

Raising Scorpions to Raise Income and Reduce Poverty – Integrating People with Disabilities into Agricultural Training in Rural China

The Challenge

Initiated in 1990, the Government's Green Certificate Training Project aimed to teach farmers how to improve their skills and increase their agricultural output. Better yields would mean higher incomes and an improved quality of life for millions of impoverished farmers. However, even though nearly one-fourth of China's rural disabled persons live in poverty and could benefit from skills training, the training project did not target people with disabilities.

By the end of the 1990s, the China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF) estimated that 40 per cent of rural persons with disabilities had the capability to do some type of work but lacked the necessary skills. While government hiring quotas helped people with disabilities find jobs in the formal sector, the same quotas had less impact in the rural provinces, which depend on agriculture. A group of provincial CDPF officials wondered how to change the situation and reduce poverty rates among the rural population with disabilities. How could people with disabilities gain access to opportunities such as the Green Certificate Training Project and improve the quality of their lives?

Meeting the Challenge

In 1998, officials with the Heilongjiang Disabled Persons Federation, a provincial branch of the CDPF in northern China, lobbied the provincial government to issue administrative policies, or "Notices," mandating the integration of people with disabilities into programmes such as the Green Certificate Training Project. Once the provincial government responded affirmatively to the federation's request, officials of the federation formed alliances with government agencies and other programmes that deliver services at the township level.

Primarily, the CDPF worked with the Department of Labour and Social Security and the Department of Agriculture, Fishery and Animal Husbandry to help meet the needs of people with disabilities in rural areas. In a partnership that was unique for rural China, the three counterparts built on one another's strengths: a high level of knowledge about people with disabilities and their needs, considerable experience in vocational training and familiarity with agricultural skills.

The Good Practice: A rural-based integrated training programme resulting from official policy and innovative partnering.



• Background •

China's Disabled Persons' Federation was established in 1988 to protect the rights of people with disabilities and provide a range of services, including employment assistance. The Government funds the CDPF, which, in return, assists the Government by studying, formulating and implementing disability-related laws, regulations, plans and programmes. With offices at the central, provincial, municipal, county and district/township levels, the CDPF is highly structured. In Heilongjiang province alone, the CDPF operates 1,554 local branches. In 1995, those local CDPF offices conducted a survey to determine who among people with disabilities was interested in training in agricultural production and techniques or some other type of business. Armed with the survey data, the CDPF drafted a proposal to the provincial authorities for a formal directive aimed at overcoming negative attitudes about training people with disabilities. In adopting a policy directed at popular perceptions, the provincial government provided special financial resources and administrative mechanisms to move toward the realization of that policy.

"It was an easy process," says Dr. Zhuoying Qiu, a researcher for the China Rehabilitation Research Centre. Within a few months, the administrative government agreed to the passage of two policies: the Notice on Actively Supporting the Vocational and Technical Training for the Disabled Persons and the Notice on Actively Organizing the Rural Disabled Persons to Take Part in the Green Certificate Training Project.

The pioneering province. Heilongjiang is an agricultural province of 38 million people, including 1.3 million with a disability. Of those with disabilities, approximately 124,000, or 9.5 per cent, live in poverty. About half of all people with disabilities earn a living – however modest – from some type of agriculture.

As required by the two local policies, a total of 13 prefectures and cities and 67 rural counties, or 70 per cent of Heilongjiang province, immediately took action to include people with disabilities in mainstream training programmes.

The Green Certificate Training Project. The Green Certificate Training Project is a national programme (though it does not operate in every province) aimed at improving farming practices and farmers' agriculture skills. It provides expertise in planting techniques, animal husbandry and veterinary skills, aqua-culture, agricultural machinery, forestry, water conservancy, irrigation and agricultural products processing and other related skills. Many training courses focus on applying new skills to agricultural and rural income-generating activities that require low investment but nonetheless represent an opportunity for high income, such as raising scorpions (see box). Instructors are agricultural experts; the instruction takes the form of lectures, field work and follow-up guidance. Upon completion of the course, trainees take an examination in order to receive a Green Certificate, which is a "badge of credibility". The certificate is not a prerequisite to employment in farming or any other line of work, but it is a merit degree attesting to knowledge or skills qualification.

Government officials report that the Green Certificate training makes a difference in people's incomes. Average earnings are 30 per cent higher for farmers with a Green Certificate than for farmers without such a certificate. In regions where the Green Certificate project provides training, income in rural areas is 24 per cent higher than in rural areas of regions that do not offer Green Certificate training.

