



**THE MODEL OF  
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT  
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  
DEVELOPED BY THE LIFE PROGRAM**

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The opinions expressed in the Report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of US Government, USAID and Save the Children.

## **EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN ARMENIA: NEEDS AND BARRIERS**

### **REPORT ON QUALITATIVE STUDY FINDINGS**

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## List of Acronyms

CBWG - Capacity Building Working Group  
CDPF – Civic Development and Partnership Foundation  
CWG - Coordination Working Groups  
DPO - Disabled People Organization  
DPON - DPO Network  
EC - Employment Center  
GoA – Government of Armenia  
HDPF - *Human Dignity and Peace* Foundation  
HR - Human Resource  
IPDP - Individual Professional Development Plan  
ISSC - Integrated Social Services Center  
JC -Job Coaches  
LIFE - Save the Children *Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment for People with Disabilities* Program  
MAST - Manual Ability Scanning Test  
MCPO - Methodological Center for Professional Orientation under the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues  
ME&S - Ministry of Education and Science  
MLSI - Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of Armenia  
MSEA- Medical-Social Expertise Agency under the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues  
MTM - Method-Time-Measurement system  
NCVETD - National Center for Vocational Education and Training Development  
NGO - Non-Governmental Organization  
PCG - Parents/Children Groups  
POP - Public Opinion Poll  
POWRC/PWD - Professional Orientation and Work Rehabilitation Center for People with Disabilities  
PSA – Public Service Announcement  
PWDs - People with Disabilities  
SC - Save the Children  
SEA - State Employment Agency under the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues  
SEA MT – State Employment Agency’s Master Trainers  
SWOT –Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis  
TOT – Training of Trainers  
TVET - Technical Vocational Education and Training institutions  
TWG - Technical Working Group  
UTE - Union of Information Technology Enterprises  
WRLST - *Work Readiness and Life Skills* Training  
USAID - United States Agency for International Development

## INTRODUCTION

The *Model of Vocational Education and Employment for PWDs* (hereinafter the Model) was developed, tested and used during the Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment (LIFE) for People with Disabilities Program (2012-2016) implemented by Save the Children with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development ( USAID) . The *raison d'être* of the application of the Model is to promote social inclusion and integration of people with disabilities (PWDs). The underlying principles of the Model are equality and social inclusion through vocational education and employment. The Model has been a key tool for attaining the LIFE Program's goal of promoting equal employment opportunities and access to employment as a basic human right for PWDs.

The gradual development of the Model relied heavily on learning from experience and on feedback from main stakeholders and was grounded in the underlying philosophy of the LIFE Program of bridging the earlier gap between theory and practice in the field and of making sure that the resulting model of PWDs' labor market integration and social inclusion is **evidence-based, functional, efficient** and **replicable**.

It is a strategic Model because of its goal, objectives, range and scale of activities, implications and expected outcomes and because it is a game-changer in the sense that it contributed to introduction and routinization of practices that reflect a new paradigm and conceptual framework for PWDs' full-fledged integration into vocational education as well as into employment and the society.

Since independence, the Armenian Government has made conscious and consistent efforts to improve the socioeconomic status of PWDs as one of the most vulnerable groups of the Armenian society and, to some extent, the infrastructure that facilitates PWDs' social integration and gives them a better opportunity to attain a productive and decent life. However, discrimination against PWDs has not been completely eliminated yet, the scope of services provided to PWDs is not sufficiently extensive and PWDs' knowledge and awareness of their rights and opportunities and access to relevant information remain limited. The Government policy is still focused primarily on social protection of PWDs, even though it has been moving (albeit slowly) from the "medical" to "social" model of disability and trying to better integrate PWDs into the society. Policy-driven innovations encounter numerous challenges ranging from financial constraints to institutional inertia to tenacity of traditional mentality and practices. Therefore, it is not surprising that while

important, focused and valuable, many Government interventions are still isolated, limited in scope and scale and have yet to become a factor of significant impact despite the considerable financial support and technical assistance provided by bilateral and multilateral international donors to reform efforts.

While nothing short of a paradigm shift can bring about a dramatic change in the social standing and socioeconomic status of PWDs in the Armenian society based on their integration and full and meaningful participation in all spheres of public life, including their economic empowerment, the LIFE Program pursues realistic, more modest but still ambitious goals. Since gainful employment is a prerequisite for becoming a productive member of the society and for securing a decent life, it is only natural that the development and application of a model that would improve PWD chances to obtain relevant skills and qualifications, to be competitive on the labor market and to get and keep jobs became a centerpiece of the LIFE Program.

In developing its Model, the SC LIFE Program proceeded from the realization that to enable PWDs' smooth transition to supported and/or open employment in a competitive labor market an efficient model has to be *integrative* and *comprehensive* and to incorporate the *holistic* approach.

In conformity with the international and nationally recognized and promoted human rights-based disability policy the Model operationalizes the tenet that PWDs are entitled to the same political, economic, civil, social, cultural and educational rights as and on an equal basis with nondisabled persons.

It embraces the idea of social, educational and professional inclusion of PWDs and for the most part discards (except few cases of extreme disability) the notion of segregation as counterproductive for the development of PWDs' social and professional skills, for boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem and for elimination of various barriers that PWDs face such as stereotypes and prejudice that fuel discrimination.

The use of the Model provides PWDs with more and better opportunities to live decent and productive lives and helps to combat manifest and latent discrimination through *support* to changes in the legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks and *reforms* of social security and Medical Social Expertise system, education and training, and employment sphere.

Furthermore, the Model stresses PWDs' involvement at all stages, including decision-making. Ideally, they are seen not merely as beneficiaries and passive recipients of services but as active participants. The rationale behind this approach is not confined to considerations of social justice and equity and to respect for human rights but also has solid grounds in prospects of building

strong and lasting motivation, releasing the hitherto untapped potential and using the human agency of an individual who is treated as an equal and whose choice, interests, views and inclinations are taken seriously.

At this stage, the Model developed by the SC LIFE Program understandably focuses primarily on a set of employment-related issues but it has a potential for subsequent expansion and possible transfer to other sectors and spheres. It is flexible enough to allow necessary modifications, provided its key features and underlying principles are retained.

At present the Model has two major components, viz. (i) *fostering inclusive vocational education* and (ii) *fostering integrated work environment*.

The *first component* encompasses professional orientation, provision of inclusive vocational education, career guidance mechanisms and internship opportunities, removal of psychological barriers and improvement of physical and cognitive learning environments in TVET institutions.

The *second component* focuses on securing an enabling legal environment, on promoting equal access to open employment, accessibility of public-sector workplaces and supported employment programs for PWDs, on raising awareness of employers and on providing job placement and post-placement support to PWDs.

While the elements of the two components are not necessarily strictly consecutive or successive (as some of them may overlap or go hand in hand) and would defy attempts at placing them in a neat flowchart or a logframe matrix, there is, nevertheless, certain logical sequence of both the components and their elements.

Thus, the Model developed and implemented by the SC LIFE Program is represented by the following diagram:

## **(i) FOSTERING INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION**

### **Support to Professional Orientation for PWD<sup>1</sup>, through**

- *Organization of parents/children groups in boarding/ special schools<sup>2</sup>*
- *Organization of awareness raising meetings with PWD in communities*

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<sup>1</sup> These are core sections of the Model in question. While they can be modified to some extent and while they are not placed in any particular order, in their entirety they make up the Model.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the Sections, the subsections can vary to a much more considerable extent. Some of them can be replaced, new ones can be added and the scope of the remaining ones can be changed thereby ensuring flexibility, adaptability and, hence, viability and effectiveness of the Model.

**Improvement of TVET Physical and Cognitive Learning Environments to Integrate PWDs, through**

- *Improvement of physical accessibility of TVETs*
- *Capacity building of TVET teachers and staff*
- *Development of an adapted methodology, curricula, supporting materials and teachers' guides*

**Elimination of Psychological Barriers, through**

- *Psychological consultation to PWD and their parents,*
- *Cultivation of positive attitude of non-disabled students and staff of TVETs*

**Development of Career Guidance Mechanisms that will offer youth with disabilities appropriate choices, including**

- *individualized assessments of students' skills, employability and*
- *proactive guidance (professional orientation)*
- *development of instructive materials on career development;*

**Provision of Vocational Education at TVET**

- *support to organization of the long term education*
- *support to organization of the short term education*

**Internship for PWD**

- *supported internship in corresponding field*

**(ii) FOSTERING INTEGRATED WORK ENVIRONMENT**

**Promotion of equal access for persons with disabilities in the open labor market, through**

- *Provision of Work Readiness and Life Skills training for PWD*
- *Support to Registration at the Employment Centers*
- *Support for participation in Job fairs*
- *Organization of Job fairs in cooperation with the State Employment Agency*

**Awareness-raising among public/private employers of their duty to employ persons with disabilities and to provide reasonable accommodation, through**

- *Organization of Round table discussions with employers and representatives of business community*
- *Training for Human Resource specialists*
- *Dissemination of special booklets and leaflet on PWD employment rights and capabilities*
- *Dissemination of information on state programs in support of PWD employment*

**Ensuring accessibility of public- and private sector workplaces for persons with disabilities, through**

- *Development of instructive materials on PWD employment peculiarities*
- *Development of instructive materials on work place adaptation*
- *Organization of “public demand” actions*

#### **Building capacities of service provider organizations, through**

- *Training for State Employment Agency staff*
- *Training for Medical Social Expertise Agency staff*
- *Training for Integrated Social Service Centers staff*
- *Training for Social workers*
- *Training for NGOs working in the field*

#### **Enabling legal environment, through**

- *Enacting legislation prohibiting disability-based discrimination in the area of work and employment*
- *Enacting legislation promoting the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation*
- *Promoting adoption of positive measures to increase employment of PWD*

#### **Support "supported employment" programs which involves on-the-job training in a regular workplace, through**

- *Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with NGOs*
- *Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with business structures*
- *Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with municipalities*
- *Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with TVETs*

#### **Job placement of PWDs, through**

- *Individual meetings with employers*
- *Correspondence with employers*
- *Activation of Job clubs at Employment centers*

#### **Post placement support to PWDs, through**

- *Coaching services for PWDs (within the framework of the state program)*
- *Psychological support for PWDs*
- *Mentoring*

### **(iii) RESEARCH**

- **Public opinion polls**
- **Survey among PWDs and main service providers on PWD employment and vocational education issues**
- **Assessment and documentation of experience, initiatives and innovations**

# CHAPTER ONE. FOSTERING INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Now let us have a look at how, to what extent and with what results the normative ideal of this Model was applied during over a 4-year period of the SC LIFE Program implementation (2012-2016). It is advisable to follow the logic of the Model and review its components and elements in the order and sequence proposed by the Model.

## Section 1. Support to Professional Orientation for PWD

- *Professional orientation meetings and organization of parents/children groups in boarding, special and inclusive schools*
- *Organization of awareness raising meetings with youth with disabilities (YWDs) in communities*

In this Model, support to professional orientation for PWDs aims to facilitate transition of youth with disabilities from boarding/special or even inclusive schools to Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions or labor market. The support is provided through the above-mentioned 2 closely interrelated types of activities.

### **Organization of parents/children groups in boarding, special or inclusive schools**

Organization of parents/children groups (PCG) in boarding, special or inclusive schools sought to facilitate professional orientation and future employment of children with special learning needs, to raise those children's and their parents' awareness about the rights of children with disabilities and about issues of child safety and positive parenting and to ensure family support and understanding of children's expectations. While focus in a large number of series of meetings with those groups held by the SC staff and implementing partners (MLSI Methodological Center of Professional Orientation – MCPO of MLSI and some DPOs) was on a broad spectrum of children's rights, professional orientation issues figured prominently on the agenda.

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, professional orientation is important for identifying occupations that better match the interests, personality and abilities of adolescents with special learning needs (those are schoolchildren with mental or physical disabilities or somatic problems) and for subsequently providing more focused and better-targeted vocational training and education. The primary objective of professional orientation is to ascertain YWDs' interests and preferences, capabilities, capacity-development prospects and, thus, potential employability as well as to explore YWDs'

and their families' vision for their future, to present existing vocational education and labor market opportunities and to provide information and, if asked, advice and guidance, including the most appropriate areas for vocational education. Most importantly, the sessions provided an overview of practical steps to ensure disabled children's integration into vocational education and further involvement in the labor market and relevant information about availability of State-funded education opportunities and employment services. All sessions included professional orientation training program, which is based on comprehensive training modules (Professional Diagnostics - Determination of Employability, Information Provision, Provision of Professional Consultation and Professional Adaptation) adopted by MLSI.

