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# Indigenous lessons for Nicol David

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UNDP Goodwill Ambassador Nicol David visited an orang asli community to find out their needs.

ORANG asli children at the Semai settlement in Kampung Ulu Tual, Pahang, walk 10km to school every morning, going uphill and downhill through the lush forest terrain. Sometimes, they don't make it all the way, especially during the rainy season when the muddy tracks prove too dangerous to traverse. With school being so inaccessible, it is not unusual for these children to stop their schooling. Formal learning is not of high priority to the orang asli, who prefers to invest in activities that uphold the culture customs and lifestyle of their community. Instead of learning to read and write, children learn skills to enable them to find their living from the land.

Recently, UNDP Goodwill Ambassador Datuk Nicol David spent a day at the village as part of UNDP's upcoming release of Malaysia's first ever National Human Development Report (NHDR), which will highlight many key issues faced by different communities in Malaysia, including the orang asli. Themed "Redesigning an Inclusive Feature", the report is an analysis of the country's development.

Nicol's field visit to Ulu Tual was meant to open up a platform for Malaysia's bumiputera minorities to be heard.

This is Nicol's second visit to a rural community in Malaysia since the squash champion's appointment as the UNDP Goodwill Ambassador in 2002. Her first was in 2008 when she visited Punan Bah in Sarawak.

"The villagers have been so warm and welcoming. They are so open and willing to learn. You can see that they've got so much potential and that if we were to just give them a little bit of support, they would then go the extra mile," said Nicol.

Since January, the villagers had been hard at work building a community learning centre, with support from the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC). Named cenwey penaney (shoots of ingenuity), the centre is designed to appeal to the Semai children who will learn valuable skills and traditions that are relevant to their community, like basket-weaving and making hog and bird snares.

According to Kampung B's village head Yok Ek Chantan, 45, construction of the centre has been slow due to financial constraints. Nevertheless, there is much enthusiasm for the learning hub as it will be the first dedicated space to ensuring the continuance of the community's traditions.

"We've tried sending some of the children off to boarding school but they don't seem to fit in well with the rest of their classmates. We've also had some children who find it hard to ease back into the orang asli way of living after they've been away for some time," said Yok Ek.

The establishment of the cenwey penaney will make a huge difference in the community's lives, said Nicol.

"We take a lot of things for granted, like our education system. The orang asli make the most of what they have, and that's really inspiring. Hopefully, we can help create the awareness that everyone should come and support those who do not necessarily have the same privileges as we do," she said.

COAC assistant co-ordinator Jenita Engi, who has been assisting with the cenwey penaney project, hoped that more support will be given to orang asli, and in the way they need it.

"When it comes to the orang asli, every tribe has its own customs and cultures. I've seen many cases where city folks try to take the villagers out of their comfort zone to try and 'rehabilitate' them into one of them. That's just wrong because we're not listening to what it is that they really need.

"If you say the orang asli need homes, they know how to build their own homes. If you say they need a good source of income, they have their own ways of making a living. To help them, we have to start thinking about how to enhance what they already have and give them the support to continue with their way of living," said Jenita.



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