

Capacity Building of Indigenous Youth through Skills and Career Training Programs in Malaysia

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Abstract

Orang Asli is a unique tribal group living in the vernacular settlements in Malaysia. Their job opportunities are similar to the jobs available in the natural environment. However, they still lag in the high-paying job sector compared to the other communities. This situation is due to Orang Asli not having the appropriate levels of education and skills to compete with the other communities. Although the government has planned and implemented various forms of skills and career training programs for the Orang Asli, their participation is still inadequate.

To explore this issue more systematically, a study was carried out on 36 Orang Asli youth in the Gua Musang district of Kelantan. The objectives of the study are to explain the perception and readiness of Orang Asli youth towards skills and career training programs, and to describe barriers and appropriate skill training programs for the indigenous youth. Data was collected using interview techniques and focus group discussions. They were analyzed using QSR NVivo computer software.

The study shows that Orang Asli youth offer only a moderate response to the relevant programs. They did not show a high interest and willingness to participate in the skill training program conducted. Several factors make it difficult for them to follow the organized program. However, they believe that skills and career training programs are important in strategizing economic growth through participation in the employment sector. They also believe that the skills they have will help them to get better jobs. Therefore, they expect the organized program to be appropriate to the local environment, capital resources, and their interests. In addition to the appropriate rules implemented in the village or the district, follow-up action is necessary after the end of the training. Related parties need to help the Orang Asli youth to get job opportunities after the end of a training program.

Keywords: Indigenous youth; Training and skills; Careers and income; Perception and readiness; Orang Asli.

Introduction

The history of Orang Asli, who were a minority group and indigenous people of Peninsula Malaysia dates back to 5,000 BC (Fix, 1995; Hill et al., 2006). The 'Orang Asli' are

considered as the first people or original people just as their name implies. This was even backed up by the speech of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister who asserted that 'there is no doubt that the Malays were the indigenous people of this land because the original inhabitants did not have any form of civilization compared with the Malays...and instead lived like primitives in mountains and thick jungle' (Nicholas, 2000: 90). They were classified into eighteen distinctive minority aboriginal groups. Each of these groups has its own culture, social organization, belief system, language, physical characteristics and economy (Knox, 1997; Wook, 2016). They number over 4 million and constitute more than 13% of the total Malaysian population of 32,382,300 as of 2018 (JAKOA, 2022). Before this time, anthropologists and sociologists have given several epithets to the Orang Asli based on their specific domicile, perceived attributes or 'civilization'. Few of these descriptions are made up of Orang Darat (hinterland people), Orang Hulu (people of the headwaters), and Orang Liar (people who live in the wild). Others include Orang Jinak (tame people), Orang Laut (people who live by the sea) and Orang Mawas (apelike people) (Wazir-Jahan, 1981; Colin, 2000).

In general, since the implementation of the Malaysia Plan, the Orang Asli community has always been listed as one of the poorest ethnic groups in Malaysia. Various social indicators have shown that the community continues to remain in a marginal position in the Malaysian society. The problem of extreme poverty is higher among the Orang Asli than among the other communities. In general, poverty of the Orang Asli community is often linked to jobs that are based on natural resources. Most still practice traditional jobs, although there are a few Orang Asli who have been active in agriculture-based jobs, such as being small rubber and oil palm farmers. Many of them still go to the forest or farm at a small scale (Omar, 2004; Colin, 2000; Noraini Ali, 1999; Emby et al., 1996).

The basis of their work is still oriented towards self-sufficiency, either in cultivating gardens and orchards or in the activities of searching for forest products such as rattan, resin, agarwood, and wood roots, or catching fish and hunting animals in the forest. This continuous reliance on the traditional jobs causes the Orang Asli community to lag in the process of improving their economic achievements.

In this context, this paper has the following objectives:

- (i) To clarify the perception and readiness of Orang Asli youth towards skills and career training programs and;
- (ii) To describe the challenges and suitable skills and career training programs for the Orang Asli youth.

Literature Review

Globally, the world population is projected to reach 9 billion by 2050 (International Labour Organisation, 2010). About 1.3 billion numbering the young persons within the age bracket of 15 to 24 will add to the visualized global population of 1.3 billion. By these statistics, they represent 14 % of the visualized global population (ILO, 2010). According to UNDESA (2011) and Ahmed et al. (2020), majority of them will be born in developing nations in Africa and Asia, where more than half of the population still live in rural areas.

