

Engaging persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in employment – an exploratory study from Cambodia



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Introduction

“There are some companies and employers who accept [persons with physical disabilities] to get employment opportunity. But not intellectual disabilities.”

(staff member of an employment agency)

Under its National Disability Strategic Plan (NDSP) 2019-2023, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has committed to reducing poverty amongst persons with disabilities through the promotion of decent work and the strengthening of career and business opportunities. The RGC aims to do so by encouraging employers to hire persons with disabilities through the quota system of employment, provision of reasonable accommodations and by matching persons with disabilities to available jobs.

Although there are few official numbers, the employment rate of persons with disabilities in general in Cambodia is low. The 2019 census states that only 29.9 percent of persons with any disability in Cambodia that started primary school have completed it, and only 36.6% percent of those with a moderate disability are employed¹ (National Institute of Statistics, 2020). A study in Pursat in 2020 notes that only 38% of men and 32% of women with disabilities state that they have an occupation; with most of them indicating that they are farmers or laborers (Light for the World & Disability Development Services Program, 2020)

Very few of those earning an income are persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Around the world, people with intellectual disabilities have low rates of employment, and particularly low rates of employment in open employment². However, evidence shows that, with the right support, people with intellectual disabilities *can* be employed (Wilson & Campain, 2020). Being employed is important, not only because of the income it brings, but also because “being employed means being committed to participation in an activity, fellowship with others and an occupational identity” (Boman et al., 2015, p. 117).

Steps are being taken within the country to increase the opportunities for persons with disabilities to earn an income. The RGC has adopted a quota system for the employment of persons with disabilities – requiring government agencies to achieve a quota of 2% staff members with disabilities and business 1% -. In addition, government commitments and policies demonstrate that the government increasingly feels accountable for the employment of persons with disabilities. The government established the National Inclusive Employment Forum Committee in 2021, which brings together private and public sector partners and serves as a platform to promote best practices and challenges on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment. The Ministry of Labor’s National Employment Agency (NEA) has also been set up, providing services such as pre-employment training and job fairs for job seekers with disabilities. Large development programmes, such as the Australian-funded ACCESS³ programme, as well as smaller non-governmental organizations, are setting up

¹ Including own account workers and unpaid family workers.

² Open employment is salaried employment without any special considerations and through open competition. For a person with a disability this would mean being engaged in the mainstream workforce alongside individuals without disabilities.

³ Australia-Cambodia Cooperation for Equitable Sustainable Services

interventions for persons with disabilities, focusing on, amongst others, increased provision of economic opportunities. Anecdotal evidence, however, demonstrates that persons with intellectual and development disabilities are not taking part in the move into employment for persons with disabilities.

This review was therefore carried out to provide a first insight:

- What is the current situation with regards to employment for persons with intellectual and development disabilities in Cambodia?
- What steps could be taken to improve access to employment for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Cambodia?

Methodology

As a first step, a literature search was carried out, covering both academic and grey literature. The initial search focused on employment for persons with intellectual disabilities in Cambodia; this was later broadened to include other Asian countries and global literature. We searched for literature in online as well in Web of Science and other academic platforms, and searched the websites of relevant nongovernmental organisations and knowledge sharing platforms such as Source, Workability Asia and Zero Project.

Second, a survey was set out amongst non-governmental organisations in Cambodia who work on the training and employment of persons with disabilities. The survey asked respondents – all staff working in non-governmental organisations focused on persons with disabilities and education and employment - about their experience with employment for persons with intellectual disabilities, and what did and did not work in their case. 13 persons from 11 organisations responded to the survey. Semi-structured interviews were held with four key informants from non-governmental organisations working on employment for persons with (intellectual) disabilities. Interviewees shared their experience on the transition to employment for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual and developmental disabilities in Cambodia

Data on disability prevalence in Cambodia varies between sources. The 2014 Demographic and Health Survey states the prevalence as being 10% of the population (National Institute of Statistics et al., 2015). The 2019-2023 NDSP states the prevalence as being 4%, or 524,000 people (National Disability Strategic Plan 2019-2023, 2019); the 2021 Demographic and Health survey gives a prevalence of 21% (National Institute of Statistics, 2023). Data on disability is considered unreliable, as different tools are used each time, and are expected to underestimate the number of persons with disabilities in the country (Hayes & Bulat, 2018).

