

Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in Quang Binh, Vietnam

The Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (AEPD) was established in May 2010 to continue the work of Survivor Corps in rural Vietnam. AEPD uses peer support to empower persons with disabilities who have sustained mine, explosive remnants of war or other war-related injuries. This approach employs survivors, who have successfully reintegrated into communities and recovered from psychosocial trauma, as peer-outreach workers. AEPD staff host training workshops, partner with local health clinics, assist in creating self-help groups and provide economic opportunity activities. AEPD also leads landmine advocacy action in Vietnam.

by Nguyễn Thị Thúy Nga [AEPD]



Fourteen AEPD staff members stand with Ken Rutherford and Cameron Macauley of CISR in the closing ceremony of the Training Workshop on Peer Support for People with Disabilities in Vietnam, March 2012.
Photo courtesy of AEPD.

Vietnam, one of the most heavily bombed countries in the world, has a large disabled population.¹ Approximately 5 million people, or 6.3 percent of the Vietnamese population, live with a disability.² Since

1975, unexploded munitions have killed or seriously wounded more than 100,000 Vietnamese. Even in 2010, nearly 40 years after the Vietnam War ended, 42 landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) casualties were reported

in only two of the country's 58 provinces.^{3,4} Quang Binh, one of Vietnam's poorest provinces, has around 40,000 survivors and persons with disabilities (PWD), many who survived bombing raids, cluster munitions detonations, landmine explosions or Agent Orange. The majority of Vietnamese PWDs live in rural areas on incomes below the poverty line. Economic, social and environmental barriers prevent most PWDs from fully participating in society.

To preserve the legacy of Survivor Corps, an international humanitarian organization that operated in Vietnam from 2003–2010, the Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (AEPD) was established as a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) on 31 May 2010 under Decision No. 1177/QĐ-UBND by the Provincial People's Committee.⁵ AEPD is committed to continuing Survivor Corps' mission by embracing its values of equality and inclusion, and helping PWDs meet their health and economic needs in the target areas of Quang Ninh, Dong Hoi, Quang Trach, Bo Trach, and Le Thuy districts of Quang Binh province.



Truong Minh Hoc, an AEPD outreach worker, and Dao Thi Thuyen, a survivor, walk together in Quang Binh, Vietnam.
Photo courtesy of David Paul Jeffrey.

AEPD's programs aim to improve the psychological, physical, and economic well-being of PWDs, including those who were injured and disabled by landmines or ERW or have other war-related injuries. To achieve this goal, AEPD developed and applied a survivor-centric approach that focuses on peer support. AEPD runs the only comprehensive rehabilitation program in Quang Binh province.

Peer Support Methodology

AEPD operates with a 15-member staff, including seven amputees who are peer-outreach workers. Peer-outreach workers are excellent role models for other survivors, because they have successfully recovered from the psychosocial trauma related to their injuries, reintegrated into their communities and gained employment. AEPD's outreach workers learn to provide psychosocial and emotional support to other survivors recently injured or suffering from trauma.

During peer-support visits, peer-outreach workers help survivors identify recovery goals and carry out activities required to achieve these goals. Peer support is provided to survivors for no more than 24 months, after which survivors "graduate" and resume their positions in the community.

From 6 to 8 March 2012, AEPD and the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) at James Madison University cooperated to implement a training work-

shop on peer support for PWDs in Vietnam. CISR Director Kenneth Rutherford and Trauma Rehabilitation Specialist Cameron Macauley led the three-day workshop, which provided an excellent opportunity for 39 PWDs in Quang Binh to enhance their skills and improve their basic understanding of providing peer support to others. During the training, most of the participants committed to applying and transferring this methodology to other PWDs in their community. AEPD has documented this peer-support methodology for application not only in Quang Binh but also in other provinces in Vietnam with an aim of expanding the program. Peer support training greatly enhances AEPD's success in working with PWDs.

Ongoing Efforts

Since 2003, AEPD has reached out to approximately 2,850 landmine survivors and more than 2,650 PWDs. AEPD has assisted 950 households with economic opportunity activities, established 30 self-help clubs for PWDs with more than 1,000 members and upgraded 15 local health clinics with needed equipment and tools.⁶ Easing economic, psychological and social constraints, AEPD provides opportunities for PWDs in poor communities by expanding business models in order to generate increased income. Moreover, PWDs are taught soft skills and given peer counseling and referrals to

other resources—such as relatives, the community, the local government, other NGOs, etc.—that can help mobilize funds. Alternatively, self-help clubs are set up on a volunteer basis, and the local authority legally approves them. These are different from peer-support groups. AEPD offers start-up grants of up to US\$4,000 to eligible PWDs to start businesses. By training existing health trainers, AEPD has also enabled local health clinics to conduct more than 27 training courses on rehabilitation techniques. Moreover, with the recent addition of the 2010 National Disability Law, the situation for disabled people is improving as the law is considered a legal basis for the increased empowerment of PWDs.

