

Vocational training for disabled people in Ukraine

Integrating people with disabilities into working life requires active cooperation between the public authorities and the social partners. In Ukraine, an ultramodern training centre was set up with ILO assistance in 2002. The first results of this venture prove that disabilities are not an insurmountable barrier to finding a job.

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Veterans of the war in Afghanistan, victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, casualties of the many mining accidents in the Donbass region ... according to official statistics, almost 2.7 million people in Ukraine have a disability. Until a few years ago, vocational training that matched these workers' needs was in short supply. So they remained dependent on their families, who already found it difficult to make ends meet.

But things started looking up in 2002 when the Ukrainian Vocational Training Centre for People with Disabilities opened in Lutizh, in the Vishgorod region 40 kilometres from the capital, Kiev. Built in a woodland setting, the centre can accommodate up to 150 physically disabled people. The training covers 12 occupations, ranging from typing, secretarial services, social work and bee-keeping to IT and mechanics. Lasting between two months (crafts) and five and a half months (IT), the courses are completely free of charge to the disabled people. Their board, lodging and medical care are covered by the centre, which maintains high standards: very clean, comfortable rooms, ultra-modern medical equipment, and all kinds of special facilities to make life easier for the participants (disabled toilets, ramps in all the corridors, covered walkways to facilitate movement between the buildings, even in winter, and so on.). The centre also boasts a swimming pool with a special lift to ensure access for all.

The Ukrainian Government funded most of the adaptations to the centre, and it also pays its current running costs. The ILO made a substantial contribution by equipping two IT classrooms and buying three specially equipped minibuses to transport the disabled people, as well as a car. Another important source of funding is an ILO-UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) project financed by the Swiss Government. This project has developed modular occupational training programmes. Some Ukrainian trade unions also decided to partner the centre. Among them is a locomotive drivers' union which helped to equip the mechanics workshop.

Communicating positive experiences

Another way in which the ILO helped to set up the centre was by financing various feasibility studies and several trips by the project's promoters to Linz, in Austria, where there is a very efficient, long-established occupational re-education centre. About 20 of the Lutizh trainers were themselves trained in Linz, thanks in part to support from the ILO and the Austrian Government. They are now spreading their know-how to less modern centres throughout Ukraine. "There are several dozen of these centres right across the country," says Dr. Mycola Avranmenko, the director of the Lutizh centre, "but their working methods and practices are

not standardized, as they are run by different types of organization (NGOs, regional governments, etc.).”

So Lutizh is gradually becoming a reference point for Ukrainian health professionals specializing in care for people with disabilities. “One of the centre’s functions is to advise on occupational training for workers of this type,” explains Vasyl Kostrytsya, the ILO’s national contact point in Ukraine. He put a lot of work into creating the centre. “It trains other specialists from the regional and local vocational training centres for people with disabilities. These centres are less well equipped than the Lutizh one. It is neither indispensable nor possible to replicate such investments in all four corners of Ukraine, but they can draw on this expertise.”

One priority of the Lutizh centre is to help disabled people to find employment after training. “We work with the government job placement services, but also directly with the employers,” the centre’s director notes. “For instance, if a former miner has had a limb amputated and we provide him with IT training, we may contact his ex-employer and negotiate to find him an appropriate job. But in general, job placement for our trainees is primarily the task of the regional employment services.”

Disabled employment rising fast

Between 60 and 65 per cent of the Lutizh trainees have subsequently found employment. “This has helped to raise the number of disabled Ukrainian workers in employment from 290,000 in 2001 to 368,000 today,” Vasyl Kostrytsya calculates. “This encouraging trend is attributable to all of the country’s occupational training centres, but also to increased efforts by some job placement agencies and to a rise in the number of disabled people setting up their own businesses.” The public authorities are also doing their bit. For instance, they have established a prize for the employer who is most active in bringing disabled people into work.

The Lutizh centre does not want disabled workers to be handed everything on a plate. They are helped on their way, but they also have to make an effort themselves if their integration is to succeed. There is a need to change the mentality inherited from the former Soviet Union, where the State gave money and nothing else. “Some of them might be tempted to play on the Ukrainian people’s feelings of compassion and might expect the State to do everything for them,” Dr. Avramenko warns. “But we tell them the exact opposite: by providing this training, the State is giving them a chance. It’s up to them to take it. We don’t want them to see themselves as beggars, but as contributors to society.” For those who want to take their training further, the centre has established contacts with further education institutes that can receive them. So a whole network of relationships has been built to ensure a better future for people with disabilities in Ukraine. “This is an excellent example of cooperation between the ILO, UNDP, government, the social partners and NGOs specializing in assistance to people with disabilities,” Vasyl Kostrytsya emphasizes.

Almost 200 workers keep the Lutizh centre running smoothly – teachers, therapists, caretakers, cooks, and so on. “Most of them are very enthusiastic and are strongly motivated by this work,” notes Dr. Avramenko. “Some of them even come in during their weekends. That’s how involved they are in our training.” One of the problems facing the centre is that it is outside Kiev, where most of the scientific institutions are based, and cannot be reached by public transport. So it is not easy to attract specialists from the capital. The minibuses and car bought by the ILO make it possible to overcome this difficulty by laying on transport for these highly qualified staffers. The vehicles also transport the trainees to Kiev, amongst other things for medical check-ups, and take them to the railway stations or the airport if they come from far away.

Given the number of people with disabilities in Ukraine, those fortunate enough to secure a place in Lutizh have

to be selected. The choice is mainly down to the various regional administrations, which take account of such factors as transport possibilities, the type of disability and the candidate's chances of finding employment after any given course of training. As in other similar centres elsewhere in Ukraine, the great majority of the Lutizh trainees are aged below 40. "We would also like to train older people with disabilities," the centre's director says. "But they often lack the motivation, particularly as they get close to pensionable age. The younger ones are more ambitious about improving their standard of living and becoming financially independent."

There is also plenty of "extracurricular" life at the centre. Apart from sporting activities, it organizes various cultural activities at the weekend: singing, theatre, guest artists, musical evenings and visits to Kiev.

By the way, some of the centre's walls are covered in posters publicizing the ILO's core standards and its programme for the elimination of child labour, IPEC. Courses on HIV in the workplace are given to the centre's staff and trainees.

In future, Dr. Avramenko would like to equip the centre to provide vocational training to blind people. To do so, he will need to raise funds for teaching materials in Braille and specially adapted computers. "Another of my dreams is to develop complete sports installations for people with disabilities. We already have a pool and a fitness room and we are surrounded by forest. I would now like to find funding for ball game fields and tennis courts." The Ukrainian athletes who won no less than 24 gold medals at the 2004 Athens Paralympics could inspire others to follow suit.