

DEAI Presentation
25th March 2015
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Disability Sector in Laos and Association for Autism

Disability sector in Laos is very young. There are only a handful disabled people organizations and most of them are less than five years old. The government of Laos ratified the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities in 2008 and signed the Incheon Strategy to 'make the right real' for persons with disability in Asia and the Pacific in 2012. The decree on the right of people with disability has been issued in 2014 after ten years reviewing of the draft. The national commission for people with disabilities was set up under the Chairmanship of the deputy prime minister and Ministry of Labour and social welfare was assigned as a secretariat office of this committee to coordinate all aspects of disability with line ministries namely, Ministry of Public Health, Education, Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs.

Although there are quite a strong ground of supporting policies at national, regional and international levels, Laos still has poor data; we have poor medical and therapeutic support, we have poor educational services and there is not much history of civil society partnering with government to help find solutions. There is enormous work to be done to enable people with disabilities in Lao to have access to services and support that people in other countries take for granted.

Association for Autism (AfA) has a lot of ambitions to see significant policy changes. An official definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Lao PDR, a way to diagnose and support ASD, a need for the Ministry for Education & Sports to develop special education policy capability and allocate resources for special education as part of an integrated education framework.

To lead these changes AfA will require capable and experienced leadership able to engage government decision makers in ways that will result in improved policy support to disabled peoples.

We also need to build active voluntary leadership. AfA has interested parents but we don't have a culture of extensive active and engaged volunteerism or public service. This needs to change if organisations like the AfA are to grow and thrive. Lao PDR simply does not have a strong history of civil society action yet. I hope to use this scholarship to gain the knowledge of governance and leadership models that work – to learn how to motivate volunteers and build voluntary leadership. Creating a new culture of voluntary civil service, in a culture where an active civil society sector is a relative new phenomenon, will not be an easy task.

As the president of the AfA and as a mother of an autistic child I am recognized as a civil society leader. But I am not a disability expert. My background is in business, not disability studies or education. This limits my ability to respectfully influence the policy positions of Line Ministries in Lao PDR but it also limits my ability to improve dialogue with foreign donors (both bi-lateral donors and also INGOs) and other key sector stakeholders.

With all these movement combined with my strong motivation to strive for an organizational

Sustainability. AfA needs to move forward in a more professional base organization focusing on building future leaders, transfer knowledge and influence a better coordination and support among line ministries, NGO, donors and private sector to the development of the disability sector. This is the reason I come to study a Master of Disability Policy and Practice at Flinders University in South Australia. I hope to have access to the pool of professionals working in the disability sector to foster the future cooperation in the future.

The link to the song “In your arms” and music video of Vientiane Autism Center.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0GqmnuccbU>