

NEWSLETTER

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**BRIDGING THE GAP, BUILDING THE FUTURE:
THE REALITY OF ACCESS TO QUALITY
EDUCATION AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE
IN MALAYSIA**

YB Tuan Riduan Rubin
Member of Parliament for Tenom

From the Parliament to the
Ground Column

**Bridging the Gap,
Building the Future: The
Reality of Access to
Quality Education
Among Indigenous
People in Malaysia**

03

Special Feature Column

**Orang Asli: Partners in
Sustaining the
Environment and
Planetary Health
through Adat**

05

Voices from the Grassroots

**Building Connections
Through Play:
Reflections from an
Orang Asli Community
Workshop**

08

CONTENTS

Voices from the Grassroots

**Indigenous
Stewardship in
Kinabalu UNESCO
Global Geopark:
Conservation from
the Community**

10

Voices from the Grassroots

**Empowering the Orang
Asli Community of Kg
Pabai: Pioneering Change
Through 3M Education
(English Communication)
and Spirituality**

12

Voices from the Grassroots

**Growing Change
Together: An Orang
Asli Journey**

14

Voices from the Grassroots

**From the Lecture
Hall to the River: My
Journey with Long
Taa Tagang Fish
Conservation**

16

Voices from the Grassroots

**Empowering Grassroots Voices:
Indigenous Youth and
Communities Speak Out on
BHR+E**

18

Event Highlights

**Bridging the Gap between
Macroeconomic Indicators
and Lived Realities in the
Klang Valley**

20

Event Highlights

**Pitching Ideas at
the 2027 Budget
Dialogue**

22

Members of
Parliament on the
Ground

24

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BRIDGING THE GAP, BUILDING THE FUTURE: THE REALITY OF ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA

YB Tuan Riduan Rubin
(Member of Parliament for Tenom)



Introduction

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, celebrated on 9th of August each year, is an important moment for us to evaluate the extent to which the principles of social justice and inclusiveness are truly translated into the lives of Indigenous communities. In the context of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which is 'Quality Education', one of the questions that must be raised is not merely whether Indigenous children have schools to attend, but the more primary question is whether they truly have a fair opportunity to access and benefit from quality education.

In Malaysia, education remains one of the most vital instruments for breaking the cycle of multidimensional poverty that plagues a section of Indigenous communities. In fact, a 2023 study by Masni Mat Dong titled 'Exploring the Multidimensional Poverty of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: A Mixed-Methods Study Using the Capability Approach and Spatial Justice Framework' regarding the poverty structure of Indigenous people demonstrates that educational limitations are closely linked to economic opportunities and social mobility. However, the reality is that the educational landscape for Indigenous children is still shadowed by a significant gap.

Geographical Factors and Educational Opportunities

Based on my experience as the Member of Parliament for Tenom, which also has Indigenous communities from the Murut, Lundayeh, and Dusun ethnic groups, a portion of these Indigenous communities lives deep in the interior, and because of that, the distance to schools such as SK Rundum, SK Sumambu, SK Kungkular, SK Ulu Tomani, SK Kapulu, SK Korolok, and SK Pangi in Tenom is not just a measurement of kilometres, but carries implications for travel duration, transportation costs, safety, student attendance, teacher placement, and the ability of schools to operate at an optimal level.

Therefore, in this context, education must be viewed as an ecosystem because it also requires access to roads, transportation, electricity supply, water, telecommunications, and the internet, which are now among the prerequisites for quality education.

Consequently, the achievement of SDG 4 among Indigenous people cannot be driven in a silo. Quality education requires the alignment of educational policy with infrastructure development, poverty alleviation, health, social protection, and digital development.



Education is More Than Just School Attendance

In principle, the enrollment rate of students registering at school is an important measure to gauge student dropout rates. However, it is insufficient because we need to see how many students remain until they finish school, master basic literacy and numeracy skills, pursue higher education or TVET education, and ultimately achieve better social and economic mobility.

In other words, the true metric of SDG 4 is not just access, but also retention, learning outcomes, and progression. This is where the concept of quality education becomes broader. Education cannot be considered successful if a student succeeds in entering school but ultimately leaves the education system before acquiring the skills that allow them to build a better future.

Bringing Education Closer to the Community

One of the ideas worthy of attention is the Community Learning Centre (CLC) approach. Among the approaches that can be implemented is through non-formal education developed based on the identity, needs, and environment of the Indigenous community. In today's context, this concept can be expanded as a complement to the formal schooling system and not as a replacement for it.

These Indigenous community learning centres can function as spaces for early childhood education, reading, writing, and arithmetic (3M) intervention, after-school tutoring, digital literacy, parental education, and basic exposure to skills as well as TVET.

This approach is highly relevant for communities living far from educational centres. Furthermore, technology also opens up new spaces. Thus, with appropriate internet access, community learning centres can become digital hubs connecting students with educational materials, teachers, TVET skill institutions, and learning resources that were previously difficult to reach.

Policy Approach and Quota System

Furthermore, Malaysia needs to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to locality-based interventions. Data regarding distance to school, attendance, dropouts, transportation, internet access, and learning performance can be utilised to identify communities requiring immediate intervention.

In addition, the quota system remains relevant to practice as an instrument to ensure fairer educational access for Indigenous students. This is because a purely merit-based system does not take into account the differences in starting points, particularly regarding gaps in infrastructure and educational facilities, internet access, and transportation faced by students.

Therefore, placing them in the same competition without taking balance into account is not in line with the principles of justice. Thus, quotas are not a rejection of merit; rather, they serve as affirmative action to balance structural inequalities and ensure limiting factors do not hinder educational opportunities.