Thus, it is imperative to empower the local youth which is tantamount to investing on the greatness and development of a nation since the young generation represent the future. This coincides with the statement made by Krystal Abotossaway, the President of the Indigenous Professional Association of Canada (IPAC) that "Indigenous Youth represent the future. By investing in their development, we are doing what's right for our country's economic growth. Empowering the next generation is key and with our program's partnership with the Government of Canada's Youth Employment and Skills Strategy program, various industries our hope is that Indigenous youth can reach their full potential." (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021).

Based on information from many studies, the Orang Asli youth are having a hard time competing with peers and prosper in their endeavors because of some social-cultural and

economic reasons. In a recent study on the Orang Asli people, Mahmud et al. (2022) assert that in spite of financial backing the Malaysian government put in place to address the issues of these indigenous people in such areas like providing skills and employment opportunities, education and health services, many tribes still wish to adhere to their traditional and cultural beliefs at *status-quo*, which has a direct impact on people's socio economic and community health transitions

Continuation of the low socio-economic status among the Orang Asli community since Malaysia achieved independence is partly due to their lagging behind in the high-income employment sector compared to the other communities. Majority of them are involved in the traditional economy based on the natural environment (Ramle, 2009; Kamarudin & Ngah, 2007; Omar, 2008; Colin, 2000; Noraini Ali, 1999; Emby et al., 1996; Ramle et al., 2016 & Asmawi et al., 2023). E-Damak (2011) shows that the participation of the Orang Asli population aged 18-64 years of both sexes in employment is inadequate. Within the total figure of 102,511, Orang Asli in the working age group (18-64 years) until 2015, it is found that 56.9 percent were unemployed. Among those who do not work, majority are youth (38.5%) compared to the adults (18.3%).

This situation is due to the youth in the Orang Asli community having a low level of education (Ramle et al., 2012). They lack appropriate skills to compete with the other communities in employment. Orang Asli community is also labeled as not having the willingness to follow organized training programs. Although the government has a plan to implement various forms of skills and career training programs for them, their participation is still not encouraging.

E-Damak (2015) also gives a less satisfactory picture in terms of skills and personal potential that the Orang Asli community has to generate wider economic opportunities and earn better income. Although training and skill programs have been carried out, observations on E-Damak data (2011) show that on average 92.9% (N= 686,191) of Orang Asli still do not have any skills. Those who have some skills are only as many as 7.1% (N=52,538), and most of them only have skills in the field of home carpentry (27.1%), while the other skills possessed are sewing (6.2%), producing handicrafts (5.6%), cooking (3.6%), mixing cement (3.0%), repairing vehicles (1.4%) and other skills below the one percent rate.

This situation shows that the Orang Asli community is still lagging behind in mastering skills that can generate better income. Therefore, a lot needs to be done in training the Orang Asli to have certain skills.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative method to examine the issues of this study. The use of qualitative methods can help the research to obtain comprehensive, accurate, and clear data and allow producing descriptive statements regarding the aspects being studied. More specifically, it carried out a case study design that involved 36 Orang Asli youth in Gua Musang Kelantan using a purposive sampling technique. They consist of youth who have attended skills training programs and youth who have completed the secondary school.

The study employed two data collection techniques: in-depth interviews and document analysis. In-depth interviews are the main technique for obtaining data from the informants. It is an important source of data aimed at obtaining a complete description and explanation regarding the research issue. Meanwhile, the research study also adopts document analysis techniques to obtain information. It examined documents related to the results of previous studies that can be used as a backup in further clarifying the phenomena related to the study issue. Study data were analyzed and coordinated using QSR NVivo computer software. The software helped to transcribe, store, coordinate and organize research data systematically.

