

Child Care in Malaysia: Then and Now

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Child care services in Malaysia are instituted so that women can partake in the labour force. The Child Care Centre Act 1984 sets minimal standards and regulations. Possibly due to this minimum requirement, child care is seen as custodian care by the Government and parents. Changes in attitude and quality of care seem to be taking place. The Social Welfare Department with the cooperation of the Skill Development Department, Ministry of Human Resources, has drawn up the Standard Practice and Standard Content for child care providers in accordance with the National Occupation Skill Standard. This programme provides career pathways for child care providers. The Early Child Care and Development Policy is being finalized and the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System is ready but has yet to be implemented. In addition, the Deputy Prime Minister's wife has initiated an early childhood programme, known as *Pernata Negara*, which promotes holistic development of the child.

Key words: child care, quality care, training, policy

The importance of the first five years of a child's life has long been acknowledged by psychologists who term this period as the formative years. Recognizing the impact the child's experiences have on his or her development, psychologists, such as Edward Zigler who is known as the Father of Head Start, have advocated passionately for quality early childhood care and education. Numerous research findings, including those of RAND (Karoly et al., 1998), Myers (1990) and those carried out to study the impact of the Head Start programme (such as, Love et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003; Zigler & Styfco, 1994), have disclosed the positive

effects of quality early childhood care and education on children's development as well as cost savings in terms of lower crime rate, lower dropout rate, and lower need for remedial measures. In spite of the research findings and advocacy for quality early child care and education, many governments, communities, and parents are not convinced of its importance. To many of them, child care is a service to enable parents with young children to work. If the child care service provides an environment for children to grow and develop, it is a bonus and not an obligatory requirement.

In the last decade, findings of neuroscience research show that the experiences of a child during the early years, especially the first three years of life, are extremely important. Not only is brain development more rapid and extensive than we previously realized, it is also much more vulnerable to environmental

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influences than we ever suspected (Carnegie Corporation, 1994). Research findings have indicated that interactions with other people and objects are vital nutrients for the growing and developing brain, and different experiences can cause the brain to develop in different ways (Zero to Three, 2000). Quality child care helps the brain develop well but if child care does not provide stimulating, developmentally appropriate experiences and/or does not meet the child's needs (such as his or her cries for food and comfort are ignored or not lovingly answered) then brain development is compromised. In severe cases, such as abuse and neglect, a genetically normal child can become mentally disabled or develop serious emotional disorders. Unfortunately not many policy makers, parents, educationalists, and child care providers in Malaysia are cognizant of these neuroscience findings.

Child Care in the Early Days

Early Child Care and Education in Malaysia comes under two ministries – the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Ministry of Education.¹ Child care for children of 4 years of age and below is under the former ministry and kindergarten/preschool for 5-6 year-old children under the latter ministry. While kindergartens were set up by churches in the 1950s, child care services were available only in late 1970s when, by then, more than 31% of the women were working and extended families, for one reason or another, could not assist with the care of children. Rural-urban migration was one of the reasons.

Institutional child care, known then as nurseries, were set up mainly by primary teachers trained in Brinsford (England) and British-trained nurses for professional parents in urban areas. Child care services were also offered by home-based operators who offered their services in their homes without making many alterations to accommodate young

children's needs. The third type of child care services were services provided the estate management as stipulated by the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446).

State of Child Care

Mindful of the increasing numbers of homes with both parents in the workforce, as well as the reduced availability of extended family caregivers, increasing complaints of malpractice in child care centres, and the importance of child welfare in the formative years, the Ministry of Welfare Services agreed to initiate a survey, funded by UNICEF. The UNICEF survey, which was conducted by three local consultants, provided an overview of the service, assessed standards of care, and made policy recommendations for improving the quality of child care in Malaysia

The findings of this survey disclosed that the quality of child care services available in Malaysia was far from satisfactory (Ministry of Social Welfare Services, 1983; Yusof, Wong, Ooi & Hamid-Don, 1987). There were no pre-established standards and regulations concerning the premise and management of child care centres. Generally, the child care centre premise was poorly designed, was unhealthy, and unsafe for young children. The vast majority of the child care providers had little or no education and they were not trained as child care providers. Only 1% had university or professional qualifications but not in the area of early child care and education. Expectedly, the great majority of them, especially those in the estates, were child-minding rather than providing a stimulating environment for children to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally. The ratio of child care provider to children varied widely, ranging from one child to as many as 325 children per child care worker.