There is even less data on intellectual and developmental disabilities in Cambodia. The DHS does not provide further information on intellectual disability, nor does the NDSP or the census. A 2014 study gives a prevalence of 5.48% cognitive disabilities amongst children 2-9 years old (Evans et al., 2014).

Collecting data and information is difficult because of a lack of understanding on what intellectual disability is, and a general confusion between developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, intellectual disability and mental health disabilities (Cordier, 2014). Carter, in her research, reports how persons with cerebral palsy were automatically listed as having a mobility impairment, and that the distinction between mental and intellectual disabilities is not clear to many (Carter, 2008).

“staff had absolutely no understanding of what characterizes an intellectual disability. As a result, all beneficiaries with mental impairments were listed as having cerebral palsy, regardless of whether they had any physical impairment.”

(Carter, 2008, p. 39)

This is still often the case many years later, as stated in a 2022 report on autism in Cambodia: “parents were confused about the nature of the disability and whether their child with autism was similar to others categorized as disabled” (DAC & ACCESS, 2022, p. 26).

Due to a lack of services in the country, many children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not detected, referred and diagnosed. Even when there is a diagnosis, parents and other community members may still not have an understanding of what that diagnosis means (Carter, 2008; DAC & ACCESS, 2022; Evans et al., 2014). As there is little data and information, intellectual and development disabilities are underestimated and misunderstood, and therefore often invisible in the work that is happening with regards to the inclusion of persons with disabilities (Cordier, 2014).

What are developmental disabilities?

Developmental disabilities are “a range of conditions that affect physical and/or mental functioning” (Damar Services Inc., 2022). This can be an intellectual impairment, a physical impairment, or both. Developmental disabilities are present at birth and expected to be lifelong. Developmental

disabilities are identified when children do not reach the expected developmental milestones for their age. Some examples of developmental disabilities are autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities or ADHD (Institute on Community Integration, n.d.).

What is intellectual disability?

An intellectual disability is a disorder which originates at birth, which includes impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning. Intellectual functioning includes the ability to learn, reason and problem solve; adaptive functioning includes the social and practical life skills performed during everyday lives. (Institute on Community Integration, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2022)

Employment for persons with intellectual disabilities – what could it look like?

As intellectual and developmental disabilities are often misunderstood, it is also often not clear what employment, or income generation, could look like for persons with these types of impairments. There are a variety of employment options for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mainly divided into two groups: those where people with disabilities work in a segregated environment with other people with disabilities (alternative employment, in the terminology used by the RGC), and those where they work in an integrated or inclusive environment. In this section, we will give an overview of the employment options, as defined by Parmenter (Parmenter, 2011). Where available, we give examples of such types of employment in Cambodia.

Open Employment

Open employment is when an employee is engaged in a paid job of their choice in the community. This means salaried employment, on a same level as persons without disabilities, without any special considerations and through open competition. For a person with a disability this would mean being engaged in the mainstream workforce alongside individuals without disabilities.

Example of open employment

Restaurant work

A restaurant owner hires an individual with intellectual disabilities to work at her restaurant. His job is to clean the bathroom and look after the customers' motorcycles.

Day programmes/centers:

Traditionally, day programmes or centres are segregated and centre-based. They offer occupational therapy-based activities focusing on life skills and activities such as crafts and outings. Day centres also function as respite for caregivers.