Bridging the Gap, Building the Future

SDG 4 promises inclusive and equitable quality education for all. As such, geographical location or a family's economic status should not determine a student's future.

Owing to this, we must shift from merely asking how many Indigenous children are in school to the larger question of how many are truly benefiting from education and have the opportunity to build a good life after their schooling years.

In conclusion, bridging the educational gap is not just about meeting SDG 4 targets. It is an investment in social mobility, breaking intergenerational poverty, and the future of the nation. Quality education should not be determined by geographical factors; it must be an accessible opportunity for every Malaysian child.



ORANG ASLI: PARTNERS IN SUSTAINING THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANETARY HEALTH THROUGH ADAT

Malaysia's National Policy on Biological Diversity recognises the important contribution of Indigenous peoples to the conservation of nature and biodiversity. Conservation is not only about protecting forests, rivers, wildlife and natural resources. It is also about recognising the important relationship between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories.

For generations, *Orang Asli* (OA) communities have developed close relationships with their forests, rivers and ancestral territories. Their wellbeing, culture and livelihoods are closely connected to these ecosystems. Forests provide food, medicine, building materials and sources of income, while also serving as places of cultural, spiritual and community.

The *Orang Asli* have contributed to conservation through their *adat*, traditional knowledge, experience and customary practices. Conservation efforts must therefore always consider the realities of OA communities, whose lives are deeply intertwined with the wellbeing of the forests and the health of their surrounding natural landscape. The protection of nature will be more meaningful and sustainable when communities are supported to maintain their cultural practices, strengthen their livelihoods and participate actively in conservation through the strengthening of their *adat* and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into conservation initiatives.

This begs the question of what makes the OA the best partners to conserve nature?

Importance of *Orang Asli* and How *Adat* Sustains Planetary Health

First, the *Adat* plays an important role in environmental conservation. The special relationship



the OA have with their territories is inter woven into their *adat*. *Adat* is much more than tradition. It represents accumulated local knowledge, customary practices, values, relationships and principles that connect community life, culture, spirituality and the natural environment. They are not merely ceremonial activities. Their traditions, myths and rituals serve as a practical mechanisms for protecting their ancestral territories and surrounding forests. For example, certain myths prohibit people from entering particular forests or taking forest products without first following specific rituals. The belief that violating these rules may bring serious consequences acts as a powerful social mechanism to control human behaviour and prevent uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources.

Indigenous and traditional communities often regard forests, rivers, mountains and other natural places as spiritually and culturally significant. There is a real relationship as they depend on the forest for their food, medicine, building materials, school, adventure, recreation, culture and savings. But there is also a personal relationship. There is a deep respect and sacred respect for nature as they believe that the creator has given them this territory to look after as it sustains life for everyone. Nature is not seen as an

impersonal and inanimate object. It is seen as a living being, worthy of respect and to which they can have a living relationship. They believe the creator is present in nature and that if they treat nature well, nature will in turn protect them.

The embodiment of *adat* in their Land may represent a home, a source of livelihood, a cultural landscape, a place of spiritual significance and identity. Their ancestral territory is more than just land, it also defines their place of belonging and their identity.

Adat Preserves Knowledge Across Generations and Identity

Adat is also a living system for transmitting knowledge and maintaining cultural identity. Indigenous peoples possess distinct histories, worldviews and relationships with their ancestral territories. Through stories, language, ceremonies, arts, customs and everyday practices, younger generations learn from elders about their environment and community responsibilities. Knowledge about planting, harvesting, fishing, hunting and the use of medicinal plants is often closely connected to particular landscapes.

Through sustained observations, interactions and experience with the surrounding landscapes, OA communities have accumulated and refined ecological knowledges and embedded them into *adat*. This makes OA knowledge and *adat* a valuable repository of ecological understanding, particularly of the forests and natural resources upon which their communities depend. Their intimate and long-standing relationship with these landscapes places OA communities in a unique position as partners in conservation, as they possess knowledge and insights that can contribute meaningfully to the understanding, management and protection of their territories.



Protecting *adat* therefore helps preserve knowledge that may have significant value for sustainable resource.

Adat Strengthens Community Responsibility

Third, *adat* strengthens community unity and collective responsibility. Many Indigenous ceremonies require participation by families, elders, leaders and other members of the community. Through collective preparation and participation, rituals reinforce the idea that the protection of nature is a shared responsibility rather than an individual matter. Traditional environmental-care activities, including harvest festivals, fishing, hunting, opening land for agriculture, as evidence of strong community concern for environmental protection. For example, the harvest festival involves the community to gather their fruits and share with each other. And before they eat the fruits, there is a ceremony of thanks giving and supplication to the creator for good yields in the coming year. This demonstrates collective respect for nature and implicit in this recognition is that they should not exploit creation.



Conclusion

The *Orang Asli* can be important partners in Malaysia's transition towards a greener and more sustainable economy. Their *adat* brings together spirituality, culture, identity, knowledge, community responsibility and environmental stewardship.

Their experience demonstrates that conservation is not simply about protecting forests from people. It can also be about supporting communities that have developed ways of living responsibly within forest ecosystems.

Recognising the OA as rights holders, custodians of knowledge and partners in sustainable development can strengthen Malaysia's environmental policies while contributing to inclusive economic growth.

Rather than viewing OA as non productive and the seeing the forests value through an extractive land-use lens, Malaysia can increasingly consider them as sources of natural capital that generate long-term environmental and economic value. Carbon markets, green financing, ecotourism, sustainable forest products and other elements of the green economy could create opportunities for OA communities to contribute to and benefit from conservation.

