Disability – An overview

An estimated more than 650 million people in the world live with a disability, many of them in low and middle income countries. Approximately 470 million are women and men of working age\(^1\). As many as 80 per cent of all people with disabilities are not born with the disability but acquire it later in life due to illness, malnutrition, accidents or age.

While some are successfully employed and fully integrated into society, others face social and environmental barriers to becoming active members of society and holding a job. People with disabilities are not a homogenous group; they may have a single physical, sensory, intellectual or mental disability or multiple disabilities. In many cases, their disability may have little impact on their ability to work. As a group though, it is undeniable that persons with disabilities, especially women, are more likely to live in poverty and to be unemployed.

In signing the UN Convention (October 2007), Cambodia has embraced the fundamental principle that persons with disabilities are “subjects with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.”\(^2\) Article 27 of the UN Convention pertains specifically to the issue of work and employment of people with disabilities.

Disability in Cambodia

In Cambodia, estimates of people with disabilities vary significantly. The latest Socio-Economic Survey by the Ministry of Planning from 2004 indicates that there are around 600,000 disabled people in the country (4%). The recent national census released in September 2009 estimates that 1.4% of the total population has disabilities. Both figures are accepted by the government, their difference is explained by the use of different methodologies of data collection. The percentage of women with disabilities (4.9%) is slightly higher than for men (4.5%). Most people with disabilities live in rural areas. Table 1 presents more detail on the cause of declared disability in Cambodia.

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\(^2\) The text of the convention has been translated in Khmer and is available here: [http://www.un.org/disabilities/](http://www.un.org/disabilities/)
Table 1
(percentage of total reported causes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of disability</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenital</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine/UXO</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental trauma</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Incidents caused by unexploded ordnance (UXO) have been one important cause of disabilities. However, recent research indicates that the causes of disability are changing. Today, traffic accidents, disease and old age are more common reasons for a person becoming disabled. In Cambodia, limited eyesight is the most frequent type of disability reported, followed by impaired motor skills and hearing problems.

In a 2009 survey conducted by Handicap International, the key challenges faced by people with disabilities in Cambodia include a lack of access to employment or livelihoods, education and health care.

Cambodia’s first law to promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities was declared by Royal Decree on July 3rd 2009 and is an essential
Disability in the garment industry (in the workplace)

A person with a disability is capable of leading a productive life if the environment accommodates the person’s needs. Not hiring people with disabilities means losing out on the knowledge and experience these people have. A disability does not imply that a person can not do a job effectively; it might just mean that the person does it in a different way. When given a fair chance to develop skills and the opportunity to access employment, people with disabilities perform just as well as those without.

Managing diversity is a major factor in today’s global economy, and many companies are learning that hiring people with disabilities can bring many benefits to the workplace and positively impact a company’s profitability. Research shows that many companies that have hired people with disabilities are keen to hire more. Here are a few of their reasons:

• People with disabilities make good, reliable employees.
• People with disabilities perform on par or better than non-disabled workers with regards to attendance, work safety and job retention.
• People with disabilities are often good team players and contribute to good morale among staff.
• Persons with disabilities have strong problem solving skills, as many of them have to overcome various obstacles in their day-to-day lives.
• People with disabilities promote an enterprise’s good public image, as it sends out the message that the company cares for its workers.

The law recognizes that disability is a critical development, economic and social issue as poverty and disability are closely linked. The 2004 CSES data shows that household wealth of people with disabilities is about half that of non-disabled people. Access to employment for people with disabilities thus not only contributes to a sense of dignity and self-confidence of an individual, but it is also directly linked to a country’s poverty reduction and development efforts. Latest research by the ILO (2009) shows that worldwide countries are losing between 1-7% of their national GDP due to exclusion of persons with disabilities from work and educational opportunities.

How can the garment industry work towards a more disability friendly environment?

Management and worker representatives can benefit from working together in raising awareness of the issue. Disabled people organizations, such as the Cambodian Disabled People’s Organization (CDPO) and others such as Better factories Cambodia can facilitate such efforts, upon request. This is essential to ensuring that workers and supervisors can act as pro-active agents of an inclusive workplace.

