

LIFE - Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment for People with Disabilities Program

NEWSLETTER
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The Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment (LIFE) for People with Disabilities Program (2012-2016) is implemented by Save the Children with financial support from USAID.

LIFE Program partners are Activa International Foundation, Unison DPO, Human Dignity and Peace (HDP) Foundation, and Full Life NGO.

LIFE Program cooperates with the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of Armenia (MLSI), the State Employment Agency (SEA), Employment Centers (ECs), Disabled People Organizations (DPOs), People with Disabilities (PWDs), local and marz authorities, service providers, TVET institutions and employers.

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LIFE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE MODEL OF INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT OF PWDs

On February 26, Save the Children LIFE program hosted a national conference in Yerevan to discuss the Model of Inclusive Vocational Education and Employment for People with Disabilities (PWD).

Artem Asatryan, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Karen Hilliard, USAID Armenia Mission Director, Hakob Hakobyan, Chairperson of the NA Standing committee on Social Affairs, and

Arsen Stepanyan, Save the Children Country Director addressed the participants of the conference and emphasized the importance of activities and projects for PWD and in particular on PWD employment issues.

The LIFE program starting in 2012, aimed at promoting equal employment opportunities and access to employment as a basic human right for people with disabilities thus the National Conference served as a forum to share LIFE program achievements, including the model for integration of people with disabilities into the labor market, lessons learned, successful examples of inclusive Technical and vocational educational training (TVET) institutions, as well as public-private partnerships, which resulted in employment of PWDs. The Conference also helped to identify the remaining gaps that need to be addressed in order to further foster and sustain equal employment opportunities for PWDs and promote acceptance of PWD inclusion in work and social life.

More than 120 representatives of state and business structures, international organizations and NGOs, as well as Mass Media participated in the conference alongside with PWDs.



ADVOCACY PLAN FOR DPO NETWORK

In September of 2015, within the framework of the LIFE program, a network of NGOs dealing with PWD issues (DPO Network) was established. The purpose of the network is to enhance the organizational capacities of NGOs dealing with PWD issues to promote comprehensive reforms in the disability area, as well as to help effective participation of local, regional and national organizations dealing with issues of the disabled.

Presently the Network engages 20 organizations involved in different components of the LIFE program. In 2015, the Network members carried out a number of public awareness raising events and activities for the protection of the interests of people with disabilities within the framework of Discrimination Does Not Work Nation-wide campaign initiated by the LIFE program.

The campaign implementation showed that the need for a comprehensive approach, strong evidence-based advocacy through efforts of DPO network members throughout the country, their strong networking and resource mobilization skills, becomes critical; and in February 2016, SC LIFE program organized a workshop aimed at development of a long-term advocacy plan for DPO network.

Being faithful to its mission to improve the standard of living of Armenian PWDs through defence of their interests, employment provision and capacity development, the DPO Network defined the following strategic goals:

- To promote PWD employment through awareness raising on PWD working capacities and rights among people with disabilities and their families, employers and state structures, and through their capacity building.
- To promote the improvement of the legislation related to PWD right to work through policy oversight and initiation of legislative reforms.
- Help the capacity development of the Network, both at the level of individual member organizations and at the level of the entire network.

The Long-Term Advocacy Plan includes also a mapping of the Network resources, plan of actions and a comprehensive budget for one year.

PARENT-CHILDREN GROUP MEETINGS

The LIFE program continually targets children with special learning needs in order to increase children's and parents' awareness about the rights of children with disabilities and to ensure family support and understanding of children's expectations.

During the period of January-April twenty-seven Parent-Children meetings in Yerevan, Ararat, Gegharkunik, Shirak, Lori, Aragatsotn, Syunik, Vayots Dzor, Armavir and Kotayk marzes were held to provide children with disabilities and their parents with information on opportunities for vocational education and employment, availability of state-funded education opportunities, and employment services. Teachers of the corresponding institutions, involved in the inclusive education (special pedagogues, physiologists, social workers, logopedists) are also involved in the sessions to ensure the initiative's sustainability.

The career orientation for PCGs is being conducted through the "Specialty Systematic Selection Test" methodology developed by Methodological Center of Professional Orientation within the framework of the LIFE program.

The information on available TVET studying opportunities (lists of TVETs along with the lists of specialties taught) has been also provided to parents and children.

