

## **RI's initiatives for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities**

By Venus Ilagan, Secretary General, Rehabilitation International

I thank the organizers of this panel discussion for the opportunity to speak to you today. The annual celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities is a constant and consistent reminder to all of us that over ten years after the universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in spite of some great strides achieved in realizing disabled people's rights, a lot remains to be done if persons with disabilities are to enjoy their rights on equal basis with others.

As previous speakers have articulated on recent initiatives of and by the UN System and Member States to empower persons with disabilities, I would like to speak on what civil society, specifically, what my own organization has so far done to empower Persons with Disabilities as this is something I have been personally involved in and more familiar with.

Rehabilitation International has launched at the beginning of this year, what we call the Global Disability Development Fund (GDDF) and our Africa Fund (AF) aimed to provide financial support to jumpstart initiatives for the empowerment of grassroots persons with disabilities. We give special attention to initiatives that build the capacities of women and children with disabilities in mostly rural areas.

Among the first recipients of the RI funding is an organization in Brazil which is helping build capacities of women with disabilities to be economically independent and enable them to become contributing members not just to their families but also to their communities. This project likewise aims to help disabled women develop the capacity to speak about their issues and participate in developing positive actions and solutions for their particular concerns in a more long-term and sustainable manner.

Another grant recipient of RI's Global Disability Development Fund (GDDF) is an organization based in Lebanon which is working to develop a model of inclusive education for poor disabled children that takes into account the need for a partnership between and among the children themselves, their parents, teachers and the community at large. The project promotes acknowledgment and recognition of the evolving capacities of disabled children. Everyone involved in this partnership considers himself or herself as a contributing

partner who stand to benefit if and when children with disabilities are educated and are helped to achieve their fullest potentials.

We have also provided grant support to a project in Ethiopia that is engaged in developing center-based rehabilitation, inclusive education and social inclusion interventions where families and community volunteers play an immense role in developing capacities and using every opportunity to share lessons learned with neighboring communities for them to start similar activities.

In Nepal, RI is funding a pilot project aimed at facilitating inclusion of rural disabled children in education, in partnership with other social groups within rural communities.

In South Africa, RI's Africa Fund is assisting a project titled "Inclusive Employment for South Africans with Disabilities" which aims to support both persons with disabilities needing jobs as well as employers interested to employ persons with disabilities but have limited knowledge and capacity to do so. The project includes sourcing of available job openings and identifying and training disabled persons who can fill those open job slots, helping develop skill sets that are required by employers and raising awareness among employers on the potentials and advantage of giving opportunities for workers with disabilities to be productive.

We have just started our engagement in these initiatives and have yet to see success. However, we think it is very important that as an organization working in disability and rehabilitation, we take proactive steps in giving disabled persons' organizations a chance to demonstrate to their communities that they can play an important and meaningful role in realizing the goal of building productive lives for persons with disabilities and others in their societies.

Thank you.