

# Moving Towards Disability Inclusion

## Thailand

### Trade unions promoting disability inclusion in the workplace

*In Thailand, the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme's PEPDEL project is working with the trade union movement to promote equal rights and equal opportunities for disabled workers. Some of these efforts are already bearing fruit with trade unions taking leading roles at workplaces and within their communities to influence attitudes and opinions about the rights and capacity of disabled persons.*



#### About the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme

*The ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme supports two disability specific projects. The Promoting the Employability and Employment of People with Disabilities through Effective Legislation, or PEPDEL, project supports governments in improving disability-related laws and policies. The Promoting Decent Work for People with Disabilities through a Disability Inclusion Support Service, or INCLUDE, project works to build capacity at regional and national levels to effectively support equal access of persons with disabilities to training, employment services, entrepreneurship and business development services and micro-finance. Both projects operate in selected countries of South-East Asia and East and Southern Africa.*

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## The challenge

Many women and men with disabilities can and want to work. Yet, the majority are less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers because of different types of barriers they face: unequal access to training and education and physical and social discrimination. In applying for jobs, these obstacles may include unnecessary or unfair job requirements or negative perceptions about their abilities. On the job, disabled workers may face difficulties in being treated fairly, lack a formal employment contract or fail to receive comparable wages and benefits. And they may be the first to lose their jobs in the event of lay-offs.

Because of their commitment to equality, solidarity and social justice, trade unions are uniquely positioned to promote equal opportunities for, and equal treatment of, disabled workers. One important way is to recruit, organize and integrate them into the movement, making it clear that disabled persons are as important as any other worker, and have an equal right to have their voices heard. Unions can also campaign and negotiate on behalf of persons with disabilities to ensure that employers comply with legislation and offer equal opportunities and full job satisfaction for disabled staff. In addition, unions play a vital role in raising-awareness among employers and co-workers about the capacity and rights of persons with disabilities.

In Thailand, the push for greater recognition in the workplace of the rights of people with disabilities has received a boost from four trade unions representing approximately 450,000 workers in different sectors, which are working with the ILO-Irish Aid's PEPDEL project.

## Meeting the challenge

Since 2010, the Labour Congress of Thailand (LCT), National Congress Private Industrial of Employees (NCPE), State Enterprises Workers' Relations Confederation (SERC) and Thai Trade Union Congress (TTUC) have worked with the PEPDEL project to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their programmes to provide decent work for all.

For many unions, promoting the rights of disabled persons in the world of work is a new concept. Contributing to this growing interest in the issue is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) that came into force in 2008 and was ratified by Thailand in the same year. The second was the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities' Quality of Life Promotion Act B.E. 2550 (2007), a comprehensive rights-based law for persons with disabilities which contains an anti-discrimination component. Thailand also ratified the ILO Convention concerning Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons), No. 159, in 2007. The third, and possibly the most significant, was ILO-Irish Aid's role in equipping trade unions to advocate and actively campaign on behalf of disabled people through activities designed to build understanding on disability equality and law, including discussions on Proclamation 2550; sharing information on international good practices that promote inclusive approaches in the workplace; and, disseminating ILO tools and standards.

"Management had not heard about the new Proclamation 2550, so I thought it was important to print and distribute several copies for everyone to know", said a representative of the SERC secretariat who, motivated by his participation at an ILO-Irish Aid sponsored event on the role of worker organizations in promoting employment for persons with disabilities, decided to take the first small step on the path to inclusion.

As part of its awareness-raising efforts, the PEPDEL project provided Disability Equality Training, or DET, to 15 trade union members from LCT, NCPE, SERC and TTUC. DET explores the concept of people being disabled by society's barriers and attitudes. It highlights the role of the organization or group in removing those barriers and in helping to change attitudes. With DET training completed in June 2010, trade unions were motivated to create a small group of disability focal points who could

support inclusive approaches to disability within each of the movements. "I feel more confident about promoting the issue of disability in the workplace", says Ms. Paveena Sittipoolthong, an active member of the Port Authority of Thailand Workers' Union, a member of SERC.

