

FLEXIBLE LEARNING FOR THE INDIGENOUS ORANG ASLI COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA: NON-FORMAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Anne A. Christopher, Universiti Utara Malaysia
althea@uum.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation with a population of 28.5 million which constitutes three main ethnic groups, the Malay and indigenous people, the Chinese, and the Indians. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has seen a transformation from a poor, developing country into a middle-income nation. Despite facing external challenges, the Malaysian economy has seen a measured growth (Hatta & Ali, 2013). No matter how developed a country can be, the indigenous people are always found to be left behind from the mainstream of development facing educational and economic issues. The Department of Orang Asli Development (2012) in Malaysia is on hand to address these issues. The department outlines 6 thrusts with the aim of raising the standard of living of the indigenous people in the country. The 6 thrusts are:

- Developing Human Capital
- Generating Economic Activities and Integrating Viable, Competitive and Resilient Industries
- Expanding Access to Infrastructure
- Improving the Quality of Life of the Orang Asli
- Researching, Gathering, Conserving and Highlighting the Traditional Knowledge and Heritage of the Orang Asli
- Strengthening the Service Delivery and Governance Systems

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the government has introduced various programmes to improve the quality of life, particularly in education, of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (Mohd Noor, 2012). In Lubuk Legong, Baling, a rural town on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, there resides the only surviving Semang Negrito tribe in the world, the Kensiu community. They reside at an Orang Asli settlement area, a village which consists of Malay-style wooden houses with thatched roofs, built for them by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, a school and a community hall.

“They belong to the Negrito sub-group of Orang Asli (also known as the Semang) which comprises of over three (i.e. 3.2) per cent of the total Orang Asli population. The Negritos are the smallest sub-group of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. They are the oldest to have been in the Peninsular Malaysia” (Abdul Ghani, Che Lah & Zulkifli, 2011, p. 59).

Among their activities are extracting forest products such as fruits, rattan and wood to be sold to the nearby villages. Among the Orang Asli subgroups, they are often considered economically backward (Abdul Ghani et. al., 2011). Statistics from the Department of Orang Asli Development (2012) show that 80% of this endangered Kensiu community consisting of about 225 people have an income of less than 450 Malaysian Ringgit per month. This figure is below the poverty line figure for Peninsular Malaysia, which is 760 Malaysian Ringgit.

Enactus (Entrepreneurs in Action) have carried out thousands of voluntary projects worldwide. Known for its successful programs, Enactus, a non-profit global organization mobilizes university students to create community empowerment projects. Enactus Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) have also carried out many projects and one of these is HOME, which stands for Hope, Opportunity, Motivation and Entrepreneurship. The agricultural project carried out by the university undergraduates, essentially aims to improve the standard of living of disadvantaged communities in Malaysia.

This indigenous Orang Asli community in the rural villages of Lubuk Legong in Baling were targeted for the project as they faced a lot of problems and challenges ranging from economic problems, hygiene problems and social problems to lack of knowledge. The project was carried out to help develop the lower level skills of this indigenous community with a focus on educating them on how to carry out their own business.

VISION AND GOALS

It is important to note that the Enactus projects are in line with the university's Enactus philosophy that emphasizes sustainability aspects with regard to agricultural produce and practices. The vision of this project is to educate the Kensiu community in the field of competitive and successful entrepreneurship in their social and economic lives. The project has several goals:

- to reduce poverty of the Kensiu community
- to reduce the dependency on government assistance
- to improve the lives of the Kensiu women in Ulu Legong
- to help the Kensiu women to learn about household management
- to introduce the Kensiu community to the activities of entrepreneurship
- to provide knowledge about entrepreneurship to the Kensiu people

DEFINITIONS

"Flexible Learning is a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalisation to suit the learner. In particular, flexible learning provides learners with choices about where, when, and how learning occurs. Sometimes also referred to as personalized learning. Flexible learning is a term often used in New Zealand and Australia" (Shurville, O'Grady & Mayall, 2008).

"Non-formal learning refers to learning in structured programs for developing skills and knowledge required by workplaces, communities and individuals. These do not lead to nationally or internationally accredited formal qualifications" (Misko, 2008, p.10). Non-formal education "consists of a wide variety of activities and programmes which include development initiatives to address the plight of poor communities. It is directly linked to the development process which is regarded as an educational process Kotze (2012, p.4). Non-formal education is also associated with "relevance to the needs of disadvantaged groups, concern with specific categories of persons, and flexibility in organization and methods" (Smith, 2009, p.1).

IMPLEMENTATION

This long-term project has been carried out in 4 different phases. The Hope, Opportunity, Motivation and Entrepreneurship (HOME) project began with Phase I and subsequently moved on to Phase II, Phase III and the recently completed Phase IV which aimed at increasing the number of individuals or families who were involved in the project. In the course of helping this community, the participants of the project, who are also undergraduates of the university, at the same time, also conducted research about the problems and lifestyles of this indigenous community.

