



# Inclusive growth: how to encourage persons with disabilities into the labour market

Ms Gan Siew Wei, Dr Vengadeshvaran Sarma, Mr Tang Yu Hoe

## Executive Summary

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) are regularly discriminated against in the labour market and have little opportunity to participate in employment and entrepreneurship. In Southeast Asia, the lack of data masks the severity of their exclusion. This brief draws on an impact-evaluation of a multi-country corporate social responsibility project in the region. Policy makers should consider the collection of a centralised database and the implementation of new training and mentoring to support PWDs.

## Recommendations

### ■ Create a centralised database of PWDs at the national level

Based on our research, many ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, the Philippines and Laos lack an updated and functional database for PWDs. The lack of a database hampers organisations' efforts to assist PWDs effectively. Malaysia, through partnership with non-governmental organisations and cooperative societies, has designed a more robust database of PWDs in the country. Intergovernmental sharing of knowledge on the setup of such databases or a United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities/ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/ ILO led framework for such databases will aid state and non-state agencies to identify PWDs and to target measures to assist them.

### ■ Train and mentor PWDs to start entrepreneurial ventures

The R.I.S.E. programme has proven to be successful in allowing PWDs to actively participate in the country's economic growth. Evidence from our research shows such measures (of entrepreneurial activity) have led PWDs to be self-sufficient and be able to provide for their families. Support from state and donor agencies (including United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and ILO) to conduct entrepreneurial and/or craft related training and mentoring may therefore help PWDs to actively participate in the labour market.



A participant from Laos who makes a living out of painting using his legs.

## Context

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 10% of the world's population are PWDs. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlights that Southeast Asia has the second highest prevalence of disability. For Indonesia and Laos that have experienced natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and remnants of wars respectively, the percentage could be even higher. The PWDs are twice as likely to not participate in the labour market compared to persons without disabilities. However, many PWDs prefer to work if opportunities are available. In some parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, PWDs often lack adequate formal education, further hindering their labour market participation.



“Due to a vicious cycle of low education, lack of job opportunities, and a lack of adequate safety net, many PWDs are at high risk of relative income poverty.”

Our work with Maybank Foundation’s Reach Independence & Sustainable Entrepreneurship (R.I.S.E.) Programme has demonstrated that PWDs, with adequate support, can become successful entrepreneurs.<sup>1</sup>

The R.I.S.E. programme was conducted in three phases from 2014 to 2019 across four countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Laos. The participants were selected in collaboration with recognised NGOs and governmental bodies that support PWDs, to attend three days of training followed by three to six months of mentoring. The project has trained and mentored over 5,000 participants across the four countries. We collected data from a sample of those participants through online and telephone surveys, face-to-face interviews and visits to their businesses. We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the increase in income for participants, their ability to sustain this income, the effect of the programme on food sufficiency, access to education for children and the immeasurable impact the training has had on the participants’ emotional well-being.

## What is the impact of supporting PWD with entrepreneurial opportunities?

“The Mindset topic had the main impact on me. Before the training, I only stayed at home and did not have any motivation, which led to boredom. However, after the training, I became more motivated from the trainer’s guidance. I can now earn money from my business and lessen my family’s burden.”

On average, the participants experience 100% or higher increase in their income within a year of participating in the R.I.S.E. programme. Many of these participants were engaged in ad-hoc part-time work or were dependent on social welfare handouts prior to setting up their entrepreneurial venture. The setup of their entrepreneurial ventures have enabled them to grow their income and support themselves and their families financially. The availability of continuous mentoring allows for continued support of the PWD as they enter their new ventures.

More than 80% of the participants also reported being able to meet their basic needs after setting up their businesses. This represents a 30% increase to levels prior to the training. Being able to meet their basic needs and provide for their families had also improved the PWDs mental well-being. More than 85% of the participants reported improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem and a positive outlook.

The biggest impact the programme has had on participants is a change in mindset. Many participants relayed to us that the “awareness and change” topic in their training enabled them to refocus their energy and think more positively about their ability to start new ventures. Many participants suffer emotional trauma and a feeling of apathy as they remain passive members of society. Some PWDs also feel that they are a burden on their families. The training helped them to refocus their energy on productively setting up and managing new enterprises.

## Further reading

- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019 New York, Disability and Development Report, available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/07/disability-report-chapter2.pdf>
- Maybank Foundation, R.I.S.E. programme [online], available from: <http://maybankfoundation.com/index.php/our-impact/rise/rise-overview>

Ms Gan Siew Wei (Wendy) is an Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Wendy can be contacted at [wendy.gan@nottingham.edu.my](mailto:wendy.gan@nottingham.edu.my)

Dr Vengadeshvaran Sarma (Venga) is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Venga can be contacted at [vengadeshvaran.sarma@nottingham.edu.my](mailto:vengadeshvaran.sarma@nottingham.edu.my)

Mr Tang Yu Hoe (Ioannes) is an Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Ioannes can be contacted at [ioannes.tang@nottingham.edu.my](mailto:ioannes.tang@nottingham.edu.my)

1. Other regional programmes that assist the PWD include free legal assistance projects in Vietnam by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); education projects for persons with Dementia by the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and state capacity building programme by the UNPRPD.