Sheltered workshops:

Sheltered workshops are often segregated facilities established for people considered unable or unlikely to obtain or retain a job in the open labour market. The workers engage in some form of work to cover costs, generally earning some form of minimal wages (or not).

Example of sheltered employment

Paper bag development

Young adults with intellectual disabilities work together to create paper bags in the Rabbit School center in Phnom Penh. The paper bags are made to order for companies in the city. The young adults keep 70% of the earnings; 30% goes to Rabbit School to pay for the programme. The programme still needs external funding to stay open.

Supported employment:

Supported employment consists of an individual engaging in competitive work in integrated settings, with ongoing support. Supported employment can be broken down into four models.

- Supported jobs model:
Involves a 'place and train' approach. Job coaches work with potential employees to identify interests and skills. A job is found and the employee is placed, where necessary the employer makes reasonable accommodations and a mentor (or the job coach) provides ongoing support and training.

Example of supported jobs model

Hostel staff

Rabbit School students would work at hostels and restaurants, such as a hostel in Phnom Penh. Co-workers at the hostel were trained on how to work with persons with intellectual disabilities, and would provide daily support to the students. Rabbit school would provide regular follow up with the employer and the parent. Students receive a salary, generally a percentage (e.g. 80%) of what other staff members make.

- Enclave model: a group of people with disabilities who are trained and supervised work among workers who do not have a disability, usually in an industrial or commercial environment. Often paid at a level adjusted to productive capacity; wages are often paid by the sheltered workshop. On-going support can be provided by a job coach, or by natural supports from within the company.
- Mobile crew model: This model is a combination of service and business. It may consist of a crew of five people with disabilities working from a van, rather than a building, performing service jobs in community settings. Examples can be window cleaning or lawn cutting. Like with the enclave model, wages are often at the level of a sheltered workshop.

Example of mobile crew model

Cleaning team

In the past, Rabbit School had a mobile crew doing cleaning work in Phnom Penh. Four or five students, accompanied by a teacher and a driver, would go around the city and clean expat houses.

Customized employment:

This model embraces a 'person-centred' approach, beginning with the person's needs, aspirations, talents and skills. It focuses on what the person with disability can offer the labour market. Potential employers are then contacted with this offer. With customized employment, the job seeker *and* the employer work together to create a specific job description to match the requirements of both (Wilson & Campaign, 2020). Job carving, job negotiation, job creation and job sharing are strategies that can be used within customized employment.

Self-employment / micro-enterprise:

Self-employment, self-directed businesses or micro-enterprises, are small business centered around one person. In the case of persons with intellectual disabilities, it is not unusual for someone, often a family member, to provide a supportive role. Businesses are set up around the interests and abilities of the individual with intellectual disabilities. Some businesses may generate enough income to make a full wage; in other cases individuals are happy enough to simply keep busy (Wilson & Campaign, 2020).

Example of self-employment

Laundry shop

Together with her mother, a women with a mild intellectual impairment sets up a laundry shop at home. Doing the laundry fits with her skills and abilities; her mother supports her where necessary.

Social firms:

Social enterprises are businesses which trade for a social or environmental purpose, with the profits being reinvested into the company to help them achieve this purpose. The specific social purpose of social firms is to create jobs for people who find it hardest to get them.

EXAMPLE

20-year old Leang Huy is a full-time staff member at King Kids School in Phnom Penh. He has an intellectual disability, and attended vocational training at Rabbit School before starting an internship at the school. He is responsible for gardening, cleaning, looking after the students and sometimes even helping the teachers in the classroom.

Initially, his supervisor had low expectations of Leang Huy. She had to repeat instructions, he wouldn't cooperate, and he didn't always want to work. After working together for a while, she learned how to communicate better with him: repeating instructions, staying patient, building up a relationship and learning what he likes and doesn't like. Since then, their working relationship and his work has improved. He understands more, and is great at routine jobs.