Such approaches could provide incentives for communities to continue their role as environmental stewards while contributing to state and national economic activities. Benefit-sharing mechanisms can also help ensure that communities receive tangible returns from sustainable use and conservation of natural resources.



This requires practical policies that recognise OA knowledge, strengthen participation in decisions affecting their territories, protect cultural heritage and provide pathways for sustainable livelihoods.

The challenge is therefore not to choose between development and tradition, but to build a development model in which economic progress, environmental protection and the wellbeing of Indigenous communities reinforce one another. By working with the OA and valuing their adat, Malaysia can draw upon an important source of knowledge and partnership in safeguarding its natural wealth for present and future generations.

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BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH PLAY: REFLECTIONS FROM AN ORANG ASLI COMMUNITY WORKSHOP



Our first meeting with the *Orang Asli* community was filled with both anticipation and uncertainty. Initially, many participants appeared shy and reserved when we first arrived. However, as the session progressed, simple icebreaking activities helped soften the atmosphere. Laughter and interaction gradually replaced the initial hesitation, and once the first activity began, participants became increasingly cooperative, curious, and engaged. This experience reinforced an important principle of our community-based approach: meaningful participation often begins with creating a space where people feel comfortable enough to participate in their own way. This aligns with the wider study's emphasis on respect, reciprocity, and community participation rather than treating community members as passive research subjects (Omodan, 2025).

The first activity focused on recognising and expressing emotions. It was an interesting challenge. Participants frequently relied on basic emotional labels such as "angry", even when the situation or expression portrayed more nuanced emotions such as fatigue, frustration, or emotional exhaustion. Some participants also described observable actions rather than emotions, giving responses such as "crying" or "sleeping". This suggested that distinguishing between a person's behaviour and the underlying emotional state was not always straightforward.

Interestingly, these patterns were not limited to a particular age group. With participants spanning a wide range of ages, similar difficulties could be observed among both younger and much older participants. At the same time, several exceptionally perceptive participants were able to distinguish between emotions, even when they used relatively simple emotional vocabulary. Rather than viewing these responses as shortcomings, the activity provided us with a small glimpse into how emotional experiences may be understood and communicated differently across individuals and generations.



The second major activity, Lego Serious Play, offered a very different experience. Participants were given four stages of Lego-building activities, with instructions gradually progressing from simple to more challenging tasks. What immediately stood out was how easily participants of different ages followed the instructions. The activity became an informal observation of coordination, memory, problem-solving, and creativity.

The younger participants, particularly the boys, appeared to grasp the structures quickly and confidently. They assembled the Lego pieces with little hesitation and seemed eager to progress to the next challenge. The women, in contrast, often took more time with the construction process. They carefully inspected the individual pieces before deciding how they should be assembled. These differences were fascinating to observe, not because one approach was better than the other, but because they demonstrated the different ways participants approached the same task.

By the final stage, the activity moved beyond simply following instructions. Participants were asked to extend their original Lego models and use their creativity to represent their own idea of “strength” and how it could support others. This was perhaps the most meaningful part of the activity because the models provided a starting point for understanding how participants perceived care, support, and community.

Although time constraints meant that we could not invite everyone to explain their creations in detail, the stories that emerged were revealing. Participants described forms of support rooted in ordinary everyday activities, including gardening, cooking, helping one another, and spending time together. These seemingly simple actions illustrated something much larger: community strength is not necessarily built through formal structures, but through everyday relationships and acts of care.

This observation resonates with the broader findings of our study. The research shows that community life, learning, and digital inclusion cannot be separated from the social relationships and everyday realities surrounding them. For the community, inclusion extends beyond access to technology; it also involves connection, belonging, dignity, and empowerment (Qureshi et al., 2025).

Looking back, the workshop reminded us that community engagement is not always about obtaining immediate or complete answers. Sometimes, it is about creating opportunities for people to interact, observe, build, and share. The shy participants we first encountered gradually became collaborators in the activities. The Lego structures they built became more than objects; they became small representations of how they understood strength and support. Their stories showed us that behind the challenges faced by the community is also a strong network of everyday relationships.

Ultimately, this experience strengthened our understanding that co-design begins with connection. Before communities can contribute meaningfully to research or the development of solutions, they must first establish trust, feel comfortable, and have space for their voices to emerge. As our study emphasises, community participation allows local knowledge and lived experiences to shape the direction of research rather than imposing solutions from outside (Corburn, 2003). What we witnessed through a few hours of play, conversation, and creativity was therefore more than participation. It was a glimpse into how a community builds strength together, one everyday interaction at a time.

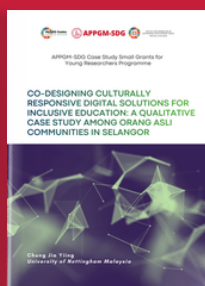
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By Chung Jia Yiing
(Recipient of APPGM-SDG Case Study Small Grants for Young Researchers 2025)

READ JIA YIING'S PAPER HERE



This study examines how digital inclusion impacts quality education among the Orang Asli communities in Selangor. Although national policies such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and other plans aim to resolve the digital gap among the rural communities, many rural Indigenous learners continue to experience limited internet connectivity, lack of devices, and inadequate support.





INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP IN KINABALU UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK: CONSERVATION FROM THE COMMUNITY



Protected river with no fishing signboard

The Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark (KUGGp) is internationally recognised for its geological, ecological and cultural heritage. However, behind this recognition are communities whose lives, livelihoods and identities have long been connected to the landscapes surrounding them. Research on Indigenous conservation behaviour within the KUGGp found that conservation is not simply about awareness or formal regulations. Instead, it is embedded in everyday community practices, customary systems, local values and a strong sense of responsibility towards the places they call home.

