

Social Mobility of Orang Asli: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Social mobility exists because of the causes and effects of collective or individual movements arising from changes in the social system (Aldridge, 2001). In 2020, the World Economic Forum produced Global Social Mobility Report that placed Malaysia at Number 43 indicating that there are decreased opportunities for people in health care, education, access to technology, working conditions and social protection (The Global Social, Mobility Report, 2020). Furthermore, social mobility does affect the indigenous people in terms of their employment, education and risk of exclusion (United Nations, 2016). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has the potential to be transformative for indigenous people if its implementation respects these principles of equality and participation (United Nations, 2017). To achieve the SDGs in Malaysia, the government is committed to increase the socio-economic well-being of the indigenous people. Moreover, the Malaysian government has planned several development programmes such as the New Economic Policy, Structured Placement Program and a few more, to improve the social mobility of the indigenous people (Wee, Maryati, & Mohd Nur Syufaat, 2013). As a result, the focus of this conceptual paper will be on a discussion of the lack of literature related to the social mobility of Orang Asli in Malaysia, factors influencing social mobility, and possible future studies in social mobility concerning indigenous people in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Indigenous people; Orang Asli; Social mobility; Socio-economy*

INTRODUCTION

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Indigenous peoples of Malaysia are among the people who make up the country's population. They are a minority, with a population estimated to be between 140,000 and 180,000 individuals. The Orang Asli is classified into three groups: ethnolinguistic, Senoi, the Proto-Malay or Malay First, and the Negrit (Masron, Masami and Ismail (2013). Indigenous peoples make up a small minority in Malaysia, accounting for less than 1% of the overall population (Department of Orang Asli Development, 2018).

The Orang Asli people were the first to settle in the area. It is a population that was among the first to settle in a particular location and has cultivated various crops to

supplement their income. As a result, the Orang Asli sources of livelihood, culture, spirituality, customs, and laws diverge from those of the dominant community. The Orang Asli people still have a strong bond with the land, woods, rivers, and other natural resources in their ancestral homelands. They have lived in the inherited area for generations because they relied on natural resources.

The Malaysian government has taken various steps to enhance the Orang Asli's living conditions. JAKOA, for example, has launched several social development programs for the Orang Asli community to promote their well-being. JAKOA has carried out physical aid projects such as dwelling renovations, public facility construction, and infrastructures such as halls, surau, and water tanks (Manaf, Omar, Razali, Abdullah & Saputra, 2021). As a result, we can see Orang Asli's success in sports, education, entrepreneurship, leadership, and other areas. Furthermore, JAKOA is committed to enhancing its collaboration with the Ministry of Education to improve the Orang Asli community's access to continuing education throughout the country (Maria, 2019). This is because education is the most crucial subject in which the Orang Asli population, which is still impoverished, can make a difference.

The biggest issue confronting the Orang Asli community today, however, is the high percentage of poverty. The Orang Asli community continues to be excluded from mainstream economic development. Other difficulties affecting Orang Asli include losing and maintaining their culture and language, land ownership, ownership and exploitation of natural resources, political and autonomy issues, pollution, health, and discrimination (Syed Hussain, Krishnasamy, & Golam Hassan, 2017). As a result, research on social mobility is required to address this issue.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to the Global Social Mobility Report, countries that fail to invest in the key pillars of social mobility could experience damaging consequences for the governments and citizens. The negative consequences are weakening social fabric, perceived loss of identity and dignity, the unpredictability of living without secure and well-paid employment, eroding trust in institutions and disenchantment with political processes (The Global Social, Mobility Report, 2020). In addition, high social mobility

among deprived groups can generate feelings of exclusion. This promotes clear identities of groups and a divide towards those who are better off (OECD, 2018).

Generally, the Orang Asli populations in Malaysia are very poor compared to the mainstream Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. Based on the 2010 Malaysian Census, 31.16 percent or 11,423 Heads of Households are the percentage of households below the poverty line income in the Orang Asli settlement area (Abdullah, Azmah, Juli and Rohana, 2019). Therefore, the Malaysian government has designed and implemented many development policies and programmes through the Department of Orang Asli Development (Department of Orang Asli Development, 2018), such as New Economic Policy, National Vision Policy, Structured Placement Program, Housing Program, Economic Development Program, Community Development Project, Indigenous Entrepreneurship Development Program, Infrastructure Development Program and a few more, to improve the social mobility of indigenous people (Wee, Maryati, & Mohd Nur Syufaat, 2013).