Key learnings regarding employment and income generation for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Cambodia

There are only a handful of initiatives in Cambodia working on access to employment for individuals with intellectual and development disabilities. These initiatives are mostly run by non-governmental organisations. The initiatives that have worked on inclusive employment have worked on vocational training, (life) skills development, awareness raising within the community, job matching and coaching, and the provision of employment through the NGO's own organization (e.g. within the organization itself, or within a social enterprise set up by the organization). The numbers are small; on average, initiatives on employment support between 2 and 15 individuals with intellectual disabilities. Most said that they considered their activities to be unsuccessful so far, due to a lack of support budget and staff, interest from employers, and the inability to place individuals in workplaces without family or other support. The organisations are proud of the skills that their youth have gained, the fact that the youth are invested and trying their best to learn, and the people they have been able to provide with employment and that have been able to demonstrate their abilities. The recent pandemic has, of course, created difficulties with youth being let go and programmes closing. However, the pandemic is not the only reason why it has, so far, been difficult to find – and keep – employment for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In this section we summarize the experience of these initiatives, and what they consider to be the difficulties, and the positive actions, in arranging employment.

Individuals do not have the pre-requisite skills to enter into a form of employment

As noted, there are only very few organisations in Cambodia that provide services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Services, including rehabilitation services, respite care, education and training, are few and far between, with many focused within the large urban centres. Besides the fact that there are few services available, persons with disabilities in many cases are not able to access them because of the cost related to transport, materials, or in some cases – like private schools and therapies – the cost of the services themselves (DAC & ACCESS, 2022) (NGO staff member, interview). This also means that, where they are available, persons with disabilities and their families need to know about the services. However, poor families are less likely to access such information (DAC & ACCESS, 2022) (NGO staff member, interview.), or even if they do have the information, have the resources necessary to attend and make use of the services.

People with disabilities, and people with intellectual disabilities more so, also have difficulty entering and completing an education (Cambodian Disabled People's Organization, 2013; Ta & Leng, 2013). Research states that 52% of children with disabilities in Cambodia are not enrolled or have dropped out of school; those with intellectual or multiple disabilities are most likely not to enroll in school (Hayes & Bulat, 2018). There is only one school for children with (severe) intellectual disabilities and it is located in Phnom Penh (Kalyanpur, 2018). Multiple respondents to our survey indicated that persons with intellectual disabilities have limited skills and education, and would need to first gain access to basic education (NGO respondents, survey).

Historically, children with disabilities in Cambodia have had little opportunities to access education, with little support being available in mainstream education and the country only having a limited number of special education schools (Cambodian Disabled People's Organization, 2013; Kalyanpur, 2018). There are improvements, such as the transfer of a number of special education schools to the government in recent years, such as the five Krousar Thmey schools for deaf and blind in 2019 and the Hands of Hope autism school in 2021. Educational provision to children with intellectual and developmental disabilities is still very low, with mainstream schools being ill-equipped and special schools being few and far between, or being private schools which means only the wealthy families can access their services (DAC & ACCESS, 2022).

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are most likely not to have had a diagnosis or otherwise acknowledgement of their support needs, not have had access to early intervention programmes and therapies, and most often have not been able to access (inclusive) education or other programmes to develop life skills or activities of daily living. As noted by the NGOs, this means that persons with intellectual disabilities often are not trained enough to be able to gain employment. It is not simply the lack of academic skills – as there are enough jobs and tasks that individuals are able to take on without having basic literacy or numeracy skills. But development needs of persons with intellectual disabilities in general are often ignored throughout their developmental years, meaning that they do not have the life skills, daily living skills and/or academic skills necessary to transition into a form of employment when they reach the age of adulthood.

Initiatives on employment are too little; too small

The NGOs noted that the few initiatives that did exist on employment, training and income generation for persons with intellectual disabilities are too small scale, and there are too few of them. Most stated that they were able to support only a handful of individuals. In addition, NGO staff said that placement of individuals with intellectual disabilities within companies was dependent on personal contacts and individual advocacy. This severely limits the amount of individuals that can enter into employment through NGO programmes.

