



EXPLORING THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK FOR ORANG ASLI CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 04.04.2024

Revised date: 23.04.2024

Accepted date: 05.06.2024

Published date: 20.06.2024

To cite this document:

Rahman, N. H. A., & Hassan, M. S. (2024). Exploring The Human Rights Framework For *Orang Asli* Children In The Context Of The Covid-19 Pandemic . *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 9 (36), 61-71.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.936005

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Abstract:

The United Nations' 2030 World Agenda is a comprehensive development plan encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions that has been universally adopted and implemented by 193 nations since 2015. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 epidemic has impeded the realization of this initiative, which aims to protect the rights of Orang Asli (OA) children, who are considered a susceptible demographic. The main objectives of this study are to provide a concise overview of the correlation between OA children and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDG 2030). Subsequently, an examination will be conducted about the challenges faced in safeguarding individuals' rights to life, health, and development within the framework of the preceding COVID-19 pandemic. This study employs a conventional legal research approach to examine the pandemic's impact on OA children's ability to protect their development rights based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) with emphasis on the child's best interest principle. The findings imply that the recent pandemic has posed several challenges that have impeded global advancements in achieving the SDG by 2030. This study posits that strict adherence to the objectives outlined in the SDG 2030 is essential for all governments, particularly post-COVID 19. Hence, it is recommended that ongoing efforts be made to advocate for property rights, implement community development projects, safeguard cultural assets, and enhance the availability of education and healthcare services.

Keywords:

Child Law, COVID-19, Human Rights, Orang Asli, SDG 2030

Introduction

Orang Asli (OA), who reside predominantly in Peninsular Malaysia, are recognized as Malaysia's indigenous population. The term 'Orang Asli' in the Malay language may be translated as 'original people' or 'aboriginal people'. The group consists of a heterogeneous collection of ethnic groups with distinct linguistic, cultural, and traditional practices. In Peninsular Malaysia's rainforests and rural areas, the OA have resided for a lengthy period, extending thousands of years, throughout recorded history. Historically, the indigenous population relied primarily on foraging, gathering, and shifting cultivation for subsistence. Every community has unique characteristics regarding its lifestyle, social structures, and beliefs. Typically, the OA population is divided into several ethnolinguistic groups, including the Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay. Over time, the population has faced several obstacles. Due to deforestation, land development, and modernization, Indigenous communities have faced challenges to their ancestral lands and traditional practices. The conditions have forced many OA people from their native territories. These people have also faced marginalization, prejudice, and barriers to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Land rights and relocation are significant issues for their community. Logging, agricultural expansion, and industrialization have displaced many indigenous tribes. Displacement often causes people to lose their way of life and culture, resulting in social and economic isolation. In addition, many OA communities are impoverished and lack access to healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation. This reinforces social inequality by limiting schooling and professional prospects.

Furthermore, guaranteeing equal access to high-quality education remains a significant obstacle for many young members of the OA community. Numerous factors, such as geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, linguistic barriers resulting from the numerous languages spoken by various OA groups, and cultural differences, may impede their access to education and limit their ability to obtain a substantial and valuable education. The limited availability of technology and restricted access to information, also known as the digital divide, impedes OA youth's ability to interact with and gain an understanding of the larger global community. In addition, OA communities continue to experience health disparities due to the limited availability of healthcare facilities and services. Inadequate access to medical treatment because of geographical isolation, cultural differences, and linguistic barriers may result in an increase in preventable disease incidences. Additionally, accelerated industrialization and foreign influences threaten the survival of OA cultures and languages.

Indigenous knowledge practices and languages passed down through generations may be jeopardized by the exposure of newer generations to Malaysian mainstream culture. OA groups have also historically been subjected to exclusion by the larger Malaysian society. Negative preconceptions, a lack of understanding, and unequal treatment are responsible for social exclusion and limited participation in national development. This situation reduces participation in decision-making because individuals frequently encounter limited representation and participation in procedures affecting their own communities. This phenomenon may result in the formulation and implementation of policies and development initiatives that fail to adequately consider the specific requirements and perspectives of the individuals or communities involved. Despite the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights as stated in the Malaysian constitution, there have been persistent discussions about the level of legal recognition and preservation of indigenous communities' land rights and cultural heritage.

