

DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECT OF ORANG ASLI CO-OPERATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF PERAK AND PAHANG

Nurizah Noordin, Mohd Shahron Anuar Said, Shamsul Khairi Abu Hassan,

Juliana Md. Yusop*

Co-operative College of Malaysia

Asan Ali Golam Hassan

School of Economics, Finance and Banking

Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken to identify the status and progress of the indigenous people or so called the Orang Asli co-operatives, their participation in economic and entrepreneurial activities, governance practices, and potential growth. The individual household economic and entrepreneurial activities amongst the Orang Asli community were also examined to provide further insights to the research. A total of 33 Orang Asli co-operatives in Perak and Pahang and 655 heads of households (HOHs), of whom 241 of them were co-operative members were selected as the sample for the study. Data were collected through surveys using structured questionnaires and interviews with various stakeholders, conducted by the researcher and a group of trained enumerators from amongst the Orang Asli community. The study observed that the development of the Orang Asli co-operatives was largely lagging behind particularly in terms of financial performance, business capacity, leadership, management expertise and economic participation by members. Most of the co-operatives have not been able to accumulate adequate capital and establish any form of sustainable economic activities to generate fund for the co-operatives. Management of the co-operatives and its business are entirely run by the Board who lacks business expertise and experience. The Orang Asli co-operatives also faced poor participation by members, consumers, employees and suppliers, poor accessibility to funds and insufficient support from related agencies. The study found that only a small percentage of individuals are involved in producing and marketing products and services at the community and local level. Besides poor infrastructure which limits mobility, inaccessibility to funds and unavailability of business premise to spur economic activities, Orang Asli entrepreneurs also encounter bureaucratic problems in obtaining permits, licenses, and approval of working paper. To improve the performance of the Orang Asli co-operatives, the study proposed a "business development model" that puts emphasis on the collaboration and strategic alliance between the co-operatives, the private sector, government agencies, government link companies (GLC) and non-government institutions. Adequate incentives and policies must also be in place in order for the co-operatives to achieve its role as an effective platform to enhance economic and entrepreneurial activities and develop their communities economically and socially.

Key words: Indigenous co-operatives, Orang Asli, business and management

*Corresponding author Email: juliana@mkm.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Orang Asli are indigenous people who first inhabit Peninsular Malaysia around 8th Century B.C, or about 10,000 years ago (Fauzi, 2006). The Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia is made up of three main groups, namely, the Senoi (54.9%), Proto-Malays (42.3%) and Negrito (2.8%). There are 178,197 Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia comprising of 36,658 families residing in 852 Orang Asli settlements (JAKOA, 2011). In terms of geographical distribution, most Orang Asli settlements are located in Pahang and Perak, accounting for more than two-thirds of the total Orang Asli population.

The socio-economy and living standard of the Orang Asli community are lagging behind in comparison with the population of Malaysia as a whole. The community faces a number of problems including high incidence of poverty, limited job opportunities, large school dropouts, low health status, limited social infrastructure, and problems associated with land settlement and ownership. Thus to strengthen the community, various educational, skill building, infrastructure and social programmes was carried out by the government. In addition, entrepreneurial activities and the formation of co-operatives among the Orang Asli communities were encouraged to help them market their produce, widen their business activities, increase their income, and enhance their entrepreneurial skills.

Despite an increasing number of Orang Asli co-operatives being formed since 2009, membership remains small (8.2%) and performance in terms of economic participation questionable. Therefore, the objective of this research is to evaluate the development of the Orang Asli's co-operatives from the perspective of economic performance, members' involvement and co-operative practices, management, and social responsibility. Further, the general profile of the community under study is examined to shed more lights. The study also seek to identify the success factors associated with the co-operatives and constraints faced that could hinder its progress.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term Orang Asli as defined in the relevant act can only be used to describe the *pribumi* (literally 'the sons of the land') status in Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah and Sarawak, the *pribumi* people are defined as *Bumiputra* (Khairul Hisyam et. Al, 2007; Hasan Mat Nor, 1998).