Families are often not supportive of their family members with a disability

Families in Cambodia are often not understanding and supportive of employment for their family member with an intellectual disability. NGOs indicated that lack of motivation, commitment and support from the family was one of the reasons that employment opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities were not successful. And employment does not work if there is “less motivation from the family members” (NGO respondent, interview).

Family members and caregivers often have low expectations of the person with an intellectual disability. Parents may be concerned for their child's safety and wellbeing, overprotective, or simply believe that their child does not have the capacity to be employed (Wilson & Campain, 2020). Parents of children with disabilities in Cambodia believed that their children with disabilities would not benefit or succeed in school and therefore did not send them (Evans et al., 2014); this is likely to be even more so for children with intellectual or development disabilities. In a 2012 study, interviewed caregivers stated that they had “never tried to find a paid job for their young adults with intellectual disabilities” (Aide et Action International, 2012).

Family support is essential not only to motivate the person with intellectual disability, but also to ensure that they get the right information and experiences: if parents are equipped with knowledge

about where to get employment, training and work experience they can arrange that for their family member (Wilson & Campaign, 2020). In addition, family support is also needed in the more practical ways, such as supporting their child to get to their job and back home if they cannot travel independently (NGO staff member, interview), or for supporting their child in taking up tasks in the community.

“The family have problems with transport. Some children can go to the place themselves, but some need support from their parents. [...] Sometimes the parents are busy. Parents have other commitments.” (NGO staff member, interview)

Families need stable finances to be able to invest in their family member

An important step in working towards employment for an individual with intellectual or developmental disabilities is to get their family and/or caregivers onboard and involved. However, in Cambodia, persons with disabilities and their families are often poor and have difficult financial situations. Having a child or family member with a disability increases costs, such as for medicines or therapies, and also present an opportunity cost – family members need to take care of their family member with a disability and are therefore not able to take part in income-generating activities⁴ (Cordier, 2014) (DPO director). As a result, families choose not to or simply are not able to attend or partake in services for children with disabilities, such as rehabilitation services or education, or may even leave their child alone when they need to work, despite the negative developmental consequences of doing so: difficult decisions need to be made to support the family (Cordier, 2014; DAC & ACCESS, 2022). Caregivers, often the mothers, are usually overburdened and, despite their best intentions, limited in their possibilities. If caregivers or parents are expected to be involved in the training or employment of their children, then they first need to have the time, money and space to ensure their own basic needs.

“Until parents can ensure that the family will have food, water and shelter, caring for a child with a disability is not a priority.” (Carter, 2008)

Companies do not know how to be accepting of persons with intellectual disabilities

Many of the current initiatives indicated that lack of awareness and interest of employers to hire persons with disabilities, and persons with intellectual disabilities specifically, was a major barrier to employment. NGO staff stated that employers would not want persons with intellectual disabilities to be their employees as this might hurt their reputation, or because of the belief that persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities cannot work (NGO respondents, survey). A 2012 study indicated that interviewed employers “appeared to have fairly stereotypical information/understandings on intellectual disabilities, describing people with intellectual disabilities as stupid, talkative and speaking or acting without responsibility” (Aide et Action International, 2012, p. 25).

⁴ 2016 research concludes that the median cost associated with having a disabled family member in Cambodia is 38 USD per month, with only 4% of households with a disabled family member receiving a government payment, the majority of whom whose family member with a disability was of retirement age (Palmer et al., 2016).

