

PRESS RELEASE

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‘We need business leaders to make disability inclusion happen: companies are influenced and inspired by their peers’

On 6/7 March, AAR Japan, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) brought together 110 Myanmar stakeholders from business, disability organisations and government and international experts for second multistakeholder forum on promoting employment of persons with disabilities in Myanmar. The first forum was held in November 2017.

The meeting was a chance for networking and an opportunity to raise disability awareness for a wider group of businesses, and in particular human resources managers, using the handbook: “Employing Persons with Disabilities” published in December 2018 by AAR Japan and MCRB with the support of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and the Myanmar Federation of People with Disabilities (MFPD).

Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, U Myo Aung outlined government activities since the first forum, including the adoption in December 2017 of the Rules to implement the 2015 Law Protecting the Rights of People with Disabilities. He explained that eight sub-committees had recently been formed to support the work of the National Committee, including one dedicated to Employment, for which the input of employers was essential, including through the participation of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI).

Director-General of the Department of Rehabilitation in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement U Win Naing Tun described the activities which the Ministry was coordinating across government so that Myanmar could fulfil its commitment to disability-inclusive development under the November 2018 ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 on Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

U Thein Lwin, Acting Chairman of MFPD underlined that persons with disabilities needed jobs, to ensure that they could make use of their hard-won education. He called on the government to accelerate the implementation of the 2015 Law by establishing a registration process for persons with disabilities. He also encouraged the Sub-Committee on Employment to provide advice to the National Committee on setting a percentage quota for employment of people with disabilities, as is provided for in the law.

U Win Naing, Deputy Chair of the Myanmar Industries Association, and representing UMFCCI, highlighted that disability inclusion was a new concept for most Myanmar companies. However UMFCCI recognised the national importance and was committed to ensuring that the country made the most of the ability of persons with disabilities. Businesses were looking

for guidance and support on how to do this, as well as clarity from government on issues such as registration.

Jane Cordell, Director of Result CIC, a UK social enterprise which coaches and trains people with disabilities, and the organisations which employ them, shared her personal experience. As a professional musician she became deaf in her mid-20s, but had since pursued a career as a language teacher, diplomat and business coach.

Jane shared her observations on what it takes to change discriminatory attitudes in society, at home and in the workplace: *“Positive change occurs in society because rules requiring non-discrimination are adopted. These rules influence behaviour. Behaviour influences societal attitudes. Eventually, inclusion becomes ‘the new normal’.*

She explained that the UK’s 2010 Equality Act legally protects people with disabilities from being discriminated against in the workplace and in wider society. She also outlined the incentives available, such as the Access to Work, a UK government fund which gives discretionary grants to disabled people in paid work, for example to help them with assistive technology. She noted that this is ‘net positive’ for government finances: studies show that \$1 of grant leads to disabled people paying \$1.50 more income tax due to increased earnings.

She highlighted how businesses could be proactive about recruitment: *“There is a voluntary initiative that some leading companies have adopted called ‘Positive about Disabled People’. These companies guarantee an interview to any job applicant with a disability who meets the minimum requirements for the job. It helps to get disabled people through the door, and that helps to change attitudes. If they have a chance to be interviewed, they can demonstrate the innovation and problem-solving skills that all disabled people, including me, have had to develop to overcome the challenges that each day brings. And these are exactly the skills most employers say they need”.*

Workshop participants were asked to nominate good practice by business on disability inclusion in Myanmar. The company most commonly highlighted by participants was KBZ Bank for the job opportunities it provides to persons with disabilities and the ‘reasonable accommodation’ it offers them to support them in the workplace. Other banks mentioned were Myanmar Apex Bank (MAB) and CB Bank. Hotels praised for their disabilities policy and employment were Novotel, Shangri-La, Rose Garden and Melia. Moe Yan lottery was also highlighted for its support.

Peter Fremlin, an external consultant to the ILO, stressed the importance of business leadership: *“Companies aren’t going to be convinced by hearing a consultant like me saying that it’s good for business to employ people with disabilities or develop services for them as customers. They need to see their competitors do it, and hear about it from their peers”.*

To meet Myanmar companies’ need for guidance, the workshop discussed establishing a ‘Myanmar Business Disability Network’, a business-led coalition where businesses could share good practice and push for positive change. Peter Fremlin, who has worked with the ILO’s Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN) and some of the 28 existing national networks, and Murteza Khan, CEO of the Bangladesh BDN shared lessons learned from setting up business disability networks, and how they could be most useful to business. .

Murteza explained: *“For Bangladesh, one reason we’ve made progress on disability inclusion is because we – and in particular the garment sector - are part of a global supply chain. Buyers like Marks and Spencer have actively encouraged and supported their 70 partner factories in Bangladesh to employ more disabled people. We’ve also had strong local NGO partners such as Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP)”*.

The workshop also discussed initiatives and good practice concerning employment including job coaching, assistive technology and ‘reasonable accommodation’. Speakers from disability organisations and NGOs included representatives of Myanmar Physically Handicapped Association, Myanmar Independent Living Initiative, Shwe Minthar Foundation, Myanmar Deaf Community Development Association, The Leprosy Mission Myanmar, Japan Heart and BRAC Myanmar.

Business speakers included Sule Shangri-La Hotel, Accor Hotels, Myanmar Apex Bank, Mira Myanmar Travel, Mizzima Media Group, Hla Day and Yangon Bakehouse.

Background

1. All the presentations and a report of the workshop will be available on www.mcrb.org.mm. Details of the first multistakeholder workshop in November 2017 are available at: www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/news/multi-stakeholder-workshop-people-with-disabilities.html
2. The Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan) in Yangon has been running a Vocational Training Centre (VTC) for persons with disabilities since 2000 under the cooperation of Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. The VTC has provided training in haircut/beauty, tailoring and computer, and supported employment of more than 1,600 persons with disabilities across Myanmar, including through establishing relationships with both international and local businesses.
3. Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) is a Yangon-based initiative funded by the UK, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands and Ireland, based on collaboration between the UK-based Institute of Human Rights and Business, and the Danish Institute for Human Rights. It has been working on business and disability since 2014, in partnership with local organisations and also on wider issues of discrimination in the workplace. See www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/dialogues/disability-and-business/
4. In December 2018, MCRB and Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan) with the support of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR) and Myanmar Federation of Persons with Disabilities (MFPD) published a bilingual handbook to support employers taking their first steps on this journey, or wanting to improve their performance. www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/resources/persons-with-disabilities-handbook.html
5. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a specialized U.N. agency devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace. Since 1919, the ILO brings together governments, employers and workers of 187 member States, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men. ILO has had an office and program in Myanmar since 2002. Their support for this workshop is part of a joint action by the European Union, the ILO and the OECD on responsible supply chains in six countries in Asia, including Myanmar, to promote responsible business conduct (RBC) with regard to decent work, environmental sustainability and respect for human rights. <http://www.businessanddisability.org/>

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