One of the clearest examples is the *Tagal* system, a customary approach to managing natural resources practised by communities in Sabah. Within the KUGGp, communities use Tagal to regulate access to rivers and, in some cases, forests, placing restrictions on resource use to prevent overexploitation and maintain ecological balance. In one of the communities studied, Tagal was traditionally associated with river and fish conservation, but the practice had also been extended to a forest area. Trees could not simply be cut without permission, demonstrating how customary rules can be applied to protect both aquatic and terrestrial resources.

Tagal is therefore more than a restriction on fishing or resource extraction. It represents a form of community-based resource management in which local people collectively establish and uphold rules for the resources around them. The study found that such practices bring together traditional ecological knowledge, customary law and collective responsibility, demonstrating the capacity of communities to organise and manage their own conservation initiatives.



View of Tagal-ed river

Another important example is *gotong-royong*, which remains part of community life in the villages studied. Residents participate in communal activities such as cleaning village areas and graveyards, with some communities organising these activities several times a year. Beyond maintaining the physical environment, these activities strengthen social cohesion and reinforce a shared sense of responsibility towards the village and its surroundings.

Community conservation also extends beyond established customary systems. One village described its own tree-planting programme, encouraging residents to plant trees in bare areas within the village. Such initiatives demonstrate that conservation can emerge from community awareness and pride, rather than being driven solely by formal conservation programmes.

This relationship with the environment is closely connected to identity. Some community members expressed pride in being among the communities closest to Kinabalu Park and in their historical connection with the surrounding landscape. For them, the environment is not simply a protected area or tourism destination; it is part of their history and cultural identity. This connection to place can strengthen their sense of responsibility for protecting the landscape for future generations.

At the same time, conservation does not occur separately from livelihoods. Communities living alongside natural areas must balance environmental protection with everyday needs. The study found that wildlife damaging agricultural crops can sometimes lead residents to set traps to protect their harvests, while limited financial support can restrict their ability to sustain conservation activities. These realities illustrate the complex relationship between conservation and livelihood security in communities living within and around the KUGGp.



Community member shows the planting around the house areas

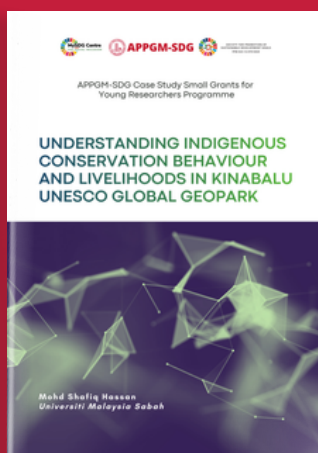
Taken together, these experiences show that conservation within the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark is already taking place through ordinary community life. From *Tagal* and *gotong-royong* to tree planting and customary rules, local communities are actively involved in caring for the natural environment while maintaining their connection to the land. Their practices demonstrate that conservation is not only found in formal programmes or protected areas, but also in the collective actions and traditions that communities continue to practise in their own villages.



Gotong-Royong activity

By Mohd Shafiq Hassan
(Recipient of APPGM-SDG Case Study Small Grants for Young Researchers 2025)

READ SHAFIQ'S PAPER HERE



Although community involvement is widely recognised as crucial for conservation, most research has focused on awareness and participation, with little attention to the behavioural mechanisms in newly designated geoparks such as Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark (KUGGp). This study investigates conservation behaviour among indigenous communities in the KUGGp, Sabah, Malaysian Borneo using the Integrative Model of Behaviour Prediction (IMBP).





EMPOWERING THE ORANG ASLI COMMUNITY OF KG PABAI: PIONEERING CHANGE THROUGH 3M EDUCATION (ENGLISH COMMUNICATION) AND SPIRITUALITY



In conjunction with the celebration of World Orang Asli Day, it is a shared responsibility to ensure that no community is marginalised from the current of development. Recognising this fact, the 3M Religious Development & Education Programme for the Orang Asli Community (Y23-SP209) has been successfully implemented to bring the light of education to the Orang Asli conversion community in Kampung Pabai, Rembau, Negeri Sembilan.

This CLC programme was led by Solution Provider Dr. Madihatun Zainuddin together with a team of lecturers from Poly-Tech University Malaysia (UPTM), this initiative received full sponsorship from APPGM-SDG from the Southern zone with close collaboration with JAKOA and JHEAINS.



Bridging the Gap Through Structured Education

Starting from January to April 2024, the programme has guided a total of 20 participants consisting of 10 adult women as well as 10 teenagers and children. Armed with a high spirit of volunteerism, the teaching staff from UPTM commuted from Kuala Lumpur to Negeri Sembilan every weekend to conduct 12 class sessions at Surau Al-Hidayah, Kg Pabai.

The main goal of the programme is a two-pronged approach:

1. To produce a competitive and intellectual Orang Asli community through mastery of the 3M (Reading, Writing, Counting) principles in English.
2. Strengthen spiritual understanding through the Basic Syllabus of Fardhu Ain and study classes.

To ensure the smooth learning process, the activities are divided into three main slots, namely the 3M Slot (with a special focus on basic English proficiency), the Fardhu Ain Basic Slot, and the Al-Quran Recital Slot.

