

Spinning Wool into a Better Way of Life – Including People with Disabilities into Mainstream Training Programmes in Mongolia

The Challenge

M. Ariunzaya studied for a career as an elementary school teacher and, in 1995, was hired for a position in a school in Mongolia's second largest city, Darkhan. Then a car accident destroyed his dreams. His recovery took two years and required Ariunzaya to learn how to use a wheelchair. He eventually returned to the school where he taught, but was not allowed to return to his job. The staff did not believe that someone who survived a major accident would be physically and mentally fit for teaching. During his recovery, Ariunzaya's family lived off the pension of his elderly mother. Ariunzaya believed that his failure to support his family violated Mongolian tradition, which dictates that the eldest son assume financial responsibility for the family.

Mongolia's State Social Welfare Office estimates about 80 per cent of all people with disabilities live below the poverty line. Yet, the country has few programmes that address the specific employment needs of people with disabilities. In economic transition from socialism to a market economy since the early 1990s, Mongolia – whose citizens largely lead a nomadic life or reside in remote villages – offers limited employment in general. Therefore, people with disabilities, such as Ariunzaya, struggle to provide for their families. In Mongolia, how can people with disabilities work toward self-sufficiency?

Meeting the Challenge

Beginning in 1995, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) reached out and began integrating people with disabilities into its newly established training courses to help rural residents in Mongolia develop income-generating projects. It was a first for Mongolia – and even for much of the developing world. Its success is largely related to recognizing the obvious: With most herding families in Mongolia tending sheep and goats, raw wool is plentiful, but it is often sold at low prices for export. Wool processing and the production of woollen goods can generate higher incomes. Accordingly, NLM set up animal husbandry and wool processing facilities in its two regional projects, one of which operates in partnership with the Government's State Social Welfare Office. Aside from taking advantage of a national resource, NLM's creation of an easily accessible centre and the active recruitment of people with disabilities have spelled success.

“It is hard to be disabled in Mongolia”, says Eva-Synnøve Dickson Lid, an NLM consultant, “People with disabilities are often left out.” The NLM programme offers them an uncommon opportunity.

The Good Practice: Designing mainstream vocational training programmes that include people with disabilities.



• Background •

The Norwegian Lutheran Mission originally began its work in Mongolia by focusing its two regional projects on poverty alleviation. NLM launched the first effort in 1995 in Darkhan as the Selenge Development Programme (SDP) in partnership with the local State Social Welfare Office. It launched the second project two years later in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar as the Bayansurkh Development Programme (BDP). From the beginning, the NLM projects were designed for all people, including vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities, although staff members made a special effort to reach out to disabled people in remote areas. At the same time, NLM recognized from the start that a training programme targeted even in part to vulnerable groups and people with disabilities requires special supports, such as transport assistance and lodging.

In the beginning, as now, the two projects provided training in animal husbandry, vegetable cultivation and wool processing. Each of the two sites operated a wool processing facility called a competence centre. NLM also operated a Health Development Programme (HDP) in Darkhan and Ulaanbaatar and a Child and Family Strengthening Programme (CFS) in Ulaanbaatar, both started in 1998. NLM received 90 per cent of its funds from the Norwegian government and the remainder from private donations.

The success of the wool processing project, which is the focus of this profile, has made that project the focal point of NLM activities in Mongolia. One of the advantages to this type of skills training is that trainees have the opportunity to earn an income relatively quickly. Both training centres teach wool processing; the SDP also offers animal husbandry (mostly sheep breeding) and vegetable cultivation. The SDP project not only provides raw wool for use in both projects but also sells the raw material to programme graduates. For trainees who become home-based wool producers, NLM guarantees

a market by buying products that meet the standards and quality demanded by NLM. With a huge demand for Mongolian handicrafts – 80 per cent of what NLM buys is exported to Norway, France, Germany and England – the products are either sold to tourists in Mongolia's capital city or exported.

• How the Wool Processing Project is Structured •

NLM takes sole responsibility for the training at the BDP site. At the SDP site, NLM supports the State Social Welfare Office trainers and provides equipment.

Skills training. NLM schedules basic two-week training courses several times per year. Each session accepts up to ten people with or without disabilities. Every SDP training session includes two to four people with disabilities. Skills taught include:

- Cleaning raw wool, or "carding" it, to produce the wool bits for processing;
- Spinning carded wool into yarn or felting it; and
- Creating slippers, shawls, scarves, socks, wall hangings, vests and bags.

