

Beyond Coconut Shells – Finding Vocational Solutions for Adults with Mild to Severe Disabilities in Indonesia’s Rural Areas Affected by the Financial Crisis

The Challenge

In the early 1990s, making wooden toys, tailored shirts and leather wallets provided a decent income for hundreds of people with disabilities who trained through the YAKKUM Rehabilitation Centre in rural Indonesia. But when the country experienced both a financial crisis and political upheaval at mid-decade, the marketplace changed, along with the earning potential of people with disabilities. Around the same time, the intense competition in open employment produced a crisis of confidence among graduates of the YAKKUM Rehabilitation Centre. Many of the graduates returned to YAKKUM in search of help. In addition, field workers started reporting that self-employed graduates were struggling and needed assistance.

By 1999, YAKKUM could not help but recognize that, first, a surplus of people were making similar handicrafts and that, second, job skills training was preparing people for positions that no longer existed. Clearly, YAKKUM needed to adjust its services to stay true to its mission of providing effective rehabilitation and vocational assistance, especially for people with severe disabilities who lived in rural areas.

Meeting the Challenge

YAKKUM’s eventual changes, seemingly small, testify to the power of good follow-up services and the importance of a rapid response to evolving needs: YAKKUM added “modern” and competitive training courses in areas such as computer skills; it offered seed money to former graduates interested in starting small businesses as either a main or second source of income; and it enlisted the skills of psychologists to help former trainees develop assertiveness in the increasingly competitive marketplace. With these adjustments, the income of many YAKKUM graduates returned to levels earned before the financial crisis.

The Good Practice: Follow-up mechanisms that detect problems and help current and former trainees maintain independent livelihoods.



— One Woman Affected by YAKKUM's Changes —

Former trainees such as Ni Nengah Wati benefited from the new approach. Since age six, Ni Wati, now 33, has been unable to walk. Because of her disability, she never attended school. She had no skills and no chance to earn income to help her family as she grew older. Then she attended YAKKUM, first in 1987 and again in 1991 and learned to cross-stitch and make toy animals. Upon finishing the training courses, she sold her handicrafts to YAKKUM's craft centre. Such was her success that she became her family's primary income earner. But then her sales orders declined during Indonesia's economic crisis. Ni Wati thought that she was somehow failing. In 2000, YAKKUM staff at the craft centre suggested that she start a second business. She decided to raise pigs, a typical project in her native Bali. YAKKUM offered "stimulation" money – part grant, part loan – to buy her first pigs and feed. She continued making handicrafts as well as raising pigs. Two years later, she had enough savings to build herself a house.

• Background •

In 1982, a man from New Zealand with support from church groups started the Bethesda Rehabilitation Project in Yogyakarta, central Indonesia. At that time, the centre was located in a house and offered a place where up to 20 people with disabilities could live and receive basic education. In a radical departure from the coconut shell crafts typically taught to people with disabilities, the centre offered vocational training in shoemaking and sewing. In 1987, the centre expanded its facilities to accommodate more people. It built dormitories where trainees could reside during training. In 1991, the centre became the Yayasan Kristen Untuk Kesehatan Umum (Christian Foundation for Public Health), or YAKKUM Rehabilitation Centre. By then, it was an independent foundation that received funding mostly from donor agencies and some private individuals. YAKKUM now provides medical, social and vocational rehabilitation programmes at a large facility in Yogyakarta. This profile focuses on its vocational services.

• The YAKKUM Vocational Training Approach •

Targeting rural areas. Under the YAKKUM approach, field workers locate people in rural areas who have mild to severe disabilities and who can benefit from the centre's services. The targeted individuals are the poorest of the poor and include those with disabilities attributable to congenital disease, polio, burns and accidents. Where possible, the centre arranges for corrective surgery, particularly in the case of club feet or cleft palates.

YAKKUM provides vocational skills training on three tracks:

- People seeking self-employment can choose a trade, such as tailoring or wood working. The training includes a course on managing a small business.
- People seeking open employment in factories study a particular skill.
- People interested in working in handicraft production learn techniques for producing soft toys, leather goods and wooden items.