Real Impact on the Ground (Ground-Level Impact)

This 12-week journey yielded very encouraging and heartwarming results. Some of the most significant achievements include:

1. Increased Literacy: Participants who initially did not recognise the ABC alphabet are now able to recognise and pronounce it with confidence.
2. Improvement of Tajweed: Significant progress has been made in the recitation of the Quran, where participants who used to read without tajweed are now able to read with makhraj and the correct laws of tajweed.



Sustainability

The biggest success of this programme is not only the end of the 12 class sessions, but the sustainability of the spirit of seeking knowledge among the community. Surau Al-Hidayah Kg Pabai now not only functions as a place of worship for prayers, but has been actively activated as a Community Learning Centre. It proves that lack from the point of view of infrastructure or background is not an obstacle to continue generating knowledge if given the right support.



Conclusion

Producing an Orang Asli community that is literate and spiritually strong requires a collective commitment from all parties. This success story from Kg Pabai is proof that with the collaboration of government agencies (JAKOA, JHEAINS), higher education institutions (UPTM), and strategic financing (APPGM-SDG), we are able to close the gap in education.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), let us continue to empower the voices and potential of the Orang Asli community towards a more inclusive and brilliant future.

*By Dr. Madihatun Zainuddin
(APPGM-SDG Solution Provider)*

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TERMINOLOGY “ORANG ASLI” & “ORANG ASAL”

- **Orang Asli** refers specifically to the indigenous tribes of Peninsular Malaysia (such as the Semang/Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay ethnic groups). This term is legally recognised under the *Akta Orang Asli 1954 (Akta 134)* and is managed by the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA).
- **Orang Asal** refers to all indigenous peoples across Malaysia, encompassing the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia as well as the native Bumiputera groups in Sabah and Sarawak.

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GROWING CHANGE TOGETHER: AN ORANG ASLI JOURNEY



Throughout my journey in developing Akademi Hayati Alam as a community learning space in Tangkak, I have come to understand that meaningful change does not always begin with a large project. Sometimes, it begins with something simple: being present, listening, building trust, and creating space for every community to become part of the change.

My experience with the Orang Asli communities in Tangkak has taught me exactly that.

In October 2025, the Chairman of JPKKOA Tangkak participated in our Zero Waste Learning Centre Development Programme. The programme explored how a community space could become a learning hub for waste separation, recycling, and zero waste practices.

It made me realise that the true value of training lies not only in what we share, but also in whom we engage. When a community leader gains knowledge, there is an opportunity for that knowledge to be shared, adapted, and grown within the community itself.

On 24 December 2025, we went to Kampung Orang Asli Tanah Gembuh, Tangkak, where we carried out a recycling collection activity with the community.

Being on the ground gave me a different perspective. Sustainability cannot remain a conversation within a training room. It needs to become part of everyday community life. Through something as simple as collecting and separating recyclable materials, we were not only encouraging environmental responsibility, but also building relationships and trust.

The journey continued in July 2026, when the Secretary of JPKKOA Kampung Mering, an Orang Asli woman leader, joined our Women's Leadership in Waste Management Programme.

Seeing her learn alongside women from other communities was particularly meaningful to me. Together, they explored leadership, waste management, sustainability, women's rights and roles, and the potential of women to become agents of change.



From this programme, the Tangkak Sustainable Women's Group was formed as a platform to continue networking, learning, and community action. To me, the participation of an Orang Asli woman leader carries an important message. Inclusive development begins when every community has a place at the same table, a voice in the conversation, and an opportunity to shape change.

This journey is still unfolding. One of our greatest challenges is not simply delivering programmes, but building trust and ensuring that relationships continue beyond each activity.



This experience has changed the way I understand empowerment. We do not need to enter a community with all the answers. Sometimes, our role is to listen, open doors, share what we know, and remain willing to learn from the community. Most importantly, we need to create spaces where solutions can grow together with the community, grounded in their strengths, experiences, and needs.

Through these small but meaningful steps, I see the values of SDGs 5, 10, 11, 12 and 17 coming to life through women, communities, responsible resource management, and grassroots partnerships.

My hope is that these relationships will continue to grow, creating more opportunities for Orang Asli communities not only to participate in sustainability initiatives, but also to lead them.

Because truly sustainable change is not something we build for communities. It is something we build together with them.

*By Hayati Saleh
(APPGM-SDG Solution Provider)*

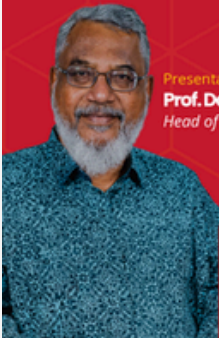
UPCOMING PROGRAMME


APPGM-SDG

SOCIETY FOR PROMOTION OF
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
PPM-SDG-14-6712828

A Conversation Together

The political ideology of
Tan Sri Dr. Tan Chee Khoo (Mr Opposition)
and its relevance to Malaysian society today



Presentation by:
Prof. Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria
Head of Secretariat APPGM-SDG





Nur Rahmah Othman
Executive Director
APPGM-SDG



Dr. Khairil Ahmad
Director
MySDG Centre for
Social Inclusion



Dr. Teo Lee Ken
Director
Constituency Coordination
Department APPGM-SDG



James Ryan Raj
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FROM THE LECTURE HALL TO THE RIVER: MY JOURNEY WITH LONG TAA TAGANG FISH CONSERVATION



For me, Indigenous empowerment is not simply about preserving what we inherited from our ancestors. It is about transforming that knowledge into practical action that protects our environment, strengthens our communities and creates opportunities for future generations.