According to the *Pelan Strategik Kemajuan Orang Asli (2011)*, and from the study by Khairul Hisham et al. (2007), the sole dependence on traditional economic resources such as collecting jungle produce, fishing and hunting makes it difficult for the Orang Asli to move out of poverty. Zahid et al. (1996) had a similar view that the economic activities of Orang Asli that are based on traditional resources are incapable of generating a permanent and stable income. Therefore, to take the Orang Asli out of their traditional livelihood, the government gave them land planted with rubber and oil palm and encouraged them to plant cash crops such as bamboo, rattan and rear fish, and commercialise their economic activities. This would make them competitive

economically, consistent with the aim of making agriculture a business and a source of family income to the Orang Asli community (JAKOA, 2011).

In the year 2010, a total of 31.16% of the Orang Asli community has household income below the poverty line. The government plans to reduce the proportion of Orang Asli under poverty to below 25 per cent by 2015 (JAKOA, 2011). Through the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA) a number of initiatives was taken to transform the Orang Asli community at large. One of the strategies and plan of action to develop the economy of Orang Asli (*Pelan Strategik Kemajuan Orang Asli, 2011-2015*) is to empower the Orang Asli's co-operatives by establishing close cooperation between the co-operative and agencies as well as with other co-operative bodies (JAKOA, 2011).

According to the study, Tunisan Seman 2002, the involvement of Orang Asli in economic activities is greatly influenced by their local environment, attitude towards development and changes, relationship with the surrounding communities and awareness about the importance of monetising their daily activities. The study also revealed that JAKOA's role in providing job opportunities and development projects had a great influence in changing the mindset of Orang Asli on economy. In any case, the above study is of the opinion that changing the mindset of Orang Asli is foremost in developing and improving their community.

There are several factors that influence the involvement of Orang Asli in business. These are the desire to be seen as wanting to be successful and an actual deep interest in business (Sokyen Man, 1998). Even with these factors, Orang Asli still face many problems such as the inability to plan and manage business, limited capital, lack of communication skill to deal with customers, and lack of business experience. Azlizan Talib and Hamzah Jusoh (2012) have a similar opinion that limited capital, little exposure and low business skill, little entrepreneurship training, lack of assistance and support from outside and lack of awareness about the need to change their livelihood inhibit the involvement of Orang Asli in business. In any case, the above study shows that having connections with politicians would enable Orang Asli to venture into business, carry out economic activities and develop entrepreneurship.

In other countries, the involvement of the aborigines in economic activities and their success in business is influenced by a number of internal and external factors. The study about aboriginal businesses in desert regions of Australia by MF Rola-Rubzen and J Ferguson (2009) found that internal factors such as ideas, objectives, individual commitment, entrepreneurial capability and skills, supporting staff and resource readiness were critical factors that influenced the success of a business or economic project. External factors such as mechanism of external support, economic and market conditions, government policies and socio-culture determine the extent to which the aborigines venture successfully into business or economic projects.

A study carried out on several co-operatives of aboriginal people in Canada by Ketilson dan Mac Pherson (2001) revealed that the organisations had been successful in raising the standard of living of the former and added value to their activities. The co-operatives run by aboriginal

people in Canada had not only been successful in enhancing entrepreneurship, but had also been successful in venturing into several sectors such as finance, fishery, housing and consumerism. Moreover, these co-operatives had been successful in providing for the needs of their local communities such as health, education and old folk homes.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The study focuses only on several selected Orang Asli settlements, covering four districts in Perak (Batang Padang, Kinta, Kuala Kangsar and Hulu Perak) and three districts in Pahang (Bentong, Kuala Lipis & Rompin). The sample of Orang Asli co-operatives was obtained using the purposive sampling technique. The sample population comprises 16 co-operatives in Perak and 28 co-operatives in Pahang. However, the sampling requirement dictated that all the 16 co-operatives in Perak were included, whereas only 17 from the initial 28 in Pahang were selected, hence the final sample size of 33 co-operatives. In selecting the sample of heads of families (HOHs), the convenience sampling technique was used. The respondents must be permanent settlers in the mukim (sub-district), post (a prefix on the name of an Orang Asli settlement that is in reference to a postal address), or a village where the sample co-operatives are located. A total of 375 HOHs, comprising 234 from Perak and 141 from Pahang, were selected following Sekaran U (1999)'s "sample size for a given population size" table and using the proportionate stratified random sampling technique.

The primary data were obtained from survey conducted using three sets of structured questionnaires based on the objective of the study and literature review and unstructured face-to-face interview of respondents. The computer programme used for processing and analysing the data is SPSS Version 20. Information on co-operatives, members of co-operatives and HOHs are produced in the form of percentages, frequency tables and cross-tabulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the results of data analysis on the background of the co-operatives, its management, involvement of members, economic activities and the progress of the Orang Asli co-operatives.

