

“Opportunities for all”: promoting employment for disabled jobseekers and persons with HIV/AIDS

According to the ILO's new global report on discrimination worldwide, the challenge for enhancing the employability of people with disabilities and HIV/AIDS is significant. Promoting the rights of vulnerable groups, such as workers with HIV/AIDS or disabilities, is therefore among the major areas of focus of the ILO. A good example is its Opportunity for All Initiative which is helping seven companies in the north of Viet Nam to include people living with a disability or HIV/AIDS in the workplace. ILO Online reports from Hanoi, Viet Nam.

5/16/2011

FTR/Disabled jobseekers Viet Nam

HANOI, Viet Nam (ILO Online) – When it comes to communication, the sign language used by the Vietnamese workers at Chula Fashion resonates from Hanoi to Santorini, Canberra and Mexico City.

Yet it's not about the language Chula's workers use to communicate, but rather the quality and originality of the product, according to head designer and owner, Diego Cortizas.

“Five years ago we started our business. Our first employee was deaf”, he says. “Today, we have 55 employees and about 80 per cent have a disability; the majority are deaf.”

In Spanish, ‘chula’ means beautiful or pretty. A tour of the premises of the enterprise reveals not only the beautiful creations but also the expressive and elegant gestures of sign language.

“For me, what is important is the training”, says Diego as he provides instructions in sign to workers painting the latest fashion collection on the atrium walls, just outside of the small shop. “When a person is disabled and has good skills training for a specific job, the results tend to be quite good. We’ve had a lot of success, not because our clothes are made by disabled women but because we produce a good quality product.”

Over 200 dresses of various fashion designs are made each month using locally sourced fabrics, mostly Vietnamese silk, and are rich in both local and international cultural motifs. Each style is exclusive to Chula Fashion. The limited stock is sold to stores in Hanoi and clients from other countries in East, Southeast Asia and in select European and Latin American cities.

“We have only positive things to say about our experience, above all, in terms of the office atmosphere: there’s a willingness to improve, and to focus on areas where we can help each other. In our case, disabled people are not in the minority but the reverse – they are majority. And this totally changes the environment”, Diego resumes his experience.

He encourages employers who may have an opening at their enterprises to consider hiring a disabled person: “I think that in 90 per cent of the cases, when they hire a disabled person they will be happy with the results”.

In February, Chula Fashion was awarded a 'Blue Ribbon Award' designed to recognize employers, organizations and employees with disabilities who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion of employment for people with disabilities. Since its inception in 2008, it's the second time that the award has been presented by the Blue Ribbon Employers' Council (BREC).

Few people with disabilities have stable jobs

Yet, not all people with disabilities in Viet Nam are afforded the opportunity to have decent work and live a better life. Of the country's nearly seven million disabled persons, very few who are of working age have stable jobs and regular incomes. Many remain outside of the formal employment systems due to discrimination and negative attitudes and mistaken assumptions about their abilities. As a group, their unemployment rates are high – some estimate them as high as 30 per cent¹.

Chula Fashion embodies the ILO's vision of a workplace with no barriers, and which recognizes that a person's impairment does not limit their ability to contribute. It's an example that can serve to inspire other

1 ILO Fact Sheet: Inclusion of people with disabilities in Viet Nam, (Geneva, Switzerland, 2009).

enterprises to recruit disabled job seekers. Chula is also an example that will be useful in a new ILO project in Viet Nam: The Opportunity for All Initiative.

The Initiative is helping seven companies in the north of the country to include people with disability in the workplace. The new initiative also aims to promote HIV/AIDS awareness raising and prevention.

Launched in late February, the initiative is being jointly carried out by the ILO-Irish Aid's PEPDEL² project on disability, the ILO's HIV/AIDS Programme, and Job and Enterprise Development Department, in coordination with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) as part of the Decent Work Country Programme.

Women and men living with HIV/AIDS face the same sort of discrimination and exclusion from training and career opportunities as people with disabilities. According to a [report issued by Viet Nam's Ministry of Health](#), some 280 000 people will be living with HIV/AIDS in the country by 2012, and more than 40 000 will be infected with the human immunodeficiency virus each year. The AIDS epidemic may become a significant economic issue for enterprises in Viet Nam as this can lead to lost work and skills through the illness.

Enterprises selected to participate in the new initiative range from mid-sized to large companies, with employees numbering from 200 to 7,000. They represent various sectors of the economy, including construction, garment, electrical device assembly, cosmetics manufacturing and a coal fired power plant.

Key elements of Opportunity for All include a commitment to the full length of the programme, which spans over a six to eight week period; agreement to have the CEO and possibly other senior managers attend the launch; and, the setting up of a Workplace Disability and HIV Management Team with representation of management, workers and trade union, medical staff and the Team's continuing to meet and monitor policies and practices beyond the project period.

A full day of training on HIV/AIDS and disability is provided by joint-project staff. In addition, three half-day visits to each of the seven participating companies by project staff, with one to two weeks in between visits, help to provide detailed technical advice and guidance.

"Ultimately, the aim is to encourage companies to adopt sustainable policies for both HIV/AIDS and disability which result in concrete actions", explains Mr. Pham Ngoc Chinh, specialist on HIV/AIDS, Bureau of Employers of the VCCI.

"Stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and disability makes day-to-day living nearly impossible for many women and men who can and want to be productive members of society. This initiative helps to improve the attitudes and break down the barriers among managers and workers in participating enterprises towards disabled persons and those living with HIV/AIDS", concludes Ms. Rie Vejs-Kjeldgaard, Director of the ILO office in Hanoi.

The Opportunity for All Initiative builds on the ILO's Factory Improvement Project (FIP) which ran in Viet Nam in 2006. FIP aimed at assisting factories to address the rising pressures for increased competitiveness productivity through improved quality and productivity and fair labour practices.

The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization.

² The ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme supports two disability specific projects in Southeast Asia: one promotes the employability and employment of disabled persons through effective legislation and its implementation, also known as PEPDEL; the other supports the inclusion of disabled persons in general skills training, employment services, and in entrepreneurship and business development, known as INCLUDE.