Such meetings with YWDs and their parents in boarding schools in Yerevan and all regions were instrumental in raising PWD students' self-awareness, self-confidence and motivation to continue education in TVET institutions, in managing students' and their parents' expectations and in turning parents' perceptions of and attitudes towards prospects for their children's vocational education into more optimistic and positive thereby ensuring much-needed family support and encouragement.

To ensure success it is necessary to engage representatives of TVET institutions in this process since they have the required expertise and experience to guide the qualifying YWDs. This component of the Model can effectively provide career guidance services.

Collaboration also helps to better confront, if not offset, problems posed by, for instance, certain types of mental disabilities that significantly narrow down the available vocational education options and hinder or even hold back interaction and socializing with non-disabled peers.

Even though only a certain proportion of students with special learning needs are identified as qualifying candidates for vocational education, the efforts to discover and refer them to vocational education or training are worthwhile. An individual case is developed for each candidate. Some of them then enroll in TVET institutions, where they study on a long-term basis, while others take short-term vocational education courses.

Initially the methodology included discussions, presentations and drawing therapy. In addition, information about vocational education opportunities, including conditions and specific training courses in various TVET institutions was provided to students and their parents.

Subsequently, the MCPO revised and refined the methodology, developed didactic tools for professional orientation (including a specialty systematic selection test, which identifies the matching fields for an YWD, with each field encompassing a number of occupations, and

expedites a consistent and conscious career choice process) and designed an electronic test system to provide online access and make the testing process easier.

While being a standardized test, the tool is tailored to individual interests, needs and abilities of PWDs (including those with visual or hearing impairments) and can help *experts* to give a more specific advice and *individual YWDs* to make a sensible decision about the occupational field where they can best develop and use their potential.

At least 900 YWDs, 750 parents and 200 teachers, social workers, psychologists and EC staff members took part in professional orientation meetings. Over 500 of those YWDs subsequently enrolled in TVET institutions and many others took short-term vocational training courses.

### **Organization of awareness-raising meetings with youth with disabilities in communities**

Awareness-raising and professional orientation meetings for YWDs and their parents were held not only in boarding, special and inclusive schools but also in other venues in local communities in Yerevan and in all regions. Those were organized by the LIFE team and its partners (HDPF, *Full Life* and *Unison* DPOs) to discuss issues related to the inclusion of YWDs in vocational education and training programs, to engage YWDs and their parents in a dialogue with representatives of TVET institutions and Employment Centers (EC) so that all groups better know and understand each other and to support YWDs' transition from schools to vocational education and employment. Open and lively discussions revolved around such crucial issues as *reasons* for importance for YWDs to get vocational education and to enter the labor market; *labor market integration prospects* for YWDs that vocational education can improve; *availability of State-funded study opportunities* for some categories of PWDs and of State-funded employment services; how *strong partnerships* between YWDs and TVET institutions can be built; *what occupations* PWDs can be trained for; the extent to which the *learning environment* in TVET institutions is inclusive and how those institutions can *better integrate* YWDs.

In 2012-2016, at least 430 graduates of special and boarding schools and beneficiaries of partner NGOs, parents, teachers of special and boarding schools, and representatives of TVET institutions and ECs attended those meetings.

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\*

The role of PCG and other vocational orientation sessions as a venue for YWDs and their parents (as well as for the teaching staff of schools) to gain a new perspective on vocational education and subsequent employment opportunities should be emphasized and taken into account.

They not only support the YWDs' transition from schools to vocational education and eventually to the labor market but also help to ensure that the transition is smooth. They also have a potential to bridge a gap between adolescents with disabilities, their families and schools on the one hand and TVET institutions and Employment Centers on the other.

To better assess effectiveness and efficiency of professional orientation activities for YWDs it is advisable to include a mandatory monitoring component and to establish a tracking system to get a reliable data on how many YWDs who had taken part in professional orientation sessions were subsequently admitted to TVET institutions or took short-term occupational training courses, how many of them took the specialty systematic selection test and to what extent the results of the test matched the field of occupational studies they pursued in TVET institutions. These efforts can be complemented with quantitative and qualitative studies (including surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group and round table discussions, etc.) targeting YWDs, their parents, school teachers and staff of TVET institutions and Employment Centers.

## **Section 2. Improvement of TVET Physical and Cognitive Learning Environments to Integrate PWDs**

- *Improvement of physical accessibility of TVETs*
- *Capacity building of TVET teachers and staff*
- *Development of an adapted methodology, curricula, supporting materials and teachers' guides*

The next stage in the implementation of the Model is to ensure better access of PWDs to inclusive vocational training and professional rehabilitation in improved physical and cognitive learning environments. This ambitious goal can be achieved by undertaking the above-mentioned three types of activities. The objectives are closely interrelated, very often go hand in hand in real life situations and can be separated only for analytical purposes. They are meaningfully addressed through a comprehensive approach, as evidenced, for instance, by the LIFE Program's *Small Grants Program* that fostered vocational education by tackling in a systemic fashion the interconnected issues encompassing major aspects of the goal.

### **Improvement of physical accessibility of TVETs**

As regards improved physical accessibility of TVET institutions, the LIFE Program engaged as partners those institutions that either were already physically accessible to PWDs or were in the process of becoming such as a result of the institutions' or State policies or because they were motivated by prospects of collaboration with the LIFE Program. The LIFE team addressed the

issues of ensuring physical accessibility of buildings and of providing other support aids (special tools) for students with different types of disabilities. Thus, while involved in the construction works aimed to adapt the physical plant of only 10 TVET institutions to the PWD needs and to make it accessible to them, the LIFE Program, nevertheless, paid much attention to the issue and used various incentives to encourage the education institutions in question to ensure a PWD-friendly environment, including physical accessibility. As a result, 44 out of 90 existing TVET institutions initially became Program's partners and played an important role in promoting equal educational and employment opportunities for PWDs. That important role is reflected in the Model because physical accessibility of TVET institutions is a *sine qua non* for ensuring equal vocational education rights and opportunities to PWDs and is a first step in providing a friendly and enabling physical, learning and social environment to PWDs.

### **Capacity building of TVET teachers and staff**

Another important element of the Model that has a direct bearing on integration of YWDs in the vocational education institutional settings is an adequate capacity of administrative and teaching staff, including masters of vocational courses. In general, their professional training did not include knowledge and skills of interacting with and teaching PWDs. In the context of introduction of inclusive education, they found themselves tasked with improving a learning environment and establishing inclusive classes for YWDs thereby supporting YWDs' integration and promoting equality of opportunity for them. However, more often than not TVET institutions did not have an adequate capacity to do so and definitely needed technical assistance. Here was an entry point for the LIFE Program's intervention. First, it was necessary to map out a strategy and to formulate an Action Plan. The LIFE team conducted a situation analysis and needs assessment based on site visits and consultations with targeted TVET institutions and the ME&S National Center for Vocational Education and Training Development (NCVETD). The main goal of the assessment was to identify the level of teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusive education issues and of different teaching methods to support YWDs. A range of problems was discovered and it became clear that in order to meaningfully address them it was necessary to provide professional guidance and training to TVET teaching and administrative staff on how to interact with YWDs and their parents, including the use of appropriate vocabulary, to integrate YWDs through inclusive and enabling institutional and classroom environment and to provide them with psychological support. While the teaching and administrative staff of TVET institutions was on the whole aware of the existing significant physical, social, educational and health barriers for YWDs to vocational education, they had to be sensitized to the specific needs of YWDs and informed about the importance of *specific skills* in verbal and non-verbal communication with

persons with special educational needs, *inclusive environment*, *supportive atmosphere* in the classroom and in the institution and *attitudes* of empathy and acceptance. Thus, it is imperative to complement knowledge and skill transfer with an attitudinal change through awareness-raising. Based on the assessment results, a training course was developed reflecting the main principles of inclusive education in TVET sector that could support teaching staff in getting professional knowledge and developing capacities and skills in working effectively with persons with special educational needs.

Also required was information on the existing State programs and on the projects implemented by international organizations and domestic NGOs.

It is important to bear in mind that effective intervention is possible only if committed partners with an extensive expertise and experience in the field are brought on board. The LIFE team tapped into their expertise in a collaborative effort to undertake capacity development initiatives for teaching and administrative staff of TVET institutions by providing them with necessary knowledge and skills in the field of market-oriented inclusive vocational education for persons with special educational needs. It is essential to equip YWDs with such occupational and social skills and knowledge that will make them competitive in the labor market and enhance their employability. *Professional Education Reforms* NGO, *Pyunic* Association, *Tatev-95* Center, *Scarp* Health Center NGO and *Ughekits* Consulting and Training NGO helped to provide initial and follow-up training to the TVET staff. The LIFE team also drew on the expertise and experience of the partner DPOs and NGOs for producing a training manual for the teaching staff of TVET institutions<sup>3</sup>. The Manual was subsequently approved by the ME&S National Institute of Education. Based on the principles of inclusive education, tolerance-building and communication and usage of proper terminology acceptable to PWDs, the Manual has become a main document used in capacity-building training sessions and important source providing guidance and information to the teaching staff of TVET institutions.

A useful way to broaden the scope and scale of training in a shorter period of time, to ensure its more lasting effect in terms of strengthening an institutional capacity and to make intervention cost-effective is a ToT (training of trainers) methodology. This strategy, which was employed by the LIFE team and its partners, produced a considerable social and educational multiplier effect in the capacity development initiatives and is another value-added component of the Model.

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<sup>3</sup> *Manual for teachers working with students with disabilities at technical and vocational training institutions*. Yerevan: USAID & SCI, 2013. (There is also an Armenian version, the latest edition of which was issued in 2015).

Initially, in 2013-2014, the LIFE team and its partner DPOs and NGOs built capacity of 887 staff members of 44 TVET institutions in Yerevan and in 4 target regions (Ararat, Gegharkunik, Lori, and Shirak). Then, in 2015, they reached out to another 46 TVET institutions in Yerevan and in 6 new target regions (Aragatsotn, Kotayk, Armavir, Vayots Dzor, Syunik and Tavush), where they trained 254 staff members. Thus, in the course of the LIFE Program implementation the capacity of about 1,150 teaching and administrative staff members of 90 TVET institutions was developed for working with PWDs.

It is very hard to evaluate effectiveness of training because there are no indicators that would unequivocally measure the improved quality of PWDs' life, including more and better jobs, because there are many other factors at work, especially in the sphere of employment and labor market. However, a gradual but steady increase in the number of PWDs getting employment in recent years. At least about 550 among the Program's PWD beneficiaries got jobs. It is a clear indication that inclusive vocational education works and that TVET instructors are now better prepared to teach PWDs.

The process of capacity building of the TVET staff was closely monitored and regularly evaluated by the LIFE team. The team developed pre- and post-course evaluation forms and the training participants were asked to fill out the forms. The results of at least 3 evaluations conducted in 2013-2015 demonstrate that according to the participants the training was almost at maximum efficiency. On average, 90% of the respondents evaluated the course as relevant to their job and said that their expectations had been met. Over 95% intended to use the handouts and other materials, which had been distributed to them, while conducting inclusive classes for PWDs. On average, over 80% of the respondents regarded as satisfactory the teaching methodology, technical support of the training, and pace of the training.

### **Development of an adapted methodology, curricula, supporting materials and teachers' guides**

To provide efficient inclusive vocational education to youth with disabilities it is necessary to develop a new or adapt the existing package of relevant materials, including curricula, educational materials, teachers' guides and teaching methodology. Efforts made within the LIFE Program focused on adapting or developing new vocational programs that are in line with the market demand. The rationale behind those initiatives was to make sure that PWDs have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for successful transition into gainful employment.

All those activities were again undertaken in close collaboration with or on the initiative of partner DPOs and NGOs and participating TVET institutions. Thus, for example, in 2013, several course syllabi were developed taking into consideration the labor market demands and new inclusive classes were established that support PWDs' integration into vocational training and education.

*Meghvik* NGO in partnership with Gyumri-based *Kara-Murza* Musical College developed a Manual that aimed to build the institutional capacity of the College in providing inclusive vocational education of students with disabilities in the area of culture (music, theater, dancing, computer and music technology).