COOPERATION WITH "MY WAY" CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS WITH AUTISM

In order to support children and adults affected by autism in Armenia by solving their developmental, educational and employment issues, starting from March 2016, the LIFE program funds the activities of "MY WAY" Social-Rehabilitation Day Care Center for Children and Teenagers with Autism, aimed at establishing separate age-specific Vocational Training Program for Teenagers and Adults Affected by Autism.

In frames of cooperation the Center administered regular seminars and workshop for 40 trainees who were introduced to Deep understanding of Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped (TEACCH) methodology, Verbal Behavior Interventions, Functional Behavior, Applied Behavior Analyses (ABA), etc.

Besides, all 40 participants went through the on job learning process in “My Way” rehabilitation center. Leading specialist of the Center developed individual schedules for each project participant to work with youths.

At the same time, the leading specialist of “My Way” rehabilitation Center started considering the waiting list of new beneficiaries/youths, so that newly recruited project specialists will start working with new students as well.

For the project duration term it is supposed that 25 teenagers attending “My Way” Center and in long run – 100 teenagers and young adults affected by autism will have an opportunity to get free social-rehabilitation and vocational training services.

DOCUMENTATION OF LIFE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISING

In 2015 the LIFE program initiated the documentation of the “Social Enterprise Experience” aimed to capture the cumulative experience of the 18 social enterprises established during the program, analyzing the successes and challenges of the social enterprise model.

The analysis implemented by SC LIFE team assessed different pros and contras of involvement of NGOs, municipalities, business entities and individual entrepreneurs in social enterprising; the effectiveness of these enterprises, their attractiveness for the private sector, employers, and PWDs, as well as the legal constraints facing the entrepreneurs.

Report on social enterprise experience is intended for the RA Government, international and domestic organizations, employers and companies pursuing social entrepreneurship that aim to assist the formation of a sustainable and basic social entrepreneurship institute in Armenia, as well as the involvement and integration of people with disabilities in the workplace.

The document presents social enterprise management considerations and practical advice, a theoretical conceptual framework targeting the regulation of the field, as well as some suggestions for legislative improvements.

The document was circulated among Social Enterprises and Employers Network (SEEN) members and discussed during the SEEN meeting.

NEW PROJECTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Chances of gainful employment considerably improve for PWDs, if they get vocational education that provides them with useful knowledge as well as with professional and social skills. As in case of other youth, social and vocational education is important for improving the life of children and adolescents with special learning needs. To better respond to the educational needs of children and youth with disability Save the Children started implementation of two other projects aimed at improving livelihood of children and youth with disabilities in Armenia:

Social Innovations for Vocational Education and Employability (SIVEE) of Young People with Disabilities Project

The Project (2016-2017) is implemented under the funding from the European Commission and in partnership with the Professional Education Reforms NGO. The project closely cooperates with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Armenia, members of the DPO Network (DPON) and Network of Social Enterprises and Employers (NSEE), established within the scope of LIFE Program as well as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions.

The Projects' overall objective is to promote social innovations in the technical vocational education sector in order to create equal employment opportunities as a basic human right for Young People with Disabilities (YPWD) and generate shared growth. The project will be implemented in Yerevan and Araragtsotn, Armavir, Kotayk, Syunik, Tavush, and Vayots Dzor marzes and comprised of the following main components:

- Development of capacities of TVET Teachers and representatives of boarding and special schools,
- Professional orientation for children and youth with disabilities,
- Support to long-term and short-term vocational educations
- Establishment of the TVET-based social enterprises to ensure employment of YWD, which passed vocational education and training

It is expected that 46 TVETs and more than 400 PWD will benefit from the project.

Community Based Services for Children with Disabilities Project

The Project (2016-2018) aims to bring a significant improvements in quality service provision for children with disabilities which will be done through cooperation with the national government, local governing structures, community based NGOs and other stakeholders.

The program is being implemented in five Eurasian countries: Armenia, Georgia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina targeting the following outcomes:

- Enable children with disabilities develop their abilities, practice independence, and enjoy inclusion
- Strengthen families and support parents
- Mobilize community stakeholders to support quality services for children with disabilities

In Armenia the project is being implemented in partnership with Armavir Development Center and Full Life NGOs.

Two comprehensive centers for children with disabilities (age 0-18) and their parents will be established in Yerevan and Armavir cities.

Annually 300 children and their parents from Yerevan, Armavir and Ararat marzes will benefit from the offered quality services in these two centers.

