

Power in Unity – Self-Help Groups Ask for Government Training in Thailand

The Challenge

Sub Tongdonpum was 30 and a wage labourer when a coconut tree fell on him during a storm. It left him paralyzed from the chest down. With only a seventh grade education, Mr. Tongdonpum found few employment options upon his discharge from the hospital. He sold balloons and miscellaneous items that he picked up from the street. His meagre income put a strain on his marriage. Eventually, his wife left him, taking their son with her. In a culture where family is largely the only social safety net, Mr. Tongdonpum felt alone. And, yet, he recognized that many people in Thailand had suffered injuries in adulthood or had been living with disabilities since their youth and had no family to lean on.

Mr. Tongdonpum then heard of a quadriplegic man in his province who wanted to form a group of people with disabilities who could help each other. Unable to feed or bathe himself, Mr. Tongdonpum wondered how he could do anything for someone else.

Meeting the Challenge

“We can work together,” said Teerawat Sripathomsawat, the man with the self-help idea (see box). His positive outlook and determination overwhelmed Mr. Tongdonpum when the two men met. “I realized I have two working arms, a brain and a brave heart,” Mr. Tongdonpum said. He also agreed that together, “We could make change.” In 1996, they found ten more people with disabilities in their native Nakhon Pathom province, about 56 kilometres west of Bangkok. The nine men and three women joined forces and formed the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Club to seek rights and services. In 2000, they decided that the best way to help people live independently would be to assist them in starting businesses. The club asked the Government to provide its members with vocational training. Those members then shared their new skills by forming smaller vocational groups to train others and help members’ microbusinesses. And thus they began repeating the group-train system throughout the province. The club has now grown to about 4,000 members and in 2001 became the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association.

The Good Practice: A self-help peer group of people with disabilities that develops work opportunities and links to government services.



• Background •

People with disabilities, especially in Thailand's countryside, typically spend their lives either relying on family members for sustenance or living lives of seclusion and neglect. The lack of assistance and access makes travel within Thailand, even short trips, difficult. Moreover, many people with disabilities are neither aware of government entitlements nor knowledgeable of how to gain access to services. The 1991 Rehabilitation Act of Disabled Persons, for example, provides for living allowances, a supply of assistive devices, education and loans but many people with disabilities are unaware of these benefits.

At its outset, the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Club set out to make disabled people in the countryside aware of available services, their rights and how to seek assistance. The club developed a home-visit programme that offered information and consultation to encourage people to take charge of their lives. However, the process took time, and the club exhausted the funding provided by a provincial charity. The club then changed strategy and asked the local government's social welfare and health care staff to set up a mobile service that would work with people with disabilities where they lived. Club members participated in the mobile service visits as peer counsellors.

Club members next decided that the best way to seek further financial assistance was by surveying their province to assess the needs of people with disabilities. When they proposed a census project, the good reputation the club had established through the home-visit project helped it secure financial support from the Government. Members put up banners and sent out vehicles with loud speakers to every district asking people with disabilities to register with the social welfare department. It took the club about two years, from 1996 through 1997, to collect more than 2,000 names. But the impressive feat earned the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Club the respect of government agencies as well as invitations from other provinces to assist in setting up self-help organizations.

In time, club members realized that the only way to secure independence was by earning their own income. They asked the Government to train them in job skills. The first group of ten trainees learned how to laminate picture frames. From this, Mr. Tongdonpum developed a successful laminating business and now earns on average 10,000 baht a month (US\$225). To spread the trainees' newly acquired knowledge and help others, Mr. Tongdonpum took "charge" of a small group of people from the district in which he lived and trained them in lamination. He and the small group began repeating the group system throughout the province.

• Organizing at the Grassroots Level •

Self-help vocational groups. Today, the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association acts as a coordinating centre for its members. The managing committee of ten volunteers is the link between club members and the Government. The committee provides information on services, welfare and rights of people with disabilities and sends referrals for rehabilitation, training and education.

Small self-help groups pursue business opportunities by sharing information or, when orders for products are too large for a member to handle alone, by sharing work contracts. The small groups organize either by geographic location, such as members from the same district, or by type of product, such as needlework (crochet and cross-stitch items), clay work (miniature decorative items), herbal shampoo and detergent and even astrology (predictions). A group may have as few as two members or as many as 20; typically one person leads the group. Group leaders purchase materials to assist members who are not able to do so themselves. Buying in bulk also reduces costs. Groups sell their products at provincial fairs, where those able to travel with ease operate stalls. The groups also sell handicrafts on consignment at museums and restaurants. From their earnings, members contribute two per cent to the district groups' activities fund. Some trainees do not stay with a group once they have learned a skill and instead strike out on their own. For those unable to work alone for mobility or other reasons or for those without market access, the groups offer a way for people to help other people. Members earn from 1,500 baht to 15,000 baht (US\$35 to \$350) per month.