Background and Management of Co-operatives

Of the 33 co-operatives in the sample, two-thirds (66.7%) were only registered in the last two years, the period when the establishment of co-operatives was being pursued aggressively. Four co-operatives were registered more than five years before. Only 21 of the co-operatives have more than 100 members each, and as a whole each co-operative is small in terms of membership size relative to the population of Orang Asli in the area the co-operative is located.

Further, none of the co-operatives has its own office and staff, and none has any stable economic activities as yet. This situation arises because of lack of fund and that the co-operatives have not

been able to identify and plan any suitable economic projects. On a good note, these co-operatives do have plans to go into growing of plantation crops, livestock rearing, retailing, operating rest houses, doing contract works, logging, running petrol stations, running bus service and operating bulk selling centres. Alas, these economic projects would not be able to take off without JAKOA, SKM and other agencies giving financial support, opportunities and supervision. The results support study conducted by Tunisan Seman (2002) and MF Rola-Rubzen and J Ferguson (2009).

From the perspective of the management of co-operatives, the board members are below 50 years in age, with most of the chairmen, secretaries and treasurers having little experience as co-operative board members and with only primary or secondary education. Slightly more than half of the board members (51.5%) are self-employed as traders, contractors, rubber smallholders, hunters and collectors of jungle produce.

Management of Co-operatives and Members Involvement

As a whole, the co-operative boards do not convene meetings as regularly as that dictated by the rule. As many as 28 co-operative boards (84.9%) meet less than six times a year, implying that the board members do not discuss problems and plan their activities frequently enough. However, the attendance of board members in any meeting, if held, is high, exceeding 80 per cent. This suggests that as a whole, the board members are supportive of their co-operatives. What is needed is someone among them who is able to convince that they should hold meetings more regularly and have the annual general meetings as scheduled.

The study reveals that participation by members in any activity of the co-operatives is very low, unless the activities give economic benefit directly to the families such as being appointed as contractors, plantation supervisors and suppliers of jungle produce and handicrafts. That the majority of the co-operative members do not attend annual general meetings may have to do with the fact that they live in settlements far from the co-operatives and that their awareness on the importance of co-operatives is low.

Economic and Social Activities of Co-operatives

Although at the moment majority of Orang Asli co-operatives under study have not been carrying out any activities, a small number have successfully organize some economic activities for their members. Several of the latter have more than one activity which include plantation works, agricultural projects, fish rearing, contract work, transportation, tourism, petrol station and retailing.

A small number of co-operatives was also involved in organizing social activities such as providing courses, trainings, credit, funeral expenses and agricultural advisory services to members. As most Orang Asli co-operatives do not have stable income generating activities, it is difficult to provide social amenities for their members due to lack of fund. Despite this outlook, study conducted by Ketilson dan Mac Pherson (2001) shows aboriginal co-operatives has the capacity to increase the standard of living.

Performance of Co-operatives

As a whole, the financial situation of the co-operatives is in a dire state. The main problem is that members could only come up with very little capital contribution. A number of co-operatives do not even have share capital although they have long been registered. This situation arises because members are not aware of the importance of putting in their contribution or are not confident about investing in the co-operatives, apart from the fact that they have small income to part with. This issue is confirmed through the findings of Zahid *et al.* (1996), Sokyen Man (1998) and Khairul Hisham *et al.* (2007) that some Orang Asli are incapable of generating permanent and stable income, hence they are unable to fulfill minimum amount of share capital. Most of the co-operatives do not have any asset and do not generate revenue, let alone make profit.

Features and Success Factors of Active Co-operatives

The study has identified four co-operatives that are active and have the potential to be successful. The ability of a co-operative to run well, overcome the various challenges and be successful depends a lot on many internal and external factors. Among the factors that have been identified to be associated with the success of the four co-operatives above are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Success Factors of Active Co-operatives

Success Factor	Description
1. Awareness on and understanding of co-operatives	- Early engagement with the Orang Asli to make them understand and accept the concept of co-operatives
2. Relationship with the Orang Asli community	- Long-term relationship with co-operatives (including related government agencies and NGOs) to establish the confidence and trust of the Orang Asli community towards co-operatives
3. Commitment and leadership	- Commitment and leadership abilities of the board members in capitalizing on the Orang Asli culture of being respectful to their leaders.
4. Competency of the co-operative board members and the staff	- Knowledge and skill in management and the business venture - Combination of board members' experience and external expertise

5. Capacity of the Orang Asli community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Readiness from the point of mental and work culture - Active involvement of members and the community at large in co-operatives' activities - Knowledge and the skills to build their ability, particularly among the younger generation
6. Support and cooperation from external entities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities given by external entities - Good relationship with community and political leaders - Assistance in the form of financial, materials and know-how.

