Orang Asli Leaders in Nature . Economics Initiative By Kon Onn Sein

YKPM strong at Gambia

1. Background and Context

The initiative addresses the interconnected challenges of poverty, environmental degradation and the loss of ancestral lands among Orang Asli (OA) communities in Malaysia. Many Indigenous households survive on monthly incomes of RM500–RM1,200, with a significant proportion living in extreme poverty. Deforestation driven by logging, mining and commercial plantations threatens their livelihoods, access to clean water, cultural identity and environmental security.

Presented as a case study of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), the initiative demonstrates how Indigenous communities can combine environmental conservation, climate action, food security and sustainable livelihoods through community-led development.

2. Objectives

The initiative aims to empower Orang Asli communities to become active leaders in protecting their ancestral forests while improving their economic well-being.

Its key objectives are to:

- Strengthen Indigenous land stewardship through forest mapping, monitoring and documentation.
- Develop decent and sustainable incomes through regenerative agriculture and community enterprises.
- Improve food security through local food production and sustainable farming.
- Strengthen community leadership, participation and collective decision-making.
- Build technical capacity in land rights, environmental protection, GPS mapping and. climate action.
- Promote an Indigenous led green economy linking conservation with sustainable economic opportunities.

3. Key Activities and Achievements

The presentation highlighted three interconnected areas of intervention:

A. Sustainable Livelihoods through OAOrganik

YKPM presented OAOrganik as a community-
based farming and social enterprise model that connects isolated Orang Asli farmers to . mainstream markets while ensuring fairer returns.

The model addresses barriers relating to financing, agricultural technology, transportation and market access.

Reported achievements include:

- 70 farmers from 40 households supported.
- Approximately RM1,300,000/USD325,000 in income generated for farmers.
- Approximately RM2.8 M/USD700,000 in total sales revenue.
- Household income increases of 20–100%.
- Monthly production of approximately 2,000 kg of organic vegetables.

B. Ancestral Forest Protection and Climate Action

The initiative supports Orang Asli communities in mapping, monitoring and documenting their ancestral forests. Approximately 5,000 acres have been mapped and documented, with a longer-term ambition to work towards 10,000 acres of conservation.

Community members are trained to use GPS, document evidence and monitor biodiversity, strengthening their role as guardians of forests and wildlife.

C. Community Leadership and Capacity Building

Community dialogue platforms strengthen unity, leadership and collective decision-making, with participation from elders, women, youth and community leaders.

More than 80 Orang Asli community members have received training in Indigenous rights, environmental laws, forest ecology, climate action, GPS mapping, community planning and evidence documentation.

4. Methodologies

The initiative adopts six complementary approaches:

1. Bottom-up development: Communities identify their own priorities and solutions.
2. Participatory forest monitoring: Traditional knowledge is combined with GPS mapping a nd documentation.
3. Regenerative agriculture: Sustainable farming practices improve soil health and food production.
4. Social and Solidarity Economy: Community enterprises and cooperative supply chains promote fairer income distribution.

5. Participatory leadership: Dialogue and collective planning strengthen community. institutions.
6. Strategic partnerships: YKPM facilitates access to financing, technology, logistics and markets.

5. Key Outcomes and Recommendations

The initiative demonstrates that environmental conservation and economic development can rein force each other.

Key outcomes include improved farmer incomes, stronger food security, increased community capacity for forest protection, and more inclusive community leadership.

The following recommendations were proposed:

- Strengthen legal recognition and gazettement of Orang Asli ancestral lands and reserves.
- Develop transparent carbon-credit and conservation-financing mechanisms that provide fair benefits to Indigenous communities and recognise state interests.
- Expand Indigenous-led regenerative farming and OAOrganik through financing, technology, infrastructure and market access.
- Strengthen community-based forest monitoring towards the longer-term 10,000-acre conservation ambition.
- Invest in community institutions, leadership development and inclusive decision-making.
- Document and replicate the integrated Indigenous green economy model in other Indigenous communities across Malaysia.

6. Challenges and Lessons Learned

The main challenges include unresolved customary land rights, limited access to finance and markets, inadequate compensation for conservation efforts, limited technical capacity and insufficient long-term institutional financing.

The experience demonstrates several important lessons:

- Secure ancestral land rights are fundamental to sustainable development.
- Indigenous communities must be recognised as development partners and environmental guardians, not merely beneficiaries.
- Conservation must generate economic opportunities rather than impose additional . hardship.
- Fair market access and value distribution are essential for decent incomes.
- Community ownership and inclusive leadership build stronger institutions.
- Conservation financing must provide transparent and equitable shared benefits.

7. Conclusion

The OA Leaders in Nature Economics initiative demonstrates a practical pathway towards an. Indigenous-
led green economy, where sustainable livelihoods, cultural identity, climate resilience and biodiversity conservation reinforce one another.

The YKPM and OAOrganik experience shows that with secure land rights, appropriate technology, financing, knowledge and fair market access, Orang Asli communities can become economic partners, environmental guardians and leaders in sustainable development.

The initiative offers a replicable Social and Solidarity Economy model for Indigenous communities in Malaysia and potentially other countries of the Global South.