

Empowering Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh, Uganda and Vietnam

Reporting by Peace Fellows Amanda Lasik, Rebecca Scherpelz and Ryan McGovern

Three Peace Fellows are working this summer on disability rights in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Uganda. In this bulletin, they reflect on the critical importance of providing education for persons with disability and compare the different approaches of their host organizations.

Blind Education in Bangladesh



Photo by Amanda Lasik

[The Blind Education and Rehabilitation Development Organisation's \(BERDO\)](#) founder and executive director, Md. Saidul Huq, lacked access to Braille books when he completed his education. He noted that of approximately two million people living with visual impairments in Bangladesh, most lacked access to education and relied on begging or their families for support. Today BERDO tackles disability by advocating for systemic change while offering programs to address the immediate needs of the disability community.

Because Bangladesh only has five schools that administer adequate Braille education, BERDO provides a school where children from rural areas who would otherwise not receive Braille education come to learn to read and write Braille and gain independent living skills (photo left). BERDO also has a Braille library that serves 272 students and a computer program that offers 60 monthly training sessions. Perhaps the most innovative of BERDO's educational programs is a microcredit project that provides a venue for persons with and without disabilities to meet, discuss disability issues and receive small loans. Group leader Sekender Ali commented, "Previously people with disabilities were considered a burden, but this is changing gradually. Parents are now helping their children and BERDO is giving assistance."

Mr. Huq acknowledges that BERDO's services are small compared to the vast needs of the disability community and recognizes that the [Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act of 2001](#) must become effective to truly address the depth of needs. For this reason, BERDO partners with Bangladesh's [Center for Disability in Development](#) and the [Christian](#)

[Blind Mission](#) to promote human rights and activism for the disability community.

- Learn more about [BERDO's mission](#) to provide education to the blind in Bangladesh.
- Read Peace Fellow Amanda Lasik's [blogs](#).

Disability Rights in Uganda

In Uganda, children with disabilities (CWD) go to school at a disproportionate rate to children without disabilities. In Northern Uganda, "more than half - 51% - of the CWDs are not going to school," according to a 2010 Baseline survey by the [National Union for Disabled Persons of Uganda \(NUDIPU\)](#). Reasons for this include a physical inability to access the school (no ramps, etc); a lack of special needs teachers who are adequately trained to support CWDs; and a general stigma against CWD.



Photo by Rebecca Scherpelz

[Gulu Disabled Persons' Union \(GDPU\)](#) Field Officer, Ojok Patrick, explained, "The community has many perceptions of PWD. In some families with a disabled child, that child might not be seen as human. They might say 'We have four children and one disabled child,'" completely disregarding that individual's place in the family. Consequently, when it comes to education, the child with a disability would be last priority for school fees. Education has also failed to reach many adults with disabilities, especially in regards to HIV/AIDS education. As recently as 2010, the NUDIPU baseline survey reported that 61.5% of persons with disabilities (PWD) had never received information on HIV/AIDS. Inaccessible health centers, a lack of sign language interpreters, a lack of information available in Braille account for the disparity, and discrimination account for the disparity in education.

To help address the void of educational opportunities for both children and adults, GDPU has multiple programs. For CWD, GDPU recently started an Inclusive Disability Sports program in local schools (photo above). While the focus is on athletics and inclusive competition, "Boys and girls are also mentored on academics. They are encouraged to stay at school to have the chance to participate in sports," Aloya Michael of The Kid's League said. For adults, GDPU strives to provide them with vocational skills, including tailoring, hair plaiting and ceramics. These livelihood programs help ensure financial support for PWD and inclusion in the community while allowing them to showcase their individual skills. Additionally, some PWD, especially those with disabilities affecting movement and mobility, have taken one of GDPU's trainings on sign language interpretation, where they learn the basics of Ugandan sign.

- See [GDPU's impact](#) on the lives of PWD's in Uganda.
- Read Peace Fellow Rebecca Scherpelz's [blogs](#).

Economic Empowerment in Vietnam



Photo by Ryan McGovern

The Vietnamese government appears committed to providing inclusive education for children with disabilities. For instance, one pilot program launched in the early 1990's successfully identified over 1,000 students with disabilities who were not attending classes. The program provided technical assistance to both teachers and parents, and with the help of international organizations, the attendance rates of students with disabilities rose from 30% to 86% in 3 years. While the program showed that total inclusion for children with disabilities in school was indeed possible, many barriers still exist which affect not only those with disabilities, but the entire population.

Vietnam's transition to a market-based economy has transferred many costs from the state to the consumer. Education in Vietnam is supposed to be free, but families face more and more out of pocket costs. On top of this, secondary school and universities are almost entirely privately funded, which puts even more financial pressure on families to provide their children with proper schooling. Since the current system is far from perfect, and many vulnerable groups in the population have limited access to education, one of the best remedies is to lift these families out of poverty. This is where the non-profit sector, with groups such as the [Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities \(AEPD\)](#) can help fill this gap.

While AEPD is involved in many activities, such as access to healthcare, community inclusion, and even climate change, their primary goal is economic empowerment for PWD's in the rural areas of Central Vietnam. They do this by providing vocational training and capital requirements for business startups. From the people I've interviewed in the field, most beneficiaries can raise their incomes by at least 50%, and all have sustainable plans for the future. Nearly all the beneficiaries, some who have passed down hereditary disorders to their children are able to finance primary, secondary, and even University level education with their enhanced incomes.

- See how [AEPD's work](#) had led to a more inclusive society in Vietnam.
- Read Peace Fellow Ryan McGovern's [blogs](#).