

## **1<sup>st</sup> NATIONAL SEMINAR ON REHABILITATION 2006**

*5-7 September 2006  
Bangi, Selangor*

### **The Biwako Millennium Framework for Action: The Way Forward**

*by*

**Prof. Datuk Dr. Ismail bin Mohd. Salleh,**  
*President, Malaysian Association for the Blind  
& CEO/ Vice Chancellor, IUCTT University, Kuala Lumpur*

#### **Introduction**

The BMFA sets out important policy guidelines with the view to achieving an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society for the disabled. In order to fulfil the goals as indicated in the document, seven priority areas have been outlined for immediate consideration and formulation of action plans. The seven priorities have to do with the self-help organisations, disabled women, early intervention and education, training and employment, an accessible environment, user-friendly ICT, and finally, poverty alleviation and capacity-building. Ultimately, all these priorities are aimed at bringing about the empowerment of the disabled through “full participation and equality” in society; this, in fact, harks back to the theme which was adopted in 1981 for the International Year of Disabled Persons (or IYDP).

The question we need to ask now is this: “Has the BMFA made any impact on the lives of the disabled in Malaysia?” Before I provide an answer, let us first reflect on what has taken place in this country since the IYDP of 1981.

The seven areas or targets are;

#### **1. Self-Help Organisations of the Disabled**

Although there has been no specific government policies in favour of the self-help organisations of the disabled, certain provisions have been introduced by the Government that are inclined to foster the development of such self-help groups. A good example is the policy of providing financial grants to encourage the disabled to form groups which wish to set up their own small production workshops or cooperatives; this has enabled the blind to start small workshops in Temerloh and massage enterprises in Brickfields.

Another example in which government recognition of disabled groups is implicit can be seen in the fact that the Government is willing to extend invitations to self-help organisations of the disabled to have representation on various government committees, forums and workshops. The National Advisory and Consultative Council (NACC), of course, is an outstanding example.

Over the last 30 years we have seen the growth of the number of self help organisations such Malaysian Confederation of Disabled persons (MCD), Society of the Blind (SBM), Malaysian Federation of Deaf (MFD) and MASIA were established. Organisations like Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) and the Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation (MCR) being formed by the Government played a combination role of both of and for working together for the benefit of the target group. The blind and disabled persons are able to work hand in hand with

sighted or able-bodied partners in decision-making or policy formulation for the benefit of the clients concerned.

## **2. Disabled Women**

In line with the Government's policy to open opportunities to women both on the political and economic front, disabled women have also been able to benefit from this new climate of awareness and understanding with regards to the potential of womanpower! At the university level, for instance, disabled women now occupy important positions as lecturers and administrators. Likewise, at the NGO level, more disabled women are involved in directing the affairs of such organisations and they are actively involved in self help organisations. It is encouraging for the Government to consider Gender Budgeting and I do hope that 'Women with Disability' are not forgotten while formulating the Gender Budgeting. Another area would be to focus on Private sectors.

## **3. Early Intervention and Education**

The Government's new education policy (2001 - 2010) has strongly focus on early intervention and education. Although it does not provide any direct benefits to the disabled, organisations such as MAB have been able to take advantage of this policy. Since 1998, MAB has established three pre-school programmes for the blind - in Kuala Lumpur, Klang and Kota Baru respectively. The Government has promised to provide funding for these programmes. At the same time, the Government has also encouraged residential schools and integrated programmes to set up their own pre-school programmes for the disabled.

In 2005 there were 28 special programs and 32 intergrated programs with a total of 335 students with disabilities in pre school; 28 special programs and 635 integrated programs with a total of 13,388 students with disabilities in primary school; 4 special schools and 338 integrated programs with a total of 7,400 students with disabilities in secondary schools.

Based on the available statistics, the number of students enrolment in schools is lower than the estimates number. This means there are many more disabled children that have not been identified yet.

## **4. Vocational Training and Employment**

Again, some policies and measures have been adopted by the Government intended to bring benefits to the disabled. An immediate example that comes to mind is the policy of at least 1% employment for the disabled in the public sector which was introduced in 1989. This was a very positive step that had been initiated by the Government, however the implementation of the policy has fallen far short of our expectations.