The obstacles faced by OA communities in Malaysia have a significant impact on their children's upbringing, opportunities, and general well-being. Consequently, a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations are engaged in efforts to address these challenges. Among the initiatives are the promotion of property rights, the implementation of community development projects, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the expansion of access to education and healthcare services. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize the significance of initiatives that seek to preserve culture, promote community development, and empower individuals. These efforts are crucial for ensuring the prosperity and well-being of the newer generation and preserving their cultural identity and history. Nonetheless, the complexity of these obstacles necessitates an ongoing commitment from numerous stakeholders to ensure the protection of the OA 's well-being and liberties.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to offer an overview of the connection between OA children and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDG 2030). In addition to that, the study analyses the challenges that were encountered in protecting OA children's rights to life, health, and development during the last COVID-19 pandemic.

The Arrival of the COVID-19

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) received reports of the first 27 cases of COVID-19, a newly identified coronavirus, occurring in Wuhan City, located in Hubei Province, China. The outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, attributed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, originated in a wholesale food market located in Wuhan City. Subsequently, on January 1st, 2020, authorities issued an order for the closure of this market. On the 13th of January, the first instance of COVID-19 was officially verified in Bangkok, Thailand. Subsequently, 17 days elapsed until the WHO designated the epidemic as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The purpose of the proclamation was to notify nations with susceptible healthcare systems to make necessary preparations for the heightened likelihood of infections. The Emergency Committee posited that the cessation of viral transmission might be achieved by timely detection, implementation of quarantine measures, and prompt intervention.

Nevertheless, the global situation deteriorated, leading to the official declaration of COVID-19 as a worldwide pandemic on March 11th, 2020. Despite the availability of a limited number of vaccinations since December 2020, the global incidence of viral infection has continued to increase (Liu, 2020). Many state governments implemented a range of control measures to effectively manage the pandemic, including but not limited to mobility limitations, public health interventions, governance strategies, socio-economic measures, social distancing protocols, and lockdown measures. These reactions have resulted in several substantial repercussions across social, economic, and environmental domains. For instance, the viral outbreak has resulted in a significant global economic downturn, exacerbated levels of poverty, heightened health concerns, impeded educational advancements, and hindered the implementation of development initiatives on both the worldwide and national scales.

Methodology Of Research

This study utilises doctrinal legal research methodology to analyse international law, domestic legislation, and policy related to children rights for the Orang Asli. The present article elucidates the pertinent sections of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Federal Constitutions

of Malaysia, the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (APA), other applicable statutes, and cases. The study employed library research to gather pertinent literary works from primary and secondary sources. The data collected from the literature was analysed using a qualitative methodology. The present study employs a theme analysis methodology to highlight the significance of prioritizing the child's best interests and developmental rights.

In the context of *OA* children and the COVID-19 pandemic, 'best interests of the child' is a fundamental principle and legal concept that places a child's welfare, rights, and general well-being at the centre of all decisions, policies, and actions that affect them. This concept is fundamental to preserving and promoting children's well-being, as it requires decisions that maximize the child's potential for development, protection, physical well-being, and emotional and cognitive growth. In protecting children's developmental rights, this principle directs authorities, parents, and decision-makers to make decisions that optimize the child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development while considering the child's specific needs, preferences, and cultural background. The notion is firmly established within the parameters of the CRC and UNDRIP. Both documents play crucial roles in protecting children's developmental rights.