Involvement of Members and Co-operative Practices

Although the formation of Orang Asli co-operatives is largely accomplished through the assistance of outside organisations (JAKOA and SKM), most members joined the co-operatives on account of their own awareness and interest. The heads of the Orang Asli communities (*Tok Batin*), families and friends also have an influence on members joining the co-operatives, apart from the desire to increase their income from economic activities of the co-operatives. It must be emphasised, however, that the participation of members in the activities of the co-operatives whether they serve as suppliers or workers or just being customers is very small. In retrospect, the co-operatives itself contribute to this situation because they are not active and there is a lack of social activities for members.

A total of 115 members (48.2%) have attended the co-operatives' AGM, while 97 members (41%) have attended talks and courses on co-operatives organised by ANGKASA, Co-operative College of Malaysia (MKM) or Malaysia Cooperative Society Commission (SKM). It is noted that co-operative members in Perak have been paid dividend for being members, provided with various assistance and discounts on goods purchased. They have also enjoyed community-based functions.

Profile of Heads of Household

The study sample of 665 heads of households (HOHs) from Pahang and Perak are mostly from the Semai tribe, followed by the Temiar and Jakun tribes. The majority (85%) are males and between 40 to 50 years old. More than half do not profess any religion or belief, while the rest are either Muslims or Christians. The majority of the HOHs in the study completed only a primary education, while 131 among them (20%) have had no formal education. However, a few among them (18 or 1.4%) have had the opportunity to go for higher education, either in academic or in skills training.

More than half among the household heads are married, with one to three children living with them. In addition to their own children, there are also between one to three relatives staying with them, implying that the HOHs are supporting larger households. Almost three-quarters of the HOHs are self-employed as farmers, smallholders or traders in their own villages or settlements. Only a few (14.7%) are employed in the public or private sectors.

Many of the HOHs in this study do not depend on jungle produce such as rattan, *damar*, agarwood (*gaharu*), fishing and hunting as their main source of income. The study shows that only a small proportion (14.5%) is still in this vocation. The decline on the dependence on jungle produce is due to the fact that it is incapable of providing a strong base for a continuous economic development, jungle resources are becoming scarce due to excessive exploitation, which logging and land clearing have impacted adversely on the natural environment. In addition to the above, the middlemen's control on price brought damaging consequences to the Orang Asli, such as being paid below the market price for their produce and even cheated.

The majority of the HOHs earn an average monthly income of at most RM700 from their main economic activity. To supplement their meagre income, they do other work such as trading, gathering jungle produce, farming, livestock rearing, and planting rubber and oil palm, earning an additional income of between RM100 and RM400 a month. However, there are those who earn an additional income of RM700-RM1000 from their supplementary work. The breakdown of their monthly expenditure is as follows: RM200-RM300 for food; RM200 for transportation; RM200-RM400 for children's education; and less than RM200 for recreation and entertainment. A few among them (44 respondents) set aside a portion of their income for saving and investment.

Involvement in Business

There are 71 respondents involved in a small-scale business of marketing and services in their own villages. Among them, 26 are marketing their own products at the district level, while two others at the state level. The business capital of most of these business operators are small – between RM1000 and RM3000, and invariably from their own savings and that they only employ family members. More than half among them have the experience and skills in running a business, and have received a formal training in their chosen business venture.

