



Journal of Advanced Research in Social and Behavioural Sciences

Journal homepage:
<https://karyailham.com.my/index.php/jarsbs/index>
ISSN: 2462-1951



The Influence of Zakat on the Quality of Life of the Orang Asli Community in Kuala Tahan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 March 2026

Received in revised form 24 May 2026

Accepted 2 June 2026

Available online 3 July 2026

Keywords:

Zakat; Orang Asli, Kuala Tahan; quality of life; Aid, Islamic Economics

ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of zakat on the quality of life of the Orang Asli community in Kuala Tahan, Pahang, within the context of poverty, geographical marginalization, and limited access to mainstream social services. Although zakat is recognized as an important Islamic financial instrument for poverty alleviation and the enhancement of community well-being, its impact on indigenous populations remains underexplored in empirical research in Malaysia. This study adopts a qualitative approach through document analysis, utilizing a systematic search of journal articles, reports from zakat institutions, government publications, and NGO reports related to the Orang Asli, zakat, and quality of life. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and dimensions of zakat's impact on community well-being. The findings indicate that zakat has a positive effect across several key dimensions, particularly in reducing basic financial burdens, improving access to education and school participation, strengthening social relationships, and enhancing emotional and spiritual well-being. Educational assistance such as scholarships, school supplies, tuition support, and transportation aid has been shown to increase opportunities for social mobility among younger generations of the Orang Asli community. However, the impact of zakat has yet to achieve sustainable socio-economic transformation due to persistent access gaps, infrastructural constraints, low levels of financial literacy, and a lack of alignment between program design and the lived realities of rural communities.

1. Introduction

The Orang Asli community in the Kuala Tahan area of Pahang faces multiple socio-economic challenges that contribute to a quality of life that remains significantly behind that of the majority population in Malaysia. Previous studies indicate that the Orang Asli community as a whole experience's high levels of poverty, low household income, and a strong dependence on forest

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<https://doi.org/10.37934/arsbs.44.1.249256>

resources or limited tourism-related activities [1]. In addition, research on the impact of ecotourism development in Taman Negara Pahang finds that although new economic opportunities have emerged through tourism, the benefits remain unevenly distributed. Consequently, the Orang Asli community continues to face constraints in accessing education, healthcare, and formal employment opportunities [2].

Within the context of Malaysia's social development, zakat is recognized as an Islamic financial instrument that plays a significant role in reducing socio-economic disparities and promoting societal well-being. Studies have shown that the collection and distribution of zakat are positively correlated with human development and poverty reduction [3]. Furthermore, systematic reviews of zakat institutions in Malaysia emphasize that zakat is not merely a charitable contribution but also a strategic tool for social development when implemented efficiently and in a targeted manner [4].

Nevertheless, a notable gap exists in zakat-related research in Malaysia. Most studies focus on the majority Muslim communities in urban or typical rural settings, with limited attention given to indigenous minority groups such as the Orang Asli [4]. This study aims to identify the influence of zakat on several dimensions of quality of life, including income, education, health, and social interaction among the Orang Asli community in Kuala Tahan, as well as to assess the level of satisfaction among Orang Asli zakat recipients. The study integrates perspectives from Islamic Social Finance and the Human Development Index (HDI) within the context of indigenous communities—an area that remains underexplored in zakat studies in Malaysia [6]. As such, this research is expected to contribute to the literature and to inform more inclusive zakat development policies, as well as the implementation of zakat programs that are sensitive to the needs of the Orang Asli community.

Despite zakat being widely recognized as an important instrument for poverty alleviation and social development in Malaysia, its impact on minority communities such as the Orang Asli has received limited attention in empirical research. Previous studies have largely focused on majority Muslim populations in urban and general rural areas, without deeply examining the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and institutional access contexts of indigenous communities [4]. The socio-economic conditions of the Orang Asli in Kuala Tahan remain concerning, characterized by high poverty rates, low household income, and dependence on traditional economic activities such as forest-based livelihoods and unstable tourism [5].

In this context, a key question arises regarding the extent to which zakat genuinely contributes to improving the quality of life of the Orang Asli community. Although various Zakat programs have been introduced for welfare and development purposes, there is still a lack of robust evidence demonstrating their impact on critical life dimensions such as income, education, health, and social relationships within this community. Previous research suggests that zakat can function as a supplementary source of income and a tool for community development; however, its effectiveness may be limited if it is not aligned with the socio-economic realities of indigenous populations [7].