Yerevan State College of Informatics developed vocational education materials that provide guidance in *Web design by using HTML Code* and in *Computer Administration*. The materials can also be used to conduct distance training programs for PWDs.

In 2014, the LIFE Program came up with an ambitious initiative of developing an effective model for PWDs' integration into a creative and inclusive environment in the TVET system. The model is grounded in the comprehensive analysis of the experienced gained by the Program, partner DPOs and NGOs and TVET institutions as well as of legislative and regulatory frameworks and of the pending changes in them. According to the Program document, "the model proposes to invest efforts into the existing State-run systems and structures rather than to develop parallel or alternative solutions and systems. Moreover, the approach is fully in line with ongoing reforms and legislative changes – those which have already been made and those which are currently under review. This approach will ensure institutionalization of the proposed model and its long-lasting results."

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The implementation of this component of the Model shows the latter's considerable potential for dramatic changes in the TVET system that will open up new educational and employment prospects for PWDs due to the development and introduction of new educational programs that are attuned to the labor market demands, introduce inclusive classes supporting PWDs' integration into vocational education and improve learning environment for them and strengthen institutional capacity of the TVET system.

PWDs benefit from this stage in the Model implementation directly through improvement of physical as well as social and psychological accessibility of vocational education due to a large extent to institutional capacity building in the TVET system. These changes further empower

PWDs and give them a better chance of overcoming physical and social barriers and of more meaningful and active participation in economic, political and cultural life of the society.

### **Section 3. Elimination of Psychological Barriers**

- *Psychological consultation to PWD and their parents,*
- *Cultivation of positive attitude of non-disabled students and staff of TVET institutions*

#### **Psychological consultation to PWD and their parents**

People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups of the Armenian society. Stigmatization and discrimination have a strong impact on their social and psychological status. From the childhood and very first steps in their adult lives on, they encounter numerous obstacles caused by their physical/mental state that they are not always able to overcome. Unfavorable social and psychological conditions can give rise to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, fear, despair and depression and to other emotional problems. Consequently, some behavioral changes also take place (such as passivity, isolation, withdrawal, aggression, etc.). In addition, children with disabilities often lack proper communication skills, experience relationships problems and have low self-esteem and self-confidence. These are the features of the psychological status of young people with disabilities (YWDs) that create barriers for their wellbeing.

It is obvious that when YWDs encounter new challenges in their lives they are getting more anxious and vulnerable. Particularly, when in the last year of their study at special or boarding schools they are offered to continue their education at TVET institutions, they may experience fear, reluctance or resistance. In these situations, they need encouragement and sufficient support from their parents and teachers to rise to the challenge. However, often as a result of their wrong attitudes, lack of necessary communication skills or poor emotional state neither parents nor teachers are willing or able to encourage YWDs in an appropriate way.

The situation at TVET institutions is even more complicated as their staff has very limited experience in dealing with YWDs, is not familiar with YWDs' characteristic features and has poor communication skills to treat them in a positive way. Staff and non-disabled students often do not trust or respect YWDs. Their negative or non-appropriate attitude to and treatment of YWDs and, as a result, the lack of supportive and welcoming atmosphere and inclusive conditions create significant barriers for YWDs' vocational education and training.

If YWDs do not succeed in overcoming the above-mentioned barriers and in continuing their vocational education at TVET institutions, they have very limited opportunities and chances to get decent jobs. As a result, they may end up continuing to live their lives in isolated, marginalized

conditions. Because of the lack of a stable income, most of them experience financial difficulties, as their pension is the sole source for their livelihood.. In that situation they rely and depend on their parents' or other family members' income.

In order to help children and youth with disabilities enrolled in the boarding and special schools to overcome the constraints the LIFE program in cooperation with "Tatev-95" Psychological Support and Counseling Center NGO organized psychological counseling sessions and skills-enhancing interactive training sessions for groups of beneficiaries in boarding and special schools.

Overall, activities in boarding and special schools included the following:

- Training sessions for YWDs on personal development that aim to enhance self-esteem and to develop skills for proper communication, goal setting and action planning as well as stress management training to help them to identify the root causes of their stress and to cope with it;
- Training sessions for teachers on communication principles and the development of positive attitudes to YWDs as well as stress management training to help them to cope with their emotional problems;
- Training sessions for YWDs' parents to develop proper parenting and communication skills as well as stress management training to help them to cope with parenting-related difficulties;
- Individual counseling to YWDs to help them to overcome their emotional problems, to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence as well as to realize the importance of continuing their studies at TVET institutions.

### **Cultivation of positive attitude of non-disabled students and staff of TVET institutions**

Within the framework of this Model the cultivation of positive attitude of non-disabled students and staff of TVET institutions towards PWDs took the form of a series of trainings conducted for teaching staff and students from vocational institutions with a view to promoting inclusive education for PWDs.

The previous section<sup>4</sup> contained the description of training courses provided to teaching and administrative staff of TVET institutions to equip them with skills and knowledge on integration of PWDs, inclusive education and enabling environment for persons with special needs. The syllabi of the training courses contained a component that aimed to promote a positive attitude to PWD students through cultivation of tolerance, respect, acceptance and empathy. The training

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<sup>4</sup> Improvement of TVET Physical and Cognitive Learning Environments to Integrate PWDs

stressed the idea that the principle of inclusive education is more than merely bringing PWDs to TVET institutions and adjusting teaching methodology to better serve their needs however important that might be. Inclusive education is focused on socialization and re-socialization of both disabled and non-disabled persons through a positive group dynamic, collective activities, team-building and creation of non-discriminatory climate of respect and tolerance that fosters development and realization of each student's potential.

To raise sensitivity of non-disabled youth, including TVET students, a handbook<sup>5</sup> on how to communicate with persons with different types of disabilities was developed within the framework of the LIFE Program and widely disseminated to TVET students.

In 2015, a *peer-to-peer education* method was used to raise awareness and cultivate a positive attitude of non-disabled students towards PWDs. This initiative involved 46 active students with a leadership potential from 23 TVET institutions from Yerevan and all the regions. They received 2-day training as peer educators on main principles of communication with PWDs, on strengthening inclusive learning environments in TVET institutions and on methodology of sharing information, knowledge and skills with their college mates. The above-mentioned handbook proved to be a valuable resource.

#### **Section 4. Development of Career Guidance Mechanisms that will offer youth with disabilities appropriate choices**

- *individualized assessments of students' skills, employability and*
- *proactive guidance (professional orientation)*
- *development of instructive materials on career development;*

##### **Individualized assessments of students' skills, employability and proactive guidance (professional orientation)**

During numerous professional orientation meetings for YWDs held by the LIFE team and its partner NGOs and DPOs one of the central issues addressed was that of YWDs' professional assessment, which encompasses skills development interest, potential and employability. YWDs were encouraged to take some tests that would assess their capacity, potential and employability. YWDs can take those tests in the government agencies (State Employment Agency, Employment Centers, Medical Social Expertise Agency and Integrated Social Service Centers) as well as in some DPOs and NGOs. Within the framework of this Model, for the most part two tests have been

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<sup>5</sup> *How to communicate with persons with disabilities*. Manual for youth. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2014 (in Armenian).

used so far, *viz.* the MAST test<sup>6</sup> and the Testing Pattern Model. The MAST test is used to find out the scope of work that PWDs can perform. So far, over 500 PWDs took the MAST test. Now they know their occupational area and the occupation and work activities that they can best engage in.

The Testing pattern model uses observation of the capacity of the person, of the work place and of the function/task evaluation. Based on the observation results the observers and PWDs themselves can estimate PWDs' compliance with the requirements of the given vacancy/workplace. The advantage of this method is that the Work Sample Testing environment is created, which allows an in-depth analysis of PWDs' abilities in realistic work settings ensuring a higher level of PWDs' engagement.

MCPO developed the career guidance test "*The systematic choice of profession.*" The test presents a range of professional opportunities and aims to offer consistent and conscious career choice.

Based on the results of these tests the agencies that administer the tests can create a more specific vocational profile to be reflected in the PWD's Individual Development Plan and thus can better assess not only capacity and skills but also employability and provide a more focused, proactive guidance and professional orientation and come up with more efficient job matching strategy. Proactive guidance also entailed provision of relevant information about available options in terms of State-funded programs and educational opportunities, the list of occupations that can be obtained through vocational education, the list of TVET institutions that have accommodations for students with disabilities, TVET institutions' admission requirements and procedures and useful links to relevant websites.

The more refined and reliable the methodology, techniques and a toolkit for individualized assessments of PWDs' capacities and capabilities are the more effective the Model becomes. In fact, adequate individualized assessment is an empowerment tool for PWDs as it allows them to make well-substantiated choices and to get better chances for success.

Therefore, to expedite that process the LIFE Program gave support to the agencies, which assist PWDs in getting vocational education and employment, by providing equipment, methodology and other materials and by giving technical assistance through capacity building of staff members.

It is noteworthy that the LIFE Program also supported the MLSI Methodological Center for Professional Orientation to develop the fundamental methodology for providing career guidance services to PWDs. The methodology makes professional orientation process more functional,

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of the MAST test is discussed in greater detail in Section 10 (*Building capacities of service provider organizations*)

consistent and systemic. It was developed taking into consideration both the local context and the relevant international experience and in conformity with the new concepts and models of the person's comprehensive assessment and disability definition approved by the MLSI.

### **Development of instructive materials on career development**

According to the Model, activities in the field of career guidance are more effective when supported by instructive materials. Within the framework of the LIFE Program a number of such materials were produced.

An updated version was produced of the instruction manual on employment for job seekers with disabilities *Your Right to Work*, which was initially published in 2008 by *Unison DPO*<sup>7</sup>. The publication includes brief presentation of disability-related legislation (rights and privileges of PWDs, incentive programs for employers hiring PWDs, labor contracts, etc.) and job search information (resume development and interview skills, information on job search and placement websites, contact information of SESA local offices and other contact information).

MLSI Methodological Center for Professional Orientation produced a Manual on vocational education and professional orientation of persons with disabilities<sup>8</sup>. The Manual discusses a number of core factors that affect PWDs' career development. Based on the analysis of the current situation in Armenia with regard to the services that provide vocational education and professional orientation to PWDs and of some developed countries' experience in this field, the Manual discusses how to better organize professional orientation and to ensure more efficient job matching. The proposed key method is creation of a PWD's social and work profile, which entails identification of professional suitability for engaging in certain activities, clarification of boundaries and levels of adaptability and elaboration of types of organization of professional activities.

### **Section 5. Provision of Vocational Education at TVET**

- *support to organization of the long term education*
- *support to organization of the short term education*

Vocational education is at the heart of the Model. The PWDs who received vocational education have a much better chance of getting and keeping a job and of becoming self-reliant not only because they are equipped with relevant knowledge and occupational skills but also because of

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<sup>7</sup> *Your Right to Work*. Manual-Guidebook for the disabled. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2008 (in Armenian).

<sup>8</sup> *Manual on vocational education and professional orientation of persons with disabilities*. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2014 (in Armenian).

important experience of social and professional interaction and integration that they obtained in inclusive TVET institutions and other settings.

The LIFE Program made consistent and concerted efforts in partnership with DPOs, NGOs and Government entities to provide support to organization of long-term education for PWDs in Yerevan and in 4 target regions and subsequently in all other regions of the country. The LIFE Program and its partners sought to improve PWDs' access to TVET institutions and to ensure inclusive education and PWD-friendly climate there by *providing professional orientation* and psychological support to YWDs, *building capacity* of teaching and administrative staff of TVET institutions, *producing* and *disseminating* relevant educational and reference materials and manuals and *raising awareness* and *cultivating a positive attitude* of non-disabled students and staff. So far 670 PWDs beneficiaries of the LIFE Program have graduated from or become students of TVET institutions. It is important to note that some occupations that PWDs have received training in are quite challenging and require imagination and creative abilities beyond mere technical skills or diligence. Those are such occupations as (gold and silver) jewelry-making, artistic design, music (instruments and vocals), theater, dancing, and computer and music technology, to mention but a few.