My journey with the **Long Taa Tagang Fish Conservation Project** began in 2023, when Philip Jangau of Long Taa, Dapui, Ulu Tinjar approached me for assistance. Together with his wife, Lavang Galan, Philip had initiated efforts to protect the Dapui River and its native fish as early as 2018. Despite their determination, limited resources, inadequate facilities and other constraints made it difficult for the initiative to progress further.

I decided that before proposing any solution, I needed to understand the situation myself. I travelled 6 hours in my 4WD to Long Taa and conducted a fact-finding visit along the Dapui River. What I witnessed convinced me that the Tagang initiative had tremendous potential. Native fish were returning, and the community had demonstrated that local commitment could reverse years of pressure on the river ecosystem.

That experience changed my own direction. When I retired as a **Senior Lecturer at University of Technology Sarawak (UTS)** the following year, I chose to move from the lecture hall to the ground, applying my experience in planning, managing and community development directly to my own Indigenous community.

One important step was seeking support through APPGM-SDG to strengthen the Long Taa Tagang initiative. With that support, ideas could be translated into practical action. We strengthened conservation zones, installed colour-coded signages, conducted

river patrols, protected and fed native fish, and increased community awareness of the importance of sustainable harvesting and river stewardship.

Today, the results can be seen in the river itself. Indigenous fish such as **Empurau, Semah, Sultan, Adong** and **Kaloi** are not merely surviving—they are thriving in the pristine Dapui River. Seeing these fish swimming abundantly in their natural habitat is deeply rewarding. It reminds us that it is never too late to restore a river when a community decides to protect it.



My experience with **APPGM-SDG** has shown me that the **Sustainable Development Goals must ultimately become actions on the ground**. Our Tagang initiative contributes particularly to SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG 15: Life on Land, and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

For me, Tagang is more than fish conservation. It represents the power of Indigenous knowledge, community ownership and partnership. When traditional wisdom is supported by the right resources and opportunities, even a small Indigenous community deep in the interior of Sarawak can demonstrate a model of sustainable development worth sharing with the world.





A Living Sign of River Recovery — The writer with a healthy Semah, one of the prized native fish thriving within the Long Taa Tagang Fish Conservation Zones. Its presence reflects the encouraging recovery of fish populations following years of community-led protection, regular river patrols, and controlled fishing practices. More than just a fish, the Semah represents the return of biodiversity, the value of Indigenous stewardship, and the Long Taa community's determination to protect the Dapui River for future generations.



Marking the Red Zone — Protecting the Heart of the Tagang — Prominently displayed along the Dapui River, this Red Zone signage marks a strictly protected section of the Long Taa Tagang Fish Conservation Initiative, where fishing is prohibited to provide a safe sanctuary for native fish to breed and recover. Sponsored by APPGM-SDG, the signage strengthens community enforcement and public awareness while symbolising the partnership between the Long Taa community and APPGM-SDG in safeguarding the river's biodiversity for present and future generations.



Philip Jangau, Headman of Long Taa and one of the pioneers of the Long Taa Tagang Fish Conservation Initiative, with an impressive 9 Kg Empura from the Dapui River. The return and growth of this highly valued native species provide a powerful indication of the river's improving ecosystem following years of community protection, regular patrols, and responsible fishing practices. The Empurau represents more than a prized fish—it is a living symbol of successful community-led conservation, Indigenous stewardship, and the determination of the Long Taa community to safeguard the Dapui River for future generations.



Patrolling the Long Taa Tagang Conservation Zones — The writer and team conducting a river patrol along the Dapui River, monitoring the Long Taa Tagang Fish Conservation Zones. Regular community-led patrols help protect native fish populations, discourage illegal fishing, and ensure that the agreed Tagang rules are respected. More than a conservation activity, each patrol reflects the community's continuing commitment to protecting the river, restoring its biodiversity, and safeguarding this natural heritage for future generations.

*By Clement Langet Sabang
(APPGM-SDG Solution Provider)*



EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS VOICES: INDIGENOUS YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES SPEAK OUT ON BHR+E



For the *Orang Asli* (Indigenous Peoples), land is a source of life, identity, and a heritage for future generations. However, *Orang Asli* communities continue to face irresponsible business and development activities, including logging, mining, and plantations that impact their customary lands and territories.

In Kampung Kelaik, Kelantan, the Temiar *Orang Asli* community has been dealing with iron ore mining activities for over a decade. The river that serves as the community's source of water and food has reportedly turned rust-red, while concerns have also arisen regarding heavy metal pollution and its impact on the community's health.

The issue is not just about the impact of a project, but also about how decisions are made and the extent to which affected communities are involved in the process. This is one of the key issues in discussions surrounding Business, Human Rights, and the Environment (BHR+E).

FPIC: The Right of Indigenous Peoples to Participate in Decisions

In *Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli's* (AKWOA) work with communities, an issue frequently highlighted is community involvement from the onset—before any project or business activity is carried out. This is where Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is vital.

FPIC is not merely about informing or holding consultations with the community. Communities must also receive adequate information from the start, be free from pressure or coercion, and have the space to make decisions regarding matters that affect their land and lives.

When FPIC Is Not Respected: Kampung Kelaik's River of Death

The experience of the Temiar community in Kampung Kelaik demonstrates why the principle of FPIC is particularly important. The impacts raised by the villagers are not merely concerns.

In 2024, tests run by Malaysiakini on samples from a sedimentation pond near a mining operation in Kampung Kelaik recorded chromium-6 levels at 19.4 mg/L, compared to the 1.4 mg/L limit referenced for Class III water quality standards. The Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) subsequently launched an investigation into allegations of chromium poisoning.