Although there is avenue for expanding their business, they face problems related to business capital and premise to run their business. Their operating centres are far from the supply points and marketplace, and this adversely affects their cost and selling prices. There are also competitions from Chinese companies, Kampuchea traders and others and these affect their expansion potential. They also encounter problem of customers buying on credit and supplier's inability to deliver goods, apart from the difficulty in getting business licence/permits and securing business grants from government agencies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study indicate that Orang Asli co-operatives are faced with many constraints that affect their performance and competitive position and is in great need of assistance from government and various related agencies. Some of the reasons identified are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Constraints Faced by Orang Asli Co-operatives

Constraints	Details
1. Location	- Being far away from town centres makes it difficult for them to communicate and obtain supply, thus adversely affecting cost.
2. Limited resources	- Difficulty in obtaining land and supply - Difficulty in obtaining financial assistance/funding for economic activities - The unavailability of appropriate business premises to enhance entrepreneurship
3. Low competency	- Low education, skills and expertise among members of the community and co-operatives - Low creativity and innovativeness
4. Dependence on the government and JAKOA	- Dependence on opportunities and assistance from the government, JAKOA and other agencies (Top-bottom) - Difficulty in establishing strategic alliances with the private sector
5. Sub-optimal infrastructure	- Unmetalled roads, lack of water and electricity supply, non-existent telephone and internet facilities rendering it difficult to communicate with outsiders.
6. Little knowledge on co-operatives	- Little understanding on the principle, foundations and practices of co-operatives - Low participation in and support for the business activities of co-operatives
7. Values and culture	- Most of the Orang Asli are comfortable with the status quo and not inclined towards materialism.

In order to improve the ability of the Orang Asli co-operatives, the following short and long term development plans and a development model are recommended. The model proposed is suitable as a reference to develop the Orang Asli co-operatives.

Short-Term Development Plans

Increasing Awareness about Co-operative through Training

Education and skills training on business planning, business management, marketing and other specific areas should be made available for the younger generation, entrepreneurs with potential, and co-operative members. Skills development programme should focus on business management and business areas identified to have a potential to grow in the locality. Once the Orang Asli are aware about the importance of being involved in co-operatives, MKM can organize special programmes on the preparation of working papers and provide the grant to form co-operatives.

Instilling Excellent Work Culture through Recruitment and Orientation Programmes

There is a need for recruitment and orientation programmes for Orang Asli entering the job market to make them more disciplined and dedicated to their jobs. The orientation programmes should also be extended to those about to venture into business so that the risk of business failure is minimised and that they would not be saddled with ineffectiveness. On the other hand, the agencies responsible for co-operatives and the development of the Orang Asli should provide exposure, supervision and monitor the co-operatives's programmes closely. There is also a need to improve the infrastructure and amenities in Orang Asli settlements.

Long-Term Development Plan

Increasing the Active Involvement of Public and Private Sectors

The responsibility of improving the economy of the Orang Asli and their co-operatives should not be placed solely on the government, government agencies and NGOs, but should also be shouldered by the private sector and government-linked companies (GLCs) through contract farming. The involvement of the private sector is not just to support the drive to empower the Orang Asli co-operatives to be more active in economic activities, but more importantly to enhance entrepreneurship and develop the community economically and socially. The involvement of the private sector can be in the form of providing employment opportunities, becoming investors, shareholders and business partners in their traditional business as well as in new knowledge-based business ventures. Public organisations and agencies should work hand-in-hand with the private sector in formulating policies, planning and implementing economic programmes. The government could assist to widen the activities of co-operatives by introducing *Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia* (One Malaysia People's Shop/Mart, KRIM), *Kedai Koperasi 1Malaysia* (One Malaysia Co-operative Shop/Mart), *Transformasi Kedai Runcit* (Grocery Store Transformation Programme, TUKAR) and various other programmes targeted specifically for the Orang Asli community.

Boosting the Growth of Entrepreneurship through Cottage Industry

The various organisations (agencies, Orang Asli communities, co-operatives, investors, corporate bodies and private sector) must be focused and formulate strategies through cooperation and partnership to encourage entrepreneurship activities and establish cottage industry within the

Orang Asli communities, emphasizing on small groups participation and through co-operatives. Among the cottage industry products that are feasible for Orang Asli are handicrafts, honey bee, *tongkat ali* (a medicinal plant), sculpture, homestay and agro-tourism. The decision to embark on any industry should be based on the local demand and availability of resources and skills. In addition, they must be provided with training and know-how to start a business, provided with access to funding, assistance in getting supplies and marketing the products. In addition, continuous mentoring programme should be designed to ensure that entrepreneurs and co-operatives are successful and resilient.