Moreover, low levels of education and financial awareness among the Orang Asli community limit their ability to fully utilize zakat assistance. This raises an important question regarding the extent to which zakat support provided to the Orang Asli can enhance their quality of life to a level comparable with that of the broader society.

2. Literature Review

In Islamic economic discourse, zakat is often portrayed as a social welfare instrument capable of addressing inequality, enhancing financial resilience, and developing human capital among vulnerable groups. Research by Ariffin *et al.*, [8] indicates that well-planned zakat distribution can

improve the capacity of poor households through support in the form of capital assistance, education, basic necessities, and income stabilization.

Zakat functions as an additional source of income for impoverished communities, including Indigenous peoples (Orang Asli). Studies indicate that the management and distribution of zakat can directly improve the standard of living for underprivileged groups [9]. Through zakat-based programs, individuals and families are able to receive financial assistance to meet basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare, thereby helping them escape the cycle of poverty [10].

In the context of the Orang Asli, zakat can be utilized to enhance education and financial awareness areas that often receive insufficient attention within these communities. Low levels of education among the Orang Asli frequently contribute to persistent poverty [11]. With educational programs funded through zakat, individuals within these communities have the opportunity to acquire better knowledge and skills, thereby increasing their chances of securing improved employment and enhancing their overall quality of life [12].

In predominantly Muslim societies, zakat is regarded as both a religious and social obligation. However, within mixed or minority Muslim communities such as Orang Asli groups who have recently embraced Islam this understanding remains limited [13]. This limitation may affect the effective delivery of assistance and their integration into formal Islamic support systems. A study by Ahmad *et al.*, [14] found that insufficient religious knowledge and financial literacy among zakat recipients reduces their ability to manage assistance effectively, thereby diminishing its long-term impact on overall well-being.

The researchers examined the forms of zakat assistance received by the Orang Asli community in Sepang, including monthly financial aid, educational support, festive (Hari Raya) assistance, and attendance allowances for religious classes [15]. The study found that zakat assistance helps to meet basic household needs, reduces the pressure of living costs, and at the same time strengthens community participation in religious learning activities.

However, their findings also indicate that some recipients perceive the amount of assistance as still insufficient to truly lift them out of structural poverty. This suggests that the improvements in quality of life achieved are more relative and gradual in nature, rather than transformative.

A more specific and recent study on Orang Asli asnaf was conducted in Pahang, which explored the experiences of zakat recipients through semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries of monthly assistance. The researchers found that zakat aid of approximately RM500 per month, within the context of the study, significantly reduced the burden of food expenses, healthcare costs, and other daily necessities, while also enhancing recipients' sense of gratitude and appreciation towards zakat institutions [16].

However, the amount of assistance was still insufficient to fully cover the rising cost of living, particularly when factoring in transportation expenses for medical treatment and large household dependents. Zakat thus functions as a social safety net that stabilizes basic living conditions, but has yet to achieve a level of sustainable socio-economic transformation for most Orang Asli recipients.

The educational dimension emerges as one of the key channels through which zakat influences the quality of life of the Orang Asli community. Jusoh *et al.*, [16] examined the impact of educational zakat distribution on the Orang Asli in Jerantut, Pahang, and found that assistance such as scholarships, school supplies, and fee support has facilitated children's continued schooling and reduced the risk of dropout. The study links educational zakat assistance with increased educational aspirations and social mobility opportunities among Orang Asli youth, thereby implying long-term improvements in the quality of life of families and communities. Similarly, a study by Abu Bakar *et al.*, [17] on zakat-based schools in Kedah shows that education-oriented programs can enhance the

quality of life of asnaf through improved access to education, literacy, and future career opportunities.

From a more holistic quality of life perspective encompassing both material and spiritual dimensions studies on da'wah and muallaf also provide important insights relevant to the Orang Asli context. [18] found that a combination of economic assistance, religious education support, continuous guidance, and surrounding Muslim social networks serves as key catalysts for improving their quality of life. Within the framework of sustainable development, zakat holds strong potential as a form of Islamic social finance that supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in addressing poverty (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), and health (SDG 3) [19].

However, the measurement of zakat effectiveness across these dimensions remains largely confined to macro-level contexts and has yet to be widely applied in studies of smaller communities such as the Orang Asli. The integration between frameworks such as the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Islamic Social Finance Index is therefore seen as crucial for evaluating the holistic impact of zakat on indigenous community development [20].