From Community to Advocacy

In facing this issue, the Kelaik community continues to speak out. Through AKWOA's videos, the community tells their own story of what is happening on the ground and voices their demands to responsible parties. This documentation helps bring the community's voice and demands to the attention of the public and relevant authorities.

This approach is also part of AKWOA's work as an *Orang Asli* young women's collective. Through videos, workshops, and community discussions, AKWOA uses media to increase understanding of BHR+E and FPIC, while encouraging more *Orang Asli* youth and women to document and voice their community issues.

NAPBHR: Commitments Must Reach the Grassroots

Malaysia now has the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAPBHR) 2025–2030, developed by the Government of Malaysia, through the Legal Affairs Division (BHEUU) of the Prime Minister's Department, in collaboration with SUHAKAM, UNDP, and other stakeholders. For the Orang Asli community, the existence of this policy opens an important space to ensure that development and business activities do not disregard human rights. However, a good policy can only bring change when translated into action on the ground.

The government has a responsibility to protect human rights, while companies must respect community rights in any business activities. For projects affecting the Orang Asli, the implementation of FPIC must be an essential part of the process.

At the same time, communities need to know that frameworks and mechanisms like these exist. Information regarding rights, protections, and available channels must be conveyed clearly and accessibly so that communities can utilize them when facing issues that impact them.

Media as a Tool for Advocacy

Through the production of a video series on BHR+E and FPIC, AKWOA attempts to translate complex issues into content that is more accessible to the Orang Asli community and the general public. At the same time, we hope for more youth to have the skills and confidence to use media to document their own community experiences.

For us, success is not measured solely by a video receiving high views. What is more important is when a young person can use said video to start a discussion in their village, when a woman feels empowered to ask about a project that might impact her land, or when a community begins to realise that they have the right to information and the right to participate in decisions impacting their lives.



Empowerment begins when a community possesses the knowledge, space, and tools to speak up. Orang Asli youth and communities are not merely recipients of development activities. We are also rights holders, environmental stewards, documenters, and part of the generation that will inherit the consequences of decisions made today.

The voices of Orang Asli youth must be heard—not after a development project has taken place, but right from the beginning when decisions are made.

Development should not come at the expense of Orang Asli rights.

Watch the AKWOA video series on Business, Human Rights & Environment (BHR+E) and FPIC to learn more about Orang Asli rights in the face of business and development activities.



Report of the Select Committee on Women, Children and Community Development

Encroachment on the Ancestral Land of Orang Asli in Kampung Kelaik, Gua Musang, Kelantan, and the Health and Environmental Harm Caused by Mining and Agricultural Activities

*By Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli (AKWOA)
(Non-Governmental Organisation)*

09 12 AUGUST 2026



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN MACROECONOMIC INDICATORS AND LIVED REALITIES IN THE KLANG VALLEY

On 12 August 2026, MySDG Centre for Social Inclusion (MySDG-CSI) and Southeast Asian Futures Initiative Centre (SEAFIC) hosted a three-hour, closed-door focus group discussion (FGD) on economic security and social mobility in the Klang Valley, titled ***The Urban Squeeze: Raising the Floor for Economic Security and Mobility in Malaysia***, with fifteen urban Malaysians. Participants were drawn equally from five categories—fresh graduates, heads of household, gig economy workers, working single mothers, and senior citizens—with three representatives from each.

The FGD aimed to capture the lived experiences of these five groups and generate critical insights on how top-down economic policies affect households at the grassroots level, across three interconnected policy areas:

1. The intersection of housing, labour, and transportation
2. Income, education, and employment
3. Accessible, affordable, and nutritional food

The FGD session began with welcoming remarks by Prof. Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria (Head of Secretariat for APPGM-SDG), followed by a special address by Puan Nurul Izzah Anwar (Executive Director of Polity), and a keynote address by YM Tengku Datuk Seri Utama Zafrul Aziz (Chairman of SEAFIC).

The FGD gathered meaningful findings from the target groups across the three policy areas. First, regarding the intersection of housing, labour, and transportation, participants expressed that daily expenditures were their primary source of financial stress, with fluctuations of daily living and transportation costs caused by inflation, public transit unreliability, and increasingly costly vehicle maintenance serving as driving factors for this stress. Young workers are further impacted by inconsistent LRT services and transit delays, pushing them towards purchasing individual transportation such as motorcycles or cars, which increases their financial burden.



Under the second policy area, participants remarked that formal qualifications are not currently translating into jobs that meet their qualifications. This is especially the case for fresh graduates and entry-level workers. Additionally, gig workers expressed that the gig economy, once viewed as a stopgap measure, has become a permanent default, with the majority of participants relying on gig work for primary or supplemental income. Among the gig worker participants, e-hailing made evident how gig work has shifted from a flexible side gig into a full-time occupation for some. Unlike participants using gig platforms for supplementary income, those driving full-time face a fundamentally different set of pressures, such as earnings tied directly to hours on the road, no separation between work and personal time, and an absence of the benefits (EPF, SOCSO, paid leave, healthcare) that come with formal employment.



Under the final policy area, food insecurity took on a form contrary to the general view of absolute hunger. Instead, food insecurity in the Klang Valley emerges as a systemic issue impacting consumer choices, especially regarding the quality of and nutritional access to food. Based on the discussion, urban households tend to calculate trade-offs when it comes to the question of affordability and nutrition, due to increased prices. Beyond this, the nature of gig work—e-hailing in particular—has brought forth the issue of time poverty, which directly harms the nutritional health of workers. This is because for e-hailing drivers, stopping for a meal represents a direct loss of fare opportunities.

