

A SUCCESSFUL ADVOCATE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

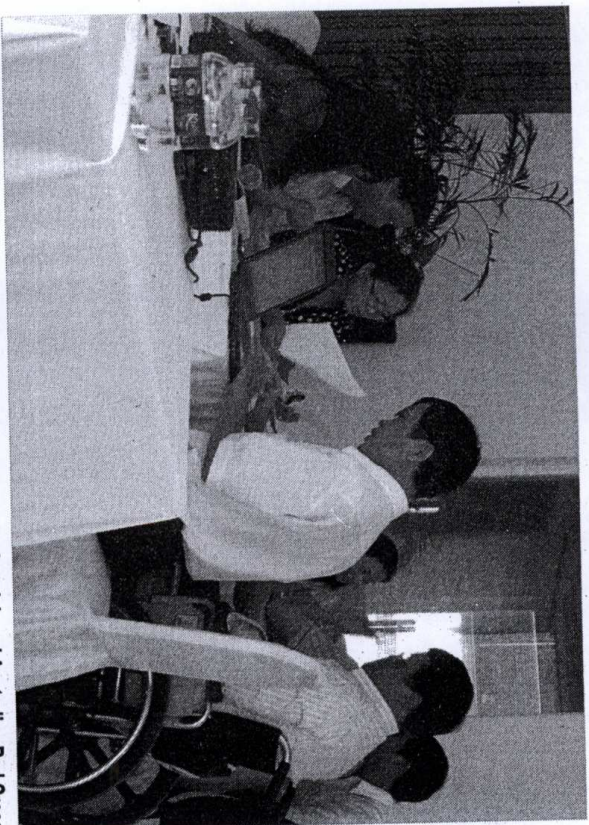
Invited by Vietnam Red Cross to participate in training on rights for persons living with disabilities, Mr. Tran Manh Thu happily joined the group from Lam Dong province. The training was held in a nice hotel in Hoa Binh province, with fresh air and good service. However, a person in a wheelchair like him would not have been able to access the training room without the assistance of other participants. This is a common physical barrier that he and many other people with disabilities have to struggle with daily in Vietnam.

Thu is the chairman of the Lam Dong Association of People with Disabilities and the Da Lat Association of People with Disabilities. Mr. Thu's life was smooth until he had an accident which destroyed his legs in 1997. For four years, he visited hospitals and traditional doctors hoping his legs could work again. In 2001, he was informed he would never walk again. He was devastated but finally his family encouraged him to stop grieving. He bought a cheap second-hand wheelchair and felt revitalized. Thu started selling lottery tickets in the streets. He felt cheerful being able to socialize and earn an income again.

One day he was invited to a meeting of a small group of disabled people in Da Lat. He talked with the members and realized that many of them were more miserable than him. Some of them did not have a house. Some had no support from their families. Some could not afford a wheelchair. Many did not have a decent job. Thu felt he was luckier than most and began

supporting the group. One day he realized that to better assist people with disabilities to attract more support from companies or organizations, his group needed to gain legal status. After learning about the process, the group was registered in 2006. The Da Lat Association of People with Disabilities was the first Association of this type set up in Lam Dong. Thu was elected Vice-chairman. When the Lam Dong Association of People with Disabilities was established, Thu became the Chairman.

"People living with disabilities face many challenges when pursuing their dreams in life compared to others," said Thu. Vietnam's laws and policies related to rights and support to disabled people are comprehensive and adequate. However, there is a big gap between laws and policies and their implementation. Lack of physical accessibility to public places is a big challenge. "In Vietnam, it is difficult for disabled to walk, to take a bus, to go to parks and cinemas etc. That a person has a disability does not mean that they are unable to do things, but the fact that roads and buildings are inaccessible to disabled prevents them from going outside and socializing more." People with disabilities also face challenges with regards to education. In his associations, most members have only completed primary education. The main factor that hinders them to pursue further education is that they cannot access classrooms on high floors. And even those with disabilities who managed to gain a tertiary education



Mr. Thu in group discussion in training on disabilities funded by Spanish and Australian Red Cross

and performed well at school, face discrimination when looking for a job. A girl in his association who has a degree in pedagogy has failed to find a job. She is now selling CDs in the market.

Since 2010, Thu's Association in Lam Dong has been supported by Vietnam Red Cross through a project funded by Spanish Red Cross and the Spanish Agency of International Development Cooperation (AECID). The project assists disabled people in getting vocational training, improving skills at work and finding employment. Many members of the associations found their first job or improved their lives thanks to this project.

However, there are still many disabled people not able to work due to discrimination and stigma.

Today the world celebrates the International Day of People with Disabilities. The Spanish Red Cross has been present in Vietnam since 2002 supporting people with disabilities through vocational training, employment and social inclusion in 13 provinces of the country and will continue supporting related activities until at least 2014. Australian Red Cross has also co-funded some training on Disabilities and Social Work for Vietnam Red Cross.

Source: Spanish Red Cross