No less important is short-term vocational education and training. In this area NGOs play a prominent role alongside State-run educational institutions. As in the case of long-term vocational education, the LIFE Program worked closely with its partners to foster short-term vocational education and training by providing small grants for implementation of scores of projects in this field throughout the country. The range of occupations that PWDs are trained for in this format is quite extensive. Next to more traditional occupations such as cooking, sewing, hairdressing, book-binding and carpet-weaving new occupations emerge such as artistic design, computer literacy, floristry and doll-making. Some projects stand out because they target particularly vulnerable and difficult to educate groups. For instance, in 2014, *Prkutyun* Disabled Children and Young People Center, a charity, provided short-term vocational training in embroidery, pottery, and design to 30 young people with mental disabilities. While challenging, such projects are extremely important because they improve chances for these categories of PWDs to be integrated into the labor market.

At least 1,000 PWDs beneficiaries of the LIFE Program took short-term vocational training courses receiving knowledge and skills, which are in demand on the labor market.

Many of the PWDs who received long- or short-term vocational education or training are among over the 550 PWDs who are now gainfully employed.

## Section 6. Internship for PWD

- *supported internship in corresponding field*

For PWDs, internship has the complementary roles of a significant component of vocational education and training and of a career guidance mechanism. The philosophy behind the LIFE Program's efforts to promote PWDs' internship initiatives (which is reflected in the Model) is that those are an effective strategy for reducing barriers to PWDs' employment and social integration.

At least 240 LIFE Program beneficiaries completed professional internships administered by partner organizations and developed or honed their occupational and soft skills and thus gained valuable work experience. Internships are important for enhancing PWDs' positive self-image, building self-confidence and improving their employability. Internships are particularly effective when they take the form of workplace-based training for PWDs. It is noteworthy that on-the-job training provided during internships in some cases included a component that dealt with issues of PWDs' self-employment, especially if the internship or the training provided during the internship included topics such as management, marketing, accounting, finances, business counseling, etc.

The lessons learned from the experience, albeit limited, of providing internships to PWDs indicate that internships can be a significant factor for employers as well. Well-designed and structured internship programs can be quite useful for employers in finding qualified candidates with disabilities. Employers have a chance to observe PWD interns in the real work environment, in professional and social interactions, to check their job readiness, their knowledge and skills as well as their ability to work in a team and under stress, and to explore their other qualities and potential, etc. When a PWD intern is really a part of the workforce and has proven to be an asset rather than a liability for the group, company or institution due to his or her contribution to common efforts, internship is very useful in eliminating entrenched stereotypes and prejudices and in breaking down prevalent misperceptions and thus serve as an entry point for PWDs into employment. Indeed, sometimes internships were in fact a probation/trial period for PWDs who then were offered a job. Offering PWDs a temporary position through or after the internship can allay employers' fears regarding inadequate competence of the PWDs or too cumbersome accommodations and allow them sufficient time before they make a long-term commitment.

Internship programs for PWDs should be supported and promoted because, as evidenced by the international experience, employers that offer internships to PWDs are twice as likely to hire at least one PWD.

## CHAPTER TWO. FOSTERING INTEGRATED WORK ENVIRONMENT

The second component of the Model focuses on securing an enabling legal environment, on promoting equal access to open employment, accessibility of public-sector workplaces and supported employment programs for PWDs, on raising awareness of employers and on providing job placement and post-placement support to PWDs.

### **Section 7. Promotion of equal access for persons with disabilities in the open labor market**

- *Provision of Work Readiness and Life Skills training for PWD*
- *Support to Registration at the Employment Centers*
- *Support for participation in Job fairs*
- *Organization of Job fairs in cooperation with the State Employment Agency*

### **Provision of Work Readiness and Life Skills training for PWD**

Training that promotes PWDs' work readiness and develops their life skills is an important element in fostering PWDs' employment by supporting their personal adjustment. Clearly, many PWDs are in need of such training that would improve their chances in a job search and in communication with potential employers. To be able to reach out to as many PWDs as possible within the Program's lifetime a decision was made to conduct Training of Trainers (ToT) first who will then provide training to PWDs. The ToT was provided by *Unison* DPO for partner DPOs and the SC LIFE team and was focused on transfer of knowledge and teaching methodology. The ToT participants were actively involved in refining the teaching methodology, finalizing the core content of the course and outlining the scope of the training materials that were to be used in training PWDs. The main topics of the TOT sessions included training preparation, independent living, job search, resume/cover letter preparation, interview skills and the post-placement issues.

*Unison* DPO also shared the pre- and post-training tests, texts of training exercises, a guide on common mistakes made during job search, CV/cover letter preparation and interview, and on coaching during the post-placement period. Also distributed to the participants were samples of training sessions' programs and texts of computer literacy tests as supplementary materials.

The training sessions for PWDs were launched in May 2012. Their duration was on the average 3-4 days, which provided an ample opportunity not only to transfer knowledge to PWDs but also to develop or hone the skills that would help them in getting and keeping a job.

The trainings were among the permanent types of activities undertaken within the framework of the LIFE Program. After they were launched, there was not a single quarter in that year and in subsequent years that the training was not provided to PWDs. Initially the training was held in Yerevan and 4 target regions but later on it was provided to PWDs in all other regions as well.

It is noteworthy that people with different types of disability were involved in the *Work Readiness and Life Skills* training. The training offered them an opportunity to explore in depth the process of making a good first impression on employers and to develop effective communication skills with a particular focus on hearing and being heard, and positive customer relations.

After the initial training course had been piloted, necessary adjustments were made to make it more focused, relevant and valuable for PWDs in terms of improving their chances of getting a job.

The total number of PWDs who went through a training course is about 730. The number of trainings is 71. On the average, there were 8 to 12 PWDs per training.

These are impressive figures even *per se*, especially considering the fact that all the PWDs who had taken the training course were upon its completion referred to the corresponding Employment Centers for registration. Good indicators of the training course effectiveness would have been the exact number (and percentage) of the PWDs invited to job interviews and the number (and percentage) of the PWDs who were then hired. The use of such indicators should be considered in future activities.

Consistent efforts were nevertheless made to monitor and measure the progress made due to the trainings. 2 methods were used, *viz.* the CVs prepared by the participants at the end of the training and *comparison* between pre-training and post-training tests results. The CVs prepared by the trainees demonstrated that most of the participating PWDs had acquired sufficient CV writing skills. Virtually all CVs were in compliance with the standards. The comparison of the pre-training with post-training tests results showed in all instances a considerable improvement of the participants' job-search techniques and interview skills. While progress was uneven fluctuating from low 65% to high 92%, it was still remarkable and on the average was about 80%.

Another positive feature of the trainings is that most of them were conducted in the regions (including in small towns far from the capital) and that the majority of participating PWDs were

from the region. It is a particularly important aspect since PWDs in the regions are to a larger extent affected by unemployment and have fewer employment prospects owing to a combination of economic, social, cultural, infrastructure and other factors.

While training for work readiness and life skills is of an utmost importance, the Model is not limited to it. Within the framework of the LIFE Program other types of training were provided to PWDs, although on a much more modest scale.

First of all, computer trainings for persons with visual impairments should be noted. These trainings were held by *Unison DPO* from late 2012 through 2015. The training was conducted on an individual basis for each beneficiary 4 times a week, lasted up to 3 months and focused primarily on Windows, Word, Internet, Skype, etc. The training was custom-made and included a flexible program to suit the abilities and objectives of the trainee. The software (*Arev* or *Jaws*), which was specially designed for users with visual impairments, was used for the training. The total of at least 73 PWDs went through this training course. The number of beneficiaries varied significantly from one quarterly cycle to another, with minimum being 2 and maximum 12 trainees.

Secondly, in 2014, Union of Information Technology Enterprises (*UITE*) developed and taught a limited number of PWDs a professional training course on web design and programming issues.

*Unison DPO* also developed a 2-day training course (that was discussed earlier in Section 3 on Elimination of Psychological Barriers) that focused primarily on development of self-expression skills and on psychological aspects of professional and social interaction in the workplace. The training course covered such topics as self-recognition, self-esteem, motivation, self-regulation, non-verbal communication, conflict situation and conflict management. Over 100 PWDs benefited from that course.

### **Support to Registration at the Employment Centers**

Employment Centers play an important part in assisting PWDs in job search and placement efforts. Therefore, it is imperative that PWDs should register with ECs in order to improve their chances of getting employment. The Model urges DPOs and NGOs to explain PWDs why it is important for them to register with EC and what kind of services (including registration, information, consultation, administration of tests, etc.) are provided by ECs. During various trainings, seminars and other events civil society organizations usually disseminate this information, including via

leaflets and other printed materials. These organizations can also devote some time during trainings to specifically address issues and answer PWDs' questions related to registration at ECs to make sure that PWDs feel comfortable and knowledgeable about registration.

On the other hand, the Model emphasizes importance of building relevant capacity of EC staff (including raising their sensitivity and awareness, etc.) for dealing with PWDs.

### **Organization of job fairs and support to PWDs participation in them**

Job fairs present another good opportunity for exposing PWDs to the realities of the open labor market, for learning about vacancies and market demands and for talking to employers and their representatives. While not necessarily an eye-opener, such experience is very useful in more ways than just one. Job fairs serve as a reality check and give PWDs yet another opportunity to see to what extent their education, knowledge and skills match the market demands and thus to manage their expectations and to assess their employment prospects more accurately. In most cases, job fairs get a message of the importance of vocational education and training as well as of work readiness and life skills across.

Job fairs are also important to employers. Businesspersons, companies', and institutions' representatives attend job fairs providing information about vacancies and looking for new employees, including PWDs. Recently, employers in Armenia have begun to look carefully at the employment potential of PWDs.

Jobs fairs can also give an opportunity to DPOs, NGOs, donor organizations, State Employment Agency, ECs and other stakeholders to synergize and to strengthen collaboration.

Therefore, organization of job fairs is regarded within the framework of the Model as an important policy direction. Within the framework of the Program the LIFE team organized, co-organized or supported organization of 20 job fairs, which were attended by at least 1,500 PWDs and by over 600 employers and their representatives. The scope of those job fairs varied: some of them were nationwide, others regional or local. Most of the fairs initiated by the LIFE Program were organized together with the State Employment Agency. It is noteworthy that 5 job fairs were organized in 2012 – 2016 exclusively for PWDs. In a sense, those job fairs were an icebreaker for some employers and especially for PWDs. They saw that the participating public and private companies and other entities did not discriminate against PWDs, were prepared to hire qualified PWDs and advertised such positions as an accountant, designer, clerk, jeweler and even film director.

Since job fairs attract more and more employers who present scores of vacancies, particularly in construction, education, trade and service, manufacturing and banking spheres, the LIFE Program and its partners encouraged PWDs to visit job fairs and helped them by disseminating information leaflets on State programs in support of PWDs' employment, CV sample forms and other guiding and assistance materials.

While information about how many job offers were made to PWDs and how many PWDs were actually hired during or in the aftermath of job fairs is lacking, there are indications that such developments are no longer an unusual occurrence.

### **Section 8. Awareness-raising among public/private employers of their duty to employ persons with disabilities and to provide reasonable accommodation**

- *Organization of Round table discussions with employers and representatives of business community*
- *Training for Human Resource specialists*
- *Dissemination of special booklets and leaflet on PWD employment rights and capabilities*
- *Dissemination of information on state programs in support of PWD employment*

#### **Organization of Round table discussions with employers and representatives of business community**

Important as efforts to equip PWDs with market demand-driven skills through vocational training and to socialize and prepare them psychologically to employment and indispensable as legal reforms and attitudinal changes of TVET staff and students might be, they will be only partially successful at best unless the backing of employers and representatives of business community has been secured. One method envisioned by the Model is direct interaction with employers and their associations through round table discussions. The LIFE Program and its partner NGOs and DPOs (HDPF, *Unison* and *Full Life*) organized at least 33 round table discussions with the participation of this target group. The round table discussions were conducted in Yerevan and in all the regions of the country throughout the entire lifetime of the Program and attracted several hundreds of employers. Well represented at these events were staff members of SEA, EC and other Government agencies, NGOs and, sometimes, PWDs.

The ultimate goal of the round table discussions was to help discard negative stereotypes about PWDs, to see the latter as productive and employable members of the society and to embrace a non-discriminatory and positive attitude towards and perceptions of PWDs as employees and fellow human beings. Most discussions centered on such issues as disability policy, corporate social responsibility, equality of opportunity for PWDs, PWDs' labor market integration, mechanisms and State-funded programs and incentives supporting PWDs' employment, including

tax benefits, quotas and other temporary special measures, PWDs' labor rights and opportunities, relevant domestic and international legislation, measures that need to be taken to better match vocational education with labor market needs, and social entrepreneurship. Importantly, the participants also discussed *ways* for introducing and operating effective national mechanisms for fostering employment of PWDs and *main principles* of cooperation with employment centers as well as achievements and constraints, strengths and weaknesses of the quota application mechanisms as demonstrated by the experience of their implementation.