Child Care Centre Act 1984

Realizing the need for setting minimal standards and regulations for child care services following the report on the survey on child care (Ministry of Social

Welfare Services, 1983), the government passed the Child Care Centre Act (Act 308) in 1984. This Act required institution-based child care centres to register, but not home-based child care centres which could receive up to nine children. This Act also did not cover estate child care centres which was under the Ministry of Human Resources. Among others, the Director-General of Social Welfare was empowered by the Act to ensure the health and well-being of children and staff while the Minister was given the power to make regulations pertaining to, for instance, registration, qualification, issuing certificates of child minders, and health and nutrition care of the children in the centre.

Training of Child Care Providers

Another outcome of the survey was the Alternative Child Care Project (1984-1992) funded by Bernard van Leer Foundation. One of the main objectives of this project was to develop materials for the training of child care providers (termed then as child minders) and to train those working or preparing for work in institution-based child care centres as required by the Child Care Centre Regulations 1984. The first course was conducted in August 1986.

This training package, mandated as the Basic Child Care Course in the Child Care Centre (Amendment) Regulations 1993, is a 103-hour course with 31 modules which is to be conducted within 17-19 days. The Course imparts an elementary knowledge of child development, child care (such as activities for children, healthcare, and safety measures) and administration. The Regulations requires all those who want to work in institution-based child care centres to take this course accredited by the Department of Social Welfare even though they have a degree or diploma in early childhood education or its related fields.

A module for trainers of trainers (TOT) was also developed almost at the same time as the Basic Child Care Course. This training of trainers was deemed necessary because if all child minders were to take the

course, many trainers would be needed. This TOT programme was first conducted by the Department of Social Welfare which was then the Ministry of Social Works to practicing child care providers in 1988.

Current Status of Child Care

Overview of the Current Status

It is more than 20 years since the passing of the Child Care Centre Act in 1984 whose main objective was to set minimal standards and requirements for child care services. Owing to the advancement made in communication technology, today's parents are better informed and are cognizant of the importance of the early years of a child's life. Logically, one would expect parents to demand for quality child care for their children. Except for a small minority, parents are generally not too concerned about the quality of early child care. They are satisfied if the custodian care is good, that is, the child care providers are taking good care of their child's physical needs, health, and safety. Neither are child care providers driven to strive for higher qualifications and professionalism, and the government is satisfied to do the minimum in raising the bar on the quality of child care. Hence, the amendments to the Child Care Centre Act 1984 hardly provide for the promotion and delivery of quality child care (Child Care Centre Act 1984 Amendment – Act 1285/2007). The amendments are more for administrative purposes than for the assertion of quality child care as they include the increase in categories of child care centres – from two to four (which are home-, work place-, community- and institution-based child care centres); the licence to operate a child care centre which is to be issued for 60 calendar months instead of 12; and the display of the licence in a conspicuous place in the premise. The qualification of the child care provider is still the Basic Child Care Course with hardly any changes to the training modules that were developed in the 1980s. The only improvement in

child care standards is the ratio of children to child care provider which was reduced from 5:1 to 3:1 for children below one year. For the 2-3 year-olds, the ratio remains at 5:1 (Child Care Centre Act 1984 Amendment – Act 1285/2007 Regulations). The requirement for home-based child care centres to register can also be considered as another assurance for improvement in the quality of the child care service.

Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010

The Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010, like all the previous Plans, spells out the Government’s mission and direction for growth and development for the intended period, thus indicating the policies of the Government. In this Plan, the Government’s thinking is conveyed as five key thrusts and one of them is “to raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation and nurture a first class mentality” (para.33, p.13). To achieve this goal of human capital building, improving the access and quality of the education system at all levels was identified as one of the critical strategies. But child care was not considered as part of the education system (while preschool is) in spite of being a signatory to the Declaration of Education for All whose first goal is the expansion of early childhood care and education. Instead child care is seen as a service to empower women’s participation in the labour force: “Measures will also be undertaken to increase provision of childcare facilities and promote flexible working arrangements to facilitate the greater participation of women in the labour force” (para. 1.33, p. 33). Ensuring that children in early vulnerable years are given an appropriate environment and experiences to grow and develop their potential is thus not considered to be a critical strategy for building up the human capital of a nation.

In the Plan, it was stated that “The Child Care Centre Act 1984 will be reviewed to further improve the provision of quality services in line with the

principles of early childhood education care and development” (para. 15.35, p. 316). The amendment to the Child Care Centre Act was passed in July 2007 but the Act does little to improve the quality of the service in line with childhood care and development principles. Without the improvement in the quality of child care providers, the quality of child care will not be raised considerably.

Provision of Child Care Services

The Ninth Malaysia Plan acknowledges that child care services are needed to enable women to participate in the labour force. In 2005, 3.9 million women were employed, indicating the female participation rate in the labour force to be 45.7% and showing an increase from 44.7% in 2000 (para.15.35, p.316). Out of the population of 26.75 million in 2005, 3.05 million were estimated to be children in the 0-4 age group. Going by the number of registered child care centres in 2005, as shown in Table 1, it appears that there were insufficient centres if parents were to use the service. Admittedly, there were many centres that did not register and there were home-based child care centres and centres run by government agencies which were not required by law to register.

Table 1.
Number of Registered Child Care Centres (Institution) by Year

| Year | Number of registered child care centre |
|------|--|
| 2004 | 446 |
| 2005 | 311 |
| 2006 | 371 |
| 2007 | 306 |

Note. In 2007, the total number of institution-based child care centres that had at one time or another registered was 2,176 (this figure included 306 that registered in 2007).

Source. Ministry of Social Welfare (2008, October).

However the data presented in Table 1 disclose a worrying trend; the number of registered institution-based child care centres dropped from 446 in 2004 to 306 in 2007. On record, there were 2,176 (this figure includes the 306 child care centres that registered in 2007) that had at one time or another registered with the Department of Social Welfare. This decline needs to be investigated. The Department of Social Welfare has to ascertain the reasons for (a) leaving the industry, (b) the reluctance of people to go into this industry, and (c) the disinclination of child care operators to register their centres.

The study conducted by the National Family and Population Board in 1999 reported that only a small percentage of parents were using child care centres: 9.2% of the children younger than one year old, 13.3% of the 1-2 year olds and 15.1% of the 3-4 year olds were in child care centres (see Table 2). In 2006 the National Family and Population Board conducted another study on child care (National Family and Population Board, 2008). Unfortunately, this study analyzed the data for children below seven years of age and not for those below four years of age. Nevertheless, the data indicate that the percentage of parents using child care centres was still low, being only 10.6% (see Table 3). The percentage of parents in urban areas using child care centres was much higher than their rural counterparts, with 12.9% of urban parents compared with 5.9% of rural parents are

using child care centres (see Table 3).

In 1999, 40% of the children less than one year old were looked after by family members, 31.0% by neighbours or friends, and 6.2% by maids, while the percentage of family members looking after the 1-2 and 3-4 year olds was 36.0 and 37.6 respectively (see Table 2). In 2006, family members still constituted the majority of the caregivers for children, at 35.3 % (see Table 3). The percentage of children looked after by maids was considerable, at 14.8% and was relatively high for rural children, being 11.2% as compared with 16.0% of urban children (see Table 3). The vast majority of the maids were migrant workers, mainly Indonesians, thus indicating that these children were looked after by caregivers of a different culture.

Community-Based Child Care Centres

The findings of the National Family and Population Board's study in 1999 indicated that affordability was a significant factor in the type of child care used. While 8.9% of the families with a household income of RM 4,000² and above used child care services, only 4.9% of those with a household income of less than RM2,000 did so. The Government is aware of the cost of child care and the burden the parents, especially those in the low socio-economic group, have to bear. Hence in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the Government announced that: "Community childcare and nursery centres will be established in selected housing areas to

Table 2.