A Green Certificate for Scorpion Skills

The training programme in Tieli county of Heilongjiang includes education in the skill of raising scorpions, which are used in Chinese medicine. Scorpion farming caught the imagination of Fei Ziyu, a physically disabled man. In his first year of tending scorpions, 4,000 of them, Fei increased his annual income to 3,000 yuan (US\$360). Overjoyed with his success, Fei volunteered to train other physically disabled persons. He organized a course for eight people interested in raising scorpions. Fei hopes that other disabled people can have a chance to earn a higher income and live a decent and comfortable life. Raising scorpions is just one example of skills taught to people with disabilities in rural areas. Training courses focus on applying new skills to areas requiring low investment that lead to a significant rise in income.

- **How the Mainstream Training was Adapted to Include Participants with Disabilities** •

In an effort to improve and increase training opportunities for people with disabilities, the two notices required local branches of government agencies and organizations to work with people with disabilities at the county and township levels. Accordingly, the local CDPF in Heilongjiang province assumed responsibility for planning, implementing and monitoring the integration of people with disabilities into agricultural skills training projects. A Local Coordination Committee composed of officials from the three Departments of Education, Labour and Social Security, and Agriculture, Fishery and Animal Husbandry, and others coordinated the resources made available to the project by administrative sectors and technical departments.

The CDPF provincial office developed training plans and provided technical support. It initiated specialized training of Green Certificate and other mainstream project instructors in how to incorporate the training of people with disabilities into their work plans and how to teach people with specific disabilities. At the same time, the Heilongjiang CDPF invited instructors already experienced in training people with disabilities to teach in Green Certificate and other mainstream formal and informal training courses. The CDPF also created quotas for training in different geographic areas and for people with different types of disabilities.

Ordinary vocational schools, training centres, local government-run vocational employment institutions and private institutions – all of which already focused on training in agriculture, fishery and animal husbandry – opened their doors to people with disabilities. These various institutions, called “training sites”, receive financial support from either their local government or the local CDPF to cover the cost of training people with disabilities.

Informal courses. Under the umbrella of the Green Certificate Training Project, the CDPF created informal courses tailored to the needs of certain disability groups or people living in remote areas. The courses, delivered at “training stations”, are not available in formal training facilities but only at locations such as a farm, a business or a CDPF office. Many of the courses offer apprentice-type training, often in a one-on-one arrangement that brings together, for example, a farmer and a trainee. In fact, instructors typically are farmers or businesspeople or even former trainees with disabilities who have volunteered to train others with disabilities. Some work on a volunteer basis; others receive compensation from the CDPF for training time and supplies.

Both formal and informal training programmes under the Green Certificate Training Project run from one week to one month, depending on subject matter. Special courses for people with disabilities are not of any fixed length but instead are flexible to meet the needs of trainees.

Support services. Training agencies within the Department of Agriculture, Fishery and Animal Husbandry began the vigorous recruitment of people with disabilities from rural areas for participation in the Green Certificate Training Project. The CDPF connected people not interested in the Green Certificate to other training activities. The CDPF created or extended existing support services, such as sign language interpretation, vocational planning and referral, counselling and medical rehabilitation.

The administrative notices included a provision whereby the Government funds the CDPF to cover service costs so that people with disabilities can attend some type of training. For instance, while the Green Certificate project charges participants a training fee ranging from 50 yuan to 300 yuan (US\$6 to \$40), CDPF funding covers fees, transportation, food and lodging costs for people with disabilities.

The CDPF provides former trainees with financial resources that come from a variety of government agencies and programmes. The assistance generally takes the form of low-interest loans or grants to be used as “seed” money to buy start-up supplies, such as seeds or fertilizer for farming, or to set up a business, such as raising scorpions or dogs.

Adjustments in granting the Green Certificate. Instead of requiring that people with disabilities take the formal examination for the Green Certificate, some instructors offer shorter, less formal written tests. In the informal courses, instructors assess the progress of participants by observing trainees’ use of their newly acquired skills.

Follow-up. For a period of up to three months, trainers visit with former trainees to offer guidance and check on their situation. The CDPF assists trainees by helping them develop business plans, providing market information and, if necessary, even helping former trainees gain access to markets by coordinating the transport of their products. People with disabilities can call on the CDPF any time as problems arise.