YAKKUM offers two to three training cycles per year, with training courses lasting for two to three months. Depending on their needs, trainees spend one month to one year at the centre. If a client chooses woodworking and lives some distance from the vocational training centre, YAKKUM sends the individual to study with craftspeople in a city called Jepara, which is known for woodworking.

YAKKUM requires people unable to read and write to enrol first in special preparatory training aimed at improving their literacy. During this period, they also participate in vocational training courses as a way of discovering what they want to pursue when the literacy training concludes.

Outreach and follow-up. Always in search of clients, YAKKUM field workers continue to reach out to rural areas. They also monitor the work of graduates in self-employment or full-time jobs. Some parents remain fearful over the prospect of sending their children to the centre. In such cases, field workers use photographs as a means of documenting the centre's services and reducing family anxiety. In addition, YAKKUM invites parents to visit the centre.

Craft and production centres. YAKKUM set up the Craft Centre in 1991 to offer skills training and self-employment opportunities. Graduates become "producers" whose handicrafts are bought by the Craft Centre, but graduates do not earn producer status unless they make high-quality goods. About 160 producers currently receive steady income through the Craft Centre arrangement, which is based on an oral agreement rather than a contract. YAKKUM provides the producers with the raw materials they need. The producers work in their homes and are responsible for transporting their handicrafts back to the centre in Yogyakarta. As an incentive to ensure high-quality production, YAKKUM pays all the transportation costs of its producers if their goods are accepted. Some 40 producers have chosen to work at the centre where they have access to the equipment they need to produce their handicrafts.

After the Craft Centre buys the handicrafts from its producers, it sells them in its three outlet shops or exports them to European clients. Some items are also sold on consignment in the gift shops of prominent hotels. YAKKUM employs former trainees to handle quality control, packaging and distribution of the handicrafts it buys from the producers.

Every two years, the Craft Centre hosts a meeting of all its producers. The meeting focuses on a central theme aimed at improving productivity and incorporating new design trends into product lines. The meeting also offers training workshops intended to upgrade producers' skills and explores second-business possibilities. The gathering provides YAKKUM with the opportunity to follow the success or difficulties of its former trainees.

Tooling Leather Brings Independence

Suwandi, 30, is from central Java and a leather producer with the YAKKUM Craft Centre. Suwandi was 15 when he first attended the YAKKUM Rehabilitation Centre in 1987. Financial assistance from YAKKUM enabled him to continue his schooling at junior high school. He lived with his teacher during that time because his parents worked in other cities. In 1991, Suwandi began YAKKUM's vocational training course in leather craft. He now lives at his uncle's home about 110 kilometres from the YAKKUM Craft Centre. With the aid of short crutches specially made for him by the YAKKUM Rehabilitation Centre, he travels to Yogyakarta every month to deliver his leather wallets and other products.



YAKKUM also runs a production unit that employs 14 workers with disabilities who make leg braces and prosthetics. Another six people are employed in the metal workshop and manufacture the locks for braces distributed to people receiving corrective medical services in another YAKKUM unit.

• How YAKKUM Responded to the Needs of Its Current and Former Trainees •

The financial crisis that started in 1997 made a difficult economic situation worse. Even before the crisis, job opportunities were limited. Between 1991 and 1997, only five per cent of graduates found jobs in open employment. Only 28 per cent found full-time jobs either at the YAKKUM Craft Centre or with YAKKUM referral assistance. None sought jobs in the open market. Many vocational training graduates pursued self-employment or handicraft production.

So when the financial crisis hit Indonesia, even self-employed people had difficulty maintaining their income. Sales and orders for handicraft items fell dramatically. YAKKUM's field workers, typically involved in locating people in need of services, found themselves providing follow-up support to former trainees and thus were well positioned to detect difficulties early on. In addition, when even YAKKUM did not escape the hardships imposed by the financial crisis, it had to reduce its orders. At the same time, the handicraft producers began to ask for help.