Orang Asli Co-operative Development Model

Based on the findings of this study, a business model for Orang Asli community where it involves the co-operatives, government agencies and the private sector is proposed. The business model is formulated following the approach adopted by the New Economic Model in transforming the country's economy and encompassing the following components:

- a. High income - Projects/products that generate high income
- b. Sustainability -Projects/products that can sustain over a long period of time
- c. Inclusiveness - Projects/projects that are beneficial to everyone in the local community

In the initial stage, the relevant government agencies and the co-operatives involved (if the co-operatives have indeed been formed) will identify products/activities available around the Orang Asli settlements that could be commercialised. If the project evaluation deems such product/activity commercially viable, a MoU/MoA is prepared together by the government agencies, the co-operatives involved and the public sector/GLC, covering policies, incentives and project financing. While this is on-going, courses on awareness on co-operatives, leadership and other relevant courses are conducted with the participation of designated Orang Asli communities, including especially the youth.

After the signing of the agreement, the government agency concerned will conduct training for co-operative staff, while other agencies provide technical trainings and equipment appropriate for the business selected. The private sector/GLC will be responsible to monitor the quality of goods produced by the co-operatives so that these meet the standard they set and are thus marketable. These products are then sold to the private sector/GLC under the contract farming arrangement or any other form of joint-venture as agreed in the MoU/MoA.

Figure 1 summarises the proposed development model for the Orang Asli co-operatives encompassing the functions of the government and implementing agencies, the activities, both production and marketing, and entrepreneurship development. Central in the model is the role of co-operatives in the economic development of the of the Orang Asli community.

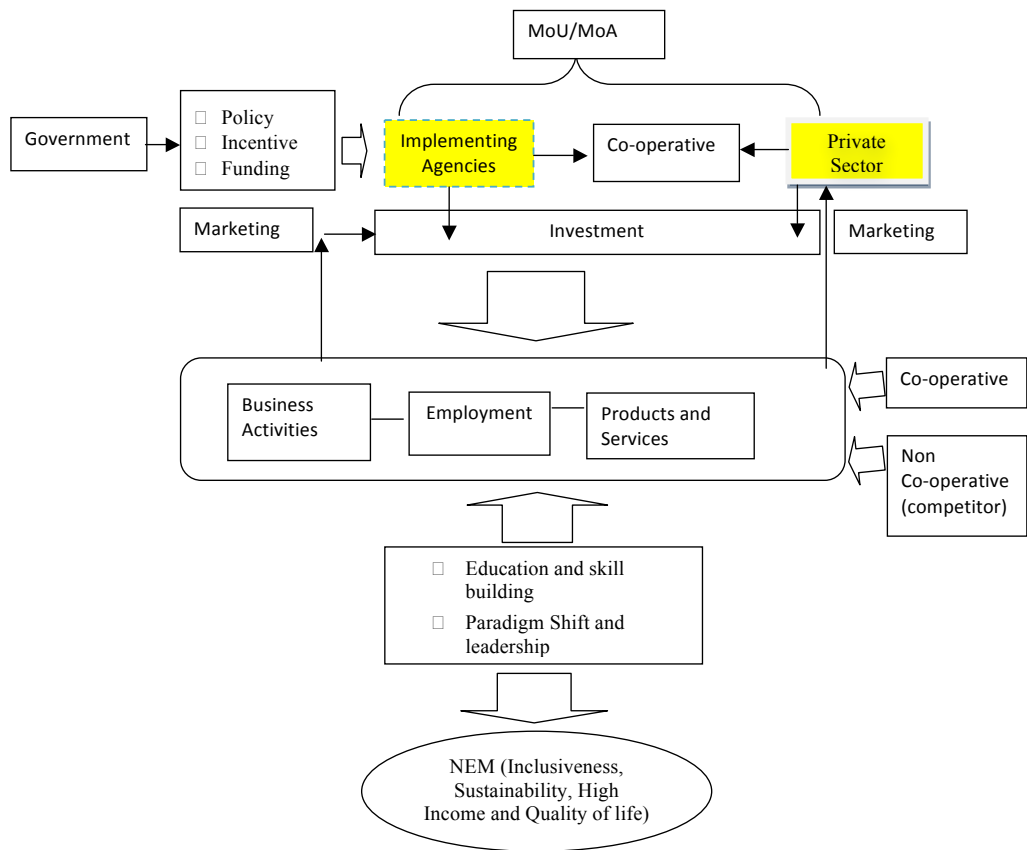


Figure 1: Development Model for Orang Asli Co-operatives

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