Employers do not have realistic expectations of employees with disabilities

NGO staff mentioned that when employers *did* hire individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the experience was not always successful because they were not happy with the work delivered or found that the employees were not able to match the speed they had expected. This could indicate that employers are not aware of what intellectual and developmental disability entails, may have been promised too much by job matching programmes, and may not be aware of what jobs are or are not suitable for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Employment programmes and support services lack (long-term) funding

In Cambodia, a lot of programs are (still) donor-driven, focused on clear deliverables and finite projects (Carter, 2008). Donors are often aiming for quick results, and therefore not so focused on providing long-term and structural support to NGOs working with persons with intellectual disabilities (NGO staff member, interview). But most of the service providers for persons with intellectual disabilities are NGOs, and therefore struggling with keeping activities such as day-care centres, training programmes and job-coaching open for the long run.

There is currently too little funding available for programmes focused on employment for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and where funding is available it is often (too) short term and unstable. There is also no or little financial support to fund, for example, transportation costs or support assistance.

There is currently too little long-term planning to support meaningful employment or income generation for persons with intellectual disabilities

Programmes that work with youth and adults with intellectual disabilities are not easy programmes, and can take a long time to show results. However, in line with the point above, many of the current initiatives in Cambodia aiming for employment of persons with intellectual disabilities are donor-funded and project-based. This means that initiatives are ad-hoc and subject to closure once funding or support stops. NGOs indicate that learning new skills for persons with intellectual disabilities can take a long time, with continuous repetition being necessary. Long-term planning is necessary to understand how youth transition from pre-vocational training, to training, to employment, and to understand how they can be included in the pathways that already exist.

“NGOs want quick results. But we are looking long term. So that is a bit of our issue.” (staff member NGO, interview)

Recommendations towards employment for persons with intellectual disabilities

The above section narrates several factors that make it more difficult for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Cambodia to transition into employment. So what does this mean for the Cambodian government and other parties who are invested in ensuring that *all* persons in Cambodia, including persons with disabilities, can enter into a form of employment?

Invest in early intervention and (inclusive) education

One of the main facilitators to (open) employment is the completion of (secondary) school (Park & Park, 2021; Wilson & Campain, 2020). The same goes for early intervention (that is all services and support for babies and children with developmental delays) which can significantly impact a child's ability to learn new skills. Working with government, service providers and schools to ensure that children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are able to access and benefit from early intervention and education services, would increase the possibilities for employment as these children become adults.

Ensure that families of persons with disabilities are adequately supported and able to meet their basic needs

Parents and caregivers are the first support and gatekeeper for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. An important step would be to ensure that they believe that their child is capable – with the right supports – of being an active part of the household and the community, and subsequently of taking steps towards employment. Families and caregivers need to be onboard and involved in any steps their disabled family member takes towards employment. They also need to have the stability to invest in their family member. Support services are needed for families, to provide them with the energy and resources necessary to take care of and support their family member with a disability. This could be in the form of respite care, whether formal or community based, which give families time to earn an income, or financial support such as disability allowances.

Keep raising awareness amongst (potential) employers and customers – but be realistic

Raising awareness among employers about the capabilities and possibilities of persons with disabilities is a first step in getting them on board with hiring persons with disabilities. Making personal connections with companies and appealing with them on a personal level seems to be the best approach (Aide et Action International, 2012) (NGO staff, interview). Companies should not simply be informed about the need and possibilities of hiring persons with intellectual disabilities, but can best be supported – for example by taking them to see other companies who have hired persons with disabilities and learning from them, and by demonstrating how they can break down tasks in their work flow to create appropriate work assignments for persons with intellectual disabilities (i.e. job carving).

“Personal contact is very important. You need staff there who want to help and take care of [the employees with intellectual disabilities]. They feel they want to contribute to social development, that is very good. So we do more awareness raising amongst companies and in society.” (respondent 2, 2022)

When raising awareness, it is tempting to elaborate on the benefits. But employers need to be honestly informed that persons with intellectual disabilities may need more support, may not be able to work as independently as others, and may not work with the same speed as others. This prevents disappointment and disengagement in the future.

