

The Role of the State towards Employability of Malaysian PWDs – Myth or Reality?

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Abstract—In this era of globalization, the role of the State in all aspects of development is widely debated. Some scholars contend the ‘demise’ and diminishing role of the State whilst others claim that the State is still “de facto developmental”. Clearly, it is vital to ascertain which of these two contentions are reflective of the role of the State as nations ascend their development trajectories. Based on the findings of this paper, the perception that the Malaysian State plays an active and committed role towards distributing equitable educational opportunities and enhancing employability of Malaysian PWDs is actually a myth and not reality. Thus, in order to fulfill the promise of Vision 2020 to transform Malaysia into a caring and socially-inclusive society; this paper calls for a more interventionist and committed role by the Malaysian State to translate the universal rights of education and employment opportunities for PWDs from mere policy rhetoric into inclusive realities.

Keywords—People with Disabilities, Malaysia, role of State, equal employment opportunities

I. INTRODUCTION

THE role of the State in all realms of development is widely debated in today’s globalised world. Arguably, with globalization setting in, some call for the receding role of the State [1, 2] whilst others claim that the State should *still* be “de facto developmental” as national economies liberalizes and integrates into the global economy [3]. This paradox requires further investigation when dealing with social development agendas such as health and education where the interventionist role of the State has always been distinctive, until recently challenged by such globalization doctrines. For education per se, the intrinsic relationship between an individual’s educational attainment and employability opportunities; and subsequently a nation’s economic growth is widely recognized [3]. However, the emerging concern now is to question the extent to which equality and accessibility to educational opportunities are open to vulnerable and marginalized groups such as People with Disabilities (PWDs). Although there are altruistic calls for ‘Education for All’, but burgeoning reports by UNESCO show that the universal right towards education (for all) was rarely extended to PWDs [4].

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PWDs are often deprived and neglected from accessing education. Such educational deprivation and neglect automatically shut all doors of employment to PWDs which inevitably exacerbates the link between disability and poverty.

In Malaysia, the right of PWDs towards equal employment opportunity is gradually gaining importance in the national agenda as the nation aspires to be a developed nation by 2020 in line with the Vision 2020 blueprint. No doubt that the Malaysian Government has formulated various forms of disability policies and legislations to champion for the rights of PWDs, but to what extent these policies are implemented warrants further investigation. In fact, the greater concern would be to deliberate on the scenario of educational accessibility of Malaysian PWDs without which the hopes and aspirations of PWDs to enter the work of employment will forever remain as unachievable realities. Clearly, for PWDs at least, the significant pairing between ‘inclusive education’ and ‘equal employment opportunity’ is vital where the former has to be set in motion before the latter can take place.

Although a myriad of Malaysian research have been carried out related to opinions on social advocacy on disabled issues/rights [5, 6, 7, 8], but to date no research has been undertaken to investigate the role of the State towards enhancing employability of Malaysian PWDs originating from a political-economy perspective. Thus, this paper is deemed timely, significant and aims to fill this huge research gap. The key research question raised is as follows: “*What is the role of State towards enhancing employability amongst Malaysian PWDs?*” To answer this question, this paper will be organized into five sections. The section after introduction will review the role of State in today’s globalised world and then discuss the policies and initiatives related to PWD employability by the Malaysian Government. The third section will briefly outline the methodology of this study and subsequently section four will discuss the key findings. Section five concludes this paper by suggesting pragmatic policy implications.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Globalisation and the role of the State

Globalisation and the changing role of the State is a widely debated and highly contentious issue. Although some scholars claim of the ‘demise’ of the State [1, 2, 9], there are opposing views that suggest otherwise arguing that the State’s role is not receding, but only changing [10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. For instance, Green (2007) contends that most East Asian States are evolving to respond to global changes and thus still maintain and assume an interventionist role. He goes on to criticise theorists [1, 2] who generalise orthodox globalisation theories that suggest a diminishing role of the State in today’s globalised world.