The round table discussions were instrumental not only in raising employers' awareness and sensitizing them on the importance and effectiveness of employing PWDs but also in identifying the existing problems and challenges. The participants particularly stressed the lack of a complete and updated database of job-seekers with disabilities on a national level and the non-existence of legislation on Social Enterprises. They emphasized the bureaucratic complexities, gaps and inaccuracies that beset the State programs promoting PWDs' employment and pose significant problems to social enterprises.

### **Training for Human Resource specialists**

Many public and private companies and organizations in Armenia have human resource management specialists or even human resource departments. Therefore it is critically important to raise their awareness and develop their capacity regarding PWDs-related employment issues. The biggest challenge is to get them realize that PWDs can be productive employees and a valuable asset for their companies.

Within the framework of the LIFE Program at least 17 training sessions and seminars were organized for over 200 HR specialists in Yerevan and all regions of the country. Those efforts were particularly intensive in late 2014 and throughout 2015.

At the training sessions and seminars important issues such as PWDs' rights and responsibilities, disability-based discrimination and its effects on PWDs as well as the issues usually raised by employers were addressed and relevant legislative and regulatory frameworks were presented alongside the specifics and potential benefits of hiring qualifying PWDs. Experts from the LIFE team, partner organizations and SEA representatives led the discussions and made presentations drawing on extensive international and local experience focusing on success stories and lessons learned. They reviewed the State programs promoting PWD employment against the background of the new Employment Law that introduced a PWD quota for public and private sector employers. They encouraged HR specialists to consider recruiting PWDs because many PWDs received

vocational education and training and are in fact a quality workforce. A highlight of one of the seminars was a presentation made by the representatives of one of the social enterprises set up with support from the LIFE Program who described their positive experience of having PWD employees and successful collaboration with an Employment Center. Also discussed were issues of how to create an inclusive working environment and make reasonable accommodations of the workplace for PWDs in the optimal fashion.

Very impressive was the use of role-playing that allowed the training participants to experience first-hand, albeit virtually, different types of disabilities, to reflect on that experience and to describe the challenges faced by PWDs and advantages that they can have.

A package of relevant materials, including handbooks, was handed out to the participants.

While training sessions and seminars for building capacity of HR specialists are important, institutionalization of efforts through a resource and support mobilization mechanism is required in order to have a lasting and effective impact. From that perspective, the Capacity Building Working Group, which was established in December 2012 with a view to developing capacity of specialists from HR departments of public and private organizations to competently and responsibly deal with on PWD employment issues, can be seen as such mechanism. The Working Group consists of HR professionals from private and public companies that have implemented PWD-friendly inclusive policies, created integrated working environments and made necessary adjustments to accommodate PWD employees. The Working Group has been instrumental in sharing experiences on integrated policies and adapted work environments, in developing and disseminating recommendations on inclusive organizational policies to other employers, in providing consultations and technical assistance to HR departments of private and public companies and in addressing issues associated with coaching and mentoring of PWDs.

### **Dissemination of special booklets and leaflets on PWD employment rights and capabilities and of information on State programs that support PWD employment**

Two major publications should be mentioned here. The first one is *Manual on Inclusion of People with Disabilities into Workplaces*<sup>9</sup>. The Manual is intended for employers and human resource management professionals and aims at promoting an inclusive environment as well as establishment of integrated workplaces for PWD.

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<sup>9</sup> *Manual on Inclusion of People with Disabilities into Workplaces*. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2016 (updated edition, in Armenian).

The second one is *Adaptation of Workplace for People with Disabilities* (Manual for employers, staff of Employment Centers and Medical-Social Expertise Agency)<sup>10</sup>. The Manual contains descriptions of various types of disabilities and recommendations about the adjustments that are necessary to accommodate employees with specific types of disability.

Also published are various materials with information about State programs that support PWD employment. The leaflet on State programs in support of PWD employment<sup>11</sup> should be noted here. Produced and published with support from USAID and LIFE Program, the leaflet provides brief but informative description of the State programs in question.

All the materials have been disseminated during training sessions, presentations and other events and are posted on the LIFE Program's website or on the websites of its partners (State agencies, DPOs, NGOs, public and private organizations, etc.)<sup>12</sup>.

### **Section 9. Ensuring accessibility of public- and private sector workplaces for persons with disabilities**

- *Development of instructive materials on PWD employment peculiarities*
- *Development of instructive materials on work place adaptation*
- *Organization of "public demand" actions*

The development of instructive materials on PWDs' employment peculiarities and on workplace adaptation is among the significant factors fostering PWDs' employment and PWDs' integration into an inclusive working environment. The two handbooks mentioned in the previous section<sup>13</sup> were developed within the framework of the LIFE Program and reflect the collaborative efforts of experts from the LIFE team and partner DPOs, NGOs and State agencies.

#### **Development of instructive materials on PWD employment peculiarities**

The first one is *Manual on Inclusion of People with Disabilities into Workplaces*<sup>14</sup>. The Manual is intended for employers and human resource management professionals and aims at promoting an inclusive environment as well as establishment of integrated workplaces for PWD.

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<sup>10</sup> *Adaptation of Workplace for People with Disabilities* (Manual for employers, staff of Employment Centers and Medical-Social Expertise Agency). Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2014 (in Armenian).

<sup>11</sup> *State programs in support of PWD employment*. Yerevan: MLSI SEA, 2014 (in Armenian).

<sup>12</sup> Primarily the [www.disability.am](http://www.disability.am) website

<sup>13</sup> Awareness-raising among public/private employers of their duty to employ persons with disabilities and to provide reasonable accommodation

<sup>14</sup> *Manual on Inclusion of People with Disabilities into Workplaces*. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2016 (updated edition, in Armenian).

The Manual is much more than a usual handbook with a “How to...” approach. It reflects a new philosophy in PWDs’ employment and provides an innovative and comprehensive approach to a set of crucial issues. In a sense it is a breakthrough because the Manual lays out principles and procedures, connects theory with practice, gives important information and provides useful specific recommendations and step-by-step algorithms for concrete actions and shows how ideals and principles can be implemented in real-life situations.

The primary beneficiaries of the Manual are PWDs and employers. The Manual explains how to prevent disability-based discrimination, how to help PWD employees to better understand their rights and responsibilities and how to help employers to minimize the risk of discrimination or wrongful actions and to promote and encourage equality of opportunity in a work environment. It is noteworthy that the underlying ideology of the Manual is that of equality of opportunity. It even contains sections on how to be an equal opportunity employer and how to use retraining and professional development to ensure equality of opportunity, especially in the context of legislatively introduced quotas.

The Manual explains how to operationalize the principle of non-discrimination, formulates the rules of conduct and the language to use when communicating with PWDs and explains the need and conditions for preferential treatment of PWDs in hiring. No less important is its explanation of the benefits due to the use of the workforce diversity principle.

### **Development of instructive materials on work place adaptation**

The second one is *Adaptation of Workplace for People with Disabilities* (Manual for employers, staff of Employment Centers and Medical-Social Expertise Agency)<sup>15</sup>. The Manual contains descriptions of various types of disabilities and recommendations about the adjustments that are necessary to accommodate employees depending on a specific type of disability.

The Manual explains that in many cases employers do not even need to make any adjustments to the workplace environment and/or conditions or that the adjustments can be minimal so that the PWD employee would be able to perform the job effectively.

The Manual provides a cogent argument that many barriers that deny PWDs an opportunity of gainful employment and prevent them from realizing their potential and using their knowledge and

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<sup>15</sup> *Adaptation of Workplace for People with Disabilities* (Manual for employers, staff of employment centers and medical-social expertise agency). Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2014 (in Armenian).

skills can be removed and that both the employer and a PWD employee can benefit from proper working arrangements.

The Manual addresses 9 types of disability:

- Learning, intellectual and autism,
- Neurological and brain,
- Physical,
- Skin disorder,
- Other physical,
- Psychiatric and mental health,
- Blindness or vision impairment,
- Speech or voice disorders, and
- Other disabilities (digestive conditions, respiratory system disorders and urological and reproductive conditions).

The Manual uses the following format. First, it describes and explains a disability of a certain type. Then it identifies symptoms and characteristics (such as, for instance, impairments of social interaction, including impairments in communication, and restricted or repetitive interests and activities and impairments thereof in case of autism). Then it provides a detailed description of workplace solutions and adjustments, including training assistance with a focus, for example, on the social skills and behavioral training appropriate to the particular workplace.

The Manual convincingly demonstrates that PWDs are employable and that in many cases a little help in terms of minor adjustments, proper training and knowledgeable, non-discriminatory approach can go a long way benefiting not only PWDs but also employers.

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While the Manuals do not ignore the principle of corporate social responsibility, their message is loud and clear: providing employment to qualified PWDs is not charity or PR-actions that entail expectations of some favors and privileges from the Government and the society at large. It is business and as any business, it can be profitable, if organized and managed properly, in conformity with market demand, legislative and regulatory frameworks and Government's social and fiscal policies and strategic action plans based on vision of sustainable development prospects and on international commitments and national priorities.

## Section 10. Building capacities of service provider organizations

- *Training for State Employment Agency staff*
- *Training for Medical Social Expertise Agency staff*
- *Training for Integrated Social Service Centers staff*
- *Training for Social workers*
- *Training for NGOs working in the field*

Building capacity of service providers is an important prerequisite for effective and targeted provision of quality services to PWDs. It is an integral part of any meaningful policy intervention that aims to improve PWDs' status and their prospects for equality of opportunity.

The Model contains a significant component dealing with capacity building of service providers through various trainings. The LIFE Program implemented a large number of training activities for 6 target groups. Capacity building of TVET teaching and administrative staff was discussed in an earlier section<sup>16</sup>. This section is devoted to capacity building of the staff of State Employment Agency (SEA), Medical Social Expertise Agency (MSEA) and Integrated Social Service Centers (ISSC) as well as of social workers and NGOs working in the field.

It should be noted that since training sessions for the most part targeted more than one group simultaneously, it is not easy to break them down into neat categories per group. So, it is only for the analytical purposes that training sessions are reviewed for each separate target group. In other words, the same training session may be mentioned twice or more. Therefore, the total number of training sessions is smaller than the sum total of training sessions when counted by each target group. In addition, a large number of sessions addressed more than one topic. Thus, because some topics are crossover and because some topics overlap all the estimates are rough.

### **Training for State Employment Agency staff**

Since the SEA and EC staff plays a key role not only in helping PWDs find employment but also in guiding them into a sustainable work place, it is no wonder that the SEA and EC staff was the recipient of the largest number of trainings and the topics addressed at those sessions were of a broader variety than in the case of other groups. In 2012-2015, over 150 SEA and EC employees received in-depth training.

In early 2012, 3 external experts who worked closely with the LIFE team and its partners produced a Manual that was meant for use by any employment agency, primarily by the SEA and EC staff<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Sub-section "Capacity building of TVET teachers and staff" in the "Improvement of TVET Physical and Cognitive Learning Environments to Integrate PWDs" Section was devoted exclusively to that issue.

<sup>17</sup> *Manual for Training of Service Providers*. LIFE Program, Armenia 2012-2015. Yerevan: Save the Children, Activa International and USAID, 2013.

The Manual provides not only knowledge but also key techniques and methods related to economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. It contains 7 extensive modules for professionals to conduct training sessions in a structured and practical way. The modules cover all major areas and issues that CE staff deals with in assessing PWDs' capabilities and personality traits to expedite a job search and to ensure optimal job matching and job placement. Modules 1 through 3 deal with diagnostics and skill development (MTM – MAST/Ruward test system; Psychological testing; PWDs skills development and Development of individual professional development plans). Modules 4 through 6 focus on PWD employment issues *per se* (Self-employment, entrepreneurship, group placement; Observation method, job analysis, matching and placement; and Workplace adjustment). Module 7 describes *Training of Trainers* methodology. Thus, these comprehensive trainings aimed to thoroughly prepare the SEA and EC staff in an expert and efficient manner.

Initially, 4 introductory training sessions on general issues of PWD employment were held for the staff of regional and territorial ECs and some implementing partner NGOs in Yerevan and in the regions. Since the MAST/Ruward test was to be introduced shortly and to play a role in providing a better guidance to PWDs regarding labor market and employment, the Method /Time Measurement (MTM) Concept was introduced and explained.

