation, we had to postpone some tourism product development that we planned together with several government agencies. We planned to build some infrastructure such as lookout towers,

public toilets, stalls and other public facilities. The cost for that is a bit high, and we do not want to take any risks.”

This study also finds that the economic sector was developing several tourist products, such as introducing a visit to the nearest cave that stores many natural treasures. The local flora and fauna were expected to attract tourists who love extreme activities and nature. In the cave, tourists can see stalactites hanging at the ceiling of the cave, and stalagmites formed due to minerals and water falling from the stalactite onto the floor of a cave. The cave has already been identified, but the track needs to be cleaned. Mr. R commented:

“We have planned to develop some new tourism products such as jungle tracking to a nearby cave. The cave has already been identified and the residents here are familiar with it. All that remains is for the track to be cleaned. Along the way, tourists will be able to enjoy the beauty of nature that has yet to be explored. When they reach the cave, they will be able to see for themselves the beautiful scenery inside. But, we had to postpone this planning first because we are facing the COVID 19 pandemic.”

Another finding in this study is that the Orang Asli has initiated a water rafting activity along the river around the aboriginal villages where tourists will enjoy the interesting scenery along the river. In addition, they would be shown the traditional fishing methods of the locals when they reach the areas identified as fishponds in which there are various species of river fish that are rarely found in ordinary markets. However, the activity had to be postponed. As noted by Mr. J:

“Among the planned tourism products is a water rafting along the nearby river. Along the way, tourists will pass through several areas identified to have various species of river fish. If they are lucky, they can buy some rare river fish species. However, we have to postpone the plan as of now due to COVID 19.”

In addition, the locals have also planned to develop a Huma paddy cultivation area that will be carried out commercially with the help of established private companies. The plan, however, also had to be temporarily postponed as it also involved high start-up costs.

Furthermore, it was difficult to convince the private companies involved to invest in an uncertain future. Mr. R commented:

“We are also planning to start a Huma rice cultivation project and work with an established rice distributor company to market this ‘special’ rice. With a good marketing and branding strategy, we believe the project can be successful. However, this plan also had to be postponed in the current situation.”

Based on its findings, this study proposes few alternatives to assist the Orang Asli. First, this study proposes an expansion of livestock activities and the production of downline products from livestock products. If a SWOT analysis is done, this economic activity could promise a relatively attractive return with the help of the relevant government and private agencies. Secondly, the Orang Asli has vast open land close to food and water sources. They also have a large workforce from among the village youths. The youths are their strength. The demand for beef and mutton products, which consistently exceeds the supply, and the relatively lucrative and stable market price is an opportunity that should not be missed. Meanwhile, their weakness may be that they do not have enough experience in animal husbandry. Nevertheless, with education and guidance from the relevant parties, this weakness would be overcome. Locations that are relatively far inland may be a threat to this business where farm animals may be exposed to the threat of wild animals. However, with appropriate control methods, this threat can also be overcome.

Thirdly, this study suggests that the production of by-products from livestock could also be introduced, such as processing and producing marinated meat, where the demand is high and the trend is constantly increasing. In addition, in line with the development of technology today, many are venturing into the dropshipping business. However, this business is still not well known among the aboriginal people, maybe because of limited internet access or indeed they do not know about it. With the help of several parties and experts, this dropshipping business can be developed among them by forming a complete product chain ranging from manufacturing to marketing. Product selection should be in accordance with their resources and capabilities, such as handicraft products, fish-based products, livestock, and fruits. It needs to be determined who would be the manufacturers and the drop shippers, i.e., marketing agents and sellers. Experience and business models from successful dropship projects can serve as an example.

Conclusion

This study examined the economic activities of the Jahut from the Senoi tribe in Pahang, Malaysia. Subsequently, it examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their business activities. The findings of this study showed that the Orang Asli are much left behind on the business activities, which could be attributed to the location of where they reside, which often is far from the city. Among their economic activities are operating grocery stores, operating oil palm and rubber plantations, and commercial agriculture. This study also found that the pandemic had impacted their economic activities. Their business activities came to a halt due to the lack of demand caused by the lockdown announced by the Malaysian government. This study contributes to the existing literature where it can be used as a future reference related to the Orang Asli. However, this study is not without limitations. First, the number of participants involved in this study is only three to represent 140 families in Kampung Pian. Perhaps, increasing the number of participants may provide more evidence on the way of life of the Jahut tribe. Secondly, this study only focused on the Jahut tribe. Future studies may be conducted to include others tribes of the Orang Asli, such as the Negriti and the Proto-Malays. The findings in this study could assist the JAKOA to strategize ways, such as education, to improve the quality life of the Orang Asli.

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