Stimulation fund and business training. In 1999, YAKKUM managers decided to offer financial support for second-business start-ups to both former trainees who were self-employed and former employees who were producing handicrafts. With donor assistance, YAKKUM offered a "stimulation fund", which was half grant, half loan. The loan portion is interest-free, with repayments scheduled over a ten-month period. In some cases, the former trainee may repay the loan over whatever period of time the individual can handle. Depending on the region, typical businesses are pig farming and the sale of personal care items, such as soap. In remote villages, persons with disabilities are successfully developing snack-producing ventures, such as the sale of cookies or fried bananas. The products can easily be sold near schools or markets.

After YAKKUM approves a proposal for a venture, the applicant attends a two- to three-day training course in business skills at the Craft Centre. Parents of the applicants and village leaders are encouraged to join the applicant. "Village leaders have an important role in helping disabled people," says Sasangka Rahardjo, director of the YAKKUM Craft Centre. By understanding their needs and potential, village leaders can help facilitate working spaces for disabled people through, for example, the provision of land for pig farming.

Vocational guidance and training in "soft" skills. By analysing input from its field workers, YAKKUM officials realized that its system of permitting newly enrolled trainees to choose a training course was an ill-advised approach to training. Originally, after field workers located prospective trainees in rural areas, they would discuss different training options. Trainees would then select a training course, and field workers would arrange for the desired training at YAKKUM. But some trainees selected skills for which they were not well suited or for which support at home was absent. Consequently, many

failed their courses or were unable to apply their training in their own community. Sometimes the family was unable to finance a start-up business, buy land or rent retail space. Other times, a community's biases toward purchasing items from or using the services of a person with a disability brought about a business failure.

YAKKUM learned that many trainees did not know what they wanted to do or have a sense of what type of employment might lead to success. To address this "problem" as well as the emotional slump experienced by former trainees whose businesses had failed, YAKKUM sought the help of psychologists. Starting in 2000, the psychologists volunteered on a part time basis to provide vocational guidance and training in "soft" skills, such as assertiveness training, problem solving, group dynamics and speaking in public – skills often needed in self-employment businesses. The psychologists also counselled graduates and helped them select appropriate second businesses for them.

Now when trainees enrol at YAKKUM, a psychologist evaluates them through tests and interviews to assess their potential for specific types of training. Then field workers point out trainees' strengths and help individuals select courses suited to their capabilities and the social environment at home. The process results in a better match of trainees' preferences, abilities and opportunities.

To improve trainees' social environment at home and in the community, YAKKUM now invites parents and village leaders to its centre, with expenses paid, to provide awareness training about disability issues.

Computer courses. In 2000, the Microsoft Foundation's donation of hardware, software and funding for training helped YAKKUM develop courses in the high-demand computer skills required by a changing and contemporary employment scene. The training targets women in particular. Graduates of the courses typically pursue office work in open employment.

Accomplishments

YAKKUM has successfully met some of the organizational challenges presented by a changing labour market and unstable economic climate. It has proven itself to be a flexible, needs-driven organization. Its specific accomplishments include:

- Achievement of an excellent gender ratio. An average of 45 women to 55 men attend YAKKUM's courses each year.
- Donor funding. One private donor – a German philanthropist – provided funding in 1998 that continues to offer seed money to women with disabilities who are interested in setting up second businesses.

- Placement of graduates in jobs. In 2002, about 14 people took positions in open employment. Another 10 people found employment in furniture making and other woodcraft enterprises in Jepara, where they trained. The YAKKUM Craft Centre currently employs nine men and two women to handle quality control, packaging and distribution of producers' handicrafts. They earn a monthly salary of 375,000 rupiahs (US\$45). Another 17 people with disabilities work in the YAKKUM production unit.
- Satisfactory earnings. Nearly all of the 160 handicraft producers currently working for the YAKKUM Craft Centre live independently in their communities and earn, on average, 350,000 rupiahs (US\$42) a month or as high as 600,000 rupiahs (US\$72) per month. YAKKUM's record keeping does not include a complete accounting of its producers with second businesses, partly because some people work occasionally or in a group. Those engaged in pig farming, however, earn about 8,500 rupiahs per kilogram and own six to eight pigs that might weigh 60 kilograms at time of sale.