Findings and Discussion

Interconnections of Orang Asli (OA) Children and the SDG 2030

This study investigates the correlation between *OA* youth and the World Agenda 2030. SDG 2030 represents a development agenda that was established by the United Nations (UN) as a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals 2015 (MDG 2015). The plan, referred to as the World Agenda 2030, has a comprehensive set of 17 objectives and 169 targets that include three fundamental dimensions of human existence: the economy, society, and the environment. The plan was globally endorsed by 193 nations beginning in 2015 and is projected to be executed through 2030 (Morton et al., 2017). The primary goals of the SDG for the year 2030 include the eradication of poverty on a global scale and the establishment of an inclusive framework that enables individuals to fully realise their capabilities and aspirations. In addition, the proposed plan strongly emphasizes the principle of equality, ensuring that all individuals are treated equally regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religious affiliation, political ideology, or any other relevant factor.

According to the Malaysia MDG 2015 Report, a social divide is a persistent problem in Malaysia. *OA*, the indigenous population of Peninsular Malaysia, has a notable and persistent poverty rate of 30.4%. Similarly, the poverty rates of the native populations of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia are 20.2 percent and 7.3 percent, respectively. Extreme poverty has significantly impacted the protection of *OA* children's fundamental rights, including but not limited to the rights to life, health, education, development, and participation. According to a study, Khor and Mohd Shariff (2019) revealed that *OA* children face high malnutrition, which is 43–86 percent. In addition, a sizable proportion of these children continue to encounter difficulties associated with inadequate accommodation, a notable prevalence of school leavers, and other unresolved issues. Consequently, the present sustainable agenda, SDG 2030, focuses primarily on ensuring inclusivity and equity, also known as 'Leave No One Behind' (LNOB). The All-State Members have collectively committed to instituting a comprehensive initiative to prioritize the elevation of the most marginalized populations within the development agendas of their respective nations, with the ultimate objective of reducing the extant

socioeconomic disparities. The global community has gained valuable insights from the failures of the MDG 2015, which was ineffective due to the unequal distribution of the plan's benefits. Consequently, it is essential to recognize the fundamental concept underlying SDG 2030, namely the need to ensure that no person or group is excluded or neglected. According to the UN (2015), the term 'inclusivity' appears 27 times in the SDG 2030, while LNOB is used consistently throughout the document. In addition, the phrase "vulnerable group" is frequently repeated. The frequency of these terms or phrases indicates the plan's propensity to include disadvantaged individuals within the 2030 Agenda (Winkler & Sathwaite, 2017).

The phrase vulnerability is consistently linked to risk, which might stem from individual or environmental circumstances. Nevertheless, the notion has expanded to include various elements, such as social, health, demographics, culture, and several other aspects. In a human rights context, the word "vulnerability" refers to the condition of individuals or groups who experience marginalisation, exclusion, discriminatory practices, or abuse due to their disadvantaged status. These situations need extra care, attention, and legal protection to vulnerable populations such as children, ethnic minorities, those with disabilities, those living in poverty, and the elderly, to ensure their survival. Children are often seen as fragile owing to their physical capabilities, cognitive development, and emotional resilience. The assertion is substantiated by CRC, which establishes that safeguarding children's rights begins before birth. Children's developmental stage is comparatively delicate compared to that of adults, thereby warranting a distinct position within the framework of human rights safeguarding. The situation becomes significantly more intricate when it encompasses children who are considered vulnerable, such as those who lack parental care or are at risk of losing a parent, those who reside on the streets, those who have been smuggled, those who are affected by various conflicts, natural disasters, or wars, those who are impacted by outbreaks of disease or disability, as well as those who are economically disadvantaged, among other circumstances (Brule & Eckstein, 2017). Children of ethnic minority groups, such as *OA* children, exhibit cultural distinctiveness within their civilizations. Indigenous populations constitute a mere five percent of the world's populous and often endure severe economic deprivation, resulting in a life expectancy 20 years below that of the general population (World Bank, 2021; United Nations Malaysia, 2015). Therefore, youngsters from the *OA* community may be classified as vulnerable.

