



Case study – Mongolia

'Giving voice to Mongolia's silent warriors': disability advocacy campaign

Challenge



According to Mongolia's State Social Welfare Office, nearly 80 percent of all people with disabilities live below the poverty line and the average household income for a person with disabilities is 2.5-3 times lower than mainstream households. The 2010 multidimensional poverty index (MPI) verifies that this marginalised group experiences low health, education and standard of living.

Families of children with disabilities qualify for 30,000MNT (\$26USD) per child, per month from social welfare, and 30,000MNT (\$26USD) per quarter for medications/medical aides. However, very basic care for a child with disabilities is four times this amount. Parents of children with severe disabilities are among the most impoverished, often unable to work because they must care for their child.

Children with moderate to severe disabilities are often unable to attend mainstream schools and are therefore deprived of educational, emotional and social development. Laws are in place to ensure that all children have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, but statistics show that this is not being implemented. A further problem is that the authorities simply do not know how many children in their provinces have disabilities, as these children are often hidden. It is therefore difficult to get their rightful welfare allowances to them.

The Association of Parents with Disabled Children (APDC) was founded in 2001 through the grassroots efforts of parents of children with disabilities. The association believes that every child should enjoy equal rights and opportunities for physical, emotional, social, psychological, and intellectual development. They also believe that negative attitudes towards children with special needs can be changed with an inclusive social approach in public awareness, policy development and the voice of young people with disabilities being heard.

Catalyst

VSO has been a partner of the APDC since 2005 and over this time has provided funding as well as seven skilled volunteers. The most recent volunteer was Debra McDaniel. Debra arrived at a time when the APDC was calling for a renewed boost to their advocacy work and fundraising. Over the course of 2011, the 600 members of the branch in Dornod province – all of them volunteers – took part in capacity

building and skills training, and Debra also assisted them in establishing an 18-month, results- and mission-based strategic plan. The APDC set up new projects and recruited many new members who became increasingly active and involved in the work of the association. However, APDC leaders knew that decision-makers in parliament, on the other side of the country, held the key to long-term changes.

APDC asked Debra to help them run their most ambitious project yet - to bring the cause of disabled children to the forefront of people's attention, and appeal to the politicians. In support of this objective, Debra, along with an interpreter, a herder and a Lama (Buddhist spiritual teacher), undertook a 665km horse ride from Dornod to the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar. The 21-day project, called 'Giving voice to Mongolia's silent warriors' was an awareness, advocacy and fundraising campaign. It attracted media interest in the national and local press; a website (www.mnsilentwarriors.org) was created, and small donations were raised through the site. Every day of the journey, a child's story was shared on the website, with people Debra met along the way and with the media. Each story focussed on the child's interests and dreams, their parent's dreams, and issues they had to deal with. They deliberately did not focus only on the child's disability. Each story linked to a different aspect of the law which was not being implemented.

At the same time Debra was riding to the capital, the national director of the APDC, provincial coordinator of the Dornod branch and other members of the association held press meetings to raise the campaign's profile. When Debra and the team arrived in Ulaanbaatar on 10 October 2011, she and the Dornod representatives were joined by more than 300 APDC members, children with disabilities, and other supporters in front of Parliament. Face-to-face meetings were held with members of parliament (MPs), and the APDC presented the issues to national decision-makers.

Results

The APDC members who travelled to Ulaanbaatar to conclude the advocacy campaign were well-received by the MPs they spoke with, who pledged their commitment to bringing about beneficial changes for children with disabilities and their families. Legislation has been drafted to increase the state allowance for families with a child with disabilities, bringing it up to US\$112 a month.

US\$120,000 has been provided by the government for the construction of a Development and Rehabilitation Centre in Dornod, and work has already begun on building this centre. In addition, the Dornod branch received funds from The Canada Fund to conduct a survey of children with disabilities in their province. The APDC in Dornod has gone from strength to strength, and its members feel a real impetus for change, bolstered by their recent successes. In 2011 they were recognised as the best non-governmental organisation in the province. Building on

the skills they have learned from this campaign, APDC members continue to advocate, now with greater support from parliamentarians and the public, and they hope to bring about further improvements in the lives of their children and all children with a disability.

Debra feels privileged to have been a part of such a thriving movement, and is confident in the association's power and capacity for future success: "My job was to build the capacity of the organisation and its members, I think we did that." Disabled children are now more likely to be brought out of the house to play, to take part in activities, and generally "be given a voice." Just as importantly, with the efforts of national groups such as the APDC, their parents are also finding a voice to influence legislation, as a unified force for change.

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For more information on Mongolian disability programs contact the programme manager for Mongolia, Tsolmon Gundenbal, tsolmon.gund@vsoint.org

Follow this Youtube link for short videos about the APDC and the advocacy campaign, produced by Andrew Spink, a VSO volunteer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noxgeQVUqT4>