Phase I was conducted in 2009 which was aimed at helping the Kensiu community in terms of providing information, guidance and skills in entrepreneurship. In this phase, the objective was to get as much information as possible about this indigenous community. The project proceeded with Phase II in 2010. This phase was divided into 2 sub-projects, namely the Inducement Educational Module (IEM) and the Youth Empowerment Entrepreneur Module (YEM).

Phase III of the project was aimed at giving hope, creating opportunities and motivating the Kensiu community through entrepreneurship. The project emphasized all aspects of the community's economic

and social life. Two sub-projects for this phase were introduced, namely, the Women Empowerment Module (WEM) and the Research Team. Through these 2 sub-projects, the development of the Kensiu women was focused on. The Women Empowerment Module (WEM) aimed to help the women equip themselves with domestic skills such as sewing, household management and family health. The Research Team, on the other hand, aimed to conduct research in more detail about the problems faced by this community.

Phase IV was aimed at giving maximum effect to the Kensiu community on several aspects such as economic, social, sustainability and entrepreneurship. Hence, a sub-project called the Business Operation Team (BOT) was introduced. This team aimed to deliver knowledge of entrepreneurship and also to act as an advisor to Kensiu's entrepreneurs. It also carries out short-term businesses at the university aimed at generating additional income for the project.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Youth Empowerment Entrepreneur Module (YEM) has produced entrepreneurs from among this indigenous community. One of the entrepreneurial activities they have been involved in is the chicken rearing business. Training in chicken rearing was given to them. As a result, the business generated profits and family income increased. They are now able to place orders for the supplies themselves independently.

A more successful business venture the community have got involved in is the 'kabu-kabu' pillow business or cotton pillow business where the women make cotton pillows from raw materials supplied to them and sell them to interested parties. The university's Enactus committee assisted them not only with the sales of the pillows but also 3 more essential elements, namely, supply, demand and business management skills. In securing the supply, the Enactus committee linked the Kensiu people with a cotton supplier for the raw material needed for the stuffing. The committee also helped them with the paperwork in applying for 2 sewing machines from the Department of Orang Asli Development. With these sewing machines, they are able to increase the production rate up to 150%, which is from 4 units to 10 units of pillows per day.

The Kensiu people were also guided in creating market demand for their product. The basic principles of marketing – the 4Ps, Price, Product, Promotion, and Placement were adopted into the cotton pillow business. For pricing, they were advised to use the penetration pricing strategy to enter the market. This strategy helps to establish demand for the pillows in a short period of time. For product, the Kensiu women were encouraged to expand the product design to create market attention. For promotion, the committee suggested a product brochure to better introduce their products to the retailers. For place, the committee utilized the geographical advantage of the Baling Hot Springs by converting an available vacant lot in the village into a shop lot. This shop is used as a platform for the sale of cotton. The Kensiu women themselves man the shop, supervised by the village leader. This gives the assurance of sustainability which is in line with the philosophy of Enactus Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Instilling business management skills in the Kensiu community was also one of the efforts of the Enactus committee. To ensure the survival of the business, the committee helped them develop an organizational chart which identified their role in the business. They were also equipped with simple book keeping skills to record their transactions. The business cycle is complete when the supply and demand are satisfied and appropriate business management skills are applied. "Training in specific skills is more effective when trainees have strong literacy, numeracy..." (King & Palmer, 2007, p. 28). The project is an initial step towards empowering them with non-formal literacy and numeracy skills particularly those who were not attending school.

The Women Empowerment Module (WEM) have helped develop the lives of the Kensiu women by helping them to equip themselves with the non-formal skills that have helped them become independent and to manage their household financially. The Inducement Educational Module (IEM) consisted of small flexible projects such as Eco-Me and Handicraft programs that have helped preserve the environment.

The handicraft programs used waste materials for reuse and added the value of reused items for daily use.

Absenteeism at school has been a common occurrence among the children. Through the Inducement Education Module (IEM), the Hope, Opportunity, Motivation and Entrepreneurship (HOME) project has managed to increase the attendance of the Kensiu children in kindergarten and elementary school. The project has also increased the level of interest of the Kensiu children towards learning. The children have also become more motivated and more aware of hygiene after going through a few segments of the project such as School is Fun and Be Clean.

