

Working together for development: Including people with disabilities

This year's International Day of Persons with Disabilities focuses on "Keeping the Promise of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)" to ensure that disability and the concerns of people with disabilities are reflected in the commitments made by the international community to reduce poverty by 2015. ILO Online reports on how disability-inclusive development not only helps improve the lives of people with disabilities, but can boost achievement of the MDGs.

ADDIS ABABA (ILO Online) – As a young man with cerebral palsy, the first time Mesfin Kebede tried to collect a donated computer, he was told that 'a disabled person needs a crutch or wheelchair but not a computer'.

"With no ability to defend my rights and, at that time, no laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, I had no choice but to return home frustrated," he says.

But he did not give up. When he finally did get a computer and internet access, his life changed dramatically. "I entered into a new world of courage and bright hope," he says. "Things that seemed impossible like climbing a high mountain or far away like the sky came within my reach because of the availability of information right at my fingertips."

Today, he works as a translator, including with the ILO in Addis, and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development, a non-governmental organization that promotes the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the country's development efforts and poverty reduction programmes. But he is one of the lucky ones.

In developing countries, disabled people experience disproportionately high rates of poverty. They face exclusion from mainstream social, economic and political life, with limited access to key areas of development, including health care, education, housing, skills training and employment. Though disability is relevant to all eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), disability issues are not explicitly included in the MDG framework.

"Development is about bringing excluded people, like women and men with disabilities, into society," says Fantahun Melles, ILO-Irish Aid's National Programme Coordinator on Disability/Ethiopia. "Unless disabled persons are brought into the mainstream of development programmes, it will be nearly impossible to halve poverty by 2015" as stated in the MDGs.

"Getting others to commit to more inclusive approaches or to integrate issues relating to disability into their work is not always easy. We need to dismantle the barriers that keep disabled people from fully participating in work and society so that they are included in all spheres of life and have equal opportunities to contribute to their communities and societies," Mr. Melles says.

Gradually, the ILO-Irish Aid Programme on Disability¹ is starting to see some results. "In the context of MDG 1 – *eliminating extreme poverty and hunger* – we have seen improvements in terms of income-generating and employment opportunities for people with disabilities in all aspects of work, including in self-employment over the past years," he adds.

Since 2008, the ILO has partnered with Irish Aid in selected countries in Africa to promote inclusion of women and men with disabilities in general services and programmes on vocational training, employment and entrepreneurship development. The partnership recognizes and prioritizes disability as essential to meeting MDG targets², while also contributing to MDG 8 – *global partnership for development*. Women's

¹ The ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme supports two disability specific projects in Africa: one promotes the employability and employment of disabled persons through effective legislation and its implementation; the other supports the inclusion of disabled persons in general skills training, employment services, and in entrepreneurship and business development.

² A draft resolution adopted by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly in November 2010 calls for strengthening efforts to ensure accessibility for, and inclusion of, persons with disabilities in all aspects of development efforts. To view the draft resolution, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/N10/618/41/PDF/N1061841.pdf?OpenElement>

entrepreneurship development has also been a strong theme of the ILO-Irish Aid Programme, contributing to MDG 3, *promoting gender equality and empowering women*.

In many cities and towns throughout East and Southern Africa, ILO-Irish Aid works with governments, employers' and workers' groups, and organizations representing people with disabilities to train women with and without disabilities who want to start businesses or already have one. In past years, they trained women with disabilities who then passed their skills to others. The Programme has been very successful because its primary focus has been on organizing support for women with disabilities in mainstream income-generation schemes and access to support services and systems.

Take the case of Shemsiya Hiyar, disabled due to a childhood injury. "Shemsiya is among those who had an opportunity to benefit from the ILO-Irish Aid supported programme on business development. As a producer of fine leather goods, the training she received has enabled her to diversify her business making belts and wallets that now provides jobs to five individuals. Several stakeholders along with the government played a role in the process," adds Mr. Melles.

The Federation of Ethiopian National Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD), an umbrella association of the six single disability-focused national associations, was one of ILO-Irish Aid's key partners in the early years of the Programme. Women with disabilities were included on the project management committee – a 'first' in empowering these women to take charge.

Shemsiya credits FENAPD with helping to boost her income with new skills acquired in marketing and promotion of her products.

"My life has changed a lot with work. It's a major thing to be able to be self-sufficient," says Shemsiya. "There's nothing more difficult than being dependent on others".

Mr. Melles identifies several suggestions for actions in moving towards inclusive development. "An important first step is to mainstream a disability perspective in labour market policies and laws to ensure that the rights and voices of people with disabilities are recognized and further developed. To give effect to legal and policy commitments, disabled people need to have access to general skills training and employment programmes and services, as also required by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ethiopia ratified this Convention in February 2010. In addition, community-based support services should be put in place so that people with disabilities in rural areas and those living in poverty are reached, and a disability perspective factored into country development efforts and poverty reduction strategies. To monitor progress, more reliable, comparable data about people with disabilities needs to be collected."

He also added that while the main goal is inclusive mainstreaming, disability-specific programmes or initiatives aimed at disabled people who are particularly disadvantaged will continue to be required for the foreseeable future.

"There is still much more to be done in both developed and developing countries to ensure that disabled people are included in all parts of society. Working together, however, we can support hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of disabled persons all around the world to transform their lives so that they can have decent work and a better life," Mr. Melles says.

"Everyone stands to gain from more inclusive approaches in education, training and employment that provide for more open labour markets. Inclusion allows people with disabilities to take their place as citizens on an equal basis with others and to contribute to their communities", says Ms. Pia Korpinen, Regional Technical Officer on Disability, ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme/Africa.

For Mesfin, the value of including everyone is very clear, "if given the right opportunities and with support, if needed, many people with disabilities could emerge as great thinkers and hard working members of society."