More positive developments have taken place since then, nonetheless. In 2003, the Ministry of Human Resources agreed to set up a special department on employment for the disabled in response to the request from self-help groups and NGOs serving the disabled. Through this

department, job-matching efforts have been made by the Government to enable the disabled to secure suitable employment in the public and private sectors.

The statistics available on people with disabilities in employment are not that encouraging. We have a long way to achieve economic rehabilitation and there should proper training in order to make them more marketable for the current job market.

## **5. Accessible Environment**

In 1983, two years after the declaration of IYDP, the Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM) took the initiative to draw up a memorandum on access for the attention of the Government. Subsequently, the Malaysian Confederation of the Disabled (MCD) followed up on the matter and got SIRIM and later on the Construction and Industrial Development Board (CIDB) to be involved in formulating some codes of practice on access for the disabled inside and outside buildings. The first document was completed in 1990 and subsequently the codes were revised in 2002. Eventually, the Code of Practice on Access Inside Buildings was gazetted by all the peninsular states while the Code of Practice on Access Outside Buildings had to be left to the discretion of the local authorities to implement.

In 2003 MAB called upon the Ministry of Works and DBKL to consider making Brickfields as a model barrier-free area for the blind in order to inspire other local authorities to do the same. The Mayor of Kuala Lumpur took up the challenge with great enthusiasm and, as a result, many accessible features can now be found in Brickfields. They include covered drains and manholes, tactile guides, wide pavements, gentle slopes or ramps at strategic places, and modified traffic lights especially at the busy main road. It is true that there are still some shortcomings but, nonetheless, we do appreciate the effort that has been put in by DBKL. We hope that the good example set by DBKL will be emulated by the other local authorities all over the country.

However, with all these Codes of Practice & Building by Laws in place we find that there is no proper monitoring or enforcement mechanism being implemented.

## **6. User-Friendly ICT**

Much effort has been made by the NGOs to introduce user-friendly ICT to the disabled. In MAB, for instance, the first computer literacy course was introduced at the GTC in December 1989. Since then, the use of computer technology has spread widely among the disabled persons throughout the country. In MAB, all the blind staff have started using computers with adapted speech technology since 2004.

The Malaysian Confederation of the Deaf (MFD) too has played an important role in introducing adaptive computer technology for the benefit of the deaf people throughout the Malaysia. The orthopaedically disabled organisations have also been doing the same for the benefit of the wheelchair-users and crutch-users through Malaysia.

On the part of the Government, it has introduced income-tax provisions from which the disabled can benefit. They are able to claim tax exemptions for the purchase of adaptive computer equipment. We hope that one day the disabled persons will also be able to join their fellow

citizens in taking advantage of the Multimedia Super-Corridor (MSC) introduced by the Government some years ago.

## **7. Poverty Alleviation and Capacity-Building**

A number of policies and provisions have been introduced by the Government and by the NGOs (particularly after the IYDP of 1981) in order to bring about a better quality of life for the disabled in this country. Consequently, the disabled do have better prospects for education, employment and an improved standard of living. Undoubtedly, many more disabled people have crossed the poverty line compared to 20 or 30 years ago.

Moreover, today there are many more disabled persons who are involved in all kinds of jobs and careers such as administrators, teachers, lecturers, lawyers, and so on.

In spite of this, nonetheless, we do recognise the fact that there is still much work to be done so that many more (or preferably all) the disabled can break out of the vicious poverty cycle which is mainly in the East Coastal belt of Malaysia where majority of them live. Many of them are also found in East Malaysia (Sabah & Sarawak) I believe that we can deal with this challenge effectively if we have the support of the Government at the highest policy level. This is the reason why the disabled groups and the NGOs have drawn up the disability act of Malaysia. I am indeed glad to note that the document has received endorsement from the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development and that it will be adopted by Parliament some time in the near future.

There has been remarkable improvement on the level of poverty as to the recent census but however pockets of poverty exist and the most vulnerable are the disabled and the women.

