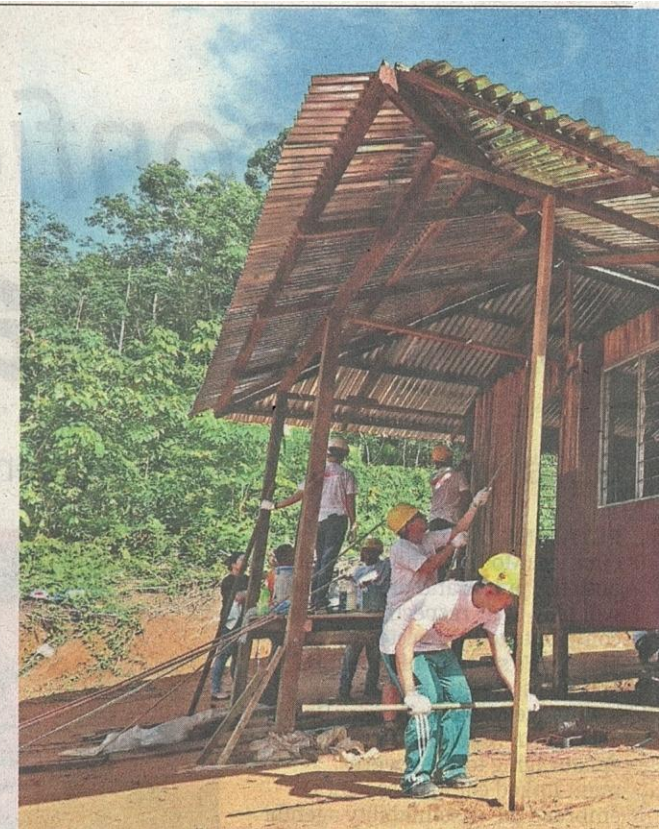




Orang Asli villagers waiting to get medical treatment at an outpost in Ulu Jelai, Pahang.



Volunteers from Star Foundation working with Insaaf Malaysia to build a house in an Orang Asli village in Negri Sembilan in 2019.

By **FARID WAHAB**
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RECENT decades saw the Orang Asli village in Sungai Buloh, Selangor, becoming increasingly surrounded by newer developments.

Its proximity to the North-South Highway helped improve accessibility, bringing more traffic through the area that was once quieter.

All these have modernised the lifestyle of the villagers, many of whom have become more integrated with their urban peers.

Despite this, some infrastruc-

Paving the way forward for **Orang Asli**

Activists say better infrastructures needed to ensure the community doesn't lag behind in developmental milestones

tures there from roads to digital connectivity are still lacking. The village only received treated water supply two years ago.

Elsewhere in Malaysia, Orang Asli communities, many of which are in remote locations, continue to lag behind in developmental milestones.

The start of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 and the subsequent economic uncertainty raised concerns that their plight has worsened.

Several activists share their views on how to ensure the Orang Asli are not left behind as Malaysia transitions to the endemic phase.

Work with NGOs

Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Buloh's former head Hanim Apeng said the pandemic had disproportionately impacted the Orang Asli communities living near cities.

"Unlike our counterparts in rural areas who can hunt, Orang Asli who live near cities need money to buy food.

"Like the city folk, they too, were experiencing financial pinch and became more reliant on aid from others," she said.

Hanim thanked the many non-governmental organisations (NGO) distributing aid to the Orang Asli during the pandemic.

"I received many requests, especially from people who lost their job and who could not afford to buy the necessities.

"I decided to get in touch with several NGOs, which were very helpful in providing aid to those in need.

"Although there are government agencies that are tasked to assist us, they are often delayed as they must follow various procedures.

"NGOs, on the other hand, have no such restrictions and can channel aid faster to the intended recipients," she added.



Ishak says the NGOs need support from the private sector to do their community work.



Hanim says NGOs can deliver aid faster during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Juvita says accessibility to services is a major challenge the Orang Asli communities face.



Dr Chow proposes that NGOs and companies adopt a specific village to better understand their needs.



Youths from Kampung Dayok, Pahang, undergoing DRsforALL's training programme to become a paramedic.

Activist Dr Steven Chow said the private sector and NGOs could adopt a specific village to better understand their needs.

The Federation of Private Medical Practitioners Associations Malaysia (FPMPAM) president pointed to the DRsforALL initiative

that provided healthcare services.

"This outreach programme has been on the ground since 2016, supporting the Kampung Dayok community in Ulu Jelai, Pahang.

"It helps to train selected locals to become first responder who are equipped with basic first aid skills.

"Volunteer doctors from FPMPAM also provide support via telemedicine (remote diagnosis and treatment via telecommunications technology).

"More than 500 patients had benefitted from this initiative that also supplies nutritious food for children of poor families," he added.

Dr Chow said 33 Kampung Dayok villagers were successfully trained to become a paramedic via the programme.

"Five qualified candidates also received a scholarship to enrol for a diploma course at a local university.

"This is to upskill them so that they can work full time in medical clinics, while also providing them with other beneficial training," he explained.

DRsforALL is a partnership with Health Ministry, with support from the Orang Asli Development Department.

Insaf Malaysia founder and president Ishak Abd Kadir said support

from the private sector was needed by NGOs in their work to help the Orang Asli.

He highlighted the "Tampal Rumah" initiative by the organisation, that built houses for the poor in such communities.

"Since the launch of this programme in 2012, we have built over 350 homes for Orang Asli nationwide.

