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**Letter to the Editor**

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### **Protect the welfare of indigenous communities in Sarawak amid the MCO**

SAM has been receiving reports from indigenous communities in interior Sarawak, which describe how the movement control order (MCO) has affected them. The communities are currently anxious over the dwindling supply of essential food items, daily necessities and cash, and their inability to access medical, banking and other essential services and sell their produce in the nearest rural towns.

As a result of the decline in soil fertility and the proliferation of pests brought about by logging and plantation operations, in the last 30 years, many Sarawak indigenous families had been forced to abandon the cultivation of hill rice. For such families, rice is now purchased in the nearest town, along with other food items such as cooking oil, seasoning herbs and spices, sauces, sugar, salt, infant formula, flour, coffee and tea as well as daily necessities such as fuel and personal care and cleaning products. Fortunately, they are still able to depend on their farms and rivers to provide them with vegetables, fruits and fish, proving to us how a diversified agricultural strategy is instrumental for food security.

Therefore, in order to ensure that their welfare is protected, we urge that the authorities immediately undertake the following actions:

- (i) The establishment of a special village committee on disaster management whose tasks will include:
  - (a) the reporting of the essential needs of their community, including important food items and daily necessities and any other special needs, such as the supply of potable water, to the selected nearest designated authority; and the joint identification, implementation and monitoring of the delivery methods of these essentials;
  - (b) the fair distribution of essential foods and goods that have been delivered by the authorities amongst their community members, based on the number of persons in each household and considerations of any special needs of specific families;
  - (c) the issuance of any written approval for community members who may need to access essential services such as medical appointments and emergencies and banking in town, and the joint coordination with the relevant authorities to assist such individuals to travel and access these services; and
  - (d) the implementation of a standard operating procedure when a community member is suspected to be showing symptoms associated with Covid-19.

(ii) The direct and bulk delivery of essential items to the community by the authorities to minimise direct contact, adhering to the guidelines established under the MCO. The total coverage of all such support mechanisms must not discriminate against communities who live under the leadership of residents' associations and village heads who have not been appointed by the state.

(iii) The strict prohibition against visits by outside parties to rural indigenous communities, including workers of plantation and logging companies; as well as voluntary humanitarian missions, unless official permits have been given to the latter.

(iv) The delivery of the same assistance to the school hostels located in the interior which may need such a support.

(v) The provision of support through the said committee, whenever possible, for rural indigenous communities to send their agricultural and forest produce to the nearest trading hubs, in accordance with the procedures that have been established under the MCO, so that the communities may continue to receive some income, while produce wastage can be avoided and the local food security can be improved. This marketing mechanism may require the support of a specific local stimulus package and logistical assistance from the relevant authorities.

(vi) The clear permission for rural indigenous communities living nearer to these rural towns where the MCO is tightly enforced by the police and local authorities, to continue their agricultural and fishery activities that may take place within a permissible range from their houses, be they for income generation or self-sufficiency needs, provided that social distancing and other health precautions can be observed.

It is our hope that our calls above will be considered and implemented by the authorities as soon as possible.

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**Sahabat Alam Malaysia**