

## 2h2: Sarawak

### Preamble

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The total land area of Sarawak is 12.4 million ha., out of which 6 million ha. (48%) are reserved for permanent forests and only 1 million ha. (8%) are Totally Protected Areas (TPAs). But even the TPAs are not safe from illegal logging, which contributes to environmental degradation.

In terms of social and economic development, there is a huge growth gap between Sarawak and the peninsular region of Malaysia, which houses the centre of federal power. Compared with developed heartlands in the peninsula, some settlements in the Sarawak interiors have yet to be provided basic facilities such as roads, electricity and clean water supply. Roughly 8–9% of Sarawakians (250,000 out of a total population of close to three million), reside outside of the state, in West Malaysia. Their reasons for migrating are mostly tied to education and employment opportunities, and the majority only return home on special family occasions due to expensive airfares. However, residing outside the state has made it difficult for these Sarawakians to exercise their fundamental voting rights, since the current voting system does not allow them to cast their ballots without being physically present in the state. Overall voter turnout in Sarawak during the 2018 general election was 73%, one of the lowest rates in the country. The need for alternative voting mechanisms to ensure that thousands of Sarawakians are not disenfranchised is all the more greater in this age of the COVID-19 pandemic, with various travel restrictions and quarantine orders.

Another issue that needs to be highlighted concerns the estimated 40,000 persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Sarawak who, like their fellow disabled community members elsewhere in the country, are often poorly represented or portrayed negatively and excluded from society. Many PWDs in Sarawak do not have a fixed income, and their precarious situation has been worsened by the pandemic and related restrictions. The prevalence of disability is expected to grow as Malaysia's population ages and chronic health problems increase. According to Department of Statistics data, the elderly (over the age of 60) population in Sarawak is expected to increase to between 15% and 20% of the total population by 2031.

## I: Disrupted Lives, Property Losses from Illegal Logging

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Illegal logging in the north of Sarawak is believed to have caused unprecedented floods that have wrecked damage on local communities and the surrounding environment, on top of having serious repercussions on climate change, which is a real threat in our backyard. Malaysia needs to do something before it is too late.

(Rining Peter, Keep Green Movement, Proposal 2H2-1)

### 1. Ensure sustainable forestry and devise green policies.

- i. Enforce strictly related laws, such as the Forests Ordinance 2015, against illegal logging, with the maximum penalty imposed on violators of the laws.
- ii. Establish a central coordinating committee with representation from all stakeholders to address issues faced by all and to coordinate social assistance programmes for the communities.
- iii. The authorities should initiate a tree-planting programme.
- iv. Instead of filling up cities with concrete jungles, introduce green lungs to improve the environment.

(Rining Peter, Keep Green Movement, Proposal 2H2-1)

## II: Non-resident Sarawakians' Voting Rights

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Voting during elections should be made accessible for the people of Sarawak who live outside the state. With the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating travel difficulties, many will face an even greater challenge returning home to cast their vote, as seen during the recent state elections.

### 2. Introduce postal voting/absentee voting.

- i. Set up Election Commission booths in major towns to conduct postal or absentee polling for the Sarawak state and federal elections.
- ii. Institute postal voting for the people of Sarawak who are living overseas, starting with the ASEAN region.

(Ann Teo, Persatuan Pemangkin Daya Masyarakat (ROSE), Proposal 2H2-2)

### III: Marginalisation of PWDs

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The national and state agendas have either shifted or dialled down the focus on the rights of PWDs over the years. Most nation-building programmes appear to be devoid of PWD-friendly content. As a collective group, PWDs are not seeking special treatment; all they are asking for is to be treated fairly and equitably in line with the principle enshrined in the Rukun Negara, of “creating a just society where the prosperity of the country can be enjoyed together in a fair and equitable manner”, so that PWDs are able to flourish and contribute more effectively to the wider society and the country’s future generations.

(Rapelson Richard Hamit, PERAIS, Proposal 2H2-3)

A new national policy framework should be established to ensure the basic rights, dignity and well-being of PWDs.

#### **3. Improve the lives of PWDs through better representation, public accessibility and access to education and employment.**

- i. Set aside a 1% quota for representation of PWDs, in both government and private sectors, and establish at least one PWD officer in every local government body.
- ii. There must be at least one PWD senator for Sarawak and one PWD ADUN in the Sarawak State Assembly.
- iii. Give PWDs half-rate discounts for purchases of utilities and goods such as the national car, a house, internet, water, electricity, public transport and flights to support their daily life and in the community.
- iv. Provide more PWD-friendly public zones, facilities, shops, washrooms, etc.
- v. Both the private sector and the government must adhere to and fully comply with the Persons With Disabilities Act 2008 in all matters, especially on development and social issues, charity and access to work.
- vi. Provide free education for all PWDs, from kindergarten to university level.
- vii. Devise state and federal incentives to encourage employers to hire PWD staff.

(Rapelson Richard Hamit, PERAIS, Proposal 2H2-3)