Similarly, during the course of the project, the Enactus committee ensured that flexible learning was of utmost importance in order to enable this indigenous community to adjust to new methods and realities. Initially, very few of them were willing to participate in something that was new to them. They were hesitant and skeptical that participation in the project would be a waste of their time and energy even though they did not have to go out of their comfort zone. However, as time went by, more of them decided to join in after seeing the tangible output of their fellow villagers and after being coaxed by them. They also realized that the project was flexible enough for them to be able to partake of the activities at their own pace as they too had family commitments, especially the women. The acquisition and development of these skills is also dependent on, among others, the presence of a supportive environment without which poverty reduction cannot be achieved (King & Palmer, 2007). It is vital to maintain the level of commitment, not only of the indigenous community but also the committee in ensuring the progress of the skills development and education of the Kensiu people. "Rural people 'vote with their feet' and may simply decide not to participate in follow-up education and training sessions if the perceived quality and relevance of the service delivered are low" (Acker & Gasperini, 2009, p. 31).

A total of 32 students participated in the Hope, Opportunity, Motivation and Entrepreneurship (HOME) project. Both the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supported the project by means of funding and supplying raw materials respectively. Such collaboration is significant and needs to be strengthened in order to achieve the long-term goals of any project, particularly poverty reduction. It is pertinent that the partnerships are based on shared visions (Sena, 2013).

Enactus Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) has maintained its available projects as it is concerned about the sustainability aspects. For instance, the chicken breeding business is a continuous program which has expanded to involve more families. Each project has many programs that have been carried out with the hope that the programs will continue and grow. This is to ensure the project gives a positive impact to the target audience. The project also targets to increase the number of people who benefit from it.

In other words, through flexible learning, the Enactus committee has created job opportunities through entrepreneurship. It has developed entrepreneurs as role models for the whole community. It has managed to transfer entrepreneurial and business management skills to the women. It has also increased their self-esteem by helping them become income providers to their families and finally, it has increased the communities' group earnings up from 67% from RM 1,800 to RM 3000 per month. Therefore the project has empowered this indigenous community to be self-reliant and has improved their living standards by enabling them to acquire practical and relevant skills by way of flexible learning and non-formal skills development.

On the other hand, the Enactus committee comprising of undergraduates admit they have gained from the project which has developed their soft skills such as leadership, teamwork and organization which would be of great benefit to them in the future. They have also become more confident and their communicative skills have also improved.

"In pursuit of effective and relevant community development, educators, students and practitioners in the development field must be continuously engaged in a process where both the teaching process and learning experience address the realities and challenges of poor communities to make community-based development a reality through a process of participation and empowerment. It is within this context that non-formal education plays an important role in addition to formal education to enhance the skills and

knowledge of community development workers to equip them to lead poor communities to empowerment and decision makers of their own destiny” (Kotze, 2012, p. 3)

CONCLUSION

The Hope, Opportunity, Motivation and Entrepreneurship (HOME) project committee has been united in tackling the problems of this indigenous Orang Asli community who have faced social discrimination, poverty and infertile land. It is hoped that when the Kensiu community become successful entrepreneurs, a chain reaction of positive changes will take place. As the acronym HOME stands for, Enactus Universiti Utara Malaysia reinstate hope, create opportunities, motivate towards success and empower the indigenous people with entrepreneurship. In other words, they have disseminated the seed of empowerment, by way of non-formal skills development, towards a better life.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Ghani, A., Che Lah, S. & Zulkifli, F. A. (2011). Kensiu's native lexical items- natural and language heritage under threat? *Malaysian Journal of Environmental Management*, 12(1), 59-71.
- Acker, D. & Gasperini, L. (2009). *Education for rural people: the role of education, training and capacity development in poverty reduction and food security*. Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO).
- Hatta, Z.A. & Ali, I. (2013). Poverty reduction policies in Malaysia: Trends, strategies and challenges. *Asian Culture and History*, 5(2), 48-56.
- King, K. & Palmer, R. (2007). *Skills development and poverty reduction: a state of the art review*. European Training Foundation (ETF).
- Kotze, D. A. (2012). The impact of non-formal education on skills and knowledge of community development workers: A case study. *Africa Development*, 37(2), 1-14.
- Misko, J. (2008). *Combining formal, non-formal and informal learning for workforce skill development*. Australian Industry Group.
- Mohd Noor, M.A. (2012). Advancing the Orang Asli through Malaysia's clusters of excellence policy. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 1(2), 90-103.
- Official Portal of JAKOA. (2012) Department of Orang Asli Development. Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. *Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.jakoa.gov.my/web/quest/home>
- Official Portal of JAKOA. (2012) Department of Orang Asli Development. Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. *Home*. Retrieved from <http://www.jakoa.gov.my/web/quest/statistik>
- Sena, K. (2013). *Empowering indigenous peoples*. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).
- Shurville, S., O'Grady, T. & Mayall, P. (2008) Educational and institutional flexibility of Australian educational software. *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, 25(2), 74-84.
- Smith, M. K. (2009). Non-formal education. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/biblio/bnonfor.ht>. 2009.04.028.

