

A 'rewarding' career in the non-profit sector

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Tom Brokaw once said, "It's easy to make a buck. It's a lot tougher to make a difference."

Last week, we lost a prominent Malaysian human rights activist who devoted her life championing the rights of migrant workers.

Irene Fernandez abandoned her career as a teacher in her early 20s to become a human rights activist.

The organisation that she formed in 1991, Tenaganita, is actively involved in fighting for the rights of migrants.

Seen as a "threat" in the country, the government repeatedly harassed her for her activism.

Ironically, she has won many international recognitions and awards for her dedication, including the Amnesty International Award and Right Livelihood Award. The United States also acknowledged Irene as one of the ten leading activists around the world in the fight to abolish any form of modern-day slavery.

Social and political activism is not new in Malaysia, but it is not a field that most Malaysians would perceive as a career, like what Irene did.

An activist is often depicted as a potential danger to political stability and a "threat" to state authority.

Edward Abbey said, "A patriot must always be ready to defend his country against his government."

However, the situation is different here.

Human rights NGOs, for example, are often portrayed as anti-government and anti-national. They are sometimes even called “traitors” who do not appreciate the government of the day.

This perception hinders the younger generation from getting involved full time in non-profit activities or social activism.

It seems quite natural to assume that most college or university graduates favour a job at a big firm or corporation, rather than to work for an advocacy organization.

Ask a college or university student, it is rare to hear them wanting a full-time career in the NGOs.

Mention the NGO, and their eyes glaze over. Not knowing what to say next, they cautiously smile and nod, and that's it.

A main concern is the salary range, generally perceived to be much lower compared with other industries.

With rapid change of the political and social landscapes in the country, there is a strong demand for talents in the NGO sector. The non-profit sector is set to become more rigorous and professional.

Although a career in activism receives little recognition, many do not realise that it could be a more rewarding job in many ways than a regular job in the corporate sector.

The salary range might not be comparable if we look at the workload, as it is a 24/7 job. However, the intangible returns are priceless.

One of the best things about working with a non-profit organisation is that you are contributing towards making a change in society and in the lives of the ordinary people.

So, if you want to be a professional activist, I say go for it! – April 7, 2014.

** This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*
