



International
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Issue brief

A cooperative future for people with disabilities

In recent decades, cooperatives have improved the lives of many women and men with disabilities. A growing number of disabled people are participating in society, increasing their independence and making decisions about their lives and futures through participation in cooperatives, many of which provide access to essential services and employment.

Equal opportunities

Around the world, approximately one billion people or 15 per cent of the population have a disability.³ Estimates indicate that disabled persons experience unemployment rates as high as 90 per cent in some low-income countries, while rates in some OECD countries can reach 70 per cent.⁴ Despite social stigma and exclusionary practices, people with disabilities have become increasingly proactive in asserting strength and confidence in their own abilities to lead self-reliant and independent lives. One area where equal opportunity is important to enable this self-determination is the world of work.

Standards and policy statements are one way the international community has responded to the barriers faced by women and men with disabilities. Specifically, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) *Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention (No. 159)*, calls for a policy on vocational rehabilitation and employment promotion based on equal treatment and equal opportunity for persons with disabilities. Its accompanying Recommendation No. 168 calls for measures to promote employment opportunities for disabled persons that conform to the employment and salary standards applicable to workers generally; the Recommendation specifically identifies the establishment of cooperatives as such a measure. The United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* offers comprehensive protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, with an explicit, social development dimension. The UN Convention recognizes the cooperative form of enterprise as a means for sustainable employment which can lead to improved livelihood and social inclusion.

People with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.¹

Disabilities disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Women are more likely than men to be disabled and lower income countries have a higher rate of disability than high income countries.²

What is a cooperative?

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons, united voluntarily to meet their common economic social and cultural needs and aspirations through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Cooperatives exist in nearly all sectors of economic and social activities and are found in almost all countries of the world.

And yet, cooperatives are often overlooked as means for women and men with disabilities who aim to fully participate in society and work to overcome the barriers they face. Cooperatives are significant contributors to national economies and to achieving social development goals. They operate across the world in nearly all sectors of the economy, such as food and consumer retail, financial services, health and social care, housing, transport, communications, utilities, and many more, providing accessible and affordable products and services to cooperative members and the communities in which they operate.

Nearly one billion people around the world are members of cooperatives. People with disabilities are among those members. They often find the cooperative form of enterprise attractive as it enables choice, flexibility, and self-determination, while catering to economic and social needs. Whether women and men with disabilities join existing cooperatives as a member of the broader community, or create cooperatives exclusively of disabled persons, they take part in democratic decision-making and have equal voice. These inclusive aspects of cooperatives can lead to self-empowerment including confidence-building and social inclusion.

Impact of cooperatives

Strategies that increase ownership and responsibility for people with disabilities create unanticipated increases in productivity, health, well-being, self-esteem and self-confidence.⁷

Employment opportunities

Cooperatives, like other forms of enterprise, include disabled persons in their workforces. With 100 million jobs already being provided by cooperatives worldwide, their role as employers is significant. Cooperatives' success in meeting the needs of women and men with disabilities rests in the cooperative values and principles that guide their operations: non-discrimination, equality, equity and solidarity, and an emphasis on education, training, and concern for community.

People with disabilities can create their own enterprises through cooperatives particularly with the objective of self-employment. One option is setting up a worker cooperative where members are both workers and owners of their enterprises. As worker-owners, members have a large degree of flexibility not only defining the economic and social benefits of their enterprise, but also establishing conditions of work that cater to their specific needs. Disabled workers' cooperatives are found around the world. In Eastern Europe numerous factories are managed and operated by them. Similarly disabled workers in lower income countries have formed industrial workers', artisan and handicraft cooperatives to maximize their individual talents engaging in joint production, purchasing, marketing and sales on local and international markets. They are engaged in a diverse array of products and services. As these cooperatives grow, they often expand their services to the provision of skills training, health care, financial services, transport and other activities.



Job creation for disabled people is often at the heart of cooperatives made of up a diverse group of members. These can include people with disabilities, their families, volunteers, disability associations, local government agencies and others that have a stake in the care or support of the disabled members. Referred to as multi-stakeholder cooperatives, these engage in a wide range of productive activities and services. For example job placement cooperatives identify opportunities for disabled people in their communities. They not only contribute to the well-being of disabled persons economically and socially, but often play a role in advocacy, reduce discrimination and promote social integration. Some like the Me2! Cooperative in Malta also offer skills training in conjunction with job placement services.

Social inclusion opportunities

One particular service crucial to the social inclusion of people with disabilities is accessible transport. There are a growing number of successful cooperatives that work to meet these needs. Examples are found in various countries including the Titi Floris cooperative in rural France¹⁰, and the Riders Club Cooperative in suburban Pennsylvania¹¹ in the United States which provide transport to children, as well as elderly and

disabled persons in vehicles adapted to their needs in areas where there is no public transport; and Especial Coop Taxi¹² in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil which specializes in providing services to physically disabled persons with its dedicated fleet and specially trained drivers.