Lessons Learned

YAKKUM's mission to provide effective rehabilitation and vocational assistance requires the continual examination of programmes and adaptations when needed. YAKKUM's lengthy experience in working with people with disabilities has yielded many lessons, including:

Graduates need support once they return to their villages. Field workers engaged in follow-up monitoring provide support and guidance when needed.

Village leaders can help YAKKUM help others. If only one disabled person resides in a village, he or she most likely will feel alone and isolated, but the support of the village leader helps foster community integration. In addition, the village leader's support helps encourage a person with disabilities to consider and succeed in developing a business. In some cases, a community leader can help provide land or a location for a business.

Monetary incentives promote better quality control. Open-market standards must be applied to products if goods are to be sold to the public or exported. Given that some producers have to travel great distances to deliver their work, they can incur significant transportation costs. Linking such expenses to quality assurance has proven effective.

Field workers can be limited in their assessment abilities. Psychologists are better skilled than field workers in detecting individuals' potential and providing counselling. Most workers benefit greatly from assertiveness and other "soft" skills training before they return to their communities.

Looking Forward

The YAKKUM Craft Centre intends to establish links with other institutions to provide additional training courses. One plan calls for a partnership with the Academy of Fine Arts in Yogyakarta to teach batik design with natural dyes.

The director of the YAKKUM Craft Centre will pursue consultations with the ThaiCraft Association, an organization in Bangkok that provides a roaming marketplace and Web site for Thai handicrafts. Through ThaiCraft, YAKKUM hopes to learn about the management of specialized marketing events to promote and sell local handicrafts.

The Rehabilitation Centre's administrators will strengthen their lobbying efforts to acquire a higher level of grant assistance from the Government to fund its services. YAKKUM aims to be less dependent on private donations, though the move toward self-sufficiency may prove difficult over the short term. The Rehabilitation Centre also intends to expand its community-based rehabilitation services.

Replication

Replication of the core programme as presented in this profile – a rehabilitation centre that targets people with disabilities in rural areas and provides corrective medical services, vocational training and financial support for business development – requires a reliable source of funding and a multidisciplinary staff. In addition, strong links to handicraft markets are essential to ensure the sustainability of a service that hires former trainees to produce goods. Such a service also requires a manager experienced in sound business practices, design and quality assurance. With those elements in place, the steps to building a holistic centre can involve the following:

- Hire a talented crew of field workers who are not averse to travelling to remote areas. Workers do not need to be highly trained. In fact, secondary education is sufficient, but field workers do need to demonstrate a strong interest in working with people with disabilities and must exhibit sensitivity to their needs. Training can facilitate sensitivity. Field workers also need to commit to monitoring graduates once they return to their villages.
- Pursue the possibility of part-time volunteer work for psychological services, especially when funding is limited. Skills training should include assertiveness training and other social skills development.
- Demand quality control and devise an incentive system to encourage a high level of craftsmanship, thereby ensuring handicraft producers a reliable source of income.

- Provide family members and village leaders with accommodation and financial support for transportation so that they can visit the Rehabilitation Centre, particularly if families appear reluctant to let a family member with disabilities participate in training activities away from home.
- Develop a vocational training curriculum that focuses on marketable skills and teaches the importance of learning about market opportunities. As YAKKUM learned, it is critical to link with other organizations or institutions to share training costs. When seeking donors, it makes sense to cast a wide net. For example, by providing equipment and funding for training, the Microsoft Foundation helps communities in developing countries exercise their right to information.

For More Information

Sasangka Rahardjo
Director
YAKKUM Craft Centre
Jl. Kaliurang Km. 13
5 Besi Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Tel: 62274 895-386
Fax: 62274 895-181 (Rehabilitasi)
Fax: 62274 896-631 (Yakkum Craft)
E-mail: support@rehabilitasi-yakkum.or.id
direktur@rehabilitasi-yakkum.or.id
yc@yakkumcraft.com
Web site: www.rehabilitasi-yakkum.or.id
www.yakkumcraft.com

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<http://www.microsoft.com/giving/Home.asp>.