Findings

Orang Asli Training and Skills Program

Development is critical for a country to ensure prosperity and well-being of its people. As a social term, development is focused not only on one aspect but includes all the aspects of community life (Ismail and Amin, 2020; Azilawanie et al. 2023). Therefore, the development of a country or society is assessed not only from an economic aspect but also involves other social aspects such as education, health, family, politics, intellectual aspects and spirituality. Development involves an ongoing process carried out by the individuals, communities, governments and whoever has the power to do so. This process simultaneously brings changes to the pattern of life either qualitatively (there has been a good change and brings prosperity) or quantitatively (measurement of several aspects and items) (Saad, 2008 & WN Jazmina, 2023; Ariffin et al, 2023).

Malaysian government has never marginalized this community in ensuring that they are in line with the other communities. Various efforts have been made by the government. The proof is that since the First Malaysia Plan (1966-1970), Orang Asli have been on the national development agenda because they are identified as a poor and marginalized group. At that time, the government allocated as much as RM6.2 million to develop aspects of health and education in addition to improving economic standards to be more productive (Malaysia, 1966; Abdullah, 2022).

Various forms of development programs have been implemented for the Orang Asli since the Malaysia Plan was introduced. Among them is a program to upgrade the socio-economic status of the Orang Asli by providing financial and livelihood assistance. However, this effort is seen as not being able to solve the problem of poverty in the long term (Nawang, 1993). Therefore, realizing that the Orang Asli do not have a high level of education, the government has introduced assistance and programs in terms of training and skills to the Orang Asli community so that they can be independent to generate their income (JHEOA, 2003). Efforts to develop Orang Asli's human capital through training and skill programs have begun in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (RMK8).

In line with the philosophy of rural development, the focus of RMK8 is to strengthen the development programs for the rural communities that are advanced and self-sufficient. For the Orang Asli community, the focus is on education and skill training for the teenagers and the youth. This program is implemented in collaboration with various skill training institutions such as Giat Mara, Kemas and others. The training program provided is to ensure that Orang Asli youth get better jobs and can increase family income (JHEOA, 2008; Abdullah, 2022).

Two training centres have been established by the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA) with the joint efforts of related agencies to guide the Orang Asli youth in improving their skills in certain fields and can improve their standard of living to be better. With the skills acquired through the training provided, it is hoped that the Orang Asli youth will be able to run their businesses and get better job opportunities (Husnorhafiza & Norasmah, 2009).

The training and skills centres are as follows

- (i) Centre Giat Mara JHEOA Damansara Damai Sungai Buloh Selangor. This centre was established with a joint venture between JAKOA and the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). The centre offers six-month-long skill courses in the fields of motorcycle technology, six-month-long courses in automotive technology, and fifteen-month-long courses in vehicle repair and painting technology. Each recruitment session is for 60 people.
- (ii) Paya Bungor Training centre Kuantan Pahang: this centre is certified in conducting level one and two women's dressmaking courses. This course is implemented for eight months. Completing trainees will be awarded the Malaysian Skills Certificate by the Skills Development Department (JPK), Ministry of Human Resources. Each recruitment session is for 50 people (JHEOA, 2008).

This policy is continued under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (RMK-9). Malaysia's economic development policy has been formed based on the government's commitment to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are equitably shared. This kind of policy is necessary to deal with the high rate of poverty among the Orang Asli community. This makes the core of the poverty development strategy under RMK-9 focused on eradicating extreme poverty and halving overall poverty by the end of 2010. Under this plan, among the main programs introduced are economic improvement programs, basic infrastructure development programs and human development programs. The basis of this policy is to increase the access of the Orang Asli community to projects that can generate income and support.

Perception of Training and Skills Programs

The results of the study (Fig. 1) indicate that the 20 informants of the study showed a moderate response and seven informants showed a low response to the training and skills program. They do not show any willingness and positive interest to participate in the various skill training programs organized by the relevant parties.

“...we are not interested in participating in the training program. We are not interested in learning...” (informants 2, 6 & 15)

“...it's not that I don't want to follow the training. Even if I have the intention to follow the training but there are many things in the village that need to be resolved...” (informants 3, 5 & 7)

They are willing only to follow an organized skills program if the organized training program is seen to have a high capacity in helping their lives in the future. Several challenges cause the Orang Asli youth not to give a positive response to following related training programs. Some of these challenges greatly affect the perception and willingness of the Orang Asli youth to follow the organized training and skills program.