SDG 10 signifies a global commitment to reducing inequality both within and between nations. The objective of 10.2 is to enhance and advance the social, economic, and political integration of all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or other relevant factors. The objective also aims to eliminate disparities between nations, especially among the most vulnerable. To ensure that *OA* children have access to fundamental rights such as the right to life, health, and education, it is imperative that all socioeconomic groups receive equal access to opportunities. In addition, it is essential to recognise that the demographics of sustainable development include both adults and children. This concept is articulated explicitly in the Brundtland Report, which defines sustainable development as the effort to meet the needs of current generations while protecting the rights of future generations to meet their own needs (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). According to the provided definition, the primary objective of the SDG 2030 is to serve as a means for individuals to improve their standard of living while simultaneously preserving and improving global conditions for future generations. It is of uttermost importance that the global community is capable of meeting the basic needs of its inhabitants. In the coming years, it is essential that children receive equal or enhanced

opportunities to experience fulfilment in their lives, pursue their aspirations, and maximise their potential. The fundamental principle of sustainable development is the conservation of the planet's extant resources and opportunities for the growth and advancement of future generations. Children play a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of sustainable development, as is widely acknowledged by scholars (Chan, 2013).

Furthermore, it is essential to recognise the global impact of children's populations, as they are a crucial factor in achieving the SDG 2030. Recent data from mid-2020 indicate that approximately 26% of the global population is comprised of individuals under the age of 15. It is believed that prioritising the requirements and development of children will contribute to the global economy's long-term viability. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, the indigenous population of Malaysia comprised approximately 13.8% of the country's 31,660,700 million total population as of 2017. Therefore, every positive change made to their region will have a substantial impact on the nation's overall growth strategy. In addition, the significance of children's role is demonstrated by the fact that they are recognised as propelling forces behind the implementation of the SDG 2030. Today, children have adopted the role of change agents, granting them the right to access information and voice their opinions on issues that directly affect them. Individuals must possess the necessary skills and authority to effectively encourage, promote, and coordinate transformation-initiating initiatives. The recognition of children's participation rights, as outlined in the CRC, has been advanced through the implementation of the SDG 2030. Implementing such a revolution is essential for guaranteeing the perpetual protection of future generations' rights, including those of *OA* children. This will ensure that their interests are consistently respected and safeguarded.

Challenges in Sustaining the Human Rights of Orang Asli 's (OA) Children Amidst COVID-19

This section will focus on the analysis of the rights of *OA* children, with a specific emphasis on the right to life and development, as outlined in the CRC 1989 and the UNDRIP.

Rights to Life and Health

Article 2 of the CRC and UNDRIP states that every child has the right to all fundamental rights. The article focuses on equality for children previously discriminated against due to their physical, mental, and emotional capabilities. *OA* and other vulnerable children face an increased risk of discrimination due to their indigenous origin, socio-economic status, and geographical factors. Article 17 UNDRIP protects indigenous children from economic exploitation or harmful work, vital for the right to life and overall health. Articles 3, 23, and 24 of the CRC mention the right to children's health. Article 3 requires states to provide children access to institutions, services, and facilities for their safety and health, while Article 23 includes the unique needs of disabled children. According to Article 24, children need access to healthcare, clean water, a nutritious diet, and safe surroundings. Next is Article 6, which explains the relationship between the right to survive and develop as part of living. *OA* children should be able to live healthy lives and adapt to any situation. UNDRIP requires taking adequate measures to fulfil the rights and unique needs of indigenous youth, children, and disabled children, as stated in Articles 21 and 22.

In the current COVID-19 situation, sustaining human's rights to life and health is challenging due to the world economic recession. It had been reported that 1159 *OA* at 23 localities in Ipoh and 135 out of 393 *OA* in Selangor were tested as COVID-19 positive. While in Kampung

Kuala Masai, Johor, about 80 per cent of the villagers were infected. To halt the virus transmission, many countries resort to lockdown while the infected person or travellers are put under quarantine. Such mechanisms aim to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, which stays in the air for an extended period and can easily infect people through communication, sneeze, or cough. However, prolonged lockdown or quarantine had caused people to lose their sources of income. Massive economic shut down for an extended period had impacted many industries to succumb, such as aviation, tourism, oil and gas drilling, automotive and many others. Many businesses had to suspend their operation or go through downsizing, causing employees' service termination. Such a situation negatively impacts the family's finances, whereby people can no longer maintain their lifestyle and barely make it for daily survival. Social issues such as extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition, suicide and many other health problems accelerated within these two years of the pandemic.

