

Remarks by Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN, at the M.O.U Signing Ceremony of Institute on Disability and Public Policy for ASEAN

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Dr. Derrick Cogburn

Distinguished guests

Friends from the less abled community

Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning.

Commitments elsewhere have prevented me from being with you this morning. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say a few words on this important occasion. Since the idea of such a post-graduate educational institution on disability and public policy was first discussed I have encouraged and supported its development. The IDPP is an idea whose time has come. ASEAN needs experts on disabilities and public policy and to empower people with disabilities through education and other public policies.

We should also know that unless the ASEAN Community achieves human development and social progress with inclusivity and equity and unless we integrate the marginalized people in our development policies the ASEAN Community will not be built on the foundations of self-esteem and dignity as well. Eventually the ASEAN Community will be judged by the people and by the global community by how we treat our citizens.

Let me repeat a little history. In 2007, the heads of states and governments of the ten ASEAN member states signed the historic ASEAN Charter, which reiterated their commitment to establish an ASEAN Community by 2015. In 2009, they launched the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community comprising three Blueprints and a Strategic Framework for the less developed ASEAN countries, expressing their aspirations to cooperate on political-security, economic and socio-cultural issues.

The primary goal of the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (ASCC) is to “contribute to realizing an ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious where the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples are enhanced”.

Moreover, the ASEAN governments have committed to “promote human and social commitment, respect for fundamental freedoms, gender equality, the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice”.

One of the key “strategic objectives” of the ASCC is to increase the participation of “persons with disabilities, vulnerable and marginalized groups in the productive workforce by enhancing their entrepreneurial skills, particularly to improve their well-being and contribute towards national development and regional economic integration”.

Another strategic objective is the “promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities”. In parallel with these objectives, the ASEAN governments have recommended the development of “regional capacity-building programmes on social services and rehabilitation for persons with disabilities”, “activities in promoting and developing care and welfare and the quality of life and well-being of persons with disabilities”. They have also recommended the “promotion and encouragement of the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making and recognition of their accomplishments”.

In my view an institution like the IDPP will therefore help the ASEAN governments realize its vision for the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community and the policies related to disabled persons.

The IDPP for ASEAN is exceptional and significant on so many fronts. Firstly, the institute will accommodate the challenges that disabled people face in accessing education through the use of cutting-edge virtual and flexible learning platforms.

Secondly, it recognizes that one of the most profound means by which we can enhance the lives of the disabled people is to develop their capacity to contribute directly to public policy.

Thirdly, the institute does not limit its ambitions to a single nation but intends to spread its work over ten countries.

Fourthly, the institute recognizes that the credibility and voices of disabled people in championing their own development will be enhanced through their training with some of the foremost learning institutions in the world, especially those with expertise on disabilities.

As the promoters have said the IDPP is designed to provide “unparalleled opportunities” for advanced studies, executive education, outreach and collaborative research for students and faculty with and without disabilities from the ASEAN region and around the world. The network of universities in the 10 ASEAN countries will employ accessible cyber-learning approaches to enable students with mobility, visual and auditory impairments to become leaders in the public, private and civil society spheres.

Let me take this opportunity to mention another related development. Indonesia is the Chair of ASEAN for 2011. The President of Indonesia His Excellency Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had stressed that the 2011 ASEAN Summits to be held in May and November should involve the ASEAN peoples in a more direct and participatory way. In this spirit of building a people-

centred ASEAN community, I had submitted a list of 16 “Flagship Projects” to the Indonesian Chair for its consideration. This list was endorsed by the ASEAN Chair and among them we have included the IDPP project.

I am therefore confident that with this endorsement the primary cause of the PWDs will be further advanced.

The IDPP for ASEAN would not have been inaugurated today if not for the vision, passion, dedication and hard work of some core believers and many of you are here today. Last August I attended a seminar at the APCD and I was compelled to describe their work as part of a “divine mission”. I refer to the so-called but appropriately named “Dream Team” and “Core Team”. The idea was so passionately driven and led by Mr Shuichi Ohno of The Nippon Foundation and other members. I want to recognize their involvement in this process..

The Nippon Foundation, especially its visionary Chairman, Mr Yohei Sasakawa deserve a special mention for sponsoring the IDPP. But few people are aware of the tireless efforts of Mr Sasakawa in advancing human security not only in Asia but in other parts of the world. The Nippon Foundation has, once again, demonstrated its foresight and commitment to the disabled peoples in ASEAN through its support of the IDPP.

The several academic institutions from the region and in the United States - Mahidol University, American University, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NTID, COTELCO, ICEVI - including the Asia Pacific Development Center on Disability (APDC) should all be congratulated for the precedent they have set in promoting institutional cooperation in establishing the IDPP as a post-graduate institution.

With its hosting of the IDPP, Mahidol University once again has demonstrated its dynamic leadership and innovativeness among regional academic institutions. As I understand it, this framework of cooperation will now embrace other outstanding institutions in the ASEAN region.

Let me end by saying that the IDPP for ASEAN when fully established will be an important mechanism to provide more space for disabled people by promoting public awareness towards building “One Caring and Sharing Community”. But let us not stop here. You have initiated an important building block. You should now aspire –through institutions like the IDPP – to turn ASEAN into the world’s most disabled friendly region.

Let me extend my best wishes to all of you on this happy occasion.

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