

Promotion of Self-advocacy of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities - Case of Myanmar

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Self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities is making small but significant headways in less developed parts of Southeast Asia. This brief paper focuses on the developments in Myanmar (Burma).

Background

Self-advocacy movements of persons with intellectual disabilities started in Scandinavia and North America late 1960's (Goodley, 2000). [1] Since then self-advocacy movements have grown around the world. It was already in early 1980's, when the international instrument on disability referred to the promotion of self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities. [2]

These global developments have impacted the Asia and the Pacific region. Major regional policy framework for the current Asian and the Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 2003-2012, proclaimed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has reflected the developments, by making a specific reference to promotion of self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities. [3]

As an implementation agency of the on-going regional Decade, Asia Pacific Development Center on Disability (APCD), has been a major promoter of self-advocacy in less developed part of Southeast Asia, including Myanmar and Cambodia. APCD, founded in 2002 as a bilateral project between Thailand and Japan, identified the self-advocacy of persons with disabilities as a priority area of its activities in its second phase starting from 2007, based on the understanding that self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities in Southeast Asia has been weak, except for some notable exceptions such as "United Voice" in Malaysia. [4] Inclusion International, an international coalition of persons with intellectual disabilities and their family

members, has been a partner of APCD . [5]

In March 2009, the first self-advocacy group in Thailand was established with the support from APCD. Members named their group as Daoru Ang in Thai, meaning the flower of Marigold.

Development of self-advocacy in Myanmar

A couple of factors led to the founding of the first self-advocacy group in Myanmar in February 2010. They include the initiative of ESCAP, Foundation for the Studies on International Development (FASID) and APCD.

ESCAP, a regional commission of the United Nations, and China Disabled Persons Federation organized “Regional Workshop on the Empowerment of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities and their Families” 11 to 13 October 2007 in Shanghai, China, which included participants from Myanmar as well as from Malaysia, Thailand Japan and others. The workshop, inviting self-advocates and family members, was ground-breaking in the sense that a United Nations organization finally focused on self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities. Though the meeting had a policy orientation, it provided a precious opportunity for self-advocates from different countries to meet and interact with each other.

Following this, APCD organized the Regional Workshop for Networking and Collaboration on Intellectual Disabilities (ID) from 22-25 January 2008, at APCD in Bangkok, Thailand. Representatives from Myanmar, Mr. Kyaw Htut, father of a person with intellectual disabilities and Ms. Yi Mar Tin, the principal of the School for Disabled Children, were invited and joined the workshop. This workshop was “epoch making” since it was the first time a person with intellectual disabilities was dispatched overseas as an “expert” by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA, 2008).

Another important step was the project, entitled, “Capacity Development in Disability and Development for CLMV Government officers” implemented by Foundation for the Studies on International Development (FASID), based in Tokyo, Japan. The In-Country Workshop was held in Yangon (Rangoon) in 26-30 May 2009 and had representatives from the United Voice of Malaysia as lecturers (FASID, 2010). United Voice, as one of the best organized self-advocacy groups in Asia, was represented in both the above-mentioned ESCAP/CDPF workshop and APCD workshop. Their presence in Yangon provided momentum for the promotion of self-advocacy in Myanmar. Ms. Yi Mar Tin, as a government official, and Mr. Kyaw Htut, as an observer, joined this training as well.

Founding of “Unity”, the first self-advocacy group in Myanmar

In February 2010, the first self-advocacy group of person with disabilities in Myanmar, Unity, was born. Unity was established at the Workshop on Intellectual Disabilities 16-17 February 2010, organized by APCD and Family Support Network for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, led by Mr. Kyaw Htut, supported by the Department of Social Welfare within the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief & Resettlement (Yi Mar Tin, 2010). [6] Mr. Min Swe Htet was elected leader while Mr. Kaung Htet Naing elected sub-leader. Self-advocates from Thailand and Japan served as resource persons.

Unity is supported by the School for Disabled Children, headed by Ms. Yi Mar Tin. The school provides space for activities and personal support and even lists “self-advocacy activities” as future direction in its recent brochure (Department of Social Welfare, n.d.). Most members of Unity are students of the School, including some over 20 years old.

Major activities of Unity currently include coffee shop as well silk skin screen printing and art mirror production. They all take place within the School of Disabled Children. The Unity members, mostly from the School of Disabled Children, wish to develop their activities beyond the School and find market for their products outside.

On 13 July 2012, APCD and JICA organized a workshop among self-advocacy groups in Bangkok, Thailand. It was attended by Unity, Daoru Ang from Thailand, and newly-established Rose from Cambodia. [7] They agreed to start “United IL Network Mekong Sub-Region” among three groups.

They identified their common challenges as (a) limited financial support, (b) limited technical support, (c) limited capacity of supporters, (d) limited participation from family members, (e) lack of coordinating knowledge and experience with persons with intellectual disabilities, (f) technique of marketing of projects, and (f) limited ownership (Daoru Ang, Unity, Rose, 2012). Certainly these seem to apply to Unity.

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, Unity leaders realize the need to expand their activities beyond the school (Min Swe Htet, 2012; Kaung Htet Naing, 2012). Unity cannot afford to lose the support from the school but its members are keenly aware of the need to go beyond it. Maintaining the current support while expanding the present support base is the major challenge it faces.

Self-advocacy movement in each country takes a different form. In case of Myanmar, it has been informed by regional and global developments as well as by the domestic democratic transitions. It remains to be seen if the first initiative for

self-advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities can be sustained in spite of the above-mentioned challenges. It is one thing to start a self-advocacy when a workshop is organized, while it is another for the group to survive. This also applies to Daoru Ang and Rose.

Notes

[1] Though, in some countries, “learning difficulties” or “learning disabilities” are preferred, this paper uses “intellectual disabilities”.

[2] In 1982 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the “World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons”, in its article 29 stated that “Mentally handicapped people are now beginning to demand a voice of their own and insisting on their right to take part in decision-making and discussion. Even those with limited communication skills have shown themselves able to express their point of view. In this respect, they have much to learn from the self-advocacy movement of persons with other disabilities. This development should be encouraged.”

[3] “Biwako plus five: further efforts towards an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society for persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific”, adopted by the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Midpoint Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 2003-2012 in 2007 states that “Governments at all levels are encouraged to support: (a) The development of organizations for persons with disabilities and related family and parent associations at the local and national levels, and the promotion of their networking at the regional, sub-regional and inter-regional levels, paying particular attention to the self-help organizations of persons with intellectual disabilities, psychosocial disabilities and multiple disabilities.

[4] Yeo (2007) provides an overview of self-advocacy movement in Malaysia.

[5] As a council member of Inclusion International, I have been working with APCD for the promotion of self-advocacy in the region. I took part in ESCAP workshop in Shanghai October 2007, as a rapporteur and APCD workshop in Bangkok in January 2008, as an expert.

[6] Myanmar signed the CRPD in December 2011. As Salai Bawi Vanni (2012) points out, the education of children with disabilities lies with the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. For national compliance with the CRPD, it needs to be shifted to the Ministry of Education. Otherwise, the implementation of inclusive education in line with article 24 of the CRPD is not

possible.

[7] Rose, the first self-advocacy group in Cambodia was established in November 2011, when the Workshop on Development of Self-Help Group Network on Intellectual Disability in Cambodia was organized by Disability Action Council of Cambodia and Komar Pikar Foundation, in collaboration with the government of Cambodia APCD and JICA.

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