

One voice to champion the rights of persons with disabilities

The vice-president of the national disabilities council explains their plans to move towards a more inclusive society

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Malai Hj Abdullah Malai Hj Othman, the vice president of the Council for the Welfare of Persons with Different Ability. Photo: Rasidah Hj Abu Bakar/The Scoop

The Council for the Welfare of Persons with Different Ability will be a platform to advocate for the rights of disabled people in Brunei, said its vice president Malai Hj Abdullah Malai Hj Othman.

Living with disabilities or different abilities is no longer a stigma, he said. "It is about discrimination, marginalisation and the attitude of our people. Therefore,

the council must empower and protect the rights of persons with different abilities as well as recognise their rights to be treated as equals.”

Known by its Malay acronym, MKOKU, the council was established on December 3, 2016, and acts as an umbrella organisation for nine NGOs representing people with disabilities.

“The council wants to make sure that all the NGOs will be at the same level. We want to be a voice for everybody, right now our voices are disjointed,” Malai said.

These NGOs include the Centre for Children with Special Needs; the Paraplegic and Physically Disabled Association; Pusat Ehsan; the Society for Management of Autism Related issues in Training, Education and Resources (SMARTER); and the Brunei Darussalam National Association of the Blind, among others.

“The NGOs are under one umbrella but we will not interfere with the operational aspects of each organisation, such as fund raising activities. If we want to get our issues across to the government, we will do it as one collective voice.”

He added that the council has been allocated a plot of land in Rimba to develop its own centre and there are plans to build a multi-purpose building. They are now awaiting the green light from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

BANISHING THE STIGMA

Issues such as lack of awareness, acceptance, and accessibility to services and infrastructure continue to affect persons with disabilities.

“The public is aware of persons with different ability but the acceptance level is still low and the amount of assistance received is still minimal,” Malai said.

He added that people with disabilities still have to wait in line for public services (such as medical services), because there are no dedicated lines for them.

“There is also limited physical access to buildings, especially old buildings and public spaces. Public spaces and facilities must be made physically accessible with ramps and disabled parking spaces.”

“We need these services, but who is responsible and accountable to ensure accessibility is in place?”

CHAMPIONING RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Malai explained that there are three United Nations conventions which Brunei currently uses as a framework to protect the rights of persons with disabilities — the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Brunei finally ratified the CRPD on April 11 last year, but national legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities is still in the works.

“(The national laws) are important as it will support and enforce the implementation of the country’s obligation under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” Malai stressed.