According to Green [14], globalization is a ‘complex and uneven process’ where the ‘developmental state’ (DS) still plays a strong interventionist role in most ‘late industrialised’

economies in East Asia. Similarly, like-minded scholars [15] affirm that the developmental state has autonomy and continues to assume a strong interventionist role linking education policies to the various phases of a nation's development path. In fact, for the broader global economy, some even advocate that "the state should be de facto 'developmental' in a global economy" [3] – a notion befitting the East Asian experience [12, 16, 17].

In the Malaysian context, education was earmarked as the key solution towards transformation, modernisation and national development since the postwar era. As reflected in the New Economic Policy (1971 – 1990), education was viewed as a 'tool for nation building and an agency for human resource building' [18]; and the Government played a significant role to expedite this aspiration. Subsequently, in this era of globalization, the importance placed on human capital development (i.e. education and training) is further espoused in national agendas such as the National Mission (2006-2020), 9th Malaysia Plan and also the Vision 2020. However, at this juncture, it is critical to highlight that globalisation also saw the emergence of neo-liberal reforms 'centred on a belief in the self-regulating capacity of the market, and correlatively the need to restrict the scope of the action of the state' [19], thus, questioning again the role of the State. But interestingly, the extent to which neo-liberalism permeates into the political economy of developing countries varies. Although Malaysia as a liberalizing economy is gradually succumbing to neo-liberal reforms since the 1980s; yet tensions and demands arise for the State to continue to be developmental and interventionist. The Malaysian State's interventionist role is particularly required especially in matters pertaining to social development agendas, like in this case, the fate and future of PWDs in the Malaysian workforce. However, according to some scholars, the dilemma whether the Malaysian State should continue to be interventionist or leave the responsibility of development to market forces is somewhat resolved through an approach that merges three diverse approaches as follows [20]:

...between 1982 and 2003...the Malaysian economy under Mahathir was subjected to three seemingly contradictory policies of the developmental state, neo-liberalism and affirmative action.

Based on this eclectic approach, it is deemed critical to investigate the extent to which the rights of PWDs towards education and employment are being addressed in a developing country like Malaysia *en route* to become a developed nation by 2020. A nation cannot be considered as fully developed if development is not inclusive. For example, recent evidence by Malaysian scholars [21] highlight that the route to legal employment by Malaysian PWDs is still met with many physical, mental and policy barriers. In line with the research question raised above, this paper aims to explore these "policy barriers" vis-a-vis the changing role of the Malaysian state in this era of globalization. Against this backdrop, the following section will review existing policies

and legislations by the Malaysian State towards enhancing employability of Malaysian PWDs.

B. Employability of PWDs in Malaysia: a policy review

Before we proceed to explore existing policies on employability for Malaysian PWDs, it is deemed crucial to understand the global, over-arching mission statement related to this agenda. Indeed, employability is intrinsically linked to one's educational attainment. Simply put, accessibility to educational opportunities will open all doors of employment and vice-versa. This notion was neatly captured as part of the goal of the Dakar Framework for Action to achieve "education for all" come 2015. Specifically, the flagship on "Education for All" and the "Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion" are formed to act as impetus to ensure the right to education (and subsequently employment opportunities) are extended and realized for PWDs [4]. Therefore, all nations are urged to recognize the universal right to education for PWDs by developing or revamping public education systems to make quality and equitable education available, accessible and appropriately suited to meet the needs of PWDs. These include the availability of appropriate educational curricular, facilities and accommodation for PWDs. Clearly, this runs parallel with the basic tenets of "inclusive education" that champions the right of all learners to an equitable and quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches live [22]. This flagship aims to develop the full potential of every citizenry with particular emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized groups. Ultimately, "inclusive quality education" aspires to eliminate and end all forms of discrimination on marginalized groups to be socio-economically integrated into mainstream society and in this case, the world of employment.

