Knowledge empowers the disabled

Education creates opportunity, drives society forward

Once suffering from dark, suicidal thoughts, Sompong Rakkot today cannot stop smiling. The disabled farmer said his newly found happiness comes from the fact that he is able to help his physically-challenged friends, the community at large, and his family.

"Being a human being does not end when one becomes disabled," said Sompong, 42, chairperson of the Non Sawang Community Learning Centre (CLC) in Ubon Ratchathani province, in the northeast of Thailand.

"Life ends on the final day on earth. Till then, even with disabilities, all people should live their lives well as human beings," he said.

For 10 years, Sompong has been confined to a wheelchair. A work-related accident paralysed him from the chest down. The tragedy happened when his twin babies were only two years old.

After lying in bed and feeling desperate for a year, Sompong realised that he needed to get up and live again, at least for the sake of his family. He learned to help himself in his daily routines and learned how to mark out fabric patterns to help his wife weave fabric to earn a living.

Sompong is perhaps the first and only person with a serious disability to chair a CLC in Thailand.

"People with disabilities are not a burden [to society] and they're not just recipients. They can play key roles to contribute to society if opportunities are given to them," said Darunee Riewprik, a Unesco programme specialist in continuing education for the Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All.

"And Sompong has proven it," she added.

Over 650 million people around the world live with disabilities, and in most developing countries, they are often excluded from the rest of society.

About 90 percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.

Worldwide, the literacy rate of adults with disabilities is as low as three percent.

Unesco Bangkok has supported a pilot project in Ubon Rachathani to empower people with disabilities to play a key role in education and community development through CLCs and social integration.

The body has been promoting CLCs in the Asia-Pacific region since 1998 to provide learning skills to ensure the inclusion of the excluded, such as minorities and people with disabilities.

"Knowledge is power, and people with disabilities must be equipped with this power," said Preecha Champaup, director of Ubon Rachathani Provincial Social Development and Human Security.

"They have the same equal rights in society. If they want to study, they must have access [to education]. Or if they prefer not to study, they must be given [some] help with income-generating skills training," he added.

Some CLCs have been set up by communities, while others have been established by the Office of Non-Formal Education and Informal Education (Onie).

There are currently over 8,000 CLCs supported by Onie across Thailand. However, currently no data are available on the numbers of CLCs operated by local people.

Non Sawang CLC, which Sompong chairs, is operated by the local community and supported by the Det Udom sub-district administrative office.

"[In Thailand,] when people with disabilities form a movement and try to live life like everyone else, they are seen as demanding, while it's actually their legal right that needs to be fulfilled," said Tongchai Chiampuk, director of the Onie Centre for Special Target Groups.

Sompong is now a driving force at Non Sawang CLC and he oversees activities for both disabled and non-disabled people, such as basic computer training, raising catfish, cotton weaving and batik cloth painting.

"Being disabled is nothing to be ashamed of. Attitudes towards people with disabilities need to be changed, not only among those without disabilities, but most importantly within the minds of people with disabilities and their families," said Preecha.

Sompong has set himself as an example. He makes it clear that it's not sympathy that people with disabilities want, but opportunities and understanding. "Many people suggested that I should become a beggar. But living with disabilities doesn't mean living without brains," said Sompong.

Rojana Manowalailao is a media and communication officer at Unesco Bangkok. She has a master's degree in Communication from the University of Missouri-Columbia, US, and a master's in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (Tefl) from Thammasat University. She has been a teacher and a journalist. You may contact her at m.rojana@unescobkk.org.