

The Role of NGO in Promoting Life Long Learning for Person with Visually Impaired and Blindness

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1. Introduction

When we discuss the topic concerning life long learning for persons with disabilities, it should be always towards the goals of The Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (2008). It stated that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to inclusion education at all levels, regardless of age, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. With that principles, the special need community such as the visually impaired and blind persons should have the right to access to pre-school, primary and secondary education, general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and life long learning.

In The Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities, it noted that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" and that "persons with disabilities continue to face barriers in their participation as equal members of society". Based on the above scenario, the blind and visually impaired person may faced with various challenges including in the life long learning opportunity. Therefore, they should be given an equal opportunity and right to access to the educational opportunity at all level especially in the adult-hood stage through life long learning. To achieve this goals, all government agencies, society and NGOs should take a lead to enable them to overcome such obstacles.

If the necessary measure has been taken to meet this special need community, the blind and visually impaired person in the country should be able to participate in all sorts of life long learning programmes. The question is does all this happen in the reality? In fact, the Convention did make participation of the disabled as one of its principles, stating "The principles of the present Convention shall be:...Full and effective participation and inclusion in society", subsequently enshrining the right of disabled to participate fully and equally in the community, education, all aspect of life (in the context of rehabilitation), employment, political and public life, cultural life, leisure and sports.

According to Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin (2007) the lifelong learning program has strengthened the efforts in providing education for this disadvantaged group in the society. In the Current situation, the campaign for lifelong learning has drawn the attention of the public to recognize the need of providing informal and non-formal learning for the adults. One of the important question raised here that does the blind and visually impaired community benefited from the above provision especially in the context of life long learning? Therefore, this paper would like to address how NGOs could contribute and provide a platform to them for life long learning at adult-hood level.

2. The Aims and Objectives

The main focus of this paper is to examine how the life long learning take-place through NGO such as Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM). Therefore, the aims and objectives of this paper are as follow:

1. To discuss the roles of NGO in the work of life-long learning among the blind and visually impaired community.
2. To share the current practice of NGO serving the blind and visually impaired in life long learning.
3. To identify and report on how the blind and visually impaired can achieved economy empowerment through life long learning.

3. Methodology

In order to accomplish the objective of this paper, the following methodology has been adopted:

1. Interview. Interviews have been carried out with a few NGOs leader especially the leader from SBM and Malaysian Association for The Blind (MAB). With such interview, they were sharing with us on how does the life long learning being carried out for the blind and visually impaired in this country. Of course, they did touch on some of the issue and challenges faced by the blind pertaining the life long learning matters.
2. Secondary data. In order to discuss the life long learning within the blind and visually impaired community, there have a few important document has been referred and used as a main source of data. The documents mention here is refer to the 2006-2008 and 2008-2010 SBM byannual general meeting reports. Based on the reports, we were able to see and analyse how the life long learning programmes which implemented by SBM to help the blind and visually impaired to upgrade and improve themselves in the non-formal education setting.

4. The Significant of the Paper

The key focus of this paper is to discuss how the life long learning programme executed by the NGOs serving the blind and visually impaired in the country. Based on the finding, we hope that eventually the data can be used as a significant resources and referral to the government and NGOs for designing a holistic model in life long learning for the special needs community. Consequently, the special needs community will be able to enjoy and live as a effective and have full participation in the inclusion society through life long learning. Finally, the paper will recommend some effective strategies to enable the blind and visually impaired community to achieve the objective "learning doesn't stop at the age of children and teenager; it should accompany a man for his whole life. It would help to satisfy and meet the needs of individual and blind and visually impaired society" continuously progressing and learning.

5. Society of The Blind In Malaysia

In order to understand and discuss how the life long learning activities being promoted to the blind and visually impaired community in the country, therefore, I would like to choose Society of The Blind In Malaysia (SBM) as a unit of analysis.

Generally, SBM is recognized as a non-religious and non- political organization. It is a national voluntary organization of blind individuals of all races and from all walks of life resident in Malaysia. It dedicated to the task of securing equal rights and opportunities for blind and visually impaired people in this country by working collectively and fraternally for the socio-economic advancement of blind people, with the view of enabling them to become responsible, useful and productive citizens.

One of the significant uniqueness of SBM is all of their ordinary members are the blind person from the nation wide. Their Presidential council members and Ex'co also is the blind and visually impaired person. This means that they are the self-help organization. They them-selves to lead, plan, and implement the programmes to meet the need of the community. Currently, SBM services covered 11 branches and region throughout the country. They have their own branch office at all state except Sabah and Perlis.

