

ACADEMY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS (ASERA)



BACKGROUND

The *Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis* (ASERA) was established on October 16, 1996 as a non-profit research and advocacy organisation, limited by guarantee, under the Registrar of Companies Act 1965. It was at first named the *Academy of Social Sciences* or 'Akademi Sains Sosial (AKASS) and was administered from Universiti Sains Malaysia, from 1996-2004, with the permission of the Vice-Chancellor's office, where its Secretariat was housed at the *Gender Development Research Centre* (KANITA). In 1996-2004, its Executive Director, Dato' Datin Prof Wazir Jahan Karim, was also the Director of KANITA, and the two organisations ran many joint projects and programmes, with KANITA engaged in academic research and AKASS, advocacy and training for civil society initiatives. Prof Wazir Jahan Karim also founded the *South East Asian Association of Gender Research (SAMA)* which was also administered from KANITA as a non-governmental organisation, from 1992-95 and later transferred to University Malaya from 1996. This organisation engaged academicians in civil society initiatives, concerned with the empowerment of women. In November, 2008, its Secretariat returned to KANITA after it was transferred from University Malaya to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Hence, the civil society movement, focusing on gender and economic justice was founded in public universities in Malaysia, with Universiti Sains Malaysia and women scholars taking a lead in laying the foundations for change and transformation in the academe. It attempted to bridge the gap between academic and popular knowledge and advocated the democratisation of knowledge and leadership. Activities were issue driven and relevant to the needs and interests of ordinary and disadvantaged people in society.

In 2004, ASERA was independently administered as a non-governmental organisation and organised both academic research and advocacy. Its field of research and advocacy covered applied areas of research on poverty and development, human capacity-building, gender empowerment and leadership and civil society building. Prof Wazir Jahan Karim was the founder of AKASS and ASERA but among the early co-founders of AKASS and ASERA were the late sociologists, Prof Mohd. Dahlan and Prof Ishak Shari of the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Others were Prof Dato' Hood Salleh of UKM, Prof Dato' Sharifah Zaleha of UKM and Capt. Dato' Dr Mohd Razha of Universiti Sains Malaysia. All are scholars in areas of social, cultural and economic development and were concerned for economic justice and civil society empowerment.

ASERA'S MISSION STATEMENT

“New Knowledge is Power but Power is only Powerful if it Empowers others to Seek New Knowledge”

STATUS AND REGISTRATION

Registered on October 3 1996, as a non-profit company under the Registrar of Companies Act 1965, Section 16 (4) limited by Guarantee.

Its permanent address is 26, Jl . Marie Pitchay, Hillside, Tanjung Bungah, 11200, Penang

STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION

The Academy is administered by an Executive Director, who is assisted by a Company Secretary, and a Financial Controller. The Executive Director is also Chairman of the Board of Directors. Membership to the Academy is by invitation and members are conferred the titles of ‘distinguished fellow’, ‘senior fellow’ and ‘fellow’.



From left: Dato' Datin Dr Wazir Jahan Karim, Founding Distinguished Fellow and Executive Director, 1996; Dato' Capt. Dr Mohd. Rashid Razha, Founding Senior Fellow 1996; Dato' Prof Hood Salleh, Founding Senior Fellow and Director, the late Prof Syed Hussein Alatas, Founding Chairman, 1996-98;

Highlights on Main Programmes

“People Economics : Globalisation and Poverty”: An initiative to develop a global and regional framework for the enrichment of social capital and indigenous cooperative networks in food production, rapidly eroded by economic globalisation and the encroachment of commercial and industrial development on indigenous settlements, both inland and maritime. An earlier component of this programme was funded by the *Toyota Foundation*, with specific focus on women migrant workers. This programme was coordinated with the *Asian Centre for Migration* of *Chulalongkorn University*, in the second phase (2008-09), through an expert group meeting and workshop. It engaged five Asian universities in collaborative research and advocacy. Other universities which participated in this programme were Sophia University and Cambridge University (Clare Hall),



Rural Poverty at Kg Cham, Cambodia:Community Visit and Participatory



Programme on “ Urban Poverty and Built Environments”:

Action Research (PAR) with the *Pan Pacific Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA)*, Penang Branch with the support of the *Cambodian Reproductive Health Association* and the *United Planned Parenthood*

Homeless Rickshaw Pullers in George Town Penang, A World Heritage City (2008)

Academic Linkages and Networking



Visiting Fellows at Clare Hall, Cambridge: W.J.Karim (far Left, seated) is a Life Member. The Hall provides a conducive climate of study and is an excellent networking centre for advancement in research and analysis. Photo by Clare Hall 2006.



