

Organisation and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in the AIFO Projects

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The first community interventions of AIFO involving persons with disabilities in less developed countries were initiated towards the end of the 1980s. In these 30 years of activities involving persons and their organisations (DPOs), AIFO developed 3 main approaches towards capacity building:

(1) Promoting persons with disabilities and their families living in neighbouring communities to come together in small groups, share experiences, learn from each other and become aware about the importance of collective approach to fighting for their rights. Often persons with disabilities living in rural areas, live isolated lives and are not aware of their collective strength as persons with disabilities.

Creating Self-Help Groups (SHGs) where people get together primarily to get an income and to become economically self-sufficient through small savings & credits, and vocational training activities can be a strategy for initiating the process. The groups which start for income generation can become spaces for sharing of experiences and information, talking about violations of human rights and the possibilities of collective advocacy. These SHGs can be the seeds for starting a grass-roots movement towards representative organisations of persons with disabilities (Grassroots DPOs), which can join in federations and bring together persons from different communities.

(2) Another approach adopted by AIFO has been that of working with national level DPOs, help them in analysing their own needs, capacities and gaps, and promoting contacts and networking with regional and international level DPO. At the same time, through its projects, it promotes capacity building activities in different areas, such as, significance of the international Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), participation in the national processes related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure the access of all SDG related activities to disabled persons, and development of advocacy strategies.

Promoting Emancipatory Disability Research (EDR) through training of persons with disabilities to be the researchers, identify the key issues facing them and collect information regarding those themes, is another specific instrument that has been developed by AIFO in this area. EDR projects focus on understanding the different kinds of barriers faced by disabled persons including physical, attitudinal, social, cultural and economic barriers. At the same time, these focus on identifying strategies for overcoming those barriers.

(3) A third approach adopted by AIFO in this area is that of capacity building of persons with disabilities as experts in disability issues so that they can be part of the multi-sectorial teams that deal with and support persons with disabilities and their families. For an adult who has developed a disability due to a health condition or an accident and for the family members of a child who has been diagnosed with a disability, trained persons with disabilities can be a valuable source of information and support that can complement the services provided by health, social and rehabilitation

professionals. Training of persons with disabilities as peer counsellors is part of this approach.

This presentation will focus on lessons learned from the different EDR initiatives carried out by AIFO in Africa, Asia and Europe over the past decade.

Conclusions: AIFO has more than three decades of experience in experimenting and developing innovative approaches of working together with persons with disabilities, especially in rural areas and urban peripheries.

EDR is one such approach developed by AIFO that has been experimented in India, Italy, Liberia, Mongolia and Palestine. This approach provides context specific information about the specific barriers faced by persons with disabilities, promotes their empowerment and facilitates collective action to overcome those barriers.