To meet the needs of the blind and visually impaired people especially the members in the country, SBM have set up the following committee:

1. Human Capital Development Committee
2. Finance committee
3. Economic Development Committee
4. Youth Development Committee
5. Women, Welfare and Community Development Committee

6. Sport Development Committee
7. Social, Arts and Cultural Committee
8. Scheme Management Committee
9. Communication and Accessibility Committee
10. Advisory and Investment Committee
11. Blind Entrepreneur Development Funds
12. Computer Resource Unit

Let see the objectives of SBM and there are as follow:

1. To encourage blind people in Malaysia to work for their mutual socio-economic advancement and their common good.
2. To uphold the rights of blind people to live as participating and contributing citizens of this country and promote their legitimate interests.
3. To promote communication and understanding among members.
4. To promote sports and recreation for blind people.
5. To monitor and/or assess services provided for blind people by government and non- government bodies, and to present the considered views and recommendations of The Society on matters concerning blind people to the relevant bodies.
6. To co-operate with other organizations to achieve the objectives of The Society.
7. To work towards overcoming social barriers and to promote integration between blind and sighted people.
8. To promote the general well-being of blind people.

6. Basic Concepts

There have two major concepts need to be clarified. There are:

1. Life long learning

Life long learning has a broad definition. It is seen as essential in creating a democracy of education for all member of the society. It enabled the society to growth progressively and encourages personal development within a social context.

Commission of the European Communities (2000) has defined Lifelong learning as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and employment-related perspective. Therefore, lifelong learning is about:

- i. Acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement. It promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future.
- ii. valuing all forms of learning, including: formal learning, such as a degree course followed at university; non-formal learning, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace; and informal learning, such as inter-generational learning, for example where parents learn to use ICT through their children or learning something new together with friends.

This mean that lifelong learning always concentrate on the development of literacy, numeracy, knowledge based society, and whatever necessary skills as required.

Again, the Commission of European Communities (2000) stated that lifelong learning can be beneficial to the quality of life and it can encourage the involvement of the individual in society.

In this context, lifelong learning can mean studying practicing, or reading about a subject. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is to enable people like person with special needs to develop skills, knowledge, abilities and understanding on a certain subjects, it can also be formalized by calling it education or training. We can schedule it regularly (each day or perhaps each month) or we can learn for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work or in another place like a college or through NGOs.

According to the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

There are a number of explicit concepts that underpin the lifelong learning policy thrust. These are:

- a. Capacity building through personal growth
Through lifelong learning, many people in all level able to have opportunities to access information, advice and guidance networks and the most significantly is where this access has been formalized
- b. Support for learning and learners - especially for those with lower levels of social confidence and less educational experience

The use of ICT and the need to 'join up' a range of initiatives - the People's Network and therefore, they are able to exchange views and learn from each other.

Finally, we hope that lifelong learning will promote the entitlement of people at all level from young to old to the learning opportunities made available the blind and visually impaired and maximize their right to access to the necessary resources or knowledge and gains benefits from their learning experiences. Therefore, they will be able to live independently and enjoy better quality of life.

2. Blind and Visually Impaired

In a general term, blind person can be divided into two major groups. They are blind and low vision. According to Waldemar Klinkosz, Andrzej Sekowski, Michael Brambring (2006) the legal definition of blindness is visual acuity of less than 20 or 0/70. On the other hand, the legal definition of low vision is visual acuity of less than 20/70. This means that the low vision person has between 5% and 20% of normal vision or a field of view limited to 20 degrees.

Meanwhile, the term visually impaired or vision impairment is referring to vision loss of a person. To such a degree of impairment, he or she required an additional support to see due to the limitation visual capability. The lost of vision is resulting from various reasons such as disease, trauma, congenital or degenerative conditions that cannot be corrected by conventional means, like refractive correction, medication, or surgery.

Of course, there have another important terms that we should clarify here is partially blind. There always causing confusion from the public perspective. This is because public think that they are the blind and have no longer seeing ability. In fact, they still can see with a limited vision as compared to sighted person.

7. Finding and Discussion

The aims of this paper are to find and discuss how and what are the role play by the NGOs in promoting life long learning for the blind and visually impaired in Malaysia. It also enlightens us how the life long learning activities took place within the blind and visually impaired community in the country. In order to get a clear picture of what and how the life long learning occurred Therefore, Society of The Blind in Malaysia (SBM) will be selected as a case study.

Normally, when people discussing about life long learning, it should be started from pre-school until post retirement. This means that after someone who is no longer in school or university and work place, he or she should be continued to learn whatever is necessary. In this connection, lifelong learning will encourage everyone in society including the blind and visually impaired community to take necessary efforts to acquire more and more knowledge and skills. This means all blind and visually impaired person should continue to learn even after living their school time, at the work place, within the family, and also retired. Does this happen within the blind and visually impaired community? Are they having the learning opportunity at adult-hood stage?