Accomplishments

CDPF’s efforts have paid off. Many people with disabilities in Heilongjiang province have joined the Green Certificate project. Various government agencies made poverty alleviation loans available to people with disabilities to help them apply their training. As of mid-2002, the Green Certificate project had trained more than 6.7 million farmers nationwide; of them, 80,600 had some type of disability. Specific achievements resulting from the issuance of Heilongjiang province’s two notices include the following:

- The wide-scale teaching of agricultural skills to persons with disabilities set a precedent and stands as a model. The impact of the effort is measured by the fact that the number of persons with disabilities who had received any type of agricultural training increased from 2,357 in 1996 (training provided by the CDPF and mostly

in urban areas) to 20,405 in 2000. In 2001, 3,442 people with disabilities received training, followed by another 8,425 in 2002.

- People with disabilities in rural areas earn higher incomes. The Green Certificate project has helped 87 per cent of the 80,600 persons with disabilities who have received training since 1998 rise out of poverty. Some 9 per cent have become relatively rich with an average income of 2,000 yuan to 3,000 yuan (US\$243 to \$363). Farmers with disabilities in Heilongjiang province raise scorpions, fish, sheep, pigs, cattle, chickens and ducks. Many grow fruits, grain and vegetables. Some operate repair services or have opened their own fishery or animal husbandry businesses.
- The Government's investment in the project totalled 170 million yuan (US\$20 million), with fees totalling 138 million yuan (US\$16.6 million). The project accounts for 63,000 training sites (institutions, CDPF agencies and so forth), 19,000 stations for apprentice-type training (informal locations, such as someone's farm or business), 15 million textbooks and the production of more than one million sets of audio/visual teaching materials.

Lessons Learned

CDPF's targeting of the Green Certificate training represents a unique undertaking in China; no other effort integrates people with disabilities into a mainstream training programme. Some of the specific lessons learned in achieving success include:

Government policies help overcome resistance to the inclusion of people with disabilities in training programmes. Before the project's implementation, very few people with disabilities received any type of training. The issuance of the notices fostered an environment of change and authorized a mechanism – the CDPF – to coordinate the collaborative work of local agencies. The notices also provided a funding source to cover costs for training people with disabilities.

Low formal education need not be an obstacle to practical training. The low level of education or even agriculture experience among many people with disabilities has been a significant obstacle to training. With the help of CDPF instructors, however, Green Certificate trainers learned how to adapt their teaching methods to the needs of trainees, often relying on practical examples more than is typically the case, thus making learning easier for all types of trainees. The trainers proved that, even without much formal education, most people, including those with disabilities, can learn new skills and apply them.

Not all experts make good teachers. CDPF officials eventually recognized that agricultural and technical experts required training in teaching techniques and disability issues so that they could effectively pass on their technical knowledge to others.

Increased assistance to trainees increases participation. CDPF administrators noticed that even simple supports, such as providing food and accommodation, encouraged more trainees to attend the courses.

Looking Forward

In Heilongjiang province, the Green Certificate's agricultural training programme and related services will undergo additional development as part of the Socio-Economic Plan 2000-2005; in particular, the plan aims to reach more people with disabilities and further alleviate poverty in the province.

The CDPF will use the plan as an example of good practice to encourage other provinces and programmes to adopt a similar model.

Replication

The Green Certificate Training Project sets a positive example for other developing countries of how to improve economic conditions of people with disabilities in rural areas by increasing access to mainstream training courses. Few disabled farmers would otherwise enjoy an opportunity to receive such training. In this case, the project achieved integration through the enforcement of government policy. In some countries, it may be necessary to lobby more actively for legislation that mandates the inclusion of disabled people in existing or new programmes. Clearly, local authorities' cooperation can be an effective tool.

In replicating the approach, programme developers should ensure that training course subjects are diverse and responsive to the unique opportunities of a geographic area, such as its natural resources and market opportunities.

Courses should take different approaches and vary in duration so that all trainees can benefit regardless of their educational level and experience. Apprenticeships and formal and informal training are useful approaches.

Two important dimensions of the Green Certificate Training Project were instructor participation in the training sessions about disability and the special supports and accommodations for trainees with disabilities. Finally, integrating people with disabilities into the Green Certificate project demonstrates the importance not only of developing a policy on integration but also of implementing the policy with financial and equipment, as well as human development, support.

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