During the past several years, AEPD has also led the work of the Landmine Working Group in Vietnam on advocacy issues, related to Vietnam's signing of three international treaties affecting survivors' lives:

- *The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APBMC)
- *The Convention on Cluster Munitions* (CCM)
- *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD)

In addition, AEPD successfully organized and chaired an advocacy workshop on the CCM with the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ho Chi Minh City. AEPD also cooperated with the Provincial People's Aid Coordination Committee to organize the first national workshop, Victim Assistance and International Cooperation in Vietnam, on 7 July 2009.

AEPD faces several challenges in Quang Binh, one of the poorest provinces in Central Vietnam with a large population of disabled people. These challenges include providing psychosocial and economic support to 40,000 PWDs; spreading awareness of disability rights and issues; reaching disabled people in remote locations; and operating peer-support programs amid funding limitations. Despite these challenges, AEPD hopes to continue mobilizing funds from multiple donors and advocating for the CRPD, APBMC and the CCM. With grant support from donors including Irish Aid, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Survivor Corps, United Nations Development Programme, Swiss Solidarity, and others, AEPD continues with Survivor Corps' mission, providing peer support to landmine survivors and other PWDs to improve their quality of life through access to health care, economic opportunity, social empowerment, advocacy and community-based, disaster-risk management.^{7,8} 

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Disaster struck Nguyen Duc Ve in early 1994.⁹ A young farmer and husband, Ve was looking to boost his income and prepare for his first child. While searching through scrap heaps, Ve's main source of income at the time, an unexploded submunition detonated, causing him to lose both of his arms above the elbow and his left leg above the knee. But more painful than any of his injuries, his wife left, leaving him to raise his newborn child on his own with the help of his parents. He later remarried and his new wife helped him raise the child.

While Ve remembers the anguish of listening to the endless cries of his infant son and the difficulty of being a single parent, his son gave Ve a reason to live. Spending countless hours practicing how to crawl, Ve learned how to stand on his own and gradually taught himself how to walk using crutches and two metal arms. Having accomplished these tasks, his mind naturally turned to the future.

Living in an isolated rural area with few supplies, Ve decided to start a grocery business. Having no motorbike, nor the ability to operate one, Ve hired a driver to take him to the district center about 50 km (31 mi) from his home, where he bought various groceries to sell to his neighbors. Eventually he saved enough money to open his own roadside shop, selling miscellaneous goods such as candy, tea, firewood and petrol. This helped him make ends meet.

While buying goods in the district one day, Ve saw a generator. Previously, no electricity existed in his area. However, with a generator, Ve could continue his trade into the evening and bring in additional revenue by selling power to his neighbors. In addition to his other activities, Ve bought the generator, a television and a video-cassette player and started a video rental service to generate more income.

Without his limbs, Ve focused on his other abilities; his vision seemed to become clearer, his hearing keener and his thinking sharper. Ve organized job after job. These ranged from charging motorbike batteries, providing transportation services, grinding stone for construction, repairing cars, planting trees, and small construction projects. Through his tireless efforts, Ve gradually built a business empire for himself.

When I met Ve, he was guiding a massive cargo truck to a parking area to replace its tires. Then he gave me a tour of the Duc Ve Enterprise building. With AEPD's financial support of 150 million dong (US\$7,186), Ve built the center and organized a vocational training center for PWDs. With support from the Department of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs and the Department of Industry and Commerce of Quang Binh (provincial level), Ve offered job training courses on making incense, candles and votive objects. To date, Ve has conducted four courses and trained 250 people, including disabled people, homeless children and the poor. Participants can come from any province or district to learn sustainable skills to support themselves, just as Ve did. Currently, Ve employs four PWDs. Working at the center is one of Ve's most rewarding jobs, and creating it for PWDs fulfilled one of his long-term goals.

In addition to the vocational training center, Ve manages two motor repair shops that employ a staff of 10 workers, each earning a monthly salary between three and six million VND per month (US\$143.70 and \$287.40 as of 4 October 2012). Ve is also involved in several other business ventures, including scrap-metal collection, construction material trade, afforestation, small-scale construction, and mechanical vocational training.

Ve's outreach continues to grow. He has gained popularity in recent years through appearances on well-known VTV1 channels, Chao Buoi Sang (Good morning) and Nguoi Xay To Am (Warm Nest Maker), and through his advocacy for PWDs in national and provincial meetings. Having created a successful life for himself, Ve believes that economic empowerment is the best way for other survivors to overcome feelings of inferiority and create independent lives for themselves.



Survivor Nguyen Duc Ve stands in front of one of his many businesses.
Photo courtesy of AEPD.



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