In other sectors, cooperatives also aim to provide accessible services over and above what is required by law. For example, the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions in the United States, which brings together over 240 credit unions that serve low-income wage earners, recent immigrants, aging populations and people with disabilities, partners with the National Disability Institute to build the capacity of credit unions (also known as savings and credit cooperatives) to better serve people with disabilities.¹³ They look not only at improving physical accessibility, but also propose materials in alternative formats and offer financial products and services adapted to people with disabilities such as a mobility and housing loan portfolio that not only enables people with disabilities to purchase cars, vans, and also finance the modifications needed to make them accessible. The Federation also trains its staff in disability etiquette to improve sensitivity and service to its disabled customers. The Irish League of Credit Unions undertook similar initiatives and published “A practical guide for credit unions to improve accessibility for their members in 2010”, prepared in collaboration the Equality Authority.¹⁴

Innovative social welfare delivery opportunities

In some countries, governments have promoted cooperatives as a means for delivery of innovative social welfare services that respect the principle of self-determination. In Asia and Europe for instance, government policies that support persons with disabilities have recognized the cooperative form of enterprise as a partner to fill gaps in existing social services for them. In these cases, cooperatives should not and are not meant to replace the State, but they can be effective in providing attractive employment opportunities and social service provisions. They therefore contribute to national social policy implementation.

The social cooperative model of Italy is good example. Specific legislation enacted in 1991 promoted cooperatives that provide social services and those that provide work integration of disadvantaged groups including persons with disabilities. Work integration cooperatives require that at least 30 per cent of employees must be disadvantaged while no more than 50 per cent can be volunteers in order to be eligible for indirect governmental support measures as recognition to their contribution to social welfare policy delivery. These arrangements respect cooperative autonomy, i.e. member control, while recognizing the social purpose of the cooperative and its relation to advancing social welfare. Since 1991, approximately 45,000 disadvantaged workers have found employment through social cooperatives including seven per cent of the total number of disabled people looking for a job at the national level.⁶

Public procurement policies that enable partnerships with cooperatives of disabled persons have also proven an effective means for balancing support measures and self-determination of persons with disabilities. Some examples include cooperatives of disabled persons in the Philippines manufacturing school furniture, cooperatives of disabled people managing public sanitation services in Ethiopia as part of an outsourcing arrangement with the municipal government⁸ and Italian social cooperatives providing building and ground maintenance services to the State.

Other entities including disabled persons organizations can also play a role in improving the well-being of disabled persons through the promotion and capacity building of cooperatives. For example, Abilis, a Finnish foundation established by persons with disabilities, provides financial and technical assistance that benefit disabled persons globally. They support cooperatives in recognition of their contribution to promoting equal opportunity, social inclusion and self-empowerment.⁹

Public procurement and cooperatives of disabled persons

In the Philippines, 10 per cent of school furniture is produced by cooperatives of disabled persons through a public procurement programme. The programme has led to the creation of a federation which provides its members with loans, medical assistance, training, and logistic support.

Today, the National Federation of Cooperatives of Persons with Disability (NFCPWD) brings together fifteen cooperatives with 1,500 members. As a result of the services of the federation, a number of member cooperatives have diversified their economic activities, running shops in their local communities and providing loans to individual members.⁵

The way forward

Cooperatives put people at the heart of their business; because cooperatives are owned and democratically controlled by their members, the decisions taken by cooperatives balance profitability with the needs of their members and the wider interests of the community. Found in many different forms, serving many different needs, resilient to crisis and thriving within diverse societies, the cooperative way of doing business provides a wide range of opportunities to address the economic, social and cultural needs of persons with disabilities.

Cooperatives of disabled persons exist in many countries of the world. They are present in countries with highly developed social policies as well as in countries where gaps in social welfare are found. The cooperative enterprise is a form that is adaptable to national and local contexts as a means to improve livelihoods. However, the development of cooperatives continues to be hampered by a lack of knowledge and understanding of the cooperative business model as well as insufficient awareness about how cooperatives can respond to needs of specific groups of people. Policy and legislation continues to limit the formation and growth of cooperative enterprises particularly in the area of the provision and delivery of social services. Existing entrepreneurship education and business support services also neglect the cooperative option. And, even when the cooperative form of business is introduced to potential members, promoters often underestimate the need for capacity building, business management skills, and specific training in cooperative governance. These are particularly important for cooperatives that cater to the needs of disabled people where expectations are often higher.¹⁵

Today, cooperatives in many countries are providing the organizational means for persons with disabilities to take their lives into their own hands and become visible parts of their communities, but the potential for further development is significant. Strong and well-developed cooperatives can contribute to escaping the vicious circle of marginalization and social exclusion. They can promote equality of opportunity and treatment for persons, improve livelihoods and help break the barriers which disabled people face in taking their place in society.

Notes

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