As a whole, the FGD presented clear case studies on the lived realities of the urban squeeze faced by selected fresh graduates, heads of household, gig economy workers, working single mothers, and senior citizens. The findings suggest that further policy efforts are needed to bridge gaps between macroeconomic indicators and realities on the ground in areas such as transportation costs, perpetual dependence on gig work, and limited nutritional access, which impact social mobility. Economic policies of today should place emphasis on these realities if they are to truly raise the floor and improve quality of life.

By MySDG Centre for Social Inclusion, APPGM-SDG

THEMES FOR UPCOMING NEWSLETTER

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10 18 AUGUST 2026



PITCHING IDEAS AT THE 2027 BUDGET DIALOGUE

The Ministry of Finance (MoF) hosted a pre-budget dialogue with the business community and leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The APPGM-SDG Secretariat was among the non-business sector invited. Four of us from the Secretariat were in attendance, although only one person was allowed in the main hall. Everyone invited was given an ID number which corresponded to their seating

Logistics of the MoF Dialogue

This dialogue was held on Tuesday, 18th August 2026 at the Ministry of Finance (MoF) Putrajaya. The Minister of Finance II, YB Senator Datuk Seri Amir Hamzah Azizan and the Treasury Secretary General, Tan Sri Johan Mahmood Merican conducted the dialogue session. Towards the end, the Prime Minister (PM), YAB Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim came and concluded it.



This year, in order to provide opportunities to as many of the organisations to speak, only a three-minute intervention per person was offered. The clock was ticking and music was played after the three minutes was up. All observed the time and kept their interventions direct to the point.

I was the first to put up my hand to make an intervention, and Tan Sri Johan Mahmood Merican called on me. Actually, it is tough to say everything within three minutes as there were so many things APPGM-SDG had from the grassroots.

Three-minute presentation

This year, unlike the previous years, we had asked our team to list out the people's requests from the grassroots. We had a letter prepared with three different attachments.

The first was on the APPGM-SDG grant for 2027. The second was a list of five major concerns, and the third was a list of about 54 local concerns from around the country. With three minutes, I managed to highlight our appreciation to the government and thanked them for the 2026 grant.

After thanking the government for the 2026 grant, I then called on the government for a similar allocation for 2027 for localising SDGs. This was needed till 2030 over the next four years to reach the global targets.

I emphasised that in localising SDGs, we worked on mapping local needs through focus group discussions and undertaking short-term micro-SDG solution projects. We engage with local stakeholders to find policy solutions and improve delivery through the 55-district level SDG Taskforces. I emphasised that over the next four years till 2030, we will reach all the parliamentary constituencies. The approach for 2027 onwards is problem-solving, moving beyond just describing local needs.

Two minutes were up by this time, and therefore I focused in the last one minute to highlight five community concerns briefly.

First, the Social Work Profession Bill, which was recently passed by both houses in parliament, is timely. The proposal is for the government to assist in creating the employment market in the social-care sector. The salaries are currently very low, and this



hinders well-trained and qualified people from entering full-time social work. If the government were to set the basic salary based on government scales and subsidise the salaries by 70–30% for the next three years—the government contributing 70% and the voluntary and welfare sector raising 30%—or implement a ringgit-for-ringgit scheme to encourage job opportunities for qualified social workers from local universities or social work training institutions.

Here, it was proposed that the government should assist in increasing employment opportunities for social work graduates. The government could subsidise the employment of a social worker in each organisation. The suggestion is that the government provides 70% of the salaries for voluntary organisation staff if they are graduates of social work, or provides a ringgit-for-ringgit match if a trained social worker is employed. The social worker job sector and salaries based on qualifications must be clearly defined.

Second, in this context too, another needy group of staff are in the 576 community-based rehabilitation centres (CBR or PDK) around the country. This finding is based on our in-depth study. Here, we identified that the majority of the staff were lowly paid and not well trained, although very dedicated in their work. Therefore, opportunities to undertake social work training, as well as increased grant support for the CBR workers, are urgently needed.



Three other points I mentioned in passing, which we received from the grassroots, were:

- The unemployment concerns of youth from Beaufort, Sabah.
- Low-cost housing in flats faced by dwellers in Buntong and Sungai Pari, Perak, where there were issues at the transitional housing.
- Major flooding concerns at Pasir Puteh, Kelantan, specifically in villages such as Kg Permatang Rambai and Kg Seligi, due to the ECRL project's tunnels.



Outside the hall

Nur Rahmah Othman (APPGM-SDG Executive Director), Rachael Tan (APPGM-SDG Director of Finance), and Karuppiah Palaniandy were waiting outside the hall. They had an opportunity to meet the PM after the session started. They passed the PM a copy of our letter and a summary of the findings from the ground for federal government intervention through the 2027 Budget. This was a valuable opportunity for greater visibility of our work.

Value of Dialogues

The MoF pre-budget dialogue is a very good opportunity to provide feedback to the government. This process is taken seriously by the government, the agencies, the private sector, and the voluntary sector, especially in the preparation of the budget. Government officials and agencies must create spaces for town hall sessions to hear the voices of the people for building a better Malaysia for all

*By Prof. Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria
(APPGM-SDG Head of Secretariat)*



We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the Members of Parliament for their unwavering cooperation and commitment. Throughout the month, APPGM-SDG has had the privilege of engaging with various parliamentary constituencies through various meeting and events. These milestones were made possible through the dedicated efforts between the Members of Parliament and APPGM-SDG. We value this synergy between policy and grassroots action, and we look forward to further strengthening our partnership to advance the Sustainable Development Goals across Malaysia.

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