“NOT ABOUT DISABILITY”

What topics are PWDs usually expected to talk about?
What type of activities are they normally involved in?
What field are they presumed to have expertise in?
And generally, what theme are they associated with?
The answer to all these questions is quite simple – “disability”. While numerous events, activities and initiatives on a multitude of topics take place every day, PWDs are mainly involved in activities revolving around disability. The direct involvement of PWDs in programs focused on their issues is a definite improve-



ment over the previous situation, whereas disability-oriented initiatives were carried out and key decisions were made with no actual involvement of the PWDs and is in line with the “Nothing about Us without Us” philosophy of the international disability movement. In contrast to the approaches utilized previously, representatives of the disability community are now often considered Disability Experts and involved in various roundtables, conferences, TV programs and other disability-focused activities as trainers, guest speakers or consultants.

However, confining the participation of PWDs to disability programs and restricting their expertise exclusively to the context of disability perpetuates the stereotypical perception of PWDs as persons with “limited” abilities and narrows the society's understanding of PWDs' aptitudes, expertise and general human potential. In reality, PWDs, like other members of the society, have a vast diversity of skills, knowledge and experiences that can and should contribute to the overall development of the society.

This belief was the stimulus behind the “Let's Be Friends” project initiated and carried out by Unison since March 2016. The project is being implemented by a group of 7 volunteers, 5 of which are young persons with various disabilities who are or have been involved in the LIFE program: Meri and Gohar have been placed to employment at the RA Ministry of Emergency Situations by Unison, Tigranuhi and Hayk have participated in the Job Readiness and Life Skills training and Psychologist's trainings and Luiza is a Unison Team Member responsible for blind beneficiaries in the frameworks of the LIFE program.

The idea of the project is the following: the volunteer group visits schools to make presentations about various non-disability topics: arts and culture, environment and ecology, health and hygiene, emergency situations and social activism. With this, the project pursues two distinct objectives. Firstly, the project aims at initiating



constructive discourse about essential social issues among the younger generation by addressing difficult problems through engaging presentations, interactive activities and attractive visuals. Secondly, the project aims at positioning PWDs in a new and unexpected role - that of active members of the society with valuable insights and creating a positive perception of PWDs among the younger generation and their parents/teachers.

After a one-month preparatory period, during which the volunteer group underwent public speaking training, selected presentation/discussion topics, developed activities and exercises, created visual materials and made arrangements with the schools, the first school visit took place in the first week of April. To build rapport with the audience over time and avoid burdening schoolchildren with excess information, it was decided to split the presentations in half and hold two meetings with each audience.

The first school to host the volunteer group was the Siamanto Secondary School No. 162, where the “Let's Be Friends” project was launched with presentations for an audience of 40: fifth-graders, their teachers and members of school administration.

The two meetings were a great success: the children were more than excited to trade traditional classes for engaging discussions and openly shared their views and opinions about the issues raised by presenters. They were especially eager to participate in role-plays, simulations and other interactive exercises, and, as later pointed out by the teachers, even the most reserved and quiet children were actively involved. After two days of presentations, such a friendly relationship was established with audience, that the children even initiated an impromptu dance and song concert to thank the presenters.

In addition to reaching the two objectives of stimulating discourse among children and creating a new perception of PWDs, the meetings proved an important point: no one is born with stereotypical attitudes and negative stigma. The fact that the presenters had visible disabilities was not an issue among children: none of them “saw” the disability. Where most adults would see a blind person and a wheelchair-user, they saw a historian with expertise in ethnic dances and a 911 Operator in a “cool uniform”. This points to a vital truth - discrimination is not innate, it is learned. It's the stereotypical attitudes, opinions and perceptions channeled down by parents and teachers, propagated in the media and reinforced by various policies and practices that perpetuate discrimination and it is through initiatives like “Let's Be Friends” that this discrimination can not only be prevented, but rooted out once and for all.

Story by Ani Asatryan

Since the beginning of the LIFE Program in January 2012

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**Persons with Disabilities
have been employed**

ATTENTION

To the attention of NGOs, researchers and business sector: the LIFE Newsletter provides with the opportunity to cover your activities towards PWD vocational education and integration into Armenia labor market. If interested, please contact LIFE program via e-mail: astghik.mailyan@savethechildren.org

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Save the Children

Save the Children International is the world's largest independent movement for children's rights, with a network of 29 national organizations working in over 120 countries.

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