To engage the trade unions more actively, ILO-Irish Aid launched a Disability Champion Initiative in the summer of 2010 inviting trade union members to submit proposals for activities to promote issues related to persons with disabilities in the workplace. Six proposals were selected for grants in amounts of up to US\$ 700 each. Among the proposals chosen were:

**LCT's** proposal to undertake a survey on the concerns and needs of disabled persons and to train labour union committee members on national disability laws. Over the long-term, increased awareness of disability legislation will enable trade unions to better negotiate with employers issues related to the employment and welfare of disabled workers.

**NCPE and TTUC's** proposal to set up a working group made up of representatives of local communities and municipalities to help create employment for disabled workers. Awareness-raising on disability aimed at local leaders would form a key part of their initial activities, followed by a survey on the needs of disabled persons. Results of the survey would be shared with government-supported service providers and employers.

**SERC's** proposal to undertake disability awareness-raising activities among its members, including a focus on barriers preventing the participation of disabled workers in the workplace and information on international and national laws on disability. Members would also be encouraged to organize activities and campaigns to push for non-discrimination in the workplace.

On the basis of the work completed by mid 2011, 'Disability Champion awards' will be given by the PEPDEL project to the trade union representatives who have demonstrated the greatest achievement towards greater equality for people with disabilities in the workplace.

At the workplace, accessibility audits have also been supported by trade unions, in particular, TTUC and SERC. In essence, a disability access audit identifies barriers, measures ease of access of premises and provides options for improvement of a building. Following an audit, an accessibility report with recommendations is provided. Within the past year, several audits have been organized in close cooperation with the trade unions. Through TTUC an audit was conducted at the Thai Nylon Company and SERC's support enabled accessibility audits at the Port Authority of Thailand and the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority. Although some enterprises had made provisions to make work environments more accessible by introducing ramps, sliding doors and toilets for wheelchair-users, more improvement is needed, especially in older buildings.

With a view to giving greater emphasis to the issue of inclusion and full participation of disabled persons in the world of work, trade unions and disabled persons organizations have agreed to enter into discussions on the possibility of organizing a joint activity on the theme over the coming months and year.

### ***Changing times***

Over the past year, actions taken by unions have demonstrated their collective commitment to taking the 'first steps' towards facilitating full inclusion. Still, these are early days. There is a need to continue to build and strengthen these initiatives and to ensure that trade unions' capacity is sufficient to effectively bring about change in attitudes and opinions about the rights and capacity of disabled persons.

## Thai employers also promote disability inclusion

*Thai employers have also demonstrated an interest in promoting more inclusive workplaces. In February 2011, the Employers Confederation of Thailand (ECOT) organized an event entitled "Law and Tax Benefits for Hiring People with Disabilities" designed to inform employers about their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis the new requirements under quota system for employing disabled persons. Changes introduced to the quota system in June 2010, which will come into force in mid 2011, require public and private organizations to hire one disabled person for every 100 employees, instead of 200 employees. The new provisions introduce sanctions, such as asset seizures, for enterprises found not to be in compliance.*

*With some 120 ECOT members in attendance, employers actively participated in discussions and raised specific questions on what the new provisions would entail and how to comply with the requirements. Participation of persons with disabilities also allowed for dialogue on more practical issues of discrimination in the workplace. The event was supported by the ILO-Irish Aid PEPDEL project.*

## The good practice

DET motivates trade unions to take action in advocating for the rights of disabled persons in the workplace.

## Lessons learned

- Equipping trade unions with appropriate knowledge, skills and tools helps them advocate and campaign more effectively for disabled workers' rights, both during the recruitment process and in retaining disabled workers, including workers who become disabled while employed.
- Trade union representatives' knowledge about the workplace and legislative changes, along with their expertise in advocating for workers' rights, means that they can be effective in raising awareness about disability and combating inequality and discrimination in the world of work.
- Trade union representatives benefit from training with regard to workers with disabilities in the workplace to understand the needs that their disabled co-workers might have, such as the need for workplace accommodations, and knowledge of the obligations that employers might have under national legislation that protect the rights of people with disabilities.
- Empowering trade union representatives to develop their own solutions to inclusive approaches in the workplace and within their communities creates ownership of ideas and fosters legitimacy.



### Further information:

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Skills and Employability Department  
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ILO/Irish Aid Partnership Programme  
<http://www.ilo.org/inclusion>