

# Breaking Down Barriers

UN convention on disability offers hope for future

WHO estimates that up to 10% of the total global population is disabled, with most belonging to the poorest and most marginalized sectors of society. This translates to about 650 million persons with disabilities worldwide. Most persons with disabilities lack access to opportunities for basic education, and 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries are unable to go to school. Acting as a barrier to employment, this condemns them to a vicious cycle of poverty. According to the International Labor Organization as of 2003, 80% of persons with disabilities in Third World Countries remained unemployed.

But the situation is not as bleak as it seems. There is hope on the horizon, particularly with the passage of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities last December 2006.

The UN Convention is an international agreement among states on how to treat persons with disabilities. It declares that persons with disabilities have and should enjoy the same fundamental human rights as everyone else.

Persons affected by leprosy are among those whose human rights are upheld by the convention. Just as with other persons with disabilities, they are rendered disabled more as a result of society's negative attitudes than by their own physical limitations. But they suffer additional stigma from the way their disease is perceived.

**“They are rendered disabled more by society’s attitudes than by their own limitations.”**

This was brought home to me during my stint as Commissioner of the National Anti-Poverty Commission (representing the Disability Sector) in the Philippines. One of my council members was an 82-year-old person affected by leprosy named Cresencia Loreda. Though cured of the disease, she had been left disabled. I was surprised that in spite of her age she was still so active. During our council meetings, she consistently demonstrated her concern for people affected by leprosy and helped me to understand their situation.

I began to feel quite ashamed as the picture became clear. Although I grew up, and still live, in Camarin, Caloocan City, near the Dr. Jose Rodriquez Sr. Hospital in Tala, I had no knowledge of the difficulties faced by the patients who were cared for there. Through Mrs. Loreda, I was able to meet with them. I also had in-depth discussions with the head of the hospital on how they could be



Acquiring skills at the Livelihood, Education and Rehabilitation Center in Metro Manila

empowered, proposing that they be given an opportunity to earn their living.

In 2003, I signed an agreement with the Department of Health and the National Housing Authority to convert the old Malaria Research and Eradication Center into the Livelihood, Education and Rehabilitation Center (LERC) for persons with disabilities, including those affected by leprosy. Now the center is being used by various disabled persons' organizations, parents of children with disabilities, and a group of persons affected by leprosy headed by Mrs. Loreda. They engage in community-based activities such as early education of children with disabilities, rehabilitation and health care, vocational training for out-of-school youth and livelihood enterprises for persons with disabilities.

My desire to alleviate the plight of persons affected by leprosy has been strengthened by my work with the Philippine Council of Cheshire Homes for the Disabled. We have established the Inclusive Youth Center (IYC), which brings together disabled and non-disabled young people. We have initiated the IYC project in Quezon City and Caloocan City, the two largest cities in Metro Manila in terms of land area and population.

IYC regularly conducts seminars and workshops among the non-disabled to raise awareness of the plight of young people with disabilities. Through the IYC, we also hope to educate society to change its negative attitudes toward persons affected by leprosy. IYC welcomes young persons affected by leprosy, and also families affected by the disease. In fact, we are going to organize an IYC chapter in Tala. I hope that this will help to reduce, if not totally eradicate, discrimination against them.

I am convinced there are many persons affected by leprosy in the world who just need an equal opportunity to share their skills and experiences. Let us take full advantage of the UN Convention to make this happen. ■

## AUTHOR:

**Richard D. Arceno**



Richard D. Arceno is a person with severe disability. During his stint as Commissioner of the National Anti-Poverty Commission, Philippines, he authored several policies that improved the plight of marginalized sectors in the Philippines. Mr. Arceno also became Senior Adviser to the 1st and 8th Ad Hoc meetings on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities held at UN headquarters in New York. He can be contacted at [richardarceno@yahoo.com](mailto:richardarceno@yahoo.com)