Type of Child Care Parents Used by Children below 4 Years of Age in 1999: Percentage of Parents

| Type | Below 1 year | 1-2 years | 3-4 years |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Parents | 12.9 | 13.3 | 15.1 |
| Family members | 40.0 | 36.0 | 37.5 |
| Maid | 6.2 | 7.8 | 8.9 |
| Neighbour/friends | 31.0 | 32.4 | 24.5 |
| Child care centre | 9.2 | 9.6 | 10.8 |
| Others | 0.7 | 0.9 | 3.2 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source. National Family and Population Board (1999).

Table 3.
Type of Child Care Parents Used for Children below 7 Years of Age in 2006: Percentage of Parents

| Type | Urban | Rural | Total |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Self | 15.3 | 27.0 | 19.0 |
| Husband | 2.2 | 3.4 | 2.2 |
| Older sibling | 0.8 | 2.5 | 1.4 |
| Family member living together | 15.9 | 21.1 | 17.4 |
| Family member living away | 15.5 | 18.0 | 16.5 |
| Maid | 8.8 | 0.8 | 6.2 |
| Neighbour | 16.0 | 11.2 | 14.8 |
| Friend | 1.6 | 2.0 | 1.8 |
| Child care centre | 12.9 | 5.9 | 10.6 |
| No one to care | 1.4 | 1.1 | 1.3 |
| Others | 9.7 | 7.0 | 8.9 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source. National Family and Population Board (2008).

ensure the availability of affordable quality care” (para. 13.26, p. 289). It went on further to explain in paragraph 15.35, “... The establishment of the community child care centres will provide affordable and accessible quality child care facilities especially for the lower income groups in the urban areas who cannot afford to send their children to child care centres run by the private sector” (p. 316).

A pilot project was launched in April 2006 which involved the Association of Registered Child Care Providers, Malaysia as the local community. A start-off grant of RM 55,000 for furniture, materials and equipment and an annual operational grant of RM 64,000 for the subsidy of 30 children whose parents’ income is below RM 2,000, and for expenses such as utilities were given to the local community. Five more community-based centres were set up in 2006 and 10 more in 2007. For subsequent years, 10 such centres will be established annually.

The effort of the Government to provide subsidy to parents with an income of less than RM 2,000 is highly commendable. However, this form of

assistance may not reach those who badly need the assistance because their areas may not have local communities who have concerns for children. Furthermore, some of those who are earning just above the cut-off point may be in need of financial assistance due to commitments such as looking after aged parents. A much more equitable system would be to provide subsidy on a sliding scale depending on the financial status of the parents as indicated on their income tax declaration. This subsidy is given to the child irrespective of whether he or she uses a community-, home- or institution-based child care centre. With this system, child care centres, whether they are institution- or home-based, are likely to have the incentive to register. In addition, the fee and quality of the centre are standardized voluntarily, without having to resort to legislation.

This proposed sliding scale system promotes equity because those who can afford child care are not given the subsidy. Table 4 shows that the subsidy is not systematized; those who needed financial assistance were not provided the subsidy while those

Table 4.

Payment of Child Care According to Parents' Income in 2006: Percentage of Parents

| Payment (RM) | <500 | 500-999 | 1000-1499 | 1500-1999 | 2000+ |
|--------------|-------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| No payment | 73.8 | 27.9 | 16.6 | 15.8 | 22.2 |
| <100 | 17.5 | 25.6 | 16.6 | 11.6 | 4.9 |
| 100-199 | 5.6 | 24.2 | 23.8 | 34.9 | 15.1 |
| 200-299 | 1.3 | 15.3 | 25.4 | 22.6 | 27.6 |
| 300+ | 1.9 | 7.0 | 17.6 | 15.1 | 30.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Mean (RM) | 112.0 | 165.0 | 210.0 | 204.0 | 293.0 |

who do not need it may be receiving it : 22.2% of those with incomes higher than RM 2,000 were receiving free child care services while the percentage of parents in the RM 1,000-RM 1,499 and RM 1,500-RM 1,900 categories who did not have to pay for child care services was only 16.6 and 15.8, respectively.