From Left: Malaysian Student Leadership Conference, London, Mediating with Tanjong Tokong Resident's Association over Displacement of Settlements, Supported by Penang Heritage Trust and below, Dining at Girton's College with Dame Prof Marilyn Strathern, and other Fellows

ASERA'S CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Among the groups which have benefited from ASERA'S programmes were school-leavers, single mothers, working women, the disadvantaged and poor in rural and urban cultural minorities and indigenous people and fragmented urban residents who have been marginalised through urban renewal and globalisation. The following are the most important programmes undertaken by AKASS-ASERA from 1996-2008.

1. Training Orang Asli leaders on Intellectual Property and Patents.

This project was made possible by a grant from the *Royal Netherlands Government (1996-98)*, and was concerned with assisting Orang Asli leaders, artisans and carvers understand the importance of patenting-claiming ownership over unique designs and works of art which have been systematically copied by others. Leaders became concerned for the need to preserve their cultural and bio-diversity which was increasingly eroded through urbanisation and globalisation.



Weaving and Plaiting are Still Women's Main Source of Income for Women in the Rain Forests.



Children of the Kensui Community in Kedah, North Malaysia. Their future remains uncertain



Sourcing an income through wood carving: A Ma' Betise' wood carver of Carey Island, West Coast of Selangor, Malaysia

2. Women's Library at the Caring Society Complex, Penang

With the assistance of the *British Council (1998-2000)*, a multi-media Library was established by AKASS-ASERA, to provide NGO's with ICT tools and reading materials to develop human capacities further. This was supplemented by ICT training programmes which were aimed at raising the technological capacities of NGO's and further advance their relevant areas of interests.

3 'Good Shoes for Walking'- Youth at Risk and Empowerment through Education

This programme was initiated from a fund-raising drive, (1998-2000) whereby 20 scholarships were awarded to poor upper secondary students from two schools on Penang Island, Sekolah Kebangsaan Tanjung Bungah and Sekolah Kebangsaan Jelutong. The scholarships were aimed at providing an incentive to bright achievers from poor families to excel in their studies, to qualify for tertiary education in public universities. These scholarships were awarded through the schools' administrative authorities.

4. Global Governance and Society: Global Islamic Civil Society Network

The Global Governance and Society Programme was established in 1995 and the two year programme (2002-3) on the '*Global Islamic Civil Society Network*' was made possible by a grant from the *US Govt.* to promote a more progressive discourse on Islam, which could be adopted by leaders of civil society movements. Topics that were debated and discussed by eminent scholars included terrorism, urban poverty in Muslim communities and social fragmentation in Muslim societies.



The Global Civil Society Initiative was driven by several factors-increasing fundamentalism and stigmatisation of Muslims globally, the perceived devaluation of women through Islam and increasing support from the West for Counter-terrorism. Responses from young Muslims throughout the world was significantly revealing, in their concern for academic achievement and job placement and defence of Islam as a progressive religion which has been misunderstood. They feared stigmatisation in the global work-force and were concerned for the future of their younger siblings and friends. This programme brought together Muslim and non-Muslim students from a number of universities, to exchange views on how to empower the younger generation to work towards social and economic excellence rather than militancy. Unemployment and prejudice and discrimination at the work place however remain a major issue.

Left: Students at a Café in Istanbul. Right: Muslim students get together from the London School of Economics and Bahcesehir University, Istanbul.

5. Social and Family Transformation among Malaysian Families

This applied research project was conducted with the cooperation of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2003-04) and involved 5,000 women in a Malaysian national survey on changing family and socio-political values. The objective was to establish the extent of women's decision-making powers in the domestic and formal sectors of the economy and to understand their concerns for civil society building.

The study revealed insignificant change in values towards the family and marriage. There was a significant increase in formal work and economic aspirations but low awareness of financial and legal rights, There was a disinterest in formal politics and civil society initiatives except in Sabah and Sarawak. Finance and economic sustainability were the primary concerns and the need for formal work was closely associated with the need for income rather than gender empowerment.

6. Gender Empowerment through Information Communication Technologies (ICT)

7. Globalisation, Migration and Gender

concerned with understanding the impact of women's migration on labour laws and policy. It was initiated with a grant from the Toyota Foundation (2006-08) , under the 'Asian Neighbour's Network'. This participatory action research project, which involved five international universities in Asia was migrant workers were interviewed to understand their concerns and needs. Focusing on the most disadvantaged communities in Southeast Asia, workers were also encouraged to understand how the research process could be an important empowering tool for change, in the villages which have been emptied out of women, who remain the most vital human resources in disadvantaged rural areas in Asia. This study has also prompted an initiative to develop a book on 'People Economics' as a resource guide for civil society initiatives for migrant workers.