The findings of the study by Kari, Masud and Yahya (2016) indicate that the indigenous people is likely to be poor if they live in environmentally sensitive and unprotected areas as compared to families under the new resettlement scheme. Inadequate access to basic education and employment contributed significantly to their poor economic status. The findings further reveal that the indigenous community is facing difficulties in receiving access and support in terms of basic needs such as housing, education, economic livelihood, and other social infrastructure. Moreover, the regulatory structure for the management of watershed areas as well as the emphasis for commodity crops such as palm oil and natural rubber have indirectly contributed toward the poverty level of the indigenous people. Henceforward, the Malaysian government needs to ensure that its country's level of social mobility is low in order to ensure that it is able to provide people with quality education, employment opportunities and quality social security.

In addition, there are minimal studies that look into the impacts of socio-economic programmes on the social mobility of the indigenous people in Malaysia (Saifullah, Kari, and Othman, 2018). In the past years, few studies have been done on indigenous people regarding land acquisition compensation (Anuar, Kamaruzzaman, & Daud; 2010), family planning (Rozniza Aznie, Lyndon, Sharifah Mastura, Selvadurai, Mimi Hanida, Syahiran, & Mazrin Rohizaq, 2018), poverty (Kari, Masud, & Yahya,

2016), education (Kamaruddin, 2006; Norwaliza, Ramlee, & Jasmi (2016); Rosniza Aznie, Lyndon, Vivien, Siti Norsakira, Syahiran, & Jali, 2018).

However, in 2017, Nor Hayati, Ibrahim and Wan Mohd Zaifurin did a study on socio-cultural change and the social mobility of the estuarial communities in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Nevertheless, their study only focuses on the aspect of employment, education and cultural changes of the estuarial communities. Therefore, future studies need to be done in order to fill in the lack of literature related to social mobility of indigenous people and it can be referred by other scholars at present and for future academic works. Furthermore, future study may explore the factors that affects social mobility of indigenous people that past studies have not.

According to Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe and Kelsey (2007), social mobility appears to be remarkably resistant to policy initiatives designed to affect it. Therefore they suggest 'joined-up' approach across Government departments, agencies, regional and local government and non-Government organisations is required in order to tackle this issue. Thus, the implementers of the government's indigenous socio-economic policy and Indigenous Leaders and their community can be the target group as to understand the complexity of social mobility.

Furthermore, social mobility study is focussed on issues of equality, opportunity and the creation of a fair society (Li, Zhang, & Kong, 2015). Hence, social mobility study is able to depict the patterns and trends in mobility outcomes between indigenous people and aim to uncover the underlying mechanisms of social inequality. Hence, future study can contribute in understanding the challenges in implementing socio-economic development policy for uplifting the indigenous people's social mobility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Indigenous Peoples

The phrase Orang Asli relates to 'People' with the connotation of 'People,' while 'Asli' is derived from the Arabic 'Asali,' which means 'original,' 'wellborn,' or 'aristocratic,' according to Iskandar Carey (1976). The term 'aborigines' was used before the term Orang Asli was coined. The Malaysian government believes that the term

Orang Asli should be used to replace the term "aborigines," which signifies "backwardness," "underdevelopment," and "primitiveness" (primitive). The term "Orang Asli" does not have connotations of "backward," "underdeveloped," or "primitive."

According to Carey (1976), Aboriginal people are grouped into three types or primary groups: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay. The Negrito ethnic group is represented by the Kensiu, Kintak, Jahai, Lanoh, Mendrik, and Batek sub-groups, whereas the Senoi ethnic group is represented by the Semai, Temiar, Jahet, and Che 'Wong sub-groups. Ma' Betis (Mah Meri) and Memoq Give are sub-groups of Proto-Malays, whereas Temuan, Semelai, Jakun, Orang Kanak, Orang Kuala, and Orang Seletar are sub-groups of Ma' Betis (Mah Meri) (Department of Orang Asli Development, 2018). According to the author's experience with the Indigenous population, each group did not understand the other ethnic languages or sub-groups. As a result, Malay has become their principal language.