According to one of the NGOs leader who served in the organization serving the blind and visually impaired, most of the time the blind hardly to get a chance to take part in life long learning in the mainstream society. This is because they are lacking of information, fees is expensive, not disabled friendly, transportation problem etc. to meet the need of the blind and visually impaired community, we found that NGOs serving the blind such as SBM and MAB have took a lot of efforts and initiative to promote life long learning for the blind community in this country.

Based on SBM 2006-2008 and 2008-2010 biannual general meeting report analysis, we found that there have various steps have been taken to promote life long learning. They have conducted a lot of courses and training program for workforce development especially for working adult. Let see the following programme

Analysis on 2008-2010 biannual general meeting report:

Table 1 Education and Leadership Training programme from 2008-2010

1.	Creative and drama writing course
2.	Leadership training course
3.	Bahasa Malaysia courses
4.	Basic English courses
5.	Braille class for adult
6.	Public speaking course

The above shown some of the adult education and leadership programme under the name of life long learning. It was carried out through out the nation-wide.

Table 2 Employment and Computer Development

1.	Employment Symposium for Person with blindness and visually impaired
2.	Improving the blind employee performance course at public and private sector.
3.	Penilaian Tahap Kecekapan course collaboration with INTAN.
4.	Various computer application courses at National and state level.
5.	Blind professional development workshop
6.	

The data shown in table 2 indicated that many of the blind and visually impaired are productive and contributing towards economy development for the nation building. They upgrade and learned various skills to improve themselves.

Table 3 Entrepreneurs Development Committee

1.	TOTT (training the trainer and tester) in massage
2.	The challenges in massage industry for the blind symposium
3.	TOTT course for women in reflexology
4.	Anatomy courses for masseurs
5.	Reflexology course
6.	Sport massage course at state level
7.	Stroke patient massage course
8.	Post-natal massage course
9.	Mushroom training course
10.	Handcrafting course
11.	Head and shoulder massage course
12.	Body massage course
13.	Packaging and rebranding course

The data shown in the table 3 indicated that the blind and visually impaired have aggressively involved in self-employment and entrepreneurial development through various life long learning programme. The aims and objective is eventually to enable them live independently.

Analysis on 2006-2008 ByANNUAL General Meeting Report:

Table 1 Education and leadership training

1.	Creative writing workshop
2.	Protocol training course
3.	English course for training the trainer
4.	Public speaking course
5.	Youth leadership course
6.	Women leaderships course
7.	Book writing course

Once again, SBM members were active in life long learning. They would like to add values to themselves.the ultimate goals is towards independent living.

Table 2 Employment and computer development

1.	Basic communication course
2.	Public relation course
3.	Receptionist course
4.	Public speaking course for employee
5.	Telemarketing course
6.	Blind Professional development course
7.	Business communication course
8.	Customer service course
9.	Various computer application course

The table shown above indicated that the blind who are in the work force always looking forwards to acquire new skills. The aims are to enable them to compete and become outstanding employees. They can learned this through NGO life long learning programme.

Table 3 Entrepreneur Development

1.	Body massage courses
2.	Reflexology courses
3.	Head and shoulder courses
4.	Stroke patient courses
5.	Sport massage courses
6.	Cooking classes
7.	Handwork courses
8.	Entrepreneur development courses
9.	Agriculture courses
10.	Arts and performance courses
11.	Management courses

The data shown above indicated that the blind and visually impaired that are in the self-employment and enterprises as well as small business required skills and knowledge to gain competitive advantages. Therefore, they would be able to earn a living to live independently.

In order to strategise and facilitate the implementation of life long learning programmes, SBM Presidential Council has agreed to restructure its main committee. Since in June 2010, they have set up a Human Capital Development Committee, Economy Development Committee, Women and Community Development Committee, Youth Development Committee, Sport Development Committee etc to replace the committee such as Employment and Computer Development, Education and Leadership Training, Entrepreneur Development etc. the goal is to ensure all programmes can be effectively reached to the grass root level.

By looking at their biannual general meeting reports, it is clear that SBM have implemented various programmes to help their members to achieve better quality of life. Mostly, the programme took place at state level and also at national level. The approach adopted is to ensure the programme is able to benefit the members through-out the country.

Based on the table shown above, we found that most of the life long learning activities carried out through main committee. There were includes Education and Leadership Training Committee; Employment and Computer Development Committee; and Entrepreneurs Development or nowadays known as Economy Development Committee. The ultimate goals are mainly to help adult blind to enhance, upgrade and develop their potential and skills. This is the way how SBM help their members through life long learning.