Later on, when new regions were incorporated into the scope of the LIFE Program, introductory training sessions were held there as well for territorial and regional CEs.

To be able to find a job for PWDs the SEA and EC staff have to have a good knowledge of their existing or potential skills so as to assess PWDs' physical capabilities for different types of working activities and thus to determine their employability.

### **MAST Equipment**

An important step in that process is the psychomotor diagnostic test, the *Manual Ability Scanning Tests* (MAST1/Ruward 1), which is administered to PWDs. At an early stage in the LIFE Program implementation the Program partner *Activa* International Foundation purchased 29 sets of the tests and had them installed in Employment Centers in Yerevan and in the target regions (in 2015, 5 more sets were procured for 5 new regions). After the test had been piloted in 2 ECs a 3-day TOT on MAST test was conducted for SEA CTT Master Trainers from Yerevan and 4 target regions to teach them how to carry out the MAST/Ruward test and then, a few months later, the second ToT was held. Eventually the ToT participants took an examination on MAST test theory and practical application and methodology of analyzing and interpreting test results.

More than 25 training sessions on the MAST test were held. The aim of the training course was to familiarize the participants with the principles of usage of the MAST/ Ruward equipment and with techniques of analyzing test results and assessing the capacities of the persons who had taken the test. Thus, it was a combination of a theoretical part with practical application of the MAST test.

The LIFE Program also organized the post-training support on MAST test usage for 35 CEs concerned through site visits by experts who helped analyze test results and assess the capacities of the PWDs who had taken the test. Later on, national and international experts helped again: this time to overcome challenges posed by the low usage level of the MAST test owing to PWDs' and employers' lack of awareness of its practical usefulness and to discuss issues concerning assessment of PWDs' abilities and job placement. That assistance contributed to further capacity building of the SEA and CE staff and made their work with PWDs more effective.

By mid-2016, more than 500 PWDs have taken the MAST test. The test results were analyzed and used in preparation of Individual Professional Development Plans and over 380 of them have been placed in relevant jobs. It is noteworthy that the SEA has expressed interest in expanding this experience to other regions in order to have a unified approach for assessing functional capacity of PWDs throughout the country.

### **Psychological aspects of work with PWDs**

Another important area of training for SEA and EC staff focused on psychological aspects of their work with PWDs. The main goal was to raise the trainees' awareness of psychological and psychiatric forms of disabilities, to present ways for supporting people with such problems in their job search and placement and in their efforts to adapt to the working environment. The training sessions aimed to equip SEA and EC staff with skills of identifying and addressing PWDs' emotional, behavioral and concentration problems, low self-esteem and low self-confidence, lack of social skills and other psychological obstacles and difficulties that hinder their job search and integration into the work place. The training sessions dealt also with such issues as psychological testing of PWDs, development of positive attitudes towards, acceptance of and respect for PWDs and elimination of stereotypes, specifics of verbal and non-verbal communication with PWDs and mobilization of PWDs' strengths and resources.

Among efforts aimed at institutional capacity building of SEA and EC staff in the area that comes close to psychological aspects of work with PWDs the trainings devoted to occupational therapy should be noted here. In early 2013, the Training Module on main principles of occupational/ergo

therapy was developed in cooperation with Ergo Therapy Department of the Armenian State Pedagogical University and Armenian Ergo-Therapists' Association. Then a series of two-day trainings were held covering such topics as introduction to the principles of Occupational therapy, its objectives, the code of ethics, evaluation methods, workplace adaptations and Ergotherapy. The participants also received a package of useful materials with practical recommendations on how to create inclusive learning and work environments. The training sessions were important in balancing, albeit partially, the SEA and EC staff's lack of knowledge and experience in occupational therapy. The limited scale of the initiative (the training, which was conducted only in 2013, involved 78 staff members) did not lead to the creation of an adequate knowledge base and a sizeable pool of staff members with relevant skills in this area. However, it highlighted the positive effect of such interventions and a considerable potential for assisting PWDs in job placement and adaptation to work environment if the SEA and ECs have occupational therapists or staff members who are well-trained in the field.

### **Observation methodology**

Observation alongside with job analysis, matching and placement is an important element of capacity building of SEA and EC staff. Initially the scope and scale of the training was limited. In 2012-early 2013, the 6 training sessions that were conducted for the *Professional Orientation and Work Rehabilitation Center for Disabled People* (based in Gyumri), but later the experience was replicated in all ECs involved in the program. The focus of the training sessions was on Work Sample Testing methodology that imitates real work settings, entails a higher level of engagement and gives an opportunity for an in-depth analysis of PWDs' abilities, competencies and skills, and evaluation of workplace suitability.

Two related training sessions were held, one on job analysis and the other, on job placement. The main goal of the 2-day training sessions on job analysis was to introduce to the participants the theory of Model Test Program that allows making objective job analysis and a better matching of a job-seeking PWD with a particular job. The main goal of the training sessions was to introduce different approaches to Job placement, viz. integrated, sheltered and home-based, as well as self-employment.

### **Work place adjustment**

Another type of training sessions (one per each year in 2012-2016) were held on issues related to work place adjustment. The trainees were given knowledge about the Theory of Workplace

Adjustment and Ergonomics and about how to make efficient and cost-effective workplace adjustments based on the internationally accepted standards and norms.

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The SEA and EC staff also received training in other issues such as career counseling, job coaching, adult education, vocational education skills development and training on individual and group oriented empowerment techniques (including the techniques for developing Individual Professional Development Plans).

#### **Training for Medical Social Expertise Agency staff**

The LIFE Program initiated a number of trainings for MSEA staff. One 3-day session held in November 2013 (attended by 14 MSEA staff members) was devoted to the application of the MAST Test. One or two 2-day sessions conducted in August 2013 (and attended by over 20 MSEA staff members) focused on main principles of occupational therapy.

While those trainings were important in terms of raising awareness of and transferring knowledge and skills to some MSEA staff members and can be regarded as capacity building activities, they were very limited in scale, scope and impact.

#### **Training for Integrated Social Service Centers staff**

Given the fact that over 30% of Integrated Social Services Centers' (ISSC) customers are PWDs it is important that the ISSC staff be sensitized to and trained for adequately addressing the PWDs' issues to be able to effectively provide required services. Therefore, the LIFE team initiated training for the staff of 19 ISSC to build their capacity and raise their awareness so that they could be better equipped and prepared for working with PWDs. About 70 ISSC staff members attended a one-day training session on main principles of communication and interaction with PWDs. 6 sessions were held in Yerevan and all regions in 2014-2016.

#### **Training for Social workers**

No special training was organized for social workers. They were invited to join some of the training sessions that were held for SEA and EC staff members. All social workers were from the LIFE Program's partner DPOs. They took part in trainings conducted from April 2012 through April 2016. The rough estimate of the total number of social workers participating in trainings stands at about 40.

All the training sessions that they took part in were mentioned above. Those were training sessions on:

- MAST test and general issues related to PWDs skills development and job placement;
- Observation methods;
- Vocational education skills development;
- Workplace adjustment;
- Psychiatric and psychological aspects of disability;
- Individual and group-oriented empowerment techniques for PWDs;
- Job analysis; and
- Job placement.

Basically, these activities contributed to capacity building not only of social workers but also of the DPOs that they are members of.

### **Training for NGOs working in the field**

As mentioned earlier, representatives of partner DPOs were involved in some training sessions alongside SEA and EC staff. In 2015, members of NGOs in the regions, which were new for the LIFE Program, took part in ToTs on MAST test, psychological testing and training on general issues related to PWDs, skills development and job placement.

At the same time, there were interventions that specifically targeted NGOs, primarily DPOs. Thus, targeted support, including hands-on training, was provided within the framework of the Program to *Union of Blind People of Armenia* and *Armenian Union of Deaf People* NGOs. The support aimed to build their capacity in strategic business planning and in more effective development of further plans in compliance with the market demands and the NGOs' actual capacities, focusing on cost-effective activities and assessing the risks.

Effective operation of NGOs requires quality monitoring and evaluation. As part of its policy to build capacity of partner organizations the LIFE Program provided a 3-day training on monitoring and evaluation to 16 representatives of 4 implementing partner NGOs (*Unison*, *Full Life*, HDPF and *PER* NGOs). The trainees acquired practical, quite extensive knowledge about monitoring and evaluation system, project cycle, designing of objectives and indicators, M&E plan and budget, quantitative and qualitative research methods, etc. An added value of the training was improved capacity of those NGOs to provide reliable, accurate, complete and timely data and to use appropriate quality control measures.

While the primary goal of those trainings was to make those NGOs more efficient, ultimately it was intended to improve their service provision capabilities.

To further strengthen capacity of partner organizations and to enhance their synergy the LIFE Program supported the establishment of a DPO Network. The Network, which comprises 20 local,

regional and national DPOs that were involved in various components of the LIFE Program, was set up in September 2015. The Network aims to strengthen organizational capacity of Armenian DPOs in promoting inclusive reforms in the disability sector as well as fostering their effective involvement.

## Section 11. Enabling legal environment

- *Enacting legislation prohibiting disability-based discrimination in the area of work and employment*
- *Enacting legislation promoting the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation*
- *Promoting adoption of positive measures to increase employment of PWD*

Implementation of the Model entails a systemic and comprehensive policy change which reflects a new philosophy that supersedes social support with social inclusion as its major goal and equality of opportunity as its core principle. To effect that change it is necessary to make it possible and to support it with adequate legislative and regulatory frameworks.

It should be borne in mind that many barriers which PWDs face in the area of work and employment (as in other areas of public and private life) and which lead to disability-based discrimination are rooted in the social constructs of disability<sup>18</sup> as reflected, for example, in the *charity* or *medical* models of disability. The first step to be taken to remove attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers is to move to at least a *social* model of disability and to support that move with new legislation.

The findings of the GAP analysis report<sup>19</sup> produced within the LIFE Program framework indicate that Armenia tends “to adopt social model of disability and promote integration of PWDs into mainstream society.” The progress achieved by Armenia in this direction includes “adoption of laws enabling equal opportunities of PWDs in line with the UN Convention on Protection and Promotion of Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities...”<sup>20</sup>

While the current Armenian legislation prohibits any type of discrimination, including disability-based, discrimination<sup>21</sup>, still some provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

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<sup>18</sup> This issue is discussed in greater detail in the USAID publication *The Prevalence of Disability in Europe & Eurasia*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2009, pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Assessment of Successes and Challenges of Projects Implemented for People with Disabilities in Armenia*. Yerevan: Save the Children International – LIFE Program, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> “Any discrimination based on sex, race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, worldview, political or any other views, belonging to a national minority, property status, birth, disability, age, or other personal or social circumstances shall be prohibited.” Article 29 of the Armenian Constitution amended on 6 December 2015.

Disabilities<sup>22</sup> have yet to be incorporated into domestic legislation and, no less importantly, to be operationalized.

Within the LIFE Program framework an assessment of the current Armenian legislation was undertaken in 2012 by partner DPO *Unison*<sup>23</sup>. Its findings indicate that the currently effective Republic of Armenia *Law on Social Protection of People with Disabilities*<sup>24</sup> provides a number of legal norms and guarantees in the field of work and employment. Those would be very valuable, if implemented; however, several of them are not applied because their implementation mechanisms and adjusted workplaces are lacking, while the others are not stipulated as a blanket norm in other legislative Acts.

On the whole, according to the assessment, the *main drawback* of the current Armenian legislation in the field is that the State cannot guarantee PWDs the enjoyment of the right to work without solving a major problem of accessible environment (including workplaces and transportation) and the main problem is a lack of *sufficient resources* and of *real mechanisms* for implementation of guarantees<sup>25</sup>.

Experts and practitioners in the field pin their hopes on the draft RoA *Law on Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion in the Republic of Armenia*<sup>26</sup>. It is indeed much closer to the spirit and letter of the UN Convention with its focus, *inter alia*, on social inclusion and integration (Articles 1 and 2) and on cooperation between State bodies and NGOs in that field and on engagement of PWDs in active employment programs (Article 4). The draft Law proposes to raise a quota for hiring PWDs (Article 14) and to design a strategy for social inclusion of PWDs which is to be reflected in a comprehensive Action Plan, which, in its turn, will be implemented through more detailed annual Action Plans (Articles 33 and 34).