Hunting and gathering agricultural goods have been typical Orang Asli activities. Their way of life, on the other hand, has changed dramatically. The changes in the forest environment are caused by development, and government policies encourage agriculture and resettlement, with related changes in the local economy. Indigenous people are also involved in agricultural activities in rubber, tea, oil palm plantations, factories, etc. (Nobuta, 2008).

Economic, physical, and capital development, among other social transformations, have had numerous positive consequences on the lives of indigenous people. These minorities' economics, religion, education, communication, and health have all improved due to the policies implemented by the government (Masron, Masami, and Ismail, 2013).

Definition of Social Mobility

According to Korea Development Institute (2014), social mobility can be described as a multifaceted term that refers to a person's status within a society changing. It is affected not only by one's financial status but also by social reputation and power. It is intertwined with the concept of economic mobility, which is determined by wages, profits, and wealth (Korea Development Institute, 2014).

Social mobility can also explain a situation in which an agent's relative economic status is not determined by initial circumstances such as parental income or family history. Hence, we are not only examining the determinants of mobility of an offspring's income linked to that of its parents, but also schooling, formal laws, abilities, opportunities, and work ethic, to name a few (Galiani, 2010).

In a study done by Poonwassie (1992), aboriginal peoples prioritise and promote education to achieve upward social mobility and live a better life. Hence elementary schools require highly skilled professionals from inside the culture and community to provide a solid educational foundation. Furthermore according to Cunningham (2017), continued funding for successful enabling, outreach, and scholarship programs is critical to ensuring that the full diversity of Australia's population, especially the aborigines, is represented in higher education and that opportunities for social mobility are available all.

There is also a study that links income with one health. Upward income mobility was helpful to men's self-rated health, while downward educational mobility was harmful to women's self-rated health, and downward income mobility was detrimental to both women's and men's self-rated health, especially individuals living on reserves and other Aboriginal settlements (Veenstra & Vanzella-Yang, 2021). According to study done by Wettasinghe et al. (2020), older Aboriginal Australians are concerned about chronic health concerns, social and emotional well-being, and access to health services. Thus, the technology could potentially be a valuable option for delivering programs.

In Australia, the indigenous population in cities has been concentrated in low socioeconomic urban areas for over 20 years. Furthermore, Indigenous Australians are segregated from the rest of the population in major Australian cities. The poor job results of the urban Indigenous community are exacerbated by the generally low level of employment demand in locationally disadvantaged low socioeconomic status regions and insufficient access to public transportation (Boyd, 1996). Hence, this paper concludes that to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians living in low socioeconomic areas, the right mix of policies should address area-specific issues common in such areas while also attempting to improve the Australian economy's overall macroeconomic employment performance.

Therefore, the study about how social mobility affects Orang Asli can help design specific policies or programs by the Malaysian Government or NGOs.

Factors Influencing Social Mobility

Social mobility is a complicated and multi-faceted phenomenon. Social mobility work in a variety of ways for different people and different situations. Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe, and Kelsey (2007) had elaborated SEVEN (7) factors influencing social mobility as refer in Table 1, which are:

Table 1: *Factors Influencing Social Mobility*

Factors Influencing Social Mobility	
Social capital	Social mobility can be hampered by a lack of positive role models, peer pressure, a lack of motivation, risk aversion, worklessness societies, anti-social behavior, and substance abuse. On the other hand, middle-class households have access to a broader variety of social networks, which are more beneficial for upward mobility and preventing downward mobility.
Cultural capital	It depends on a particular level or class of a family. For example, middle-class families confer social advantages on their children, raising their chances of moving up the social ladder and preventing them from falling behind.
Early childhood influences	Early childhood influences are crucial in influencing subsequent life outcomes. Early experiences such as the nature of the home atmosphere, family structure, pre-school care, and relationships with caring adults create a pattern of growth in later life that is difficult to change, except through education, according to compelling evidence.
Education	One of the most critical factors of social mobility is education. Middle-class families, for example, want to take advantage of educational opportunities.
Jobs and labor market experiences	Significant levels of unemployment and long-term economic inactivity can effect social mobility.
Health and well-being	Illness can be linked to social and environmental factors associated with lower socioeconomic status, resulting in its decline.
Area-based influences	Inequalities in access to private transportation, such as the lower quality provision of certain essential public services in disadvantaged areas, can leave lower socioeconomic groups unable to make effective choices about access to these services.