Overall, the literature review indicates that most studies are concentrated in specific localities (such as Sepang, Jerantut, Gombak, and parts of Pahang), with relatively small sample sizes and a focus on particular groups, such as muallaf or education aid recipients. As a result, the overall picture remains fragmented and difficult to generalize across all Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. Most studies do not integrate a systematic multidimensional quality of life framework such as a Multidimensional Poverty Index tailored to the Orang Asli and rarely link zakat data with longitudinal indicators of community well-being. Consequently, the effectiveness of zakat within minority communities like the Orang Asli remains an open question. This is further influenced by challenges such as distribution mechanisms, limited institutional engagement in remote indigenous areas, and misalignment between program design and the actual economic realities of these communities, which appear to be less robust compared to urban settings.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of document analysis to examine the influence of zakat on the quality of life of the Orang Asli community in Kuala Tahan. Secondary data were collected through a systematic search using Google Scholar and other academic search engines to obtain journal articles, research reports, documents from state zakat institutions, NGO reports, as well as government publications related to the Orang Asli, poverty, and zakat distribution.

The search process involved the use of keywords such as "*zakat*," "*Orang Asli*," "*quality of life*," "*indigenous welfare*," and "*Islamic social finance*," followed by a screening process based on publication years (2010–2024), journal credibility, and relevance to the Kuala Tahan context. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved initial coding, theme development, and cross-comparison of findings from multiple sources. This approach enables the researcher to identify patterns, similarities, and gaps regarding the contribution of zakat to the socio-economic, educational, social, and spiritual well-being of the Orang Asli community.

4. Findings

The analysis of the study indicates that the influence of zakat on the quality of life of the Orang Asli community can be summarized as follows: (a) zakat reduces the basic financial burden of Orang Asli households, (b) educational zakat enhances social mobility opportunities for the younger generation, (c) zakat strengthens social well-being and relationships between the community and

Islamic institutions, (d) zakat contributes to emotional well-being and spiritual support, and (e) there remain gaps in access and coverage of zakat distribution for remote communities.

Zakat plays a significant role in alleviating the basic financial burden of Orang Asli households, particularly among communities facing unstable incomes and rising living costs. Zakat assistance, which includes monthly cash aid, basic food supplies, and emergency support, functions as an immediate support mechanism that helps families meet essential daily needs such as nutritious food, medication, and children's educational expenses. Through such direct assistance, zakat acts as a social safety net that mitigates economic hardship among marginalized groups, especially in rural communities that depend on informal sectors such as village-based work, forest product sales, or seasonal employment. This finding is consistent with Jusoh *et al.*, [16] who reported a reduction in financial difficulties and improved household expenditure stability among Orang Asli zakat recipients in Pahang after receiving monthly assistance.

The improvement in the quality of life of the Orang Asli community in Kuala Tahan through zakat distribution must also be understood within the context of inherited structural poverty, shaped by geographical isolation, limited socio-economic opportunities, and restricted access to basic services. In this context, zakat serves as a social protection instrument that helps reduce the community's dependence on forest resources and informal employment [4]. Assistance such as monthly financial aid, basic food support, and healthcare assistance enables households to meet minimum survival needs, thereby alleviating economic hardship among the Orang Asli. However, the literature also emphasizes that the effectiveness of zakat depends on the capacity of institutions to deliver assistance in a consistent, sufficient, and needs-based manner, particularly for minority communities [21].

In terms of education, zakat plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of life of the young Orang Asli in Kuala Tahan by providing better access to formal learning and basic academic support. Although educational integration within the community faces challenges such as school dropout, low learning motivation, and lack of basic resources, studies indicate that educational zakat assistance including scholarships, transportation aid, school supplies, and tuition support helps reduce family financial pressure and increase school participation [15]. These educational interventions not only improve academic achievement but also create opportunities for long-term social mobility by enabling Orang Asli children to access employment beyond low-income traditional sectors. This aligns with the findings of Abu Bakar *et al.*, [12] which demonstrate that education-based zakat programs can strengthen long-term well-being and enhance the potential for asnaf generations to break the cycle of poverty.

Educational zakat significantly enhances social mobility opportunities for young Orang Asli, particularly in remote communities like Kuala Tahan, which face various economic and infrastructural constraints. Assistance in the form of scholarships, school supplies, tuition fees, and transportation support has been shown to strengthen educational participation among children and adolescents, thereby reducing the risk of school dropout, which often occurs due to financial constraints, especially in large families [22]. With such support, Orang Asli children are more likely to continue secondary education, vocational streams, or skills programs, opening pathways to more stable and higher-income employment compared to uncertain traditional work. Educational zakat not only covers learning costs but also motivates and instills confidence in young Orang Asli to pursue social mobility through education [23].

