

Taking the Right Approach

By Daniel Stubbs

The more than 10 per cent of Pacific Islanders with disabilities rarely enjoy human rights comparable to their peers.

Although their numbers are large, estimated at 915,500, they are invisible to most of the community, denied equal access to education, often unable to secure employment, disqualified from enjoying certain property rights and even deprived of basic health care. As a result they are the group most likely to be living in poverty in the Pacific. They are likely to be hidden away by families or institutions, the object of pity and never even aware of their rights to participate.

There are however exciting moves afoot to turn this around. The Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT) is developing an innovative new training programme to place highly skilled human rights advocates in Pacific Island countries. Most of these advocates will be people with disabilities.

On 25 August 2006 many people with disabilities around the world celebrated the finalization of the text of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. It is the first human rights convention of the century and the first to benefit from such thorough civil society involvement. After five years of negotiations the Convention is expected to come into force when the UN General Assembly votes in 2007.

In essence the new Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities enshrines for them rights which many Pacific Islanders already enjoy without a second thought. It includes rights such as liberty and security, legal due process, freedom of assembly, expression, access to information, religion, property and against discrimination. These rights are already generally articulated in the Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966 (UN).

Other key rights which will now be set out in the International convention for people with disabilities include the right to work and related conditions, mainstream standard of education and training, health, social security, adequate standard of living, housing, transport, social integration and cultural participation. These rights too are often taken for granted by people all over the Pacific. They are set out for all people in the International convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) 1966 (UN).

The 2005 Regional Workshop on disability called for RRRT to develop human rights training for disability advocates. Its skills in the area of human rights and experience working with organisations like the Fiji Disabled Persons Association made RRRT the ideal choice for such crucial work at this important time.

RRRT disability rights training will give disability advocates around the Pacific the professional skills they need to promote social and policy change in their countries. People with disabilities will take on human rights related skills and knowledge usually only exhibited by lawyers. They will be able to fully understand and explain the various UN human rights conventions including those against discrimination of women (CDAW) and for the rights of children (CRCC). The rights of these groups will be particularly important given that women with disabilities are often doubly disadvantaged and children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses.

The three year training course will be best practice training for people with disabilities. RRRT is discussing a partnership arrangement with the new Pacific Disability Forum (the regional peak body for disability) to ensure that the training and advocacy is well targeted and appropriately delivered. Arrangements are currently being made to provide for deaf sign interpretation, Braille course materials and fully physically accessible training venues.

After skilled advocacy and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities Government and society will change. RRRT and PDF believe that when these fundamental changes occur people with disabilities will become accepted members of our community often working in government, business and the community for the economic and social benefit of their countries.

Daniel Stubbs is a consultant on social policy and organisation development. He is currently working with the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT) on its human rights training for disability advocates programme. A project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), RRRT provides training, technical support, policy and advocacy advice in human rights to promote social justice and good governance throughout the Pacific region.

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