At the enterprise level, the cost of accommodating employees with disabilities is often minimal. In fact most disabilities do not require any “special” accommodation at all. It often only requires a positive attitudinal change.

To reach the fullest potential of staff, equal opportunities should be provided; this applies to all employees, with or without disabilities, and is important in any workplace. A first step towards a more inclusive work place could be the adoption of a policy showing the factory’s genuine intention to hire on the basis of competency and ability, regardless of whether the candidate is disabled or not.

However, when needed, a reasonable accommodation to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities could mean putting in ramps to make the building accessible to a wheelchair user or lowering or adjusting the height of a desk or working surface. It can also mean planning spaces differently between rows of sewing machines or regulating lighting differently. Toilets may need to be reengineered to accommodate all workers equally. Some flexibility with working hours, to allow workers with disabilities to arrive and leave few minutes before normal working hours, may be advisable. Providing information using different modes of communication may be needed, but may also present an opportunity to improve the overall communication between management and workers. These are not expensive modifications and would make the work place accessible to a whole new group of employees.

Workers’ organizations also have a responsibility to include people with disabilities and encourage them to assume leadership roles and to negotiate with employers in making disability a resource for the enterprise. Trade unions can play a constructive role advocating for equality measures including anti-discrimination clauses, policies prohibiting harassment at work, employment equity programs and job accommodation for workers experiencing employment barriers. For example, trade unions can:

- Create space for workers with disabilities to share experiences and highlight areas for improvement at the workplace,
- Educate other union members on disability issues, and rights and responsibilities related to disability management
- Provide services to workers with disabilities to assist them in becoming integrated or more integrated into the workforce;
- Support disability rights organisations and build coalitions to get positive legislative and policy change;
- Through the OSH committee, trade unions can ensure that people with disabilities are working in a safe and productive environment
Better Factories Cambodia and disability

Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) is striving to improve working conditions in the country's exporting garment factories. It provides the industry with an array of affordable services to improve the life of everyone at work – employers and workers alike. Addressing disability is a pressing matter in Cambodia, and BFC is ready to support the industry in becoming more inclusive.

This brochure is part of a tool kit on disability. As part of the advisory services it provides to the industry, BFC offers support to enterprises on developing inclusive policies and disability strategies that can be integrated into the occupational health and safety measures and human resource policies. BFC can advise on how to turn workplaces into more creative, flexible and inclusive environments, how to accommodate employees with disabilities, and how to retain workers that become disabled in the workplace while raising the awareness of the workforce through specific training, coaching and referrals to other service providers.

The way forward

When the right support is in place, a person with a disability can perform as well or better than other workers. For example, a person with poor vision might find it difficult to work without glasses, but with glasses the poor eyesight no longer presents a problem. An employee who cannot walk can still be an active and productive member of a garment factory. Even if there are other impairments that demand greater adjustments, it is still relatively easy to make accommodations to the environment and society to simplify the active participation of people with disabilities.

Stakeholders’ statements

Mr. Richard Pullen,
Former Managing Director
The Fair Manufacturing Company, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

It is to the employers’ benefit to be open-minded when hiring new staff. The experience we have had is that the retention rate of persons with disabilities is higher than that of non-disabled employees. It is a strength for my business as it reduces the employee turn-over related costs and provides opportunities for long-term staff development.

Mr. Ngin Saorath
Executive Director
Cambodia Disabled People’s Organization

People’s attitudes towards disability often are more disabling than the disability itself, and can limit the potential for people with disabilities to take an active role in society and to be productive. Increasing public awareness of the potential for disabled people to contribute to society could go a long way towards removing some of the obstacles disabled people face.

For more information on disability issues please have a look at the following websites

For Cambodia specific details see:
Cambodia Trust – www.cambodiatrust.com
Disability Action Council (DAC) – www.dac.org.kh
Cambodian Disabled People’s Organization – www.cdpo.org
National Committee for Disabled Persons (NCDP) IRS – www.ncdpcam.org

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Information:
Better Factories Cambodia
#9, St 322, Boeng Keng Kang 1
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Phone (+855) 23 212 847 ext 0
(+855) 23 220 362
Fax (+855) 23 212 903
Email betterfactories@ilo.org
Website www.betterfactories.org/ilo