The impacts and challenges COVID-19 towards Orang Asli in Malaysia

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United Nations (UN) had emphasised the important of addressing the major disproportionate
impact of COVID-19 on minorities especially the disease is exposing alarming inequalities in
some countries. The disparities similar to those fuelling current protests for greater racial
justice in multiple cities as well as online. UN Human Rights pointed that disproportionate
impact of COVID-19 on minorities needs to be urgently addressed because the fight against
this pandemic cannot be won if governments refuse to acknowledge blatant inequalities.
Indigenous people in any countries have been protected by United Nations Declaration on the
Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which is an international instrument adopted by the
United Nations on September 13, 2007, to enshrine the rights that constitute the minimum
standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world. The
Orang Asli can be considered as an Indigenous minority group in Malaysia. The Orang Asli
population in 2019 was almost 200,000, a mere 0.6 % of Malaysia’s population of 28.3 million.
‘Orang Asli’ is a Malay term meaning “original people” or “first people”. Anthropologists and
administrators applied the terminology to 18 ethnic subgroups under Negrito, Senoi and Proto-
Malay. Therefore, Orang Asli is used to describe the Aboriginal inhabitants of Peninsular
Malaysia who have their own culture, language, faith and lifestyle. Though the appalling
impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous people is much discussed, but what is less clear is how
much is being done to address it. Discourse and bottom-up approach is the only way for a
developed country like Malaysia to understand what kinds of urgent steps been taken for this
Orang Asli community such as prioritizing health monitoring and testing, increasing access to
healthcare, and providing targeted information. Multiple factors are at the heart of these
disparities. This paper aims to identify the impacts COVID-19 Orang Asli community in
Malaysia. Also, the focus is on the particular challenges among the Orang Asli during the
pandemic. The remoteness and isolation of these people that should be their salvation may
quickly become their damnation. The health system for this group are grossly under-resourced
and struggled to cope with an outbreak of COVID-19. The effects of a widespread outbreak on
vulnerable minorities such as Orang Asli in the Peninsular Malaysia, especially children, could
be cataclysmic. Orang Asli’ traditional lifestyles are a source of their resiliency, and can also
pose a threat at this time in preventing the spread of the virus. For example, most Orang Asli
communities regularly organize large traditional gatherings to mark special events e.g.
harvests, coming of age ceremonies, etc. Some Orang Asli communities also live in multi-
generational housing, which puts Orang Asli and their families, especially the Elders, at risk.
COVID-19 phenomenon has caused Orang Asli started to fear and moved to jungle as reported
by local media. Information circulation and aid assistances on COVID-19 between the
government/agencies stakeholders and Orang Asli group is still underdeveloped. Using the
Foucault’s framework of power and normalisation, this paper will be addressed how COVID-
19 pandemic exposing inequalities and challenging the UNDRIP on the current impact of these
disparities, but also their root causes. Unequal access to healthcare, overcrowded housing and
pervasive discrimination make our societies less stable, secure and prosperous. Ultimately, efforts to tackle COVID-19 and to begin the recovery process will only be successful if everyone's rights to life and health are protected, without discrimination. Using the qualitative method, textual analysis will be applied to selected media organization news between March to June 2020 according to the Movement Control Order timeline. This study hopes underscored the urgent need for governments to prioritize collecting disaggregated data, and to consult with Orang Asli communities on pandemic response. Hope the findings are essential to identify and address inequalities and structural discrimination that contributes to poor health outcomes, including for COVID-19. The disease will not be defeated if governments refuse to acknowledge what UNDRIP described as the blatant inequalities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Orang Asli, Indigenous people, normalisation