Challenges such as placement far from the training centres, lack of knowledge/information about the training opportunities provided and not being able to read/write are among the main factors influencing the Orang Asli youth not to follow an organized skills training course. In addition, the problem of time incompatibility, already working/employer's permission, no help/support after training, and facing communication problems with outsiders are among the contributing factors to their failure to realize the knowledge and skills gained through these courses as a career field.

“...I don't want to go to the training program it entails many hardships. I must leave the village earlier because the training centre is far away. It takes a long time to reach the place and we must abandon wives and children if we join the program...” (informants 15, 22 & 28)

“...we cannot follow the training program because we cannot read and write...” (informants 2,6,7,12, 15, 16, 22, 24,25, 26, 27,28, 29, 30 & 31)

“...I'm less interested in joining the program because friends who have attended the courses still work in the village. There are no job opportunities. No officer helps to find a job and capital for business. Even if they get a job, the employer doesn't pay the salary...” (informants 24, 26 & 29)

“...we lack interest in going to training because we don't know the job opportunities after finishing the course. Also, many youths in this village already have jobs as they work in oil palm plantations (informants 8, 10 & 19)

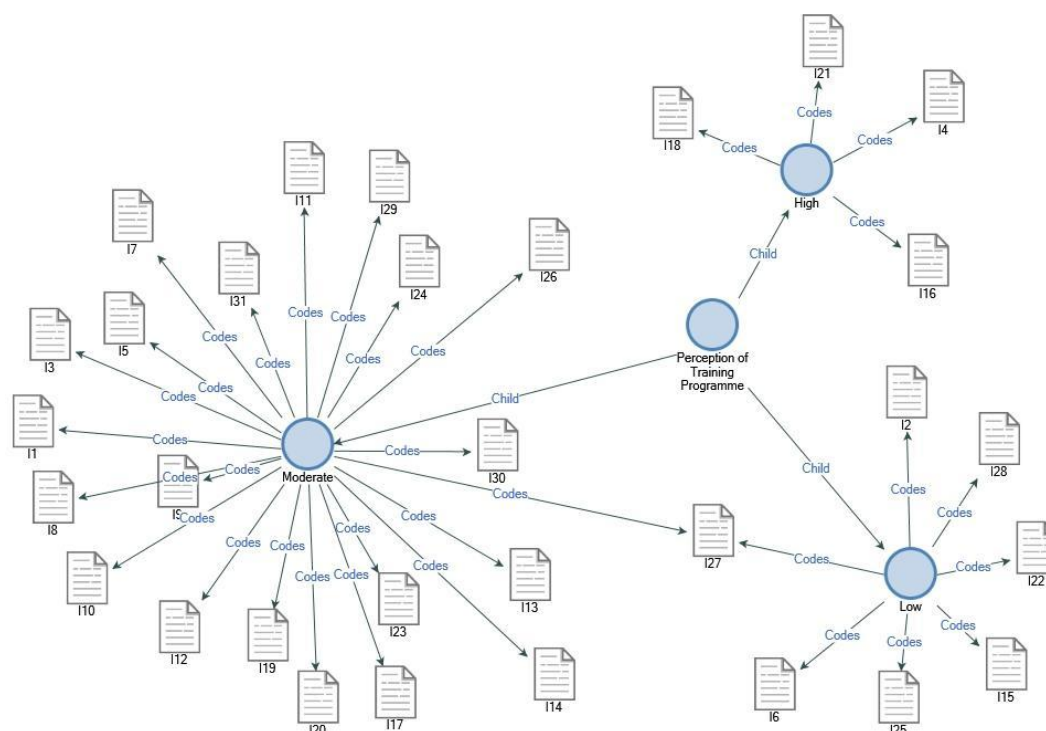


Fig. 1: Perception of the Training Programme

As explained, the training and skills centres operated by JAKOA are available only in Damansara Damai and Paya Bungor Kuantan, Pahang. Orang Asli youth who want to follow the training program provided have to leave their hometown and live in the training centre full-time because of their remote location, especially those from the other states. Added to this is the lack of own transport facilities, making it even more difficult for the Orang Asli youth to attend to the training programs provided. This is the biggest challenge for the Orang Asli youth to follow the program. This is because they have to be separated from their children and wives for a long period.