In Malaysia, there are several phases of lockdowns implemented, namely Movement Control Order (MCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), MCO between states and National Recovery Plan (NRP). Among others, the impacts of the execution of these total or partial lockdowns had restricted Malaysian and foreign visitors to travel abroad or into the country, closure of public facilities such as schools, public parks, government, and private premises, leading to economic declination. Most *OA* communities are self-employed and run small businesses involving plantation, handicraft making, food business, and even tourism. Their financial survival relies very much on the visitors, either local or foreigner and outside markets, to buy their products and services. Numerous *OA* communities rely on subsistence agriculture, wage labour daily, and small-scale commerce. As a result of lockdowns and movement restrictions, their ability to earn a living may be compromised. Without a proper income, *OA* children will risk living a good life armoured by human rights. Besides that, there is a situation whereby *OA* communities did not receive complete information about the COVID-19's vaccinations program and were even influenced by irresponsible individuals or groups, causing them to refuse it.

Furthermore, prolonged confinement periods or job loss had increased the mental and emotional stress within many humans leading to severe depression, suicide, and even domestic abuse. Many people, especially women and children, must face the risk of being abused physically, mentally, and emotionally. There are also cases of marital rape, child rape, incest, pornography, and other sexual violence acts that occur within a household. The ferocity actions against children are against Article 19 and Article 34 of CRC, which protects children against all types of violence or abuses, including abandonment and exploitation. Children are also exposed to maltreatment such as torture, armed conflict, and trafficking in this complex and challenging time, which contradicts Article 39. There is additional protection against forced removal from one group to another for indigenous children, such as *OA* children, based on Article 7 of UNDRIP.

Rights To Development

The Declaration on the Right to Development states that it includes participating in and enjoying economic, social, cultural, and political development, where all human rights and freedoms can be fully realized. To materialize development rights, one needs information, knowledge, and skills. Article 28 of CRC recognizes children's right to education, making primary education compulsory and accessible. Secondary schooling should be encouraged through full sponsorship or financial assistance. Tertiary education and vocational skills should

be accessible to all children. Article 29 emphasizes the importance of learning for children's development. Respecting human rights, the child's parents, cultural identity, language, national values, and the natural environment is essential. Article 14 of UNDRIP does not distinguish between different levels of children's education, only emphasizing the concept of equity. Indigenous children should have access to education in their own culture and language. Moreover, education will shape the child to nurture good characteristics such as being responsible, understanding, peaceful, tolerant, just and kind to everyone, including persons of indigenous origin. Development rights are also protected for the disabled children in Article 23 that safeguard their freedom to receive education or training to prepare and create opportunities for them to get involved in the industry. Other than that, the importance of the right to education for children's development is highlighted in Article 32, whereby child labour or economic exploitation must be prevented to safeguard their future (Rahman et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, the closure of schools had harmed the *OA* children, as they had to deal with the new method of learning, which is through the online method. Most of *OA* live in remote areas, while the internet is usually available in urban and developed areas as it depends on the communities' demands. Considering the cost and profit factors, such facility only exists in strategic geographical sites. Consequently, *OA* children are not likely to enjoy internet services for educational purposes. Besides that, internet services require devices like computers, tablets, smartphones, and others. These gadgets are expensive and necessitate skills before an individual can utilize them. It is to conclude that the economic and geographical factors are the main problem *OA* children faces in practising their rights to education.

Recommendation

Property rights advocacy is more important for *OA* because of the COVID-19 outbreak. The epidemic disrupted their livelihoods and exposed their land and property rights vulnerabilities. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions may have affected their sustenance and livelihood in customary areas. *OA* lands may have been encroached upon during the epidemic because of increasing resource demand, economic constraints, or a lack of protection. Promoting property rights secures their future and cultural legacy. Protecting land and property rights will help the community recover from the epidemic and preserve its culture. If their land rights are recognized, they may resume farming, foraging, and collecting, which are vital to their culture. This may support economic recovery. Secure land and property rights provide the community autonomy and resilience. They may use sustainable land management to preserve resources for future generations. Being stable and secure in the face of external adversities boosts health and happiness. In essence, advocating for *OA* property rights after the COVID-19 pandemic is a strategic approach to protect their future, preserve their culture, and empower them to rebuild their lives.

