



FAO in Action

Enabled, not disabled FAO restores hope to handicapped people

Oradee Silichai used to hide in her room. She felt worthless after a car accident left her forever crippled and confined to a wheelchair. Life had little meaning for this 20-year-old who was once bright, eager and ambitious. With her opportunities cut short, she had little chance of being independent and self-sufficient.

Today, Ms Silichai has new hope thanks to a joint programme between FAO and Thailand's Department of Public Welfare, which trained her to cultivate mushrooms. Now, she doesn't just produce and sell them – she also teaches other disabled people how to grow them too.

"My life has totally changed and my disability is not a problem any more. I used to keep myself in my room. I thought I was nothing. But when I came to the training, the ability that was inside came out. I can do many things, not just mushroom cultivation" she proclaimed with a big grin.

Silichai added that she and the other trainees "now have hope for a brighter future ... We will be carried over the difficulties and obstacles placed in our way by people who don't understand our difficulties."

Another graduate of the programme, Suphol Noivong, helps to support his wife and five-year-old son with his mushroom business. He said that he had doubts he would even be accepted into the program. His enthusiasm won over the selection committee, which received 4,000 applications. Within one year of graduating, he has already set up two mushroom houses.

The programme has had another exciting, but unplanned result. Some of the men and women

who met in the course fell in love, got married and set up their own mushroom enterprises.

The 60-day course teaches the basics of producing, processing and selling mushrooms, as well as how to build a mushroom house that will guarantee the necessary dark and moist conditions. Course participants range from 20 to 35 years old and they suffer from disabilities that include visual and hearing impairments, amputated limbs, as well as the effects caused by polio and car accidents.

Mushrooms were chosen because they are easy to sell at the market and because they are a staple of the Thai diet. They can be cultivated by physically and mentally disabled people and mushroom farms can be started at a very low cost and generate income quickly.

A major part of the programme includes motivational training. The trainees learn more about themselves and about others and their disabilities. They learn to accept who they are and are empowered with a "can do" attitude. The programme also teaches them about setting limits and not letting other people tell them what they can or cannot do.

Oradee Silichai, the young woman who became a trainer, tells her students: "Do not think you have no ability. Everybody has skills, it is up to you to decide to use them or not. Now, the world has opened more opportunities for us. The door is open for us to enter and follow our dreams."

"Seeing the participants grow is very exciting," said Lawrence Jacobson, the FAO focal point for disability matters. "Watching these people apply themselves, you realize that their abilities, energy and resourcefulness are truly without limits."



Facts and figures

About the disabled

Hunger, malnutrition and poverty breed disabilities, and at the same time disability is a cause of poverty, malnutrition and hunger. Some examples:

- According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there are 386 million disabled people of working age worldwide. Many of the disabled can and want to work, yet they are frequently excluded. Unemployment among disabled people is far higher than for the population in general;
- 70-80% of the disabled in the Asia and Pacific Region are farmers, rural workers or disabled soldiers, who have returned to the countryside. One country that has been particularly hard hit by disability is Cambodia, where 1.4 million out of a population of eight million have been disabled as a result of poverty, war and human rights abuses;
- Armed conflict, landmines and diseases such as meningitis are among the major causes of disability throughout the world. In Afghanistan some 800,000 people -- about 4 percent of the population -- are disabled largely because of the combined effects of war and poverty;
- Between 250,000 and 500,000 children go blind every year from lack of vitamin A;
- There are over 16 million mentally handicapped and nearly 50 million people with some lesser degree of brain damage caused by Iodine Deficiency Disorders;
- More than half of all pregnant women in the world are anaemic, of whom 90 percent live in developing countries.

December 3 is the International Day of Disabled People. FAO is devoting special attention to the rural disabled in Asia and the Pacific, as a contribution to *The Decade for Disabled People in Asia and Pacific (1993-2002)*.

FAO's Rural Development Division runs a programme aimed at improving the living

conditions of the rural disabled, focusing on strengthening the income generation capacities of rural people with disabilities. The programme's slogan is: "Disabled farmers *are* farmers". The programme is now being extended to Africa.

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