Moreover, access to information related to organized training and skills programs is limited. Most of the informants who were interviewed explained that they do not have clear information or knowledge about the opportunities of training programs and skills provided by the relevant parties.

“... I don’t even know what training is provided by the government agencies for us ...” (Informants 10, 11 & 13)

“...we are interested in following the training provided by the department, but we are not sure what courses are provided and how to apply...” (informants 8, 17 & 20)

“...I was told by the local leader about the training program provided by the department, and I have no information to join. When I asked the local leader about this matter, they also could not provide proper information...” (informants 23 & 30)

They do not get explanations regarding the advantages and benefits if they follow the training and skills programs. There was even an informant who was interviewed explaining that

he did not want to follow the training program because he did not know the direction after the end of the program.

“...the local leader told us about the training program, but they did not explain the career opportunities after the training...” (informants 19 & 26)

“... we are not interested in participating in the organized training program because we are not sure of the career opportunities that can be obtained after completing the courses. Instead of wasting time going to a course. It had better for us to work in the village...” (informants 7 & 31)

In addition, there is an informant who has followed the training program, explaining that he only knows about the existence of the training program and the skills provided through his friend who has successfully followed the program. This shows that access to information related to the programs being conducted is an important factor in ensuring that Orang Asli youth participate in the training and skills programs provided.

“...yes, I got information about the skills training program through a friend who has worked in the city. he helped me to apply and register to the training center...” (informants 18 & 21)

The factor that is also the main challenge for the Orang Asli youth to follow the training program is the problem of not knowing how to read and write. As fifteen informants explained that they were afraid to attend the training and skills programs that were conducted because of the language problem. The conditions set to follow the training program must be the ability to read and write because in the training program conducted, trainees are required to go through a written test before being eligible to get a certificate for the course followed.

“... we cannot follow the training program because we are unable to write and read...” (informants 2, 6, 7, 12, 15, 16, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 & 31)

“...I’m interested in following the course but I’m not eligible because my friends who have completed the program tell me that I must be good in reading and writing...” (informants 3, 5 & 21)

For those who have followed the training and skills program, there is a problem in applying the skills they have either starting their own businesses or getting related job opportunities. The problem that arises is not due to the absence of the necessary entrepreneurial skills, but that there is no support system provided after they complete their training either in the form of capital resources for them to start a private business or get a place as an employee in related sectors.