At the BDP site, trainees can continue with advanced courses in the fabrication of various woollen products. A felting session, for example, runs for four weeks; the spinning and knitting course runs for five weeks.

Obtaining equipment and raw material. Wool processing equipment includes a hand carder, drawn carder and spinning wheel. The hand carder is made up of two wooden boards with several spikes that are pushed toward each other and pulled apart to form the wool into cottony-like balls. The drawn carder is a round drum rotated by a handle; the tumbling motion separates the fibres. The spinning wheel twists the raw fibres into yarn. NLM provides loans with long payback periods to former trainees for equipment purchases. Trainees also "borrow" raw wool from the centre when starting their business.

Production system. NLM encourages former trainees to organize into groups whose different members take responsibility for specific tasks. Generally, the groups have sprung up among families and include extended family members. A former trainee generally passes on his or her newly acquired knowledge to others who become part of a self-managed group. NLM is keen to see the individual groups grow, perhaps bringing together several families and increasing output. This type of "cooperative" is in a good position to negotiate big production contracts and purchase large volumes of raw wool at a favourable price. "Because of the post-communist situation, there is reluctance among people to move toward this direction," observes Ms. Dickson Lid. Reliance on cooperatives, however, has proven more successful in remote areas, which have a tradition of cooperatives.

How Wool Processing Changed Ariunzaya's Situation

A friend of Ariunzaya attended one of the wool processing training courses and told Ariunzaya that it changed his life. Ariunzaya followed his friend's lead. In 2001, he applied to the wool processing training programme at the provincial Social Welfare Centre in Darkhan. Now the 32-year-old Ariunzaya makes high-quality woollen products and earns enough income to support his mother and two younger siblings. Although he makes the final product on his own, everyone in the family helps – sometimes his sister or brother takes the products to the welfare centre or brings the raw wool back to the house. They even help him clean the wool to prepare it for processing. When he sees his siblings wearing items he has made and hears them boast of his talents to friends, he feels great pride.

Training for trainers. In what is becoming a fairly popular practice, trainers are often former trainees who return to their families or villages and teach others. For example, one former trainee with disabilities coordinated with three other disabled people to create a self-managed group in a remote area of Darkhan-Uul province.

Financial support. Trainees pay their own transportation costs to and from the training centre. They also must find their own accommodations, though most have relatives or friends living nearby. NLM provides accommodation in its guest houses when people have no other options for lodging.

Promoting the project and its benefits. NLM organizes weekly programmes on the Darkhan-Uul provincial television station to raise awareness about its projects. The programmes feature stories about people who have benefited from NLM activities. According to NLM Project Manager Ms. Munguntuya, "The real advertisement is by word of mouth from the individuals and families who have benefited from the project to others." Advertisements for the mainstream training, which refer to the integration of disabled people, also indirectly promote public acceptance of people with disabilities as equal members of the community.



Accomplishments

The NLM project not only offers vocational training but also ensures work opportunities by taking advantage of available and inexpensive raw materials. Project success is largely related to the lack of development of a wool processing industry within Mongolia. Herders command a higher price for the raw material than what they traditionally earned by exporting it, and the project meets a clear need by both providing employment and building a new industry. Given that the wool processing equipment is produced locally, other manufacturers also benefit. Former trainees also have options for selling their products; they can sell to local shops or to NLM. “We can see results,” says Ms. Dickson Lid. “We see people improving their lives. Those who used to collect bottles now make more money and provide their family with more food and firewood – basic things they need.”

Since its inception, the project has reached between 12 and 28 persons with disabilities each year. In 2001-2002, the SDP project realized the following accomplishments:

- Some 19 people with disabilities were trained in wool processing. With the financial support of their provincial Social Welfare Office, some travelled long distances.
- Approximately 150 families worked regularly with NLM in Darkhan-Uul province; 30 of the families have a member with a disability.

When selling their products to NLM, producers earn about 30,000 tugrug (US\$27) a month, which is comparable to the state minimum wage.

