Innovative Use of TPOA Telecentres for Covid-19 Awareness among the Orang Asli Communities

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Abstract— **This paper presents the social innovation of using the TPOA telecentres as a means to create Covid-19 awareness among the Orang Asli community. The various challenges in the current means of information dissemination by the government have been highlighted, which led to an innovative adjustment on the information to be disseminated as well the adoption of a new mechanism of information dissemination to effectively convey the important Covid-19 awareness across the Orang Asli villages. The important considerations for coming up with the new information dissemination mechanism for the Orang Asli community have also been discussed together with its implementation executed through the local Orang Asli telecentre caretakers. The new dissemination mechanism aimed to achieve faster delivery and a better understanding of messages among the local community to gain quick Covid-19 awareness to better prepare them when visiting the higher risk urban areas. The learning process is part of the development for social resilience.**

Keywords— telecentre, sustainability, TPOA, ICT4D, rural development, Covid-19, social resilience

I. Introduction

Telecentre has been widely deployed for the initiative of bridging the digital divide for communities in rural areas. The introduction of ICT to the rural allows marginalized communities to catch up with urban development, especially in the aspect of obtaining new knowledge. There have been more than 2000 telecentres deployed across Malaysia to serve communities on providing information access, education, and catalyze the adoption of digital technology for development. In remote rural areas, the roles played by telecentres are even more significant as they serve isolated communities. The severely difficult road access and lack of basic telecommunication amenities have restricted the flow of information into the remote rural areas. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has created huge chaos in almost every country. Government agencies work closely to implement concurrent strategies to contain and reduce the spread of the Covid-19 infection, especially in crowded urban cities. Strategies have been rapidly changed to counter the latest development of Covid-19 across the country. Information on awareness, prevention, precaution, movement control, etc. have been delivered through all communication means to reach as many people as possible. Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic spreads through close human contact, hence dissemination of information cannot be done through conventional channels such as workshops, seminars, and assemblies where crowds are to be gathered. The use of digital media has been the mainstream of information dissemination channels, which involved mainly social media and instant messaging services. The use of digital media has proven to be very effective in disseminating the latest information quickly and timely. However, there are relatively large communities of the rural who still have limited access to crucial information, particularly the rural areas without complete telecommunication service coverage. Many still have very limited knowledge about the danger of the fast-spreading Covid-19 viruses as well as not having enough awareness on how to prevent contracting them. The lack of precaution and preparation when they visit the urban towns that have active Covid-19 cases will put them in danger of contracting the virus and bring it back to their village on their return. The lack of information coverage to the rural communities will certainly cause the rural communities to treat the spread of Covid-19 more lightly and have less preparation towards preventing the contagious infection.

In this paper, we showcase how telecentres and its caretakers can play an important role in disseminating crucial information to remote rural communities. We will be using the cases of telecentres implemented for the Orang Asli communities under the TPOA project [1]. The TPOA project has implemented four telecentres at remote rural sites in the states of Pahang and Kelantan, Malaysia, namely Pos Balar, Pos Gob, Pos Lenjang, and Pos Sinderut. With the telecommunication link made available through the telecentres, sending information to the rural communities seems straightforward but full of other challenges. The coverage of the telecentre is relatively limited for a large community consists of many villages; hence not every villager is connected via the telecentre. The low in literacy has created an extra barrier to information dissemination using the official message format from the government because not everyone has a good command of the national language, and the jargons used in these messages are beyond the comprehension of the local community. Hence, in this paper, we showcase some of the social innovations by the local telecentre caretakers as part of the initiative to enhace social resilience through the use of the telecentre as the tool to educate and prepare the local community on the Covid-19 pandemic matters. The joined innovations between telecentre caretakers and UNIMAS researchers are to achieve a more impactful awareness creation, developing social resilience among the Orang Asli community, encourage practicing the standard operating procedure (SOP) for Covid-19 prevention, and preparing the villagers to have a safer visit to urban towns where the risk of infection is high.

II. Background

A. The Telecentre Program for Orang Asli (TPOA)

The TPOA project started in 2013 aimed to fill the increasing digital gap of information between the urban and the rural through the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to amplify the social and economic transformation for the Orang Asli community in the Peninsular of Malaysia [2]. Four Orang Asli communities have been selected for the implementation of telecentres, namely Pos Sinderut and Pos Lenjang in Pahang state, and Pos Gob and Pos Balar in Kelantan state. TPOA was also a