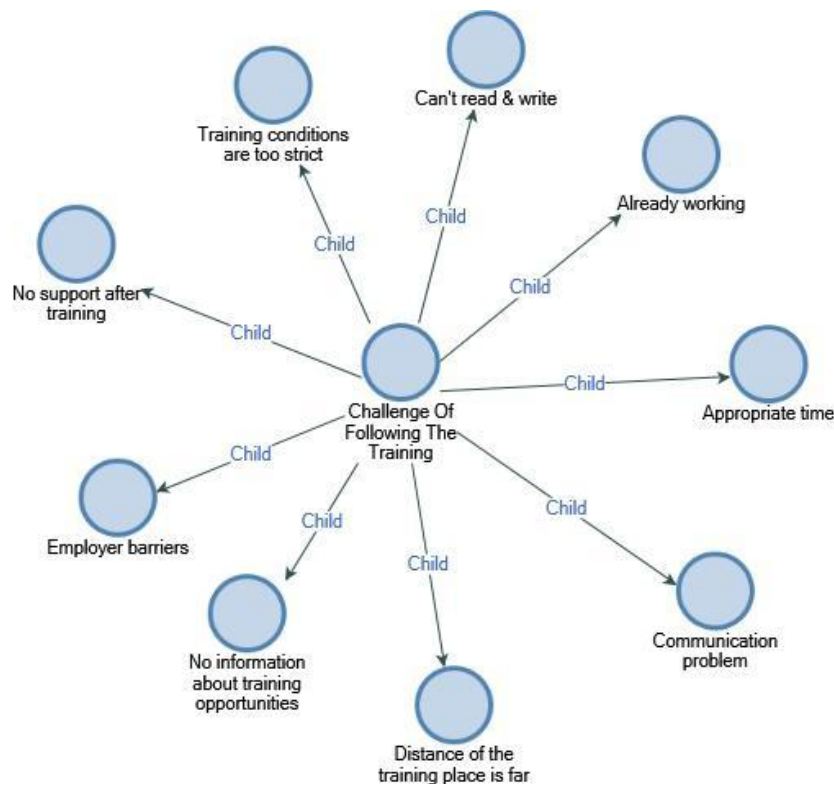


Fig. 2: Challenges of following the training

These difficulties make the Orang Asli youth who have completed their training incapable of changing their socio-economic status by earning a better income. However, the results of the study show that they agree on the importance of following a skilled course to increase the human capital of the Orang Asli youth. Indigenous youth in Gua Musang believe that skills and career training programs are important in organizing economic growth strategies through participation in the employment sector. They also believe that the skills they have can help them get better jobs. They explained that a large number of them did not get better job opportunities because they did not have the relevant skills and qualifications compared to the other communities. They agreed that by having related skills and certificates, they will get job opportunities that earn more income compared to the jobs based on hunting and gathering forest products.

Appropriateness of the training program and skills

General public is aware that several training and skills courses have been offered so far and not least among the Orang Asli youth who have followed these courses to completion. However, the findings of the study show that the training and skills programs do not help them get job opportunities and incomes that are suitable for the courses followed. They explained that there seems to be a mismatch between what they have learned through the courses and what they can do when they return to their hometowns to work on their own using existing local resources.

Orang Asli youth expect the organized program to be appropriate to the local environment, capital resources and their interests. Among the details of the appropriateness of what was implemented in the village or the district, follow-up action is necessary after the end of the training, and related parties need to help the Orang Asli youth to get job opportunities.

The location of the training is very difficult for the Orang Asli to participate in; it is suitable if the training and skills program is implemented in the nearby village or the district area. This is because it is difficult for women to leave home and family. They have commitments

to their husbands and children and due to the location of the course being far away, they are unable to attend the course provided.

Attention should also be paid to those who have completed training. If the focus is not on those who have completed the training, the program will not achieve its main objective. For example, some informants have undergone training in sewing women's clothes but do not have the appropriate equipment to practice the skills learned; they attend sewing courses but do not have a sewing machine. Ideally, they should get business capital to start a business, ongoing guidance and mentoring/training in the field of interest, knowledge of business management and knowledge of credit/loan assistance. It is important to ensure that Orang Asli youth can generate income opportunities through the skills they possess.

In the context of accepting the inclusion of the Orang Asli workforce in skills training institutions, the academic qualification requirements need to be relaxed. The qualification requirements for reading and writing also need to be relaxed, especially for those who are interested in venturing into fields that do not require high literacy skills in the job. For example, for those interested in training as a make-up artist, groomer, linen, barber, kitchen assistant, housekeeper, laundryman, reflexologist and housekeeper fields do not require trainees who know how to read and write but only require hands-on training.

In addition to opening up space for those with less academic qualifications to venture into a skilled field, others can be trained according to their potential, interests and living environment such as skills in farming, breeding, repairing vehicles, driving bulldozers, managing herb gardens, forest medicinal products, etc. The findings from the interviews show that there are no Orang Asli youth trained in agriculture or forestry to enable them to cultivate the land and forest as a career. These skills are important for Orang Asli youth following their practical living environment. They are seen as having the potential to help Orang Asli youth generate better income.

Following the lack of academic qualifications required in the mainstream employment arena, the approach to increasing the human capital of the Orang Asli youth workforce should not now be solely focused on academic qualifications. The workforce of Orang Asli can still be utilized based on considerations based on the experience and skills possessed with forests, hills, herbs, timber, river, lake, or sea life in which they have potential and are interested in venturing into it. For example, Orang Asli youth can be absorbed into working in the public or private sector such as the Forestry Department, Wildlife Protection Department and National Parks or become tourist guides for tourism companies based on their knowledge and skills about flora and fauna. As stated by the informants;

“...if possible, we would like a training program that does not require reading, writing and answering exam and the course is better related to our environment for example about herbs, forest trees, hills, mountains or fish in the river... (informants 21 & 24)

“...the government should provide a course that suits our lives. The course that allows us to work in the forestry department, wildlife protection department or become a tourist guide because our knowledge about the jungle is very high...” (informant 16)

In addition, efforts need to be made to train more Orang Asli youth workers with hands-on skills in certain fields. This effort is seen to be able to qualify more Orang Asli workforce who have a certain skills certificate to obtain a job in the skill field that they were engaged in before.