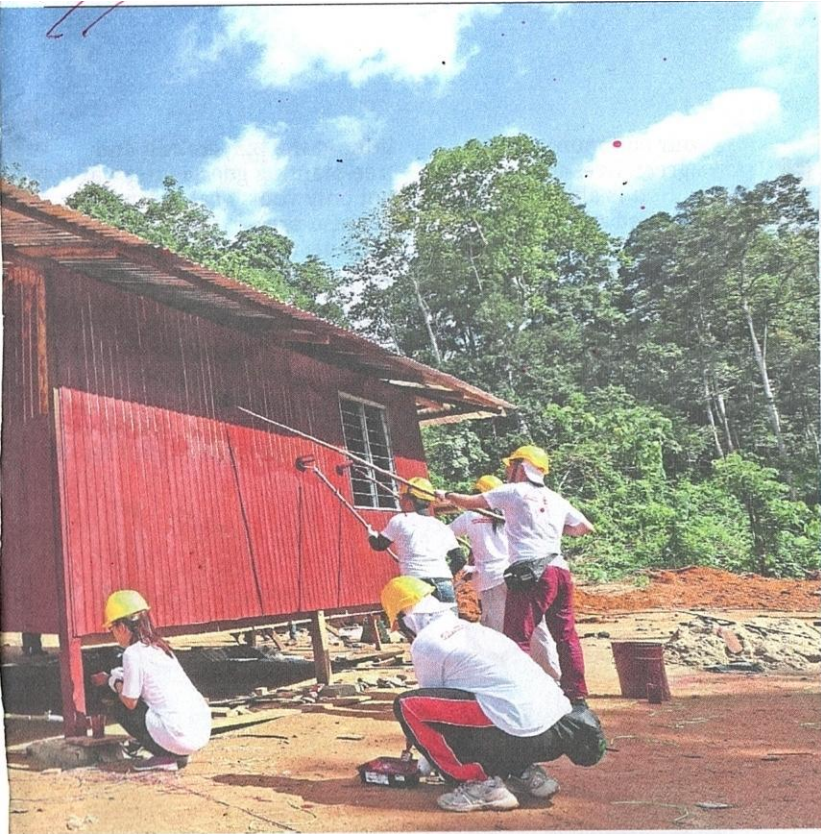
"We identify the suitable recipients while the private companies supply funds and manpower in the form of volunteers," he said.

Star Foundation was among the organisations that had worked with Insaf Malaysia on this programme in the past.

The foundation is the charitable arm of Star Media Group, which aims to support impactful initiatives to help a diverse group of beneficiaries.

Improve infrastructure

Hanim also wanted a speedy upgrade of network infrastructure



Corporate volunteers painting a new house built under Insaf Malaysia to help the Orang Asli in Negri Sembilan own homes.





Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Buloh received treated water supply in 2020.

Trained paramedics attending to Orang Asli patients at a medical outpost in Ulu Jelai, Pahang.

in Orang Asli settlements to ensure they could keep up in the digital age.

She said their children struggled to follow the classes after schools moved learning sessions online due to former movement restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19.

She pointed to her 17-year-old daughter, who had to go outside their home to get better Internet connection to access her lessons.

"This is despite our village being relatively in a more developed area. Imagine how difficult it is for those in more remote locations?"

"Had the school closure prolonged, more Orang Asli children would have been left behind in education due to poor Internet connectivity," she said.

Dr Chow said the condition of the road to Kampung Dayok had worsened in recent months and needed repairs.

"The roads are only traversable by four-wheel drives. The situation is even worse during a downpour," he said.

This prompted the DRsforALL initiative to build outposts in the area to house paramedics to improve access to healthcare for locals nearby.

Dr Chow recalled the case of a villager, suffering from severe asthma, who received treatment at one of these outposts.

"It was 9pm and he had run out of medicines after two months of

the movement restrictions.

"The nearest healthcare facility was in Kuala Lipis, which was about two hours away and he was running out of time.

"Luckily, our paramedics were able to administer the appropriate treatment and save his life," he said.

Ishak, meanwhile, saw a lack of home ownership as a key issue among the Orang Asli that had forced many families to live in the same house for generations.

He said the government should consider giving special loans to these people to build homes in their respective villages.

"Many commercial banks are reluctant to approve such loan applications due to the applicants' poor financial status," he highlighted.

Ishak also stressed that developments should not encroach into the forests which the Orang Asli depended on.

He cited the opening of new areas in Dengkil, Selangor, which he said adversely impacted many such communities.

"There were many Orang Asli settlements in the area that many people did not know about.

"Back then, a huge swathe of land was acquired for development, which forced many original settlers to relocate.

"The loss of forests meant the Orang Asli could no longer hunt, apart from it disturbing water bod-

ies which affected their fishermen," he said.

In 2019, Insaf Malaysia gave aid to the Orang Asli village in Sungai Buloh, after a pollution incident that disrupted their water supply.

At that time, that community relied solely on nearby streams for water, which were dirtied due to logging activities.

Sarawak-based activist Juvita Tatan Wan said accessibility to services remained a major challenge for Orang Asal communities.

The Tuyang Initiative co-founder said this had an impact on their access to healthcare and education,

a further setback for the communities.

"Many teachers are not keen to relocate to these rural areas for their placement, due to the high cost of transportation.

"For example, it costs between RM150 to RM250 just to travel one-way from Miri to Long Moh in Marudi," she said.

Juvita recalled her late uncle and cousin, who suffered from cancer and heart problems respectively, in Long San, Baram.

"They had to travel to Miri to seek treatment, which was more than four hours away by the log-

ging road from their village."

She said the outcome might have been different if they had better access to get treatment more frequently.

Juvita stressed that the government needed to come up with a comprehensive strategy to uplift the Orang Asal communities.

"It must not take a one-size-fits-all approach as we may have different challenges compared to the Klang Valley folk.

"We must understand that these communities deserve equal attention as those in urban areas," she said.



The DRsforALL initiative is an outreach programme that provides medical and healthcare services to the Orang Asli in Kampung Dayok in Ulu Jelai, Pahang.