The Global Social Mobility Index

The Global Social Mobility Index (see Table 2) focuses on the policies, activities, and structures that collectively define the degree to which everyone in society has a reasonable opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their

socioeconomic status, parent's origins, or birthplace. Moreover, the Global Social Mobility Index provides policymakers with a framework for identifying places where social mobility can be improved and fairly shared opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their stage of development. Thus, the Global Social Mobility Index is relevant and can be used to identify the area of social mobility that is lacking.

Table 2: *The Global Social Mobility Index*

The Global Social Mobility Index		
1st pillar	Health	The Health pillar assesses a country's capacity to provide high-quality healthcare to its citizens. Access to high-quality healthcare is a critical factor that affects one's ability to move up the social ladder for the rest of one's life. The provision of health care within a country can vary greatly, and health inequality can directly affect one's ability to find work.
2nd-4th Pillars	Education <i>(Lifelong Learning, Access, Quality, and Equity)</i>	These three pillars, Education Access, Education Quality & Equity, and Lifelong Learning, measure a country's ability to access education and ensure that high-quality education is available to all citizens across their lives, regardless of socioeconomic status. The governments should engage in human capital development policies to address the myriad systemic issues that hinder children from deprived backgrounds from meeting their educational potential (e.g., insufficient school funding in rural communities, low-quality teaching, high student-to-teacher ratios, etc.).
5th Pillar	Technology Access	The Technology Access pillar measures the population's level of technology access and acceptance. However, technology access to those resources is often unequal, perpetuating historical disparities. Access to technology can further level the playing field by delivering information to all, regardless of socioeconomic status. Furthermore, technology can blur these lines and provide unlimited access to information. The introduction of online learning has reduced the barriers to accessing educational opportunities. Online learning, in addition to traditional education systems, is critical in providing access to lifelong learning.
6th-8th Pillars	Fair Work Opportunities <i>(Work Opportunities, Equal Salaries, and Working Standards)</i>	These three pillars, Work Opportunities, Equal Salaries, and Working Standards, can measure an economy's ability to provide people with access to jobs, decent working conditions, and fair wages, regardless of their educational or socioeconomic status. Technology, globalization, and the global economy's evolving green transition are causing shifts in occupational structures, ability, and competency requirements. Emerging technology through different industries would inevitably result in a widespread transformation of

almost all currently existing job roles.

In many developed economies, the inability to turn education into a job opportunity has resulted in slower growth rates and a severe issue of long-term unemployment and inactivity.

9th-10th Pillars	Social Security & Inclusive Institutions	<p>The capacity of economies to provide social security, inclusive institutions, and effective public services to their populations is measured by these two pillars: Social Protection and Inclusive Institutions. Evidence indicates that work instability is set to rise as skill requirements shift, potentially increasing the frequency of job changes during one's career.</p> <p>Social safety nets help reduce inequalities in living conditions between regions or classes and provide assistance with work transitions so that people's long-term prospects are not harmed. For a community to be inclusive, it must have fair and equal access to the justice system and institutions and protections against the oppression of traditionally marginalized groups. Corruption has a high social cost because it allows for more significant hoarding, both in higher education and job prospects.</p>
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Sources: World Economic Forum, 2020

CONCLUSION

A new study is needed to fill in the gaps in the literature on indigenous people's social mobility so that it can be referred to by other researchers now and in the future. Furthermore, future research may look at elements that affect indigenous people's social mobility that has been overlooked in previous studies. Thus, factors influencing social mobility by Nunn, Johnson, Monroe, Bickerstaffe, and Kelsey (2007) and The Global Social Mobility Index by World Economic Forum, 2020 can guide developing questionnaire and interview questions for future studies. In addition, a study involving governments and non-governmental organizations can be executed to understand the complexity of implementing policies for indigenous people from their point of view. Furthermore, more social mobility studies that focuses on themes of equality, opportunity, and the construction of a just society. As a result, social mobility research can show patterns and trends in mobility outcomes among indigenous peoples to uncover the underlying causes of social inequality. As a result, future study could help to understand better the challenges of implementing socioeconomic development policies to improve indigenous people's social mobility.

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