Lessons Learned

The NLM project is one of a just a few examples of a successful training and income-generating programme that has integrated people with disabilities into mainstream training. The lessons learned by the NLM since opening its first training project include the following:

Earning a reliable income quickly attracts and motivates trainees. Once trainees realize that they have an opportunity to participate in skills training that can lead to employment, they become committed to the workshops. For people with disabilities, the project represents a chance to earn income and support their families and thus increase self-esteem.

Quality control is essential. Given that most products are exported to Norway and some to other European countries, quality control is a necessary concern and is the responsibility of the competence centres. Products delivered by the wool producers are checked before they are accepted. Producers receive advice on how to develop their products further to meet quality standards.

Involving persons with disabilities requires engagement with local communities. NLM has to pay special attention to the number of people with disabilities within the project. The quantity of products made by nondisabled persons dominates production. Working through former trainees and local government partners to advertise the project, the NLM staff actively seeks out individuals with disabilities to participate in the training seminars. “It is not very common in Mongolia to have programmes open to everyone, including people with disabilities,” says Ms. Dickson Lid. “You have to make them aware that the option is here and open to them.”

Including persons with disabilities broadens awareness. The NLM staff admits that it must confront state officials’ negative attitude toward people with disabilities. Staff must be persuasive and strongly encourage the inclusion of disabled people in the training process.

Length of training is important. Given that several participants come from very poor families that need immediate income, the duration of training is an important consideration. With skills training organized into time-limited sessions, participants supporting families have the opportunity to earn some income between training sessions. The training approach calls for short initial sessions, monthly consultations and more advanced skills development while trainees produce woollen products.

Finding the raw material requires some effort. The number of people who would like to learn wool processing is increasing and the demand for raw wool is growing. Many herders bring raw wool to the city to sell to large processing factories that produce world-famous Mongolian cashmere and woollen products. Recent years, however, have seen disastrously tough winters such that the absence of animal feed necessitated the destruction of livestock, thereby decreasing the availability of raw wool. In fact, the wool that is now available may or may not be of the quality required for export goods. But the shortage has had one favourable impact: Though they formerly paid a terribly low price for raw wool, Chinese traders buying for producers in China now match the NLM price, which could encourage more export and even affect the volume of raw material available to the training project in the future.

Transportation is a significant obstacle for some people who want to attend training. With Mongolia’s roads and public transport inaccessible to persons with disabilities, project staff sometimes travel to people living in remote areas in order to collect their woollen products or to transport people with disabilities to a centre for a training session.

How Training Leads to Better Housing

The *ger* is the traditional Mongolian home. It is constructed of hand-made felt from wool that is draped over a wood frame and covered with skin plaits and secured ropes. Traditionally, people in the countryside made the *gers* themselves. They sometimes passed them from generation to generation. Today, people buy *gers* in a store and the hand-made felt can be produced by people with disabilities. The *ger* does not use any nails and is easy to erect and take down, thus making it ideal for a nomadic lifestyle. Even in the towns and cities, many people still live in *gers*. Because the wood parts and skin plait covering last longer than the felt, the felt needs to be regularly maintained.

Looking Forward

NLM has a five-year plan to consolidate the two training programmes into one. It intends to train more trainers and to encourage the development of cooperatives or small enterprises. Further, it plans to offer sessions on running a small business. NLM is seeking a national partner to deliver additional wool courses in local competence centres. The main State Social Welfare Office hopes to expand its training project throughout the country as well as serve as a model for developing other types of small enterprises. NLM has helped other provincial Social Welfare Offices and NGOs create similar programmes by training teachers at the NLM competence centres and providing consultations.

Replication

Because integrated training and employment of people with disabilities is new to Mongolia, the NLM projects provide a real-life example of how people with disabilities can be included into any activity. While the specific wool processing project may not be applicable to many countries, it nonetheless embodies a set of characteristics that should be considered in establishing ventures that combine training and production with opportunities for self-employment. For instance, it offers skills training that involves low investment and can be carried out at home. This type of training is particularly appropriate for people who cannot spend much time away from home or cannot afford to pay for long-term accommodation. Further, the equipment used in wool processing is simple, easy to transport and install and is especially well suited for rural and remote areas or areas with difficult terrain. In addition, training delivered over short periods and with continued upgrading keeps trainees motivated and permits them to continue earning income while enhancing their earning potential.

The most important characteristic of the NLM project that lends itself to replication is the delivery of vocational training programmes that, from the outset, include all people, particularly those with disabilities.

For More Information

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