

Executive Summary

Voices from the Ground: Towards Strength-Based and Culturally Responsive Education for Orang Asli Children

Voices from the Ground is a participatory research initiative led by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), aimed at addressing the educational challenges faced by the Orang Asli, the Indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia. Historically, the Orang Asli have been excluded from decision-making processes affecting their education, leading to policies and programs that often fail to meet their needs. This project seeks to amplify the voices of Orang Asli communities, teachers, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to inform more inclusive and effective educational policies and practices.

The project focuses on three key agendas. First, it emphasizes building trust by strengthening partnerships between Orang Asli communities, schools, and government agencies such as Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development [JAKOA]). Second, it aims to foster strength-based discourse, shifting from a deficit-based narrative to one that celebrates Orang Asli strengths and cultural heritage. Lastly, it focuses on addressing underlying challenges such as poverty, cultural misunderstandings, and lack of access to resources that hinder educational success.

The research employed Indigenous methodologies, including photovoice and sharing circles, to ensure the active participation of Orang Asli communities. These methods allowed students, parents, and teachers to share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations in culturally resonant ways. The project focused on three schools in Kelantan, a state with high dropout rates among Orang Asli students, and engaged stakeholders through consultations, workshops, and collaborative activities.

Key findings from the project highlight the importance of building trust between Orang Asli parents, schools, and JAKOA. Parents expressed a desire for deeper engagement with teachers, while teachers highlighted the challenges of communicating with parents due to geographical and cultural barriers. Both groups emphasized the importance of JAKOA playing a more active role in bridging these gaps. The research also emphasized the value of celebrating strengths, showcasing the talents and aspirations of Orang Asli students, particularly in areas like carpentry, agriculture, and the arts. Teachers and parents advocated for a more skill-based, experiential learning approach that integrates Orang Asli culture and knowledge into the curriculum. Additionally, the study explored underlying challenges such as poverty, lack of access to clean water, and social exclusion, which significantly impact Orang Asli students' educational outcomes. Teachers noted the need for greater cultural understanding and sensitivity, while parents highlighted the economic pressures that force children to leave school early.

Based on these findings, several recommendations were made. Educational programs should incorporate Indigenous pedagogies, moving beyond traditional academic metrics to embrace culturally responsive, experiential learning that celebrates Orang Asli strengths and talents. It is also essential to strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships, promoting collaboration between schools, JAKOA, and Orang Asli communities to create sustainable and effective educational interventions. Building trust through engagement is crucial, with schools and teachers encouraged to engage more deeply with Orang Asli communities through home visits, cultural exchanges, and accessible communication tools like WhatsApp. Lastly, policymakers and program implementers must address systemic challenges, tackling the root causes of educational disparities such as poverty and infrastructure gaps, while ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and community-driven.

Voices from the Ground accentuates the importance of centering Orang Asli voices in the design and implementation of educational policies and programs. By cultivating trust, celebrating strengths, and addressing systemic challenges, this project aims to create a more inclusive and equitable education system for Orang Asli students. The findings and recommendations provide a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to work in unison towards empowering Orang Asli communities and ensuring their children's educational success.