In Malaysia, such altruistic tenets are gradually being adopted as the nation develops and modernizes. To this end, policy reforms and formulation of new legislations for PWDs are underway. For example, on 16 May 1964, Malaysia signed the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific region. Subsequently in 1988, to open more doors of employment to PWDs, a General Order (PP 10/1988) was issued and circulated by the Malaysian Government to allot and offer at least 1% of civil service positions to PWDs. On 25 February 1998, the founding of the National Coordinating Body (known as the National Advisory and Consultative Council for the People with Disabilities) was approved by the cabinet. As a strategy to entice PWDs to gain employment, the Malaysian Government also gives out a monthly allowance of RM300 to PWDs who are employed (with monthly income less than RM1,200) [23]. Lately, the Laws of Malaysia Act 685 (Persons with Disabilities Act 2008) endorsed for a shift to a "(human) rights-based" approach that advocates the need for employers to provide better work opportunities and accessibility to employment for PWDs. According to Section 29 of the Malaysian Laws under Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, the provisions for access to employment state that: "Persons with disabilities shall have the right to access to

employment on equal basis with persons without disabilities. The employer shall protect the rights of persons with disabilities, on equal basis with persons without disabilities, to just and favourable conditions of work, including equal opportunities and equal remuneration for work of equal value, and healthy working conditions, protection from harassment and the redress of grievances.” According to Sub-Section 29(6), it is clearly stated that “employer” also includes the Government.

Based on this policy review and in relation to the research question raised for this paper, it is critical to examine the role of the Malaysian State towards enhancing employability of Malaysian PWDs; and further examine whether the above policy statements set by the Government are realities or merely myths?

III. METHODOLOGY

This study engaged both quantitative and qualitative research methods to elicit information related to the role of the State towards enhancing employability of Malaysian PWDs. A survey was undertaken in four Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia (i.e. Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak) for the quantitative part. A total sample of 478 PWDs was selected from various organizations based in these four Northern States. A purposive sampling method was used to identify the samples from the organizations.

Only five categories of PWDs were surveyed in this study. The break-down of respondents are as follows: (i) Physical Disability (60.0%, 287); (ii) Deaf/Hard of Hearing (17.8%, 85); (iii) Blind/Visual Impairment (12.8%, 61); (iv) Learning Disability (9.0%, 43); and (v) Other Disabilities (0.4%, 2). The questionnaire comprises two main sections with a total of 56 close- and open-ended questions. The first section is on the ‘demographic details of the respondents’ (Questions 1 – 23) and the second section elicited information related to ‘employment status’ (Questions 24 – 56). To tease out the role of the Malaysian State based on the above concepts, the questions in the questionnaire were intentionally framed to enquire whether respondents were satisfied with the types and level of assistance provided by the State. Respondents were also asked to give their opinions on the role of the State towards enhancing their employability in order to verify the above policies to be myths or realities.

A qualitative approach was also used to complement the above quantitative method. The qualitative approach was used through focus groups in order to obtain more rich, thick and in-depth understanding of the role of the Malaysian State towards enhancing employability amongst PWDs. Selected respondents from the various categories of disabilities were invited for the focus groups. Each focus group session lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours.

A standard interview protocol containing 10 semi-structured questions was used as a guide. Despite some overlaps between the questions asked in the focus group and the above structured questionnaire, nonetheless, the focus group was a useful research tool to elicit information of the role of the Malaysian State – a topic that is quite sensitive and often

eluded if asked individually. But when asked collectively in a (focus) group, members in the focus group gradually disclosed their views on the role of the State towards enhancing their employment opportunities. The following section will discuss the findings from this study.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Demographic aspects

This study interviewed a total of 478 PWDs from the five categories of disabilities. The distribution of respondents based on ethnic groups is as follows: ‘Malay’ (57.5%, 275), ‘Chinese’, (26.8%, 128), ‘Indian’ (15.1%, 72) and ‘Others’ (0.6%, 3). In this study, the gender distribution is skewed with more male PWDs (63.0%, 301) compared to their female counterparts (36.6%, 175). As for age structure, 31.2% (149 respondents) in this study are ‘44-years-old and above’ and a minority of 1.5% (7 respondents) are categorized under the ‘15 – 19 years’ cohort. The balance of 67.3% (322 respondents) belongs to those between the ‘20 – 44 years’ age cohort. This age pattern is intentionally constructed for this study because only those 16 years old and above are considered productive entities to the Malaysian economy.