The potential for implementing community development initiatives that are specifically designed to address the distinct needs and ambitions of the *OA* community in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant. These projects may help communities become more resilient and self-sufficient by promoting sustainable agriculture, income generation, and empowerment. Collaborative endeavors facilitate the establishment of community ownership over initiatives, so cultivating a feeling of agency and generating a collective sentiment of pride. Capacity-building may teach skills, while traditional practices preserve culture. These projects promote total recovery, community cohesiveness, regional economies, and a future that matches their goals. Third, the *OA* cultural legacy must be preserved and protected,

particularly after the COVID-19 epidemic. The assets in question contain a range of elements, including traditional knowledge, languages, practices, and traditions, which together serve to identify and preserve the cultural legacy of the people in question. The preservation of these assets serves the dual purpose of safeguarding the historical history of the community and fostering a profound feeling of identification and belonging among the children of the *OA*. The elements enhance their cultural toughness, permit knowledge transfer over generations, and encourage communal cooperation. Through active preservation and revitalization of these cultural treasures, the community maintains its uniqueness, builds self-worth, and ensures future generations' rich past.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, enhancing educational and healthcare resources for *OA* children is of paramount importance, as it promotes their holistic development and well-being. This involves addressing geographical barriers by locating educational institutions and healthcare facilities close to local populations and providing transit alternatives. Educators and healthcare professionals with cultural sensitivity endeavor to tailor their services to the specific needs of the people they serve. Accessible education has transformative potential. Providing *OA* children in or near their communities with a high-quality education enables them to acquire skills, knowledge, and the ability to think critically. Education equips individuals not only to pursue personal objectives but also to make substantial contributions to families, communities, and society. Access to sufficient healthcare is a fundamental human right. The establishment of healthcare facilities near their communities ensures prompt medical care and preventative care. A holistic approach to healthcare fosters their physical growth and provides the groundwork for a healthier, more resilient community. In conclusion, accessible education equips individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate and prosper in their future endeavors. Enhanced healthcare services simultaneously seek to reduce health disparities and promote global development and progress. By prioritizing these services, society demonstrates its commitment to creating a more promising future for *OA* youth, thereby cultivating their capacity to make positive contributions to their communities and beyond.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has hampered the UN's 2030 World Agenda for global development. The pandemic poses development and resilience challenges and possibilities. This research explores the relationship between *OA* children and SDG 2030, revealing the pandemic-related obstacles to these targets. The epidemic has hit vulnerable groups like *OA* children, who already suffer institutional impediments. The epidemic has worsened their life, health, and development rights violations. This essay showed that the CRC and UNDRIP can safeguard fundamental rights under challenging conditions. Therefore, governments must avoid pandemic-related disruptions of these aims to comply with SDG 2030. The SDG requires property rights advocacy, community development, cultural asset protection, and education and healthcare improvements. As society and governments recover from the epidemic, joint action is needed. Connecting efforts with SDG 2030 and using customized ways to improve children's well-being, reconstruction, strength, and prosperity are possible. This project requires government, NGOs, and worldwide cooperation. The fight to protect *OA* children's rights inspires hope for their future and shows humanity's tenacity and progress. With determination and empathy, society can overcome obstacles and grab opportunities to make the pandemic a driver for good development towards SDG 2030.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for financing this study under the Geran Galakan Penyelidik Muda (GGPM-2022-0058).

Funding

The research is funded by Geran Galakan Penyelidik Muda (GGPM-2022-0058)

Author Contributions

NHAR extensively contributed to the study design and writing, notably on SDG 2030 and Children's Rights. MSH discussed Orang Asli rights. All authors reviewed and approved the final article.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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