At the same time, the above-mentioned Assessment and Hans Vrind's Analytical Brief contain important recommendations about how the draft Law could better address some PWD employment-related issues such as reintegration after accidents, matching vocational education

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<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

<sup>23</sup> Հաշմանդամություն ունեցող անձանց գրառվածության եվ մասնագիտական կրթությանը վերաբերող ՀՀ օրենսդրության վերլուծություն: Երևան, Unison, 2012 (*Assessment of the RoA legislation related to employment and vocational education of people with disabilities*. Yerevan: Unison, 2012, in Armenian).

<sup>24</sup> The Law was adopted on 14 April 1993 and has been amended more than ten times since.

<sup>25</sup> See *Assessment of the RoA legislation related to employment ...*, pp. 32, 33 and 10.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Vrind, the Director of International Salo Holding AG Hamburg, believes that the draft Law “is an excellent framework for the given objective” and that it “gives a good summary of the rights of People with Disability and is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ... and the relevant advises to state legislation in Europe, given in the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020... Hans Vrind. *Advise on the new law of the Republic of Armenia on Protection of the Rights of persons with disabilities and their social inclusion in the Republic of Armenia*. Yerevan: USAID, Save the Children and Activa International, September 2012, p. 1.

and professional rehabilitation with labor market demands or Government's commitment to defray the costs of workplace adjustments, etc. The problem with the draft Law, however, is that while it has been around for at least 5 years or so, it is still unclear if and when it will be adopted and what the final version will be.

The LIFE Program has also been promoting amendments to other legislative Acts. For example, the proposed amendments to the RoA Labor Code and the RoA Employment Law include introduction of mechanisms and procedures for workplace adjustments for PWDs.

Another initiative undertaken by the LIFE Program to support the enactment of the legislation that prohibits disability-based discrimination in the area of work and employment and promotes the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation is the issue of quotas for PWDs. The materials published by the LIFE team and its partners reflect recognition that out of the 2 models adopted by the ILO to promote PWD employment, *viz.* the quota system and anti-discrimination legislation, priority should be given to the latter. The quota system can significantly contribute to the solution of PWD employment problem. However, the legislation on quotas should also set up implementation mechanisms and a special administrative body for monitoring and control. When enforced through fines for non-compliance, the system may alienate employers. In addition, it may send the wrong signal to the public in a sense that PWDs are still regarded as individuals not fit for open market employment.

To help decision-makers, practitioners, NGOs and international organizations to get a better understanding of and an informed opinion about the ramifications of the introduction of a quota system the LIFE Program commissioned a study that provided what can be regarded as a SWOT analysis of quotas for PWDs<sup>27</sup>. Discussing the quota systems that exist in different countries<sup>28</sup> the author demonstrates that various factors make an impact on the size and type of quotas. The analysis also indicates that it is easier to introduce quotas in the State sector and in countries with an educated workforce. The author identifies nine risks that introduction of the quota system can bring about, including limitations on market freedom of entrepreneurs, increased burden for a number of SMEs, artificial reduction of the number of employees, danger of informal employment,

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<sup>27</sup> Մարգարյան, Արման: *Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունում հաշմանդամների աշխատանքի տեղավորման համար աշխատատեղերի նորմատիվի (քվոտայի) կիրառության և դրա հնարավոր հետևանքների վերլուծություն*: Երևան, USAID and Save the Children, 2012 (Sargsyan, Arman. *Analysis of application of quotas for job placement of PWDs in the Republic of Armenia and of its possible consequences*. Yerevan: USAID and Save the Children, 2012, in Armenian).

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that the study produced at an early stage in the LIFE Program implementation used the term “positive discrimination,” which is quite misleading and confusing. Later on, the Program used the accepted international terminology such as “affirmative action,” “positive measures,” “temporary special measures,” etc.

relegation of PWDs to low-paid and noncompetitive jobs, preference to one group of PWDs at the expense of others, recourse to unlawful methods of avoiding legitimate demands, etc. Consequently, application of the quota system is fraught with problems at micro- and macro-economic levels. The only proposed solution is slow, gradual introduction of a quota system on a limited scale under targeted State regulation and constant management.

Therefore, while recognizing the PWDs' right to adjusted work environment and workplaces (according to the UN Convention "denial of reasonable accommodation" is a form of discrimination<sup>29</sup>) and while introducing measures to accommodate PWDs' needs, it is important not to shift responsibility solely to employers. Under the UN Convention, "reasonable accommodation" means "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments" without "imposing a disproportionate or undue burden" to ensure to PWDs the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms<sup>30</sup>.

In other words, the responsibility and the burden should be shared and multilateral partnerships are important for engaging employers and providing them with incentives, while strengthening employment support services and involving donor and civil society organizations.

The amount of the partial compensation for employers of PWDs (that existed from 2006 till January 2014<sup>31</sup> and then resumed since July 2014) should be increased and made permanent (or at least for a longer period of time) and complemented with a more robust policy of tax exemptions and tax privileges for employers.

It is important to note that the Model, which has been developed within the LIFE Program framework, stresses that positive measures and enactment of legislation should prioritize real, open, competitive employment of PWDs in contrast to their quasi-universal, sheltered, segregated employment. It also advances the idea that while gainfully employed PWDs should not be deprived

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<sup>29</sup> *UN Convention on Protection and Promotion of Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities*, Article 2. See: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> According to the RoA Government Decree № 996-N of 13 July 2006, the partial compensation of a wages of a hired non-competitive PWD can be up to 50% of the wages but it may not exceed the minimum wages. The compensation is given only for one year (in the case of a PWD with a 3<sup>rd</sup> category of disability) and for two years (in the case of a PWD with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> category of disability). However, the Armenian Government suspended № 996-N since early 2014. The official explanation was that the termination of the State programs within the framework of which the particle compensation was provided to employers was owing to the "new terms and conditions" stipulated by the Republic of Armenia *Law on Employment* that entered into force on 1 January 2014. The program was resumed in July 2014 while decreasing the duration of compensation to a 6-month period.

of social benefits and entitlements, the social security system should not provide strong disincentives and lack of motivation for PWDs to work<sup>32</sup>.

Finally, the Model stresses holistic approach to enabling legislation and positive measures to support PWD employment. The lack of even one of the components may undermine concerted efforts and disrupt the entire system. PWDs may have required qualifications and skills, employers may be willing to employ the PWDs in question and even the work environment and workplace have been adjusted, the State provides compensation and other incentives to the employer but if there is no transportation for the PWDs, they will not be able to get to the work place and this negative factor will outweigh all the positive ones.

## **Section 12. Support "supported employment" programs which involves on-the-job training in a regular workplace**

- *Organization of "Social enterprises" in cooperation with NGOs*
- *Organization of "Social enterprises" in cooperation with business structures*
- *Organization of "Social enterprises" in cooperation with municipalities*
- *Organization of "Social enterprises" in cooperation with TVETs*

"Supported employment" is a model that aims to promote PWD employment and that differs from both sheltered and open employment models. It emphasizes the idea that regardless of the type and severity of disability all PWDs should have an opportunity to work. The focus in this model is not on prior development of skills and not on exclusively those PWDs who are considered to be ready for the job but on the identification and development of jobs alongside the provision of necessary accommodation, training and support. This model discards the traditional "train and place" approach in favor of the "place and train" approach<sup>33</sup>. Success of this model hinges to a large extent on adequate and relevant on-the-job training in a properly adjusted workplace and on continued support. The study comparing findings from six European countries demonstrated that participants of the supported employment programs were likelier to gain employment and that the total cost of the "place and train" model was less than traditional "train and place" models<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> These ideas are discussed against a historical background in Tines, Jeffrey and Daniela Buzducea. *Transitions towards an Inclusive Future: Vocational Skills Development and Employment Options for Persons with Disabilities in Europe & Eurasia*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2009, pp. 3-5, 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed discussion of "supported employment" vis-à-vis "sheltered employment" and "open employment" models see: Tines, Jeffrey and Daniela Buzducea. *Transitions towards an Inclusive Future: Vocational Skills Development and Employment Options for Persons with Disabilities in Europe & Eurasia*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, October 2009, pp. 21-24.

<sup>34</sup> See: Burns, Tom et al. "The effectiveness of supported employment for people with severe mental illness: a randomised controlled trial." *The Lancet*, Volume 370, No. 9593 (29 September 2007), pp. 1146–1152.

It is important to note that the “supported employment” model does not replace the sheltered and open employment models but rather comes to complement them in an innovative way.

One of the forms that the “supported employment” model takes is “social enterprise.” Social enterprises are businesses (in private or State sectors) with a social mission of providing employment opportunities to vulnerable groups (including PWDs) that have problems getting employment or are noncompetitive in the labor market and to promote their social integration. The greater the share of the revenue that they allocate for improving the quality and expanding the scope and scale of services provided to PWDs (whether provided by them or by other entities), the more PWDs they employ and the more efforts they invest into ensuring equality of opportunity the closer they are to the normative ideal of a social enterprise.

As a vulnerable social group in the labor market, PWDs benefit most of all from those social enterprises that provide employment opportunities to them. When seeking employment, PWDs are motivated not only by economic but also by social reasons as well. In a number of advanced countries the policy to promote social enterprises is driven by the considerations of ensuring PWDs’ financial self-sufficiency, raising their self-confidence and self-esteem and enhancing their social inclusion.

The Model designed by the LIFE Program encourages “supported employment” programs, particularly the establishment of social enterprises. Through its Small Grants program the LIFE Program sought to encourage joint NGO/business sector initiatives with a view to supporting institution of new integrated working environments and creation of new workplaces for PWDs, establishment of a new integrated enterprise where 70% of the employees would be PWDs and employment of PWDs at an enterprise by adjusting the workplace and creating appropriate working environment for PWDs.

The LIFE Program indicated that one of the challenges faced by social enterprises in Armenia is that of their status. So far it has been a status of a limited liability company or of an individual entrepreneur. The LIFE Program proposes that social enterprises should be given a special status due to their important social and economic role and that this change of status could be effected by the (currently draft) *Law on Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion in the Republic of Armenia*, which will then pave the way for appropriate regulations.

Due to the Program, 19 social enterprises were established and more than 210 PWDs landed long-term jobs in social enterprises throughout the country.

## **Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with NGOs**

The LIFE Program helped NGOs to set up 10 social enterprises. They are located in Yerevan and in 6 regions of the country. Each social enterprise employed from 5 to 13 PWDs. The total number of PWDs who got jobs in social enterprises established by NGOs was over 110. These social enterprises engaged in service provision or in production sectors. The areas of their activities ranged from coffee and pastry bar, confectionary enterprise, sewing workshop and leather workshop, and legwear garments production to laser printing services to production of ecologically clean paper, electric devices and solar water heating systems. As projects, virtually all of them were continued even after the grant period.

Probably, the most impressive undertaking was Unison-Studio set up in Yerevan by *Unison* DPO. It provided a broad range of services. Among those were photography, video-making, photo restoration and photo and video editing. This initiative is remarkable in more ways than just one. To begin with, Yerevan municipality provided a rent-free office space. Secondly, the quality of provided services is high and satisfies even the most demanding customers. And last but not the least – the operation of the studio sends a message that PWDs have a considerable potential that can be realized even in a high-tech sector.

## **Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with business structures**

A number of business ventures applied to the LIFE Program for grants to set up a social enterprise. Eventually, 5 business projects went through. Those businesses (4 of them located in Yerevan and one in Gyumri) set up social enterprises or turned themselves into social enterprises and made consistent efforts to create inclusive and non-discriminatory environment. The total number of PWDs employed by them is over 50. In each social enterprise the number of PWD employees varied from 5 to 11.

Only one business “Babajanyan Harutyun” was run by a private entrepreneur. He employed PWDs at his enterprise that produced polyethylene films and bags.

The other four businesses were companies. One of the projects was implemented by Union of Information Technology Enterprises in cooperation with *Instigate mobile* LTD in ICT sector and employed 10 PWDs in it.

*Lentex* LLC, an enterprise specializing in socks and knitwear manufacturing in Gyumri, trained and hired 14 women with disabilities within the framework of the Public-Private Partnership component of the LIFE Program.

*Zartprint Ltd.* printing company not only hired PWDs but also used the “place and train” model to some extent. In fact, it provided professional training courses to 15 PWDs. Initially, those were “Photoshop”, “Design” “QuarkXPress” and “Publishing Technics” courses, which were later supplemented with “CorelDraw” and “Adobe Photoshop” courses and pre-printing and binding modules. 5 of those PWDs were hired by the company. 3 PWDs were appointed to the positions of Designer, Expert on Braille system printing and Administrator.