PERMATA Negara

Permata means "jewel," "gem" or "precious stone" in Malay. This organization, the brainchild of Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, who is the wife of the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, was set up to promote and develop early childhood education and care. When Datin Seri Rosmah visited Pen Green Centre, Corby in February 2006, she was so impressed by the programme that she immediately established the Permata Negara programme to adapt the Pen Green Programme for children of five years of age and below. The first pilot Permata Child Centre was launched in May 2007.

Since then 13 Permata Negara centres have been established under the Permata Council in the Prime Minister Department with the Deputy Prime Minister as the Chairman of the Council. The main committee in this Council, under the Chairmanship of Datin Seri Rosmah, has six technical committees. The Curriculum and Training Technical Committee, one of the six committees, is tasked to modify the Pen Green curriculum, write modules, and train the early

childhood educators who already have, at least, a diploma in early childhood education. Permata is in the process of designing a uniform curriculum for all children of ages five years and below by incorporating elements of the Basic Child Care Course and those of the other early childhood programmes conducted by the various government agencies into the Permata Curriculum.

Training of Child Care Providers

From the beginning of the training for child care providers in the 1980s until now, there has been no significant change in the training module for child care providers and for trainers of trainers (TOT). In addition, there is too much educational in-breeding, as almost the same trainers have been used for TOT throughout its use. While the bottom base of trainers for the child care providers has increased, the top pool of trainers for trainers has remained unchanged. Although the pool of trainers of child care providers has increased through outsourcing the training to accredited agencies, these trainers have undergone the same TOT course by the same pool of trainers. Furthermore, during these 20 odd years, no experts in early childhood have been invited for their input in revising the basic course for child care providers and for the trainers of trainers.

Attempts to advocate for upgrades in the qualifications for child care providers via the use of

higher-quality training are often met with resistance, since any increase in the current RM450 fee may be difficult for many potential child care providers to afford. Increased costs would be likely to result from efforts to increase the quality of training for child care providers. Any increase in the length of the Course will burden child care providers further and result in even fewer of them seeking training to become registered child care providers.

This seems a chicken-and-egg situation. Owing to the fact that child care providers are not required to have high academic and professional qualifications, their status remains low. Parents and the society see them as child minders or even as maids rather than as early childhood educators. Hence, they are disinclined to pay them professional fees.

Moving Forward

There seems to be a positive move towards raising the qualification and status of child care providers. On 4 August 2006, a taskforce was formed to look into three aspects of early childhood care and development, following a 2-day workshop on this topic. The taskforce was to look into three aspects of early childhood care and development, namely (a) to draft a policy on early childhood care and development, (b) to look into the training of child care providers, and (c) to devise a quality improvement accreditation system.

Quality Child Care Providers

Studies of neuroscientists have shown the impact the environment has on children's development in the first three years of their lives (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Zero to Three, 2000). Hence, due attention must be given to ensure that the child is given quality child care by his caregivers, whether they are his or her parents or child care providers. All children, irrespective their socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, gender, and political beliefs of their parents,

must be given the same quality care so that they are not deprived of the windows of opportunity in which to nurture emotional, physical, and intellectual growth.

Quality child care service is impossible without quality child care providers. Hence, the industry must be able to attract the best brains. Appropriate status must be awarded to child care providers and this is not possible without good salary and social recognition of their importance and contribution to human capital building and to the nation's growth. Remuneration is not just commensurate with one's work, but also with the qualification, professionalism, and effectiveness of the worker. The academic and professional qualification of child care providers must go beyond the 103-hour course.