Training. The association has no budget for formal training courses, but it does arrange for training from the Government. When government training is not available, the association falls back on its own approach to training, in which interested persons learn a skill from volunteers. In fact, group leaders often serve as trainers, stressing that group members are expected to share their knowledge with newcomers. The association also encourages people with disabilities to set up their own groups in their local area or among people with similar interests.

Learning centres. The small vocational groups meet at a district-level learning centre, which is where social rehabilitation and job training take place. Three learning centres currently operate. Mr. Tongdonpum serves as leader for the Kamphaeng Saen centre; the district lets him use an old health care office as a work centre and for group meetings.

Market analysis. Government agencies provide vocational rehabilitation or training for people with disabilities. Many self-help group members have undergone the training, but few can apply the skills they acquired to earning a livelihood. The training does not provide any understanding of market dynamics or teach trainees how to run a business. The government courses are generic courses designed for all people with disabilities and are often outdated.

As a training instructor for a course in laminating picture frames, Mr. Tongdonpum emphasizes the need for market analysis. Laminating frames makes sense in his city, he explains, because the largely middle-class population can afford to buy decorative items in addition to necessities. Mr. Tongdonpum once surveyed the market potential of a remote province and found no prospects for the sale of picture frames. "I hardly saw picture frames hanging on walls," he explains. "So the same training in that area won't bring a trainee employment." With respect to the frame lamination business, Mr. Tongdonpum tells trainees to look for volume markets in government agencies, schools or temples, all of which award achievement certificates and diplomas and provide a built-in market for lamination. He also maintains orders from photography shops even though the steady work means lower prices.

The Kamphaeng Saen centre, now led by 45-year-old Jitr Muengnok, follows Mr. Tongdonpum's guidance. Mr. Muengnok travels to houses, village groups, school graduations and functions where people take pictures that they would want to frame. He looks for opportunities to solicit orders for his group.



• Accessing Government Loans •

In 1996, the Government began distributing loans nationwide from the newly created Rehabilitation Fund. Each disabled person was entitled to apply for a 20,000 baht (US\$460) interest-free loan, repayable within five years. Social welfare staff organized workshops in various provinces, including Nakhon Pathom, to publicize the availability of the loans. Applications required a business proposal and a co-signer, and applicants were to submit all the documents themselves. The approval procedure required a time-consuming case-by-case home visit by a social worker. When Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association members realized that the loan application process seemed unduly difficult, they grew concerned that many people would miss out on the funding opportunity. Accordingly, Mr. Tongdonpum's district group decided to pool their resources and work together to complete the applications and submit them en masse, thus encouraging the loan officers to work more efficiently.

Mr. Tongdonpum determined what information was needed for the business proposals. Later, when the approval officers made case-study visits, Mr. Tongdonpum scheduled appointments with each group member and the approval officers and arranged transport from one house to the next. The officers finished several cases in one day, a vast improvement over the one case per day they usually achieved. Because Mr. Tongdonpum's group members showed that they supported one another and worked as a unit, the approval officers permitted the applicants to co-sign each other's proposals. Of the 90 applicants from Nakhon Pathom who received a loan, 20 were members of Mr. Tongdonpum's group.

Mr. Tongdonpum used his loan first for a chicken-raising enterprise and second for a fish-farming enterprise; both efforts failed. He next attempted to grow coconut trees and failed in that venture. He later recognized that he lacked the needed knowledge for farming. "You need to find a job that suits you and that you can do on your own," he advises. For instance, Mr. Tongdonpum can perform nearly all the tasks in his lamination business. Therefore, he returned to that business, which enabled him to pay back his loan. Fortunately, his good repayment record helped him obtain a second loan to expand his laminating business. Mr. Tongdonpum has other jobs as well. He collects utility and funeral service payments from people in the community; he rents sound systems and lighting gear; and he manages a band of musicians with disabilities. All together, he earns up to 30,000 baht (US\$775) a month.

Accomplishments

The Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association has become a model for self-help organizations. It has not only helped raise awareness among the province's people with disabilities regarding their rights and work, but its achievements have inspired disability organizations and groups in other Thai provinces to follow the association's

strategies, including a focus on job creation. While the vocational group model is only a small part of the association's total programme, it is significant and growing and can point to a wide range of accomplishments, including the following:

- The association registered more than 4,000 people with disabilities in Nakhon Pathom province.
- It set up three learning centres for people with disabilities at the district level (though one is no longer active due to the lack of a leader) and is starting one at the subdistrict level.
- It organized work groups that produce handicrafts, white clay sculptured items and picture frames and one work group that provides astrology services. Several smaller groups are composed of only one or two individuals. Monthly earnings range from 1,500 baht (US\$35) for white clay products to 10,000 baht (US\$230) for frames to 15,000 baht (US\$350) for astrological predictions.
- During 2001, the association trained 21 people with disabilities in crochet, white clay and picture frame skills, and 11 others with severe disabilities in their chosen skills.