In terms of educational attainment, a majority of the respondents are only educated to the secondary school level. From the total respondents, 29.3% (140) hold a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)(O-levels equivalent) qualification while another 25% (118) respondents have only primary school education. Only a minority of 5% (24) has university degrees and 3.8% (18) possess a diploma. There are also respondents that never received any forms of formal schooling. For instance, respondents with learning disabilities are the largest majority (32.6%, 14) followed by those with physical disabilities (12.9%, 37), deaf (5.9%, 5) and blind (3.3%, 2) respectively. The high percentages (of respondents with learning disabilities and physical disabilities) that are without formal education are not surprising given that the present scenario and existing educational facilities in Malaysia are not PWD-friendly especially to those with physical disabilities. Schools are built in the form of high-rise buildings and they lack basic amenities for PWDs. Such high-rise structures are unfriendly and inaccessible especially to those with physical disabilities where they need to move around with a wheel-chair or a walking cane. For these two categories of respondents, it is physically challenging and daunting for them to climb the many flights of stairs before they can eventually reach their classrooms. Even though there are laws such as the Uniform Building By-Laws (UBBL) to ensure accessibility of the built environment for PWDs, but sadly, these laws and regulations are not strictly enforced.

In terms of educational curricular, the situation is equally disheartening especially for those with learning disabilities and those who are deaf. The existing Malaysian syllabus that emphasizes mainly on grammar and academic excellence poses as a major challenge to them. The lack of appropriate educational curricular and learning materials that are tailored to the learning needs of PWDs will cause them to lag further behind when compared to their able-bodied counterparts.

Clearly, the current Malaysian education system fails to uphold the principles of “Education for All” and “Inclusive Education” given that the availability of appropriate educational curricular, facilities and accommodation for PWDs are in extremely short supply. Inevitably, as posited in the introduction, educational deprivation closes all doors of employment which in turn aggravates the link between disability and poverty amongst Malaysian PWDs.

B. The role of the Malaysian State towards enhancing PWD employability – myth or reality?

To answer the research question raised in the introduction, the main aim of this paper is to examine the role of the Malaysian State towards enhancing PWD employability. As reviewed in Section Two, the Malaysian Government has initiated various efforts to enhance employability of Malaysian PWDs through the 1% quota allocation in the civil service. In addition, the Government also founded the ‘Pusat Latihan Perindustrian dan Pemulihan’ (PLPP) in Bangi, Selangor to train PWDs to align their skills with market needs. However, the findings from this study disclosed that most of these Government initiatives are implemented in a lukewarm manner, thus, leaving a majority of PWDs still jobless and unemployed. A majority of the respondents from this study is of the opinion that the Government initiatives are merely rhetoric without any concrete move to implement them. The plight of the respondent is most felt by those who are minimally educated as quoted here:

What job can I apply and fill in when I do not have a decent education?

(Male with physical disability, Chinese)

Clearly, as espoused in the literature, the intrinsic link between educational attainment and employment plays a vital role to determine the fate of PWDs to enter the workforce. Though there may be readily available job vacancies in the market, but their low educational attainments and the high illiteracy amongst them shatter their dreams of securing employment. When asked whether the Government is providing sufficient assistance to enhance their employability, only about one-third (33%, 159) answered positively whilst 56.7% (271) opined that the Government is not doing enough for them. Another 10% (137) did not give their comments. When further prompted to disclose the reasons why the Government was not doing enough, the following responses were given. The key reasons stated were the “lack of work opportunities” (37%, 88), “discrimination during job application” (13.2%, 32), “problems of mobility” (11.2%, 27), “job incompatibility” (9.1%, 22) and “the insincere intentions of the Government” (8.3%, 20). Though there are initiatives like ‘job-matching’ and ‘job-coaching’, but unfortunately, many qualified PWDs still fail to get matched to the jobs that suit their qualifications. For instance, there is a case where a PWD who holds a Bachelors degree is merely offered a position as an administrative assistant which in actual fact she deserves an officer-ranking position.