Beyond financial relief, zakat assistance also boosts self-confidence, motivation, and social interaction among recipients. In marginalized communities such as Kuala Tahan, the presence of zakat institutions helps establish social support networks through welfare visits, tutoring classes, and community activities. This improves social interaction, fosters a sense of acceptance in the broader

society, and raises awareness of their role in national development [24]. The impact of zakat on Orang Asli quality of life is also linked to spiritual and psychological well-being, especially for communities involved in religious guidance classes and muallaf programs. Studies on da'wah and spiritual welfare indicate that zakat support enhances religious understanding, emotional stability, and gratitude among recipients, contributing to overall well-being [18]. In Kuala Tahan, religious guidance coupled with zakat assistance helps build new identity, strengthen self-identity, and reduce psychological isolation often experienced by minority communities, consistent with the multidimensional quality of life concept encompassing material, social, and spiritual welfare.

Zakat also plays a key role in improving social well-being and strengthening the relationship between the Orang Asli community and Islamic institutions. Programs such as welfare visits, monitoring of asnaf, and community activities organized by zakat institutions help foster trust and friendly relations between remote communities and religious authorities. Frequent interactions not only build confidence in the zakat system but also expand the social networks of Orang Asli, who have historically been marginalized due to geographic isolation, historical factors, and social stigma. The presence of zakat institutions in the form of moral, social, and spiritual support reduces marginalization and strengthens community engagement in mainstream societal activities. These findings align with Teh *et al.*, [25] which highlights social relationships and community support as key elements in enhancing the well-being of remote communities, especially when positive interactions are established between the Orang Asli and external parties.

Zakat also significantly strengthens emotional well-being and spiritual support, particularly for communities facing the pressures of poverty and social marginalization. Through programs such as religious guidance, basic fardu ain classes, and spiritual activities combined with material support from zakat, recipients gain learning opportunities that enhance religious understanding while providing peace of mind, gratitude, and renewed motivation to face daily life challenges. Strengthening this spiritual dimension has been shown to enhance recipients' psychological capacity to adapt to stress and cultivate hope for a more positive future. These elements are particularly important in vulnerable communities such as the Orang Asli, who often face social stigma, discrimination, and prolonged economic pressure. These findings are consistent with Sham *et al.*, [18], who demonstrated that religious education and da'wah support improve spiritual, emotional, and self-identity well-being among new Orang Asli converts.

However, significant gaps exist in the access and coverage of zakat distribution for Orang Asli communities in remote areas such as Kuala Tahan, primarily due to challenging geography. The remote locations of Orang Asli villages, limited transportation networks, and difficult accessibility hinder zakat institutions from conducting regular outreach, resulting in uneven distribution of assistance. The lack of resident zakat officers or consistent outreach programs further weakens the effectiveness of distribution, particularly when only proactive families or those near administrative centers can apply and receive aid. In many cases, remote families not only struggle to submit applications but also lack knowledge of zakat procedures and eligibility due to significant information gaps. This phenomenon aligns with Inguanzo [1], who emphasizes that uneven development and lack of basic infrastructure in Orang Asli communities are key causes of unequal and non-inclusive access to social services. These access gaps indicate that the effectiveness of zakat as a welfare instrument heavily depends on the capacity of institutions to actively reach target communities and adapt distribution mechanisms to local geographic and cultural realities.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study finds that zakat plays a significant role in improving the quality of life of the Orang Asli community in Kuala Tahan, though its impact remains limited and layered. Zakat assistance including financial aid, educational support, basic food provisions, healthcare, and spiritual support has successfully alleviated part of the basic economic burden on households, increased educational participation among the younger generation, and strengthened social and spiritual ties between the Orang Asli community and Islamic institutions. These findings demonstrate the potential of zakat as a social protection instrument that not only addresses material needs but also positively influences emotional, psychological, and social integration aspects of the community.

However, the impact of zakat on the overall well-being of the Orang Asli has yet to achieve sustainable socio-economic transformation. Geographic challenges, information gaps, low education levels, infrastructural constraints, and unequal access to social services contribute to uneven and inconsistent zakat distribution in remote communities. Many families residing in isolated locations face difficulties in submitting applications, while low financial literacy and limited religious knowledge restrict their ability to optimally utilize the assistance. Dependence on unstable traditional economic sectors further limits zakat's effectiveness in transforming household income structures. The effectiveness of zakat distribution therefore depends on the capacity of zakat institutions to improve outreach mechanisms, proactively engage Orang Asli communities, and provide programs that are responsive to the socio-economic realities of indigenous populations.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), the Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development (IBSD), and Universiti Teknologi MARA for their technical support.

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