Develop and invest in programmes with long-term vision, and provide the funding to go along with it

Employment for youth with intellectual disabilities will not be solved through short programmes, but require a long term vision. Government and donors should develop a vision for training and employment of individuals with disabilities, and plan for long-term funding to go along with the vision. Plan for a pathway to work, including transition into and out of school, work experience and training opportunities, and long-term support where needed once an individual enters employment.

Think through support systems for persons with disabilities in employment

“Persons with intellectual disability are kind and honest workers, but they need some support from team work or other staff support during work.” (survey respondent, 2022)

Once persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities have started employment, support is needed to help them maintain their employment. Support can be a variety of things, ranging from having colleagues in the workplace that they can turn to for help to having a job coach come by their work place, or having family support. Practical help in the workplace is needed to “learn how to do new tasks, complete tasks and gain assistance with difficult tasks” (Meltzer et al., 2016, p. 23). People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may have a variety of support needs, ranging from needing motivation to work harder, support as they cannot work independently or guidance to stay focused on the task at hand.

Multiple survey respondents mentioned that having access to support was crucial. Companies mentioned being more likely to hire individuals with intellectual disabilities if they knew that someone would be available to support the individual with intellectual disabilities (Aide et Action International, 2012). To help individuals gain and maintain employment, it would be useful to think about support needs ahead of time: who will provide support, what is their role, and, if the support is external, such as an NGO job coach, how long will the support be provided for.

Focus training on independent life skills and specific work-related skills

Several survey respondents thought that training persons with intellectual disabilities on specific skills, both independent living skills and specific work related skills, would be beneficial to employment. Focusing on which skills would be needed to make individuals independent and employable, could be the most efficient use of time (Carter, 2008). Research shows that employment opportunities were higher for individuals with occupational skills (Park & Park, 2021). In addition, learning basic independent living skills and/or household skills can alleviate the burden for the care givers (Cordier, 2014), providing care givers more time to earn an income and/or more positive energy to support their family member with an intellectual disability.

The traditional route to skilling for employment is a train-then-place model, a system whereby individuals are trained by following (vocational) courses until considered ready for work. However, “many young people with intellectual disability can struggle with classroom-based vocational training, and learn better through practical, hands-on experience” (Wilson & Campain, 2020, p. 42). In addition, persons with intellectual disabilities may struggle with transferring generic skills learned in the classroom to the workplace. For them, a place-then-train model might be a better fit. This fits with the above point of focusing on teaching someone the specific skills they need for a specific job at a specific employer.

Increase sharing of success stories

Seeing and hearing about positive examples, and sharing learning from them, can take away fears, demonstrate what is possible, and motivate families and employers to invest in employment for persons with intellectual disabilities. Although initiatives in Cambodia are scattered and small-scale, this study has shown that there are many invested individuals and organisations who are working hard to ensure that persons with intellectual disabilities in Cambodia can work and be part of society. Sharing their stories, encouraging exposure visits and setting up platforms for good practice exchanges can be a start in demonstrating that it is possible!

Encourage income generating activities and community participation

This study is focused on the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in employment in Cambodia. However, the purpose of employment is not simply to be on the payroll, but to be involved and included in the community, to contribute to household activities and to generate a bit of income. Formal employment is not the only way to achieve this goal. A first and more simple step can be to simply encourage and support the inclusion and involvement of persons with disabilities in household tasks and income generating activities in the community.

Conclusion

Employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is not just about an earning an income. It is, of course, partly. In the successful cases where persons with intellectual disabilities have brought home an income, this has of course improved the economic situation of their family and household. But it goes further. It is also about being accepted and being valued, and feeling of value to the family and the community.

Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve to be accepted and valued. They deserve the opportunity to participate in community life. In this study we have looked at what steps can be taken to ensure that persons with intellectual and development disabilities in Cambodia can successfully transition into employment as they enter into adulthood. Although it may be daunting, we encourage government, the private sector, development organisations and families to start taking action, so that all individuals in Cambodia may find themselves in a position where they are accepted and of value.

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