

# Building Capacity to Promote the Rights of People with Disabilities in Vietnam

In Vietnam, legislation to guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities has advanced significantly during the past decade; however, implementation of laws and reduction of social barriers has been slow. An ongoing campaign focuses on changing the attitudes of Vietnamese government officials and of the public to promote education, employment and inclusion for Vietnam's large population of persons with disabilities.

by Cameron Macauley and Heather Holsinger [ Center for International Stabilization and Recovery ]

The Vietnam War (1954–1975) lasted over 20 years and left hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese with physical and psychological injuries. Although disabled veterans receive many privileges and benefits in Vietnam, most persons with disabilities (PWD) continue to face employment discrimination and lack of access to health care, transportation, education and vocational training. The exact number of PWDs living in Vietnam is unknown. A 2009 U.N. Population Fund survey found 6.1 million Vietnamese with one or more disabilities including an unknown number with neurological and genetic effects from Agent Orange, a defoliant used to uncover Viet Cong bases and supply lines during the war.<sup>1,2</sup> Those affected by Agent Orange often rely on mobility devices such as crutches or wheelchairs, but streets, sidewalks, buildings and bathrooms in Vietnam are rarely accessible.<sup>3</sup> Many PWDs also live with visual, auditory or intellectual disabilities, yet Vietnamese schools have few teachers trained to work with children with disabilities, and courses in Braille or sign language are almost nonexistent.



Training included small group activities to develop ideas for marketing materials. Photos courtesy of CISR and AEPD.



Each group presented its work to the class.

### Disability Legislation in Vietnam

Legislation has progressed through a series of laws that guarantee the rights of children and adults with disabilities. In addition to these laws, various ministries of the Vietnamese government have enacted at least 20 different directives, decrees and decisions relating to disability in such areas as labor and employment, vocational training, accessible transportation, building construction standards for residential and commercial buildings, welfare policies, teacher training, and sports.<sup>4</sup> In 2006 the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs drafted the “National Plan to Support

People with Disabilities,” to be implemented between 2006 and 2010.<sup>5</sup> On 22 October 2007, Vietnam signed the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), and the government immediately began preparing national legislation to complete ratification.<sup>6</sup>

On 17 June 2010, the National Assembly of Vietnam enacted the *National Law on Persons with Disabilities*, the first comprehensive national law in Vietnam to guarantee the rights of PWDs. The law mandates equal participation in society for disabled people through accommodation and access to health care, rehabilitation, education, employment, vocational training, cultural services, sports and entertainment, transportation, public places and information technology.<sup>7</sup>

Although these legislative reforms clearly reflect a desire on the government’s part to protect the rights of PWDs and to facilitate their inclusion into society, implementation of the laws has proceeded slowly and irregularly. Since constitutional reform in 1992, Vietnam decentralized much of its government, transferring significant power to provincial and municipal authorities. One effect of this has been inconsistent implementation of the national disability law, due mainly to lack of resources in the poorer provinces.

Another reason behind the law’s slow implementation is lack of pressure from PWDs and their families. People in



Individuals spent time identifying the problems their organizations face to support the implementation of Vietnam’s *National Law of Person’s with Disabilities* so they could design marketing materials designed to address those problems.



Pamphlet produced by AEPD as a result of the project.

Vietnam rarely petition legislators to take action on issues such as disability rights since government officials are appointed, not elected. However, signing and ratification of the CRPD gave disabled people worldwide a stronger voice in promoting disability rights and in urging its fulfillment, inspiring some Vietnamese with disabilities to engage in political activism.<sup>8</sup>

**Public Relations Campaign**

In 2013–2014, the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) at James Madison University received funding to work with Vietnamese nongovernmental organizations to facilitate the creation of a public relations campaign, conduct a nationwide training program to empower PWDs in public policymaking and advocacy, and to sensitize local

government officials as to the importance of enforcing the *National Law on Persons with Disabilities*.<sup>9</sup>

The project also sought to raise the awareness of local government officials about the need for social and political change regarding disability rights in Vietnam. This has been achieved through a series of 10 workshops held in 2014 in Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien–Hue, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi. The 326 workshop participants included 119 provincial government officials and 126 disabled Vietnamese representing 78 different disabled people’s organizations (DPO). Each workshop included sessions on the national disability law, and discussions allowed disabled participants to argue for

**Campaign Outputs**

- » Advertising with local newspaper ads, signage and billboards
- » Website dedicated to disability rights campaign, including workshops materials
- » Radio public service announcements and interviews on local stations
- » Social media messages on the rights of people with disabilities on popular sites in Vietnam
- » Printed materials:
  - 10,000 brochures
  - 5,000 flyers
  - 25 posters distributed



Concepts developed in the classroom were used to create billboards, pamphlets and other marketing materials.

the law's enforcement as a fundamental means of improving inclusion of PWDs into Vietnamese society. Participants then took part in group exercises to plan specific actions to implement provisions of the law in their home provinces.

CISR provided initial training to the Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (AEPD) and other DPOs on how to develop a strategic public relations campaign, including identifying goals and objectives and establishing a target audience. AEPD built on the initial training to carry out additional trainings to develop a cohesive publicity campaign using billboards, printed materials such as pamphlets and posters, and a variety of online social media, urging the Vietnamese public to support the fulfillment disability rights in Vietnam in accordance with the *National Law on Persons with Disabilities*. Campaigns such as this are relatively rare in Vietnam. With the growing popularity of electronic and social media in Vietnam, marketing strategies are becoming commonplace, but movements for social change remain unusual. Print media, online social media and radio ads

allow messages to reach a large sector of the populace and create an expectation that the government will improve compliance with the *National Law on Persons with Disabilities*.

CISR's training also focused on accessibility and discrimination. Among other concerns, employment discrimination against PWDs—even those with advanced training and technical skills—prevents many Vietnamese with disabilities from finding full-time employment.<sup>10</sup> Discrimination in schools also discourages many Vietnamese families from allowing their children to attend school with nondisabled children. Due to lack of accessible schools, reasonable accommodations and/or special education programs, many disabled children in Vietnam never attend school.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the project conducted a series of surveys to measure change in public attitudes toward PWDs and disability rights in Vietnam between the initiation of the project and its completion. Although the project is not the only factor influencing these attitudes, those engaged in the project anticipate demonstrating that the Vietnamese public is increasingly supportive of greater fulfillment of the rights of PWDs as specified under Vietnamese law.

As a result of this campaign, those engaged in the project are optimistic to see a series of new actions designed to immediately benefit disabled people in Vietnam. These include financial discounts and fee exemptions for health care, transportation and education; construction of accessible streets, sidewalks, entrances and bathrooms in public buildings; training of teachers for children with disabilities; new sports facilities and athletic programs accessible to PWDs; and appointment of disabled people to committees and other local government bodies advocating for the fulfillment of disability rights. ©

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