Other than the above, ASERA participated in the Penang State Government's Committee on Women's Development (1996-2006) and conducted several workshops, seminars and lectures to empower women who were already engaged in NGO activities. Among the topics which ASERA was asked to assist included counseling strategies, mental health, sustainable employment, income-generating activities and capacity-building.

Programmes and Activities of the Academy 2009-13

1. The Establishment of Community Initiative Councils

ASERA aims to reform decision-making on the State level by proposing the establishment of *Community Initiative Councils* (CIC's) which will be the most important caucus for NGO's to meet and discuss their agendas for the development of local communities. These CIC's will be a grass-roots machinery for the Federal authorities to discuss, implement and evaluate the kinds of development initiatives proposed by local level communities and an opportunity for the Federal authorities to comprehend and undertake resolutions on the diversity of problems and issues faced by local communities.

The role of ASERA would be to formulate the structure and organisation of CIC's, to provide the terms of reference for dialogue between the Federal and State governments and to provide support for capacity-building among leaders of relevant NGO organisations, to enable them to articulate their problems and to write their proposals in ways acceptable to the government. This will be the Voice of the People on the grass-roots but provided through structures of communication which will be manageable, constructive and productive.

2. Globalisation and Advancing Human Capacities in Local Communities

This programme is an extension of the earlier programme on "People Economics: Globalisation and Poverty". It will comprise several projects including a conference on 'Globalisation and the People', a book on 'Systemic Structures of Economic Exchange in Engendered Economics' and productive change in economics. It will involve workers, labour groups, labour based NGO's, academicians, economic planners and philanthropists in intensive dialogue on how the global economic systems can benefit from reforms in global policies of labour and waging.



Scouring the beach to look for bivalves and other crustaceans. Dwindling food sources force people to leave for the city or migrate to other countries. Photo by Wazir J.Karim 2001.



Straits of Melaka: Displacement of Indigenous People and Lost of Access to Maritime Resources is a Major Problem in Southeast Asia and Other Maritime Communities in Asia. Large-Scale Development for Global Tourism takes Priority. Photo by W.J.Karim 2008

3. Maritime Resources in the Straits of Melaka and the Indian Ocean

ASERA will continue with its research and publications on the Straits of Melaka and the Indian Ocean, focusing on issues of heritage, conservation, cosmopolitanism and urban transformation in the port cities in this region. Following its study on the Straits Muslims, it will undertake further research in areas of ethnohistory, anthropology and urban sociology, with the objective of promoting a better understanding of the rise of Malay States and the movement towards multi-ethnic identities.

3. Publications with “Straits G.T.” of Intersocietal and Scientific (INAS)

ASERA initiated the publication of “Straits Muslims: Diasporas of the Northern Passage of the Straits of Melaka” with an initial grant to commission writers to write the book. Since then, it has entered into an agreement with INAS to assist co-publish some of its works on heritage and conservation, including launching and promotion activities. ASERA is also interested to co-publish with other institutions and publishing houses which are interested in the same works. It will also assist in the organisation of Memorial Lectures, Workshops and Seminars connected to the famous works of Malaysian and Asian writers.

4. Mentorship Programme

ASERA’s fellows maintain wide networks with Universities, Academies and Institutes in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and the United States. Graduates students who are about to embark on higher studies, spend time at ASERA, and participate in research and advocacy programmes. They receive training in participatory action, qualitative and statistical research, assist in the preparation of reports and documents, attend meetings and workshops and present papers for workshops and seminars. Skills in English communication, editing and writing are significantly sharpened. Students who have linked with ASERA have successfully obtained places in prestigious colleges and universities, including Harvard, London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Manchester.

Executive Director

Captain Dato' Dr Mohd Razha Rashid **Senior Fellow**

Company Secretary

Ch'ng Lee Chee
Well Corporate Services Sdn. Bhd.

Fellows

Lim Pao Lin
Damina Khairah (ASERA/Harvard)
Assoc Prof Dr Hajar Abdul Rahim

Board of Directors

Captain Dato' Dr Mohd Razha Rashid
Commanding Officer, KDSri Pinang
Assoc. Prof Dr Shakila Manan
School of Humanities, USM.
Prof. Dato' Hood Salleh

Distinguished Fellows

Dato' Datin Dr Wazir Jahan Karim
Life Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge

Senior Fellows

Captain Dato' Dr Mohd. Razha Rashid (School of Distance
Education Studies, USM)
Assoc. Prof Dr Shakila Manan (School of Humanities,USM)
Dr Farid Alatas (Malay Studies Dept...NUS)
Prof Dato' Hood Salleh (Muzium Akademi UKM)
Dato' Dr Othman Yatim (Akademi Melayu, UM)
Mr Javed Jabbar (Pakistan)

Financial Controller

Loke Seok Meen

Accountant and Auditor

Tiong Heh Bin
HB Tiong and Partners

Asian Museum, UKM