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The Ecology of Health and Nutrition of “Orang Asli” (Indigenous People) Women and Children in Peninsular Malaysia

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ABSTRACT Orang Asli (translated as “original peoples”) are the indigenous inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia. They constitute a minority group making up approximately 0.6% of the total population of Malaysia. A high proportion in the Orang Asli community subsists on a level that is below the government’s poverty line income. Despite progress in economic development and continuous efforts by the government, the health of Orang Asli continues to lag behind that of the general population. These health differentials are particularly pronounced among the nutritionally vulnerable groups such as women and children. The mean energy intake of Orang Asli is often below the recommended energy and nutrient levels. The long-term insufficient intake of energy and nutrients coupled with physically active lifestyle could explain the high prevalence of chronic energy deficiency in Orang Asli women. This condition could further undermine the women’s health as well as reproductive and productive capabilities. Besides chronic energy deficiency, recent studies also showed that overweight and obesity has emerged among the Orang Asli women. Prevalence of anaemia and iodine deficiency disorders is also high among the women. Underweight and stunting in young children are often found in one-third to three quarters of the population groups studied. While efforts to improve the health and nutritional status of the Orang Asli community deserve serious attention, equally high priority should be accorded to the poor schooling performance of the Orang Asli children. Without substantially increasing the number of Orang Asli children enrolled in primary and secondary schools, the prospect of socio-economic advancement of the Orang Asli appears bleak. They will remain trapped in the vicious socio-ecological cycle of low education and skills, poverty, poor nutrition and health.