Measures to encourage smart partnerships between the indigenous communities and the private sector and non-governmental organizations can help efforts towards generating more employment opportunities among Orang Asli youth. The education-career model that was developed by UMW Toyota Malaysia with the support of trade unions has allowed training and

offering jobs to trainees in the field of mechanics and car servicing. Under the same program, UMW Toyota also provides accommodation facilities for youth and trainees in addition to offering jobs and holding a job retention program for employees. This program is very successful in helping Orang Asli youth get job opportunities and a good income to support their lives (EPU/UNDP, 2012).

The findings of the study also show that Orang Asli youth have a relatively strong attachment to their hometown and immediate family. A strong local value based on the desire to find a job around the hometown was often brought up during the interview sessions conducted. The desire to gain job opportunities outside by moving to a new place has not yet become accepted by the majority of Orang Asli youth today, especially among those with low education.

On the other hand, the study of Bammer, (1990), Islam (1985) and Sabates and Castaldo (2008) in Bangladesh and some countries in South Asia show that migration is one of the best methods to overcome the problem of unemployment and poverty among the population of backward countries. Therefore, as an alternative, all the training and skills programs that want to be organized need to be evaluated from the point of view of compatibility with the living environment of the Orang Asli so that those who follow the training programs provide benefits and can change their standard of living for the better.

Conclusion

Orang Asli youth do not show positive interest and willingness to follow the skills and career training program that JAKOA has conducted. The organized program is considered incapable of changing their socio-economic status. As explained, the less positive perception of the training and skills programs carried out is influenced by several factors faced by Orang Asli youth, whether those who have not followed or have followed a training program.

However, Orang Asli youth agree that training and skills programs are very important to get job opportunities and generate better income. They are also confident that, if they have certain skills and qualifications, they can more easily get job opportunities with higher incomes and thus improve their daily living standards.

Developing a skills and career training program for the indigenous youth of Malaysia requires a holistic approach that recognizes and respects their cultural heritage while addressing their specific challenges and aspirations. The indigenous communities have rich traditions, knowledge, and skills that can be harnessed and integrated into the program to empower and uplift their youth.

To ensure the program's success, it is essential to collaborate closely with the indigenous leaders, elders, and community members. Their insights and involvement are vital in designing culturally sensitive and appropriate training modules that align with the community's values and aspirations. This approach will foster a sense of ownership and pride among the indigenous youth, promoting greater engagement and participation.

The training program should emphasize a combination of technical skills, such as vocational training in various trades and industries and soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and entrepreneurship. By providing a well-rounded curriculum, we can equip the indigenous youth with the tools they need to succeed in both traditional and modern career paths.

Additionally, the program should incorporate mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities, where indigenous youth can learn from experienced professionals within their communities. This approach not only facilitates knowledge transfer but also strengthens intergenerational relationships and preserves indigenous wisdom.

Moreover, the program should address the systemic barriers faced by the indigenous communities, including access to education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. Efforts should be made to collaborate with the government agencies, NGOs, and private sectors to create an inclusive eco-system that supports the integration of indigenous youth into the wider job market.

Regular evaluations and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to assess the program's effectiveness and make necessary improvements. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial to ensure that the training program remains relevant and responsive to the changing needs and aspirations of the indigenous youth.

By implementing a culturally sensitive, comprehensive, and collaborative skills and career training program, we can empower the indigenous youth in Malaysia to thrive economically, preserve their cultural heritage, and contribute meaningfully to their communities and society at large. Through this program, the government can promote social inclusion, bridge the opportunity gap, and foster a more equitable and prosperous future for all Malaysians

Therefore, the governments through JAKOA or related agencies need to draw up training and skills programs that are appropriate to the knowledge, qualifications, abilities, environmental conditions, and resources that can be developed. It is to ensure that the Orang Asli, especially the youth, can get out of the issue of poverty and extreme poverty. Generating capacity development through skills and career training programs is seen as one of the alternatives that can have a long-term impact to improve the socio-economics of the Orang Asli as a whole.

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