From this study, the contention that Governments in developing countries ought to retain their roles as “de facto developmental” is somewhat a myth. This is because the Malaysian Government is not playing an active role towards enhancing employability of PWDs. For instance, only 2.1% of the respondents working with the civil service are provided transport by their employers compared to 28.1% by respondents in the private sector. Logically, one will have the perception that the public sector will be the one to spearhead initiatives to provide better PWD amenities given that they are the policy-makers who formulated these policies in the beginning, but this study discloses an opposing scenario. This irony and inadequacies on the Government’s part should be redressed as soon as possible so to enable and expedite the entry of eligible PWDs into the Malaysian labour market.

For a developing nation like Malaysia, unknowingly, indiscriminate policies to develop urban areas have inevitably created a situation of ‘urban bias’ where availability and accessibility of public amenities for PWDs are unevenly distributed. Amenities for PWDs are mostly concentrated in urban areas and these amenities are normally in short supply in less developed states such as Kedah and Perlis. The following quote is the plight of being deprived of proper amenities for respondents who reside in these disadvantaged states:

Most of disabled-friendly amenities and support services are concentrated in Kuala Lumpur and not in other less developed states. Penang has these amenities too but not Kedah and Perlis. In my state (referring to Perlis), transportation for PWDs is a great problem. There should be standardized amenities for all states in Malaysia and not only in more developed states such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang. There are PWDs here who want to go out from their houses too but are deterred by the unfriendly transportation system.

(Malay female, respondent with physical disability)

At this juncture, it is critical to note that discrimination against PWDs does not solely originate from employers in the private sector, but also from the public sector (i.e. Malaysian Government) as well. During the focus groups, respondents were asked whether the Malaysian Government is playing its role sufficiently to integrate PWDs into Malaysia’s thriving workforce, the answer is “No”. Clearly, from the responses, the respondents are very disappointed and dissatisfied with the Government’s lackadaisical role in lobbying for the rights of PWDs in terms of employment. According to them, despite provisions in the General Order (PP 10/1988) that allocates at least 1% of civil service positions to PWDs, but it in reality this policy is not being adhered by the Government. The respondents lamented that the Malaysian Government is not committed towards implementing this policy. The voice of dissatisfaction and frustration can be heard from this quote when asked if the Malaysian Government is doing enough to help PWDs secure jobs:

The Government is not doing enough at all. They (referring to Government officers) have already selected their own people. From 100 PWDs who apply, only 5 – 8 PWDs are given jobs from the Government. I have a friend who applied but had to wait very long for an answer. The Government just gives empty promises but with no action taken.

(Indian male, respondent with visual impairment)

Again, the private sector proves to be a more promising employer when a local daily 'The Star' (15 June 2010) [24] reported that 17,000 PWDs were being hired by the private sector in 2010 as compared to a miniscule figure of merely 581 persons hired by the public sector [25]. To aggravate the situation, it is even more alarming and disheartening to know that PWDs who are eager to start their own small businesses are treated in a hostile and sub-standard manner by Government officials. Such rude treatment can be perceived as a form of discriminatory behavior towards PWDs by the Government sector and should not be tolerated in Malaysia's quest to be a fully-developed nation by 2020. The quote below highlights the hostile discrimination by Government officials towards a PWD couple:

When my wife (also a PWD) wanted to set-up a sewing shop, she approached the Labor Department of Sungai Petani. The officers there were fooling around and playing tricks. They told us to fill up all the forms and submit to Sungai Petani and then to proceed to Alor Setar. When their counterparts at Alor Setar received our application, no action was taken. They should process it and send to Putrajaya. When I phoned them to ask a few times, they threatened to object my application. They even threatened to cancel my applications if I contact Putrajaya directly. Finally, I contacted Putrajaya Headquarters and talked to Senior Secretary of Dato' Dr. Subramaniam (Minister of Human Resource Development) and he told me to fill up a proper complain so that proper processing can proceed. This is how they treat OKU people.