*Ordfilm* Filmmaking Company was the fourth business enterprise that set up a social enterprise. It, too, provided professional training to PWDs teaching them such challenging and specific courses as “Journalism and Interpretation”, “Photography and Image Staging”, “Television and Direction” and “TV Production and Management”. Within the life of the Program the Company trained at least 22 PWDs and hired 12 of them. Some of those PWDs worked as journalists, cameramen, producers and a TV Director.

The experience of particularly *Zartprint Ltd.* printing company and *Ordfilm* Filmmaking Company demonstrated that lack of relevant knowledge and skills and in general of an adequate qualification is a major problem in hiring PWDs. The companies screened many PWDs referred to them by ECs and DPOs and found out that there were few PWDs with even minimum skills and knowledge base that would allow building on that via training courses and subsequently employing them.

### **Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with municipalities**

In theory, establishing a social enterprise in cooperation with municipalities should not be difficult. However, as the experience of the LIFE Program demonstrates, creating integrated work spaces in the format of a social enterprise with municipalities is a time-consuming undertaking, which has to go through several stages with certain procedures and to get approval by local Councils throughout the entire process. During the Program lifetime 3 social enterprises were established that employed 29 PWDs.

Yerevan municipality initially was enthusiastic about 2 projects (establishing a greenhouse and sewing workshop) but later on reneged on its commitments.

Other 3 joint initiatives with municipalities in the regions proved a success, even though not without delays and bureaucratic and financial problems.

In cooperation with Vanadzor Municipality, “Netsuk” social enterprise was set up to provide community greening and sanitation works. The social enterprise employed 15 PWDs and the LIFE Program provided them with job mentoring and coaching services. It is noteworthy that monitoring

results showed that they all had been integrated in the local community and that their work was highly appreciated by city residents.

A 2,000 square-meter high-tech greenhouse was constructed in cooperation with Spitak municipality. 14 PWDs were employed by the end of the Program but there were plans to increase that number.

The initiative to establish a social enterprise in cooperation with Abovyan municipality was based on the successful model of social enterprise “Netsuk” in the city of Vanadzor. The social enterprise is basically a “gardening team” responsible for planting and maintaining public parks as well for greening and cleaning Abovyan community. 10 out of 15 employees are PWDs. The LIFE Program provided equipment and tools to the newly established social enterprise and conducted two-day training on Work Readiness and Life skills.

### **Organization of “Social enterprises” in cooperation with TVETs**

The idea behind the LIFE Program’s activities which aimed to support social enterprises in cooperation with TVETs was that those social enterprises can serve as incubators to provide internships and long-term employment for the best PWD students and at the same time can generate funds for sustainable provision of short-term education for PWDs. For Armenia, this is an innovative model of a social enterprise based on TVET institutions and it seeks to couple education with income generation.

There was only one project of setting up a social enterprise in cooperation with a TVET institution. It was a Printing House established on the basis of State College of Informatics in Yerevan. Its major sphere of business is digital painting. 10 PWDs were employed in the Printing House. The College went on with the undertaking even after the project ended.

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The LIFE Program not only helped to establish social enterprises giving funding, equipment and logistical support but also provided technical and psychological assistance to the PWDs involved in them. It organized or helped to organize numerous trainings for PWDs in question with a view to developing their skills and transferring knowledge in relevant fields, including management and branding.

In addition, in order to ensure sustainability of the social enterprises that were set up with its support the LIFE Program assisted in the establishment of the “Network of social enterprises and employers” (SEEN). The aim of the Network is information and experience sharing, capacity building and advocacy for PWD employment throughout Armenia. The Network serves as a platform for discussing problems in the legislative and regulatory frameworks as well as issues of fundraising, marketing and product exporting opportunities, product promotions and advertising, advantages and taxation regulations for social enterprises, etc. At the end of the Program the number of SEEN members grew to 24.

### **Section 13. Job placement of PWDs**

- *Individual meetings with employers*
- *Correspondence with employers*
- *Activation of Job clubs at Employment centers*

Working with employers so that they would employ PWDs is an important component of the Model. Within the LIFE Program framework dozens of meetings with over 115 employers or their representatives were initiated and held.

The Program reached out to employers both in Yerevan and in the regions, primarily to major employers, big companies and organizations but also to medium enterprises and individual entrepreneurs. It also made consistent efforts to bring on board and get support from such influential organization in the field as Union of Employers and Chamber of Commerce.

Numerous meetings were held with senior officials or heads of HR departments of banks (Central Bank of Armenia, Unibank, HSBC bank, Cascade Bank, ArdShinBank), all telephone companies operating in Armenia (Armenia Telephone Company/“ARMENTEL”, VivaCell MTS and Orange Ltd), Ministries (Ministry of Emergency Situations, Ministry of Health), textile and garment manufacturing companies (“Tosp,” RuzDan” LLC), dairy producing companies (“Marianna,” “Ashtarak Kat,” “Alpian” Ltd), confectionary industry (“Grand Candy”, “Elit Shant”), “Eurostan-Uyut” construction company, printing houses (“Noyan Tapan,” “Danielyan Print”), soft drinks producing company (“Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling Company/Armenia” CJSC), food-producing companies (“Apricot” LTD, “Atenk” LTD), “Mher Lilus” LLC company engaged in production of bleach, detergent powder and dishwashing liquids, trade companies selling various household appliances and electronic goods (“Sis Art and graphics”, “Zigzag” LLC), *Marriott Armenia* hotel, supermarket “Star,” *Security Dream Co. LTD* that maintains the national traffic monitoring system, copper foundry “ACP” in Alaverdi, Insurance company “Rosgostrakh” CJSC, *Bars Media*

Documentary Film Studio, private cable-TV companies, “GEMS De Luxe” LLC company engaged in natural and artificial stone polishing and Beauty Salon “Koket”.

Also held were meetings with representatives of Vanadzor Hydroelectric center (TPP), *Qarhanyan* education center and “Cons Alliance” Accounting center as well as with individual entrepreneurs Musoyan, Ardzakantsyan, G. Sokhakyanyan and L. Nalbandyan.

It is noteworthy that the LIFE Program also helped to establish and operate trial employment settings and supported introduction of remote workplaces. The latter relies on a computer-based system and can be made use of only in a limited range of professional work. Nevertheless, highly qualified PWDs who do professional work, which is not “tying” them to workplace but which requires or entails much information processing and sharing, sometimes in an online regime, can work from home, provided they have a reliable access to the Internet that would enable them to access databases and other computing resources in the employer’s office.

It is to a large extent due to its job placement efforts that the LIFE Program managed to secure employment for 643 PWDs over a 4-year period from January 2012 through July 2016.

#### **Section 14. Post placement support to PWDs, through**

- *Coaching services for PWDs (within the framework of the state program)*
- *Psychological support for PWDs*
- *Mentoring*

More than 400 PWD beneficiaries of the LIFE Program job placement activities were provided with post-placement support by the LIFE program team and partner NGOs. The type of post-placement support (psychological support, coaching services, mentoring) was determined based on needs assessment conducted through visits and interviews. To make sure that post-placement support is provided in a timely and efficient manner the partner NGOs maintained regular communication with those PWDs (including phone calls, emails, Skype).

A Job Coach system was introduced by the Program. Upon job placement, when necessary a PWD was supported by a Job Coach who would conduct a follow-up monitoring and act as an intermediary between the employer and the PWD. The role of Job Coaches was for the most part performed by social workers from partner DPOs.

A “two-coach” approach was piloted and used by the Program: Initially the EC staff interacts with the PWD and employer, and then a Job Coach continues coaching and follow-up so as to provide support to the PWD. Job Coaches’ responsibilities included also provision of *consultations* to

PWDs regarding the latter's capacities, abilities and work requirements, and necessary *guidance* to employers to ensure adequate working conditions for PWDs.

## CHAPTER THREE. RESEARCH

Research is a third integral component of the Model. Research is, *inter alia*, an important tool to identify problems, needs and perceptions, to better analyze, assess and evaluate the experience, to monitor progress and to find effective and creative solutions.

Within the framework of the Model, the most useful, easily applicable and cost-effective methods of research include public opinion polls, baseline and endline surveys as well as assessments and evaluations.

### Section 15. Public Opinion Poll<sup>35</sup>

Early on in the Program, a benchmark poll was conducted to gather information with a view to making necessary adjustments and to enhancing effectiveness of subsequent decisions. Specifically, the main goal of the poll was to identify public opinions about and attitudes towards PWDs and the problems, particularly employment-related problems that PWDs face.

The poll was conducted through questionnaire-based standardized interviews in Yerevan and 4 initial target regions (Ararat, Gegharkunik, Shirak and Lori). A stratified random sample was used to interview 1,005 male and female respondents in the 18-64 age group.

12 hypotheses were formulated in the research plan and were tested in the course of the poll.

4 hypotheses were completely validated. Those include the public perception of a PWD as a person with visible or obvious health problems, superficial knowledge about and understanding of the typology of disabilities, negative attitude of the general public to PWDs' employment and the lack of employers' awareness of the state programs that support PWDs' employment.

5 hypotheses were partly confirmed. Those are the hypotheses that the public at large:

-on the whole has a negative attitude towards PWDs,

- has very general and superficial information about and understanding of the problems that PWDs face in hiring and employment,
- believes that PWDs encounter a negative attitude at a work place,
- rejects the idea that PWDs should have equal employment rights and responsibilities,
- and that most employers are not eager to employ PWDs.

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<sup>35</sup> *Report on Public Opinion Poll About People with Disabilities and Their Employment*. Yerevan: Save the Children, 2012.

Finally, 3 hypotheses were rejected. Those were hypotheses that the public very general and superficial information about and understanding of PWDs' everyday problems and of the types of support needed by PWDs and is not ready or is hardly willing to work with PWDs in the same workplace.

The findings clearly indicate that there is lack of public awareness and understanding of what constitutes disability and of a number of problems faced by PWDs in their daily lives, in job search, hiring and employment. At the same time, most respondents are willing to have PWDs as co-workers.

The conclusions were reached that there is a need for large-scale public awareness-raising about disabilities and their typology, that educational and employment opportunities for PWDs should be expanded and that PWDs are entitled to adjustments and accommodations of the working environment and conditions.

Currently, an end-of the-program poll is underway. Its findings will be instrumental not only in conducting assessment of the LIFE Program's impact through public perceptions and in making a comparative analysis of the current situation with the *status quo ante* but also in helping policy-makers to make better-informed choices when formulating future policies and to ensure that the Action Plans are better focused and targeted and thus more effective.

### **Section 16 Survey among PWDs and main service providers on PWD employment and vocational education issues<sup>36</sup>**

This qualitative study of major aspects of PWD employment was developed and implemented by LIFE Program of Save the Children in collaboration with the IOM Armenia Office. It was conducted in the capital city of Yerevan and in four regions of Armenia (Ararat, Shirak, Lori and Gegharkunik). The rationale behind the study was that employment is one of the best channels for social integration of PWDs and the most important tool for improving their living standards and chances for a higher socioeconomic status. Employment helps to decrease the PWDs' poverty rate and is conducive to enhancing their political and citizen participation. Effective policy interventions can expand economic opportunities for PWDs encompassing employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship. By identifying PWD employment needs and barriers to their employment the study aimed to help policy-makers make better-informed choices in formulating policies. It was designed as a baseline assessment of the PWD employment needs and barriers.

The objectives of the study included *finding out* what attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers to PWD employment exist and how they can be eliminated, what employment needs

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<sup>36</sup> *Employment of People with Disabilities in Armenia: Needs and Barriers. Report on Qualitative Study Findings.* Yerevan: Save the Children and IOM, 2013.

PWDs rank as a priority and how those are correlated with the context of socioeconomic realities and existing opportunities, *identifying* effective strategies and positive factors in job search and retention and effective policy measures for improving workplace physical and psychological conditions and a wider social environment, *proposing* high-impact policy changes and *exploring* a gender dimension of all the issues addressed in the study.

The study was conducted through a survey that focused on perspectives and perceptions of three groups of main stockholders: 50 PWDs, 9 employers and 6 representatives of Employment Centers. The method of a structured key informant interview was used in case of employers and EC representatives and a method of an in-depth structured interview in case of PWDs.