In addition, the result shown that SBM life long learning key concentration always emphasized on the following areas:

1. Non-formal education programmes such as languages classes, Braille classes, writing workshop, etc.
2. Leadership development. The targets mainly focus on the junior leader and the youth as well as the women members. The goals are develop their potential and capacity and also a future leader to the Society either at branches or national level.
3. Employment. This is one of the most significant and priority sector in their life long learning agenda. They did conduct or organized various values added and skills development programmes for the blind and visually impaired community. Therefore, they could become more competence and able to work productively.
4. Social skills. This aspect is highly important to the blind and visually impaired. They have to learn how to communicate and interact with others especially at the work place and in the mainstream society.
5. Self-employed and entrepreneurial skills. This is mainly catering the needs of those who are work on their own and venture into a business. It also to reduce the unemployed rate among them blind and visually impaired.

One of the SBM leader shared that all members have an opportunities to participate in life long learning programme as carried out by the Society provided they signed up the programme as announced in the info line of SBM at HQ or at the Branches level. According to him, (everyone have the chance to learn either highly educated or non-educated group). In addition, he added that (blind with employer and those who are self-employed) also can take part in our programme. In fact, we also give an opportunity to the non-members to join our life long learning activities but, they just have to pay a little more extra fee as compared to the ordinary members.

The discussion above strongly indicated that NGO has created the life long learning opportunity to the blind and visually impaired community. This was a great achievement for SBM. In fact, continuous education and training always considered as a best approach to improve their social and economics status. It also helps the blind and visually impaired persons to develop the kinds of skills as required in their daily living and at the work place. One of the important finding show that the blind community are able to have an equal rights and opportunity to learn especially to those who have no formal education as well as those staying in the ruler areas. Again, it proven that NGOs has played an important roles to promote such life long learning opportunities.

It is proud to say that SBM has put life long learning as one of the important agenda it their efforts to empower the community. In fact, NGOs likes SBM have a very clear mission and vision to help the blind and visually to live independently through life long learning. This finding proven that SBM have taken some necessary measures to improve the quality of life among the blind and visually impaired community. is very much in line with Kamaruzaman Kamaruddin (2006) view. He said that the community such as academicians, parents, social workers, and others felt that all categories of handicapped children need to be taken care off in guiding them towards leading a normal life and functioning as a normal person in the society.

Through Life long learning approach, it is definitely could give a lot of impact to the life of blind and visually impaired person. This is strongly supported by Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin (2007), (Looking at the normalization and lifelong learning concepts, people with disabilities should have gained a lot of benefits especially educational programs. Generally, both concepts strive for the right of adult learning. With this effort, these disabled people will be more determined to lead and experience a normal life. This approach could also give a positive implication on social integration within the society

8. Recommendation

The blind and visually impaired community always indicates the their strong wishes to be included and involved in the life long learning programme as what have been initiated by the government as well as the mainstream society at- large. Therefore, we need to find an effective mechanism to enable the blind and visually impaired community to fully participate in the life long learning. On behalf of the blind and visually impaired person, we hope that the objectives of life long learning to promote direct employability, personal fulfillment, active citizenship and social cohesion could be materialize through 1Malaysia concept.

In order to meet the goals and objectives of life long learning for people with visually impaired and blindness, we would like to recommend the following:

1. Whenever any government bodies and civil society wish to carry out the life long learning programme, such seminar, conferences, workshop, study trips, etc they should include the need of special needs community
2. Whatever related to life long learning information should disseminate and reach to the special needs community especially through the respectively NGOs
3. The professionals and career development experts who involved in any human capital planning must be equipped them-selves to deal with the diversity needs in today's society, which they should includes various group of disabilities
4. Government should allocate certain amount budget through government annual budget to enable NGOs to carry- out life long learning programme

5. Private sector are encourage to help NGOs to implement life long learning programme under CSR practice

9. Conclusion

As discussed above, we would like to say that life long learning has been promoted within the blind and visually impaired community in this country under the effort of NGOs. One of the important finding is the role of NGO is being recognized and should be given a credits. This paper also has identified what the key areas of life-long are learning programme has been implemented especially at the adult-hood level. Such NGOs effort should be praised and perceived as a role model by others. This paper also recommended some effective strategies to enable the blind and visually impaired community to achieve the objective of life long learning like "learning doesn't stop at the age of children and teenager; it should accompany a man for his whole life. Therefore, the ideas of Inclusive and rights based are always being recognized and put it in a practice. All parties should remember that do not just talk and never come out with any concrete action. Our ultimate goals is enable the visually impaired and blind persons to have effective access to general adult education programmes and continuing training opportunities to empower them to live independently. Government agencies, private sectors and others mainstream bodies should always put the special needs community as one of their important element in their developmental plan. Finally, we believe that SBM objective can be achieved if all parties work together to and up hole the rights based principles as aligned with 1Malaysia spirits to promote the general well-being of everybody inclusive of the blind in the country.

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