

# Country Report: Thailand

The development of people with intellectual disabilities lies outside the capacity of just our own families. It hinges as much upon the actions of two principal entities: civil society and the state. To risk a cliché: they are interrelated, but curiously they share a similar dual characteristic. On the one hand, the positive support is constant and ubiquitous. On the other hand, the hindrance, likewise, appear to be constant and ubiquitous.

Civil Society In the last two decades or so we have witnessed a sea change in the social attitude towards people with disabilities. The change come from two fronts, namely, the civilized international influences and the domestic democratic efforts. As Thailand has been increasingly exposed to global forces, the public has learnt more about good practices for the disabled from the international communities. There are both refinements to be followed and, legally, to be complied

with. Disabled parking, washrooms at the airport are exemplary. Though they are not seen anywhere else in town, they serve as good guidance. And it has an impact in conceptual terms. As a result, outright discriminatory attitudes and actions against the disabled are on the wane. On the domestic front in the midst of political turmoil, Thailand has gone through a series of progressive movements that have brought out the voiceless to be heard, the marginalized to be recognized. The people with disabilities are also beneficiaries of the overall trend.

However, the negativities perniciously persist. Generally speaking, the populace has the feeling of 'pity' for the disabled. But the feeling is not merely condescendingly embedded, it is coupled with the notion of 'bad karma'. Often heard, yet expressed subtly, the saying of is this sort: "the disabled deserve the condition which is attached to them". This worldview is even prevalent among the Buddhist clergy. That is why we witness the practice of making merit towards the

disabled along with the anti-disabled stand held among preachers in the name of Buddhism. A deplorable incident is a case in point. A Canadian-based charity organization whose mission was to provide prostheses and orthoses (PO) was denied their request to use a tiny space of the monastic ground that is usually used for commercial parking. This sort of thing was not an isolated case, but has happened all over at “Buddhist” establishments.

State Action Thailand rightly has not been seen in the best of light. With the reputation of being a country with vicious military coups, one can hardly expect the ruling minds would come up with ideas for powerless people. The future is bleak; the light is faint. Yet there are specific spots that shine. People with Down Syndrome along with all other disabled have gained tangible benefits from different state policies. Labour law is a case worthy of praise. It requires enterprises to employ people with disabilities as a certain proportion of the total number of their employees. If the obligation is

not met, alternatively they are to provide financial support for concerned organizations. Moreover, individuals with disabilities are entitled to receive a direct monthly stipend (800 Baht, or US\$25) in addition to free medical care. True, the sum is barely sufficient for minimal\_expenses. Nevertheless, it is a noble start.

A particular effort that our organization is highly proud of is that we were able to play a part in setting a new direction in education inclusiveness policy. It is directly and specifically conducive to the development of people with intellectual disabilities in general and with DS in particular. As set forth in the Royal Gazette of National Education of 1999 (August 18) is the testimony of one of our achievements. On paper it is delightful, though in practice the result is not as overwhelming as one would hope for.

A special record of joy to be noted is that at one of the largest hospitals in Thailand, the decline of the abandonment rate of DS infants has been in evidence over the years. Even more heartening is that the number

has recently become zero. The staff at the pediatric ward take it as an excellent sign for the future of people with DS, and hope for a better quality DS infant care.

However, it is not productive to dwell on the positive outcomes we have earned. A large number of state agencies do not seem to think, let alone to work out, pro-disabled policies under their respective jurisdictions. And those with the mandates are often unenthusiastic. What frequently happens is that some policy measures go in a direction that we would rather wish not to see. The universal coverage for amniocentesis test is a contested issue. A broad, too liberal, legal interpretation for the termination of pregnancy is another.

There is a huge space in which to work on issues for people with disabilities. State agencies in general are not equipped with initiatives, nor endowed with enthusiastic outlook. Civil society and the state are two sides of the coin. The former is to inspire and strengthen the latter. Civil society has a big role to play on two fronts, i.e. to engage with the public for a more positive

attitude towards people with disabilities, and to stir the state from apathy.

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