## **8. Biwako Millennium Framework for Action : The Way Forward**

- a. The strengthening and expansion of the Department of Disability within the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development will enhance the delivery of services to the disable.
- b. The adoption of the Disability Policy by the government will soon lead to the promulgation of the People with Disability Act by Parliament.
- c. The adoption of the “Convention of the Rights of the Disable People” by the United Nations and once rectified by Malaysia, this will lead to improve policy and implementation programmes for the disable by the government and NGOs in the country.
- d. Being an apex of the self-help organizations, there is a need to strengthen and consolidate the role, responsibilities and functions of the Malaysian Confederation of the Disable organization (MCD). This will lead to the further development and growth of the other components of self-help organizations.
- e. As the gender issues are continuously being given strong policy focus and their programme being further implemented, we can expect that the spillover effects of such policy and programme will also have positive effect on the disable women.
- f. The introduction of compulsory primary education by the MOE will increase the number of children enrolling in pre-school programme. The recent provision of incentives of RM

50 to every disable child enrolled in education programme will also increase the access of early intervention education for the disable.

- g. The establishment of more training providers by the government will strengthen the training and vocational needs of the disable. The expansion of the job placement programme for the disable by MOHR will increase their employment opportunities. Lot more work need to be done in this area in the future.
- h. The programme to narrow the gap of the digital divide introduced by the government, hopefully will also meet the ICT needs of the disable people. There is a need to formulate a more comprehensive plan of actions on the use of ICT by the disable.
- i. Barrier free environment must be made a major policy agenda. The realignment of accessibility to the built environment, transport and other infrastructure will need stronger commitment in terms of implementation, monitoring and enforcement by the government and NGOs.
- j. Malaysian record on poverty eradication has been very successful. The target to fully eradicate hardcore poverty by 2010 will ensure that the vicious circle of “Disability and Poverty” can finally be broken.

**In concluding**, I come back to the question I raised at the beginning: “Has the BMFA made any impact on the lives of the disabled in Malaysia?” Well, my answer would be a qualified “yes”. I have tried to show that the BMFA has certainly affected our lives as disabled people and I have attempted to illustrate this with just a few positive examples. Of course, we are all aware that we are still in very strong negative territory but this is the challenge that we must all seek to overcome in partnership with our able-bodied partners.

We should understand that the BMFA actually refers back to past documents on the one hand (which include the conventions, declarations and human rights instruments that go as far back as the 1950’s until the 1990’s and beyond); but the BMFA also looks forward to the future on the other hand (which will or should be backed up strongly by the new International Convention on Disability). This new Convention would actually be a culmination of all the previous international documents on disability that have gone before. Through these declarations and agreements, the United Nations, and in particular, ESCAP, has sought to create a new climate of awareness concerning the needs and rights of the disabled. Thus, over the recent past years, dating back from IYDP 1981, there has been a growing awareness among the government authorities, NGO’s and other civil organisations that the disabled are a neglected minority but they are a significant minority that should not be neglected any longer.

Thus, I would like to pose yet another question: “Can this awareness be sustained and can it be translated into positive plans and programmes for action and implementation?” Again, my answer would have to be a qualified “yes”. Certainly, the authorities at all levels, be they the Government, NGO or the private sector, have the power to act on the policies that have been recommended by ESCAP and they have the capacity to introduce measures that would bring benefits to the disabled. In the end, nevertheless, the responsibility would ultimately have to lie with the disabled because it is they who have the vested interest in seeing that the policies and plans are carried out.

The disabled must be the ones who have the determination to keep the message alive at all levels of society but especially with the government authorities. The message, of course, is that “There is nothing about us without us”. The disabled want to be empowered through capacity-building

programmes so that they can participate and make a positive contribution not only for their own good but for the good of society as a whole.

But all the effort that has been made on behalf of the disabled will soon fade away if the disabled themselves do not make positive moves to keep the message and the struggle alive. In the long term, the disabled cannot depend on anyone else but themselves to ensure that their needs and rights continue to remain on the active agenda of the policy-makers.

*Prof Dr Ismail Md Salleh  
7 September 2006, Bangi, Selangor*