

## Long-awaited Toilet Promises Accessible Services for Ugandans with Disability

Gulu, Uganda: After a year of delay, the first-ever public toilet for persons with disability was inaugurated at a rambunctious ceremony on August 14 in the northern town of Gulu.



The Gulu Municipal Council Secretary for Disability performs the ribbon cutting honors

The toilet is situated in the public bus park and is seen as a major step forward in the long struggle to provide accessible services for disability in the former war zones of northern Uganda.

and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP). The ribbon was cut by the Secretary for Disability on the Gulu Municipal Council.

Last week's ceremony was attended by many members of the [Gulu Disabled Persons Union \(GDPU\)](#), a leading advocate for disability rights

GDPU's Chairman, Ongon Simon, explained the toilet's significance at the ribbon-cutting ceremony: "This is an example of action advocacy. Most service providers do not know what accessible public convenience looks like, so we have made this one so that people can come and see. Service-providers can come and see and transfer the same thing to their respective places."

Gulu district emerged from the long-running rebellion of the Lord's Resistance Army with rates of disability at around 20% - well above the rest of the country. Yet until last week, the only accessible toilet in the district was to be found at the GDPU main office.

This scandal was publicized by Rebecca Scherpelz, who served as a Peace Fellow at GDPU in 2011, in a widely-read blog post, [The \(In\)accessible Toilet: When Nature Calls and Society Hangs Up](#). In an even more graphic blog Dane Macri, who followed Rebecca in 2012, noted that going to the bathroom could mean, "relieving yourself... by dragging your body out of your chair... to the latrine and physically placing yourself over a hole in the ground with your hands. Not only is this unhygienic and degrading but it is also very embarrassing."

Last week's ceremony followed two years of effort and frustration. In 2011, Rebecca

helped the GDPU to submit a proposal to the United Nations for \$7,000, to rebuild and renovate a public toilet in Gulu's bus-park. This was turned down. The following year, Dane found a more willing partner in Handicap International, which paid for construction of an accessible latrine.

But this project encountered many problems. The rooms proved too narrow for bicycle-style wheelchairs, and the seats were too low for those who managed to enter the stalls. Concrete slabs, which were placed across the drainage canals, began to crack. No provisions were made for the GDPU to monitor the project. The toilet was put on hold for a year.

The project was revived this year thanks to the fund-raising efforts of Rebecca and Dane, who contributed \$2,800 that remained from their own fellowships, and the hard work of [John Steies](#), from Minnesota University, who followed them as the 2013 Peace Fellow at GDPU. Working under the direction of GDPU, John employed a new company, Aworowinny Construction. He also improved the design to include a walkway for wheelchairs over the intimidating drainage canals. In addition, the open-pit latrine was replaced by a toilet that will use running water.



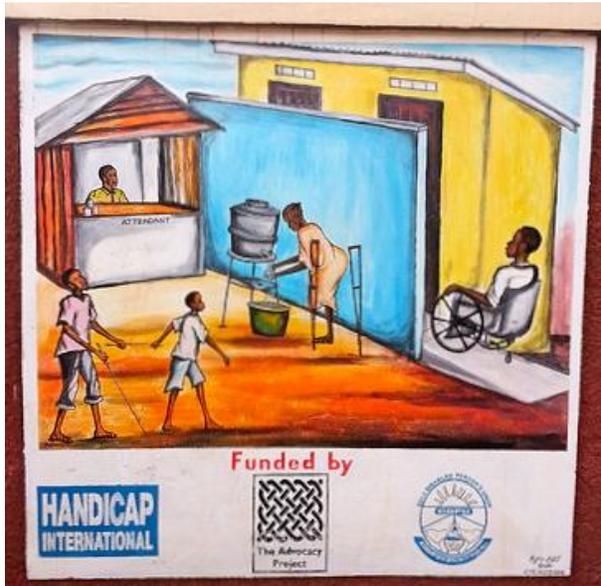
**GDPU board member, Omona Richard, gives his approval as the first wheelchair user to access the new facilities.**

Vandals destroyed some of the concrete covers, threatening another last-minute delay. But Aworowinny Construction quickly repaired the damage and the August 14 ceremony went ahead. According to the contract, the company will also undertake any repairs for the next six months. In addition, GDPU members will monitor the smooth running of the toilet. John summed up the sense of relief in a [blog](#): "Wednesday marked the end of a long process and a small victory for people with disabilities in Gulu."

Looking ahead, GDPU will now identify other strategic locations for accessible toilets, and press the local government to provide more accessible services. AP will raise funds for new projects as they come on stream, and continue to provide Peace Fellows to help GDPU advance this critically-important advocacy agenda.

As Rebecca concluded in her 2011 blog: "Will Gulu have ramps in every building before I leave on Monday? No. In a year? No way. In a decade? That's pushing it. But will people be aware (by then)? Will they consider spending the same amount to build a ramp instead of steps? Will they consider accessibility a right and not a favor? Will change happen slowly but surely? For now, I've gotta run...nature calls. I'm just glad I can make it past the

three steps, narrow hallway, slippery floor, and high door handle to get there..."



- Read the blogs of [Rebecca Scherpelz](#) (2011), [Dane Macri](#) (2012), and [John Steies](#) (2013).

- [Make a donation](#) to help build more public toilets for Ugandans with disabilities.

**Connect to AP online!**

*[Like](#) our Facebook or [Follow](#) our Twitter to get the latest from AP.*