Recognizing the need for quality child care providers, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development appointed a Committee of experts in the field, comprising child care providers, trainers, academicians, and experts in early childhood care and education, in November 2006 to develop a certificate in child care in accordance with the National Occupational Skill Standard (NOSS) with the collaboration of the Department of Skill Development in the Ministry of Human Resources. The task was completed in July 2007 after six workshops, which involved, in part, task analysis and validation. The production of their work was the Standard Practice and Standard Content for Child Care Provider (Level 2), Senior Child Care Provider (Level 3), Child Care Centre Supervisor (Level 4) and Child Care Manager (Level 5). This programme does not only equip participants with the skill needed for each of the jobs but it also provides a career path in the industry. Further, the programme makes accessible a pathway for pursuing degrees in early childhood care and development and its related fields. The pathway also enables child care providers to become Child Care Provider Specialist, Senior Child Care Specialist and Child Care Provider Expert.

The Standard Practice and Standard Content for the

four levels was first approved by the Advisory Committee on Skill Development of Early Child Care and Development in the Department of Social Welfare and then by the National Skill Development Council, Ministry of Human Resources. Finally, the curriculum for the four levels is being developed by a pool of experts appointed by the Department of Skill Development, Ministry of Human Resources.

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS)

A checklist has been designed for child care centres to assess themselves and for officers in the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) to evaluate the centres. Though the checklist has been field tested, it is on hold as not all the centres are ready to assess themselves. Most importantly, the percentage of centres that are currently registered is small. The officers of DSW have therefore to overcome centres' reluctance to register first before implementing QIAS. In addition, the assessment must have a purpose, especially in terms of benefits to stakeholders if it is to be implemented effectively.

Early Childhood Care and Development Policy

The Ninth Malaysia Plan, in paragraph 15.33, states that the second Nation Plan of Action (2006-2020):

... will be implemented to enhance the quality of life of children with emphasis on their protection, development and participation in line with the CRC and Vision 2020. An Early Childhood Care and Development Policy will be formulated for the future development of strategies and programmes to ensure the total development of children according to their rights and needs. (p. 315)

The policy, which was drafted in 2006 by a committee of experts in the field of child development, educators, child care providers, social workers, and lawyers, was not approved by the Cabinet who then assigned the task to the National Permata Committee

chaired by the wife of the Deputy Prime Minister (Early education policy for kids, 2008).

Recommendations and Conclusion

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the provision of child care centres is looked upon as a service – as measure to empower women to participate in the labour force while investment in preschool education is seen as human capital development. The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Malaysia ratified in 1995, categorically states that every child has the right to development. Since children have the right to development, child care should, like preschool education, be a means to enable children to develop their potential for their own sake and to contribute towards the human capital of the nation and not as a service to enable mothers to work.

Since neuroscience studies have disclosed the impact the environment has on the child's development during the first three years of life, the government should ensure that no child is deprived of this window of opportunity for development. Furthermore, non-discrimination is a fundamental principle of the CRC. Therefore, children who are denied access to quality child care on account of affordability are discriminated on economic ground. Subsidy on a sliding scale, which is much more equitable, is not difficult to implement.

Many parents still have the notion that child care is custodian care. Therefore, there must be an awareness drive to alert parents, especially parents in the lower socio-economic group, of the dire consequences if their children in their formative years are not given appropriate developmental experiences.. Not only are parents the first and foremost caregiver and educator of the child in his or her formative years, they are the members of society who can pressure the Government to ensure quality child care for their children.

Participation is another right of the child, implying

that children are entitled to have their views on matters concerning them heard. Alison Clark (2007), who conducted a study to involve young children and practitioners in the design process of early childhood spaces, concluded that children are “acute observers and explorers of their immediate environments” and this competency probably provides architects and designers with “different contexts for thinking about buildings and the work with young children ...” (p.40). While I do not expect such involvement to take place in Malaysia, I do hope that policy makers, society, early childhood educators, and parents will make decisions based on the best interests of the child, which is also in line with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The study to provide an overview of the service, to assess standard of care, and to make recommendations for policies for improving the quality of child care was conducted more than 20 years ago. A similar study should be carried out so that policies on early child care and development, the provision of care child services, and the training of child care providers or early childhood educators are based on what children in their vulnerable years need for the fulfillment of their potential.

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Notes

- ¹ This Ministry was formerly the Ministry of National Unity and Community Development. The Department of Social Welfare which is currently under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, was the Ministry of Social Welfare Services.
- ² RM stands for Ringgit Malaysia, the national currency of Malaysia.