

Breaking Barriers for Persons with Disabilities

A JICA-funded project in the province of Iloilo paves the way for Persons with Disabilities to take part in community life.



CREATION OF A NON-HANDICAPPING ENVIRONMENT (NHE) FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PWDs) IN THE RURAL AREAS

PROJECT SITES:

The municipalities of New Lucena in the province of Iloilo and Opol in the province of Misamis Oriental were chosen as pioneering municipalities for NHE. These sites were chosen because their local executives recognized the need for an accessible environment for the PWDs in their communities and they were committed to providing the needed facilities.

PROJECT PURPOSE:

Pioneering municipalities, in close collaboration with NCDA, create a non-handicapping environment in the rural areas. In these areas, physical accessibility (i.e., changes in the built environment) and social accessibility (i.e., changes in legislation and people's attitudes) are promoted.

DURATION: October 2008 to September 2012

IMPLEMENTING AGENCY: National Council on Disability Affairs

RESULTS:

As of January 2011, in New Lucena, 43 accessible features in nine establishments were installed or renovated to improve physical accessibility. In Opol, among the 24 audited establishments, 10 were physically renovated to improve access. Both municipalities have passed laws benefiting PWDs. PWD organizations have also been established and strengthened in the two municipalities. Activities to empower PWDs and strengthen the local government's capacities to address PWD needs are also being undertaken.

Paciano Flamiano's right leg was cut off after a car accident. Grace Servas lost her ability to walk after she was stricken with an illness in her teens. Flamiano, 32, and Servas, 27, are persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the Philippines.

The World Health Organization estimates that 10% of any given population has a disability. Based on this estimate, one in ten Filipinos—about 9.2 million people—has some form of disability. Physical barriers have kept them from going to school, working, seeking health care, and attending worship services and social functions.

PWDs need accessible facilities to take part in society. This is why lawmakers enacted the Philippine Accessibility Law, or Republic Act 344, in 1983. However, only a third of the act's provisions have been put in effect as of 2009, according to the National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA).

The lack of PWD-friendly facilities is more common in the countryside than

in the urban areas. To address this problem, NCDA partnered with JICA to carry out the Non-Handicapping Environment project for PWDs in the rural areas in 2008. The municipality of New Lucena in the province of Iloilo, where Flamiano and Servas live, is one of the project's two pioneering municipalities.

Today, the physical improvements in New Lucena, such as the PWD-friendly toilet and ramps in the public market, have boosted Flamiano's social life. They have eased his way back into the society that

he shunned for two years, during which he stayed home and wallowed in anger and self-pity.

"Before, I was too embarrassed to leave the house," says Flamiano. "Now, I hang out in the market, where I meet my friends and enjoy snacks."

The project also included advocacy activities and training in New Lucena. According to the project's mid-term review, there is a marked improvement in people's awareness toward PWDs.

However, changing people's attitudes toward PWDs begins with the PWDs themselves. Many PWDs lose their self-esteem and feel depressed due to their disability. Servas hid in her home for nine years after becoming disabled. "I lost hope," she says. "I felt ashamed of my condition."

Finally, in September 2010, a friend got Servas to go to the municipal hall, where a non-governmental organization gave wheelchairs to PWDs. There, Mylene Sustento, the focal person for PWD affairs in New Lucena, persuaded her to attend the regular meetings of the PWD organization in the municipality.

Servas did go, and she has found the meetings helpful. "I gained friends who also have disabilities," she says. "I learned that I have rights as a PWD and that I can go out, enjoy myself, and participate in the community."

The joy and hope that Flamiano and Servas feel show that when PWDs are given the way, they find the will to take part in community life.



Paciano Flamiano (right) doesn't just cut hair; he's a businessman, too. Flamiano took out interest-free loans from the PWD organization in New Lucena and bought four pedicabs. He rents out the pedicabs, and he earns about 3,600 pesos monthly.

(opposite page) Grace Servas (left) hid in her home for nine years after becoming disabled. Today, her home is where her business—selling ice and cell phone load—is. Servas is starting to come out of her shell, and she attends regular meetings of the PWD organization in the community.

(right photo) PWDs in New Lucena take an active role in designing the physical features that enhance their accessibility.