Lessons Learned

The Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association operates with volunteers. Starting with ten members and growing to its current size of 4,000, the association has proven that power in unity is the key to reaching its goals. Other lessons learned in its development as a model of self-help include:

Every organized group yields benefits and problems. Controversy and competition arise in organized groups, and the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association is no different. Leaders have to learn to mediate incidents with problem solving and conflict resolution techniques.

Good leaders need to develop successors and move on. Once a group is organized and productive, the group leader/trainer needs to cultivate a successor within the group and then move on to develop a new group. In this way, the association optimizes the talents of its most skilled members.

The market determines the type of job training. If the skills to be taught have no market demand, training is a wasteful undertaking and demoralizes participants. Even in requesting government services, trainees should be assertive in asking for what is best for them in terms of market opportunities.

Each member must become financially secure before helping others. To be a volunteer, members should be financially secure so that they have the time to work with others and are not distracted by their own financial problems.

Group leaders must help with marketing and job development. They need to be encouraged, motivated and supported in their efforts to work and start a business. They need help with marketing and in sustaining the momentum required to succeed in income-generating activities. Group leaders, as work models, serve this role.

A facility that serves as a base for a group helps build cohesion. It is important to work with local officials to identify and gain access to unused office space as a possible training and social centre. To this end, groups need to build links with NGOs and self-sustaining businesses and not merely rely on government support.

The Man Behind the Idea

Teerawat Sripathomsawat travels in a wheelchair with a hired assistant. He voluntarily leads the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association. His disabilities resulted from a rugby match injury when he was in college. Unable to finish his undergraduate degree in sport training, he resorted to selling T-shirts at the rugby stadium where he once played. "Once I brought home the money and my parents saw that I was all right, they gave me support. But it was a bittersweet experience being back to the field," recalls Mr. Sripathomsawat. "There were people who bought my shirts out of pity. I did not like that, but I had to swallow it. The most important thing was that I earned money."

Mr. Sripathomsawat eventually returned to school and earned a law degree. But when he found the work physically taxing, he began designing and selling sport shirts. The business grew, and he opened several shops. Now 43, Mr. Sripathomsawat operates a mini-mart. He supports his mother and a nephew as well.

"One person alone can hardly fight for rights," explains Mr. Sripathomsawat. "A collective has more potential. Our voices are louder and our needs are recognized. A lone disabled person tends to be treated like a beggar."

Mr. Sripathomsawat learned of the self-help idea through Thailand's Disabled Persons Association, a national group. After he identified 11 other people with disabilities in his province who believed in the self-help approach, the group launched a home-visit plan to convince others of the merits of self-help. Thus, the Nakhon Pathom Disabled Association was born.

"Independent living is a dream for many disabled people," says Mr. Sripathomsawat. "As a group we can learn from each other and exchange our experiences on how we deal with our basic needs and do things, how we survive."

Looking Forward

“I want people with disabilities to get together, create activities and learn from each other,” says Mr. Sripathomsawat, chair of the association. “My dream is to see them partner in businesses, services or industries that are not necessarily related to disability.”

In 2003 and as part of the Government’s independent living pilot project, the association plans to train severely disabled people in peer counselling. In the following year, it will provide information on health care, assistive devices, physical rehabilitation, peer counselling, rights protection and skills training. The association wants to create more work groups and see the development of centres in every district and subdistrict.

For the work groups, the association plans to merchandise herbal shampoo and detergent. It has tested the market and sees potential for the products. Mr. Tongdonpum will invite shareholders to contribute 500 baht each to help launch the products. He has applied for proper certification and registration of the products.

“To train people with severe disabilities is an ultimate goal. They have been neglected,” adds Mr. Sripathomsawat. “I wish we could do more. So far we have done so little. The problem is that we are all volunteers. We want to devote our time, but we have to earn our living.”

Replication

A self-help organization is based on the power, spirit and abilities of people with disabilities. It is essential to find those people and encourage them to work together to develop business ideas, obtain resources and, at the least, learn about available government and NGO services that may be helpful them.

To replicate the association’s self-help model, members of self-help organizations must determine an appropriate direction in accordance with their needs. With regard to vocational groups, activities need to reflect a group’s interests, abilities and market constraints/opportunities. The group must demonstrate creativity in identifying resources. Money is just one type of resource; others include volunteers, experts in various areas of job training and market analysis and unused office space for training centres. The main idea in forming a vocational group is to develop members who will establish new groups. As long as the process of group formation and spin-off continues, more and more people will benefit.

“Unity is power. We have to unite to keep the door wide open,” adds Mr. Tongdonpum. “If we stop, it will close down again. The officials can’t keep up with the job of providing services and deal with people with disabilities in general.”

For More Information

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