(Indian male, respondent with visual impairment)

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As globalization sets in, the role of the State in all realms of development is being questioned. Some argue the 'demise' of the State whilst others contend that the State should still be "de facto developmental". The dialectical role of the State is the main focus of this paper and it is critical to enquire whether the role of the State towards enhancing employability amongst PWDs is a myth or reality? Clearly, empirical evidences from this study show that the role of the State in enhancing PWDs employability is certainly a myth and not a reality! Though the Malaysian Government has formulated and legalized various policies, legislations and initiatives (i.e. Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, job-coaching, job-matching, Universal

Building By-Laws etc.), but these policies are not properly implemented. For instance, policies like the General Order (PP 10/1988) that advocates and allots 1% of civil service positions to PWDs are merely policy statements without running its actual course. The lack of political will and commitment by the Malaysian Government to monitor and ensure proper implementation of existing PWD policies has negative ramifications for PWDs. Besides depriving PWDs employment opportunities that they rightfully deserve, the act of marginalizing and not integrating PWDs into the Malaysian workforce will in turn increase the dependency of PWDs on society (i.e. family, friends) and inevitably cause them to be trapped in the cycle of poverty indefinitely. In actual fact, if given the opportunity to work and be self-reliant, PWDs can contribute to the society productively and lead meaningful lives. But before all this can happen, resources must be equitably distributed and mobilized to create an environment, society and nation that values equitable educational and employment opportunities for all.

Unfortunately, as this study shows, Malaysia still lacks and lags in terms of providing equitable educational and employment opportunities to PWDs. For a thriving and developing economy like Malaysia, arguably, the dearth of effective efforts and initiatives should not be perceived as consequences of lack of money, but more as a lack of political will. To add, it is even more disheartening to note that the 'lack of will' resides with the Government despite (the Government) being identified as the main stakeholder to promote inclusive communities and social justice for all Malaysian citizens. Without doubt, the lack of concern and disinterest shown by the civil service to be the role model in employing PWDs will give the private sector leeway not to adhere to the requirements of these policies too. This contention is illustrated by Khoo, Tiun and Lee's [26] critique of the role of the Government in their study of employability discrimination against Malaysian PWDs as follows: "Why should the private sector adhere to these policies when in actual fact the public sector (i.e. policy-maker) is lackadaisical in executing the policies that they themselves created?" Eventually, all these will lead to a 'lose-lose' situation and it will be the PWDs who will lose out the most of all. Despite the emergence of neo-liberal reforms that advocate the receding role of the State and to leave the rein of development to market forces, however, for social development agendas such as lobbying for the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups (i.e. PWDs); clearly, the role of the State should be "de facto developmental" as argued by Brown and Lauder [3].

To compound the problem, it can be concluded that in Malaysia, flagships such as "Education for All" and "Inclusive Education" are merely rhetoric rather than action. As clearly shown in this study, PWDs face multiple social and physical barriers/challenges in their quest for equitable education and employment. The lack of appropriate educational curricular and physical facilities result in low educational attainment and high illiteracy amongst PWDs which in one way or another hamper employment opportunities for PWDs. In other words, low or nil educational qualifications amongst PWDs have locked them out and closed all doors of employment. In turn,

this caused them to be perpetually trapped in the cycle of sympathy, charity and poverty given their inability to be self-reliant. At the macro level, a nation cannot be considered as fully-developed if the rights to basic needs (i.e. food, shelter, clothings) and social facilities (i.e. health, education) are excluded for vulnerable and marginalized groups such as PWDs. Ironically, national policies such as the Vision 2020 that aspires to transform Malaysia into a caring and socially-inclusive society will merely remain as policy statements if the rights of PWDs are disregarded. Until and unless the Malaysian Government reflects on how critical it is to play a more interventionist and developmental role towards enhancing employability for Malaysian PWDs, without doubt, the issue of illiteracy and unemployability amongst PWD will continue to persist and worsen. Hence, the time has come for the Malaysian State to assume a more committed and responsible role towards integrating PWDs into mainstream society as the nation develops and modernizes. It is time to translate legislations and policy rhetoric into action where universal rights towards education and employment for PWDs must be transformed from myths into inclusive realities.

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