



COMMENTARY

Disability in Brunei Darussalam: a Brief Exploration of Inclusivity and Challenges

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Disability is frequently overlooked in various countries. This lack of attention can result in insufficient support and resources for people with disabilities, impeding their ability to fully participate in society and access essential services.

Despite being Southeast Asia's smallest nation, Brunei has made strides in addressing disability issues through its universal disability welfare program. Established in 1955 under the Old Age and Disability Pension Act (Chapter 18), this non-contributory scheme aimed to ensure income security for people with disabilities (PWDs) (Haji Saim 2010). Over the years, the Act has been amended several times, most recently in 2021, to adapt to changing needs, adjusting criteria for eligibility, allowance amounts, and coverage.

Before 2021, to be eligible for the disability benefit, the PWDs must be Brunei citizens or permanent residents above the age of 15, unable to work, and should have resided in Brunei for 10 years before the disability onset. With the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Order 2021 and the Old Age and Disability Pension Act (Amendment) Order 2021, the government is taking strides to enhance inclusivity. Under the current law, the entitlement is for all ages.

However, allowances will only be given to Brunei citizens or stateless permanent residents (Han 2021). In other words, a number of recipients holding permanent residency with foreign citizenship were no longer entitled since 01 October 2021 (Hj Abu Bakar 2021). The permanent residents include those who can be culturally Bruneian, who were born outside Brunei and secured foreign nationality without experiencing to live in the foreign country.

These laws were designed to protect individuals with disabilities from abuse and neglect and ensure their equal opportunity and inclusivity in society. The commitment to integration is evident as some individuals receive double benefits, combining old age pension and disability allowance.

The disability allowance is a monthly transfer, amounting to BND250 (approximately USD186), which remains the same since 2016. Furthermore, the PwD also receives another BND250 for a care provider of the disability recipient. If a PwD aged below 15, the allowance is BND150 monthly. If the recipient reaches 60 years, the person entitles for another benefit, having another BND250 as disability pension.

This law explicitly covers people with blindness, Hansen's disease, mental disorders and disability pension. The Persons with Disabilities Order 2021 defines disability broadly, encompassing long-term impairments that hinder full and effective

participation in society. Yet, disability is indeed a complex matter, encompassing a wide range of conditions, experiences, and degrees of severity.

Brunei's commitment to inclusivity took a significant step forward with the 2021 Population and Housing Census, the first to include disability questions. According to (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, n.d.), the census revealed that 1.6% of the population, totaling 7,024 individuals, reported having at least one disability, with the majority (78.0%) having one disability. During the Covid-19 pandemic, about 9,282 people with disabilities were registered with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports to receive welfare assistance (Hj Abu Bakar 2020).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, notably in the accessibility of public spaces and infrastructure. Barriers in public transportation limit the mobility of individuals with disabilities. While government projects aim to enhance accessibility, a more comprehensive approach involving collaboration with private businesses and communities is essential.

In education, the Special Education Unit, founded in 1994, addresses the special needs of students with disabilities. However, mainstream educational institutions may lack the necessary resources for inclusive learning environments. Investment in teacher training and infrastructure is crucial to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students. A study by (Haq 2007) reported that a university student in Brunei with a visual disability experienced physical barriers in navigating the campus.

The employment prospects for PWDs in Brunei are marred by discrimination and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Hj Abu Bakar 2020). Moreover, the presence of limited career prospects, insufficient parental encouragement, and prevailing doubts regarding the capabilities of PWDs to engage in gainful employment persists (Roslan and Diah 2020). Government data indicates that only 130 PWDs are currently employed, but 480 individuals identified as able to work (Hj Abu Bakar 2020). Affirmative action policies and incentives have been introduced, yet societal attitudes towards disability remain a significant barrier. Initiatives to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity, often led by non-governmental organizations, contribute to creating a more accepting society.

In conclusion, while Brunei has made commendable strides in recognising the rights of individuals with disabilities, the journey toward full inclusivity and equal opportunity continues. Collaborative efforts involving the government, private sector, and society are crucial to addressing challenges related to accessibility, education, employment, and societal perceptions. Prioritising the needs and rights of PWDs will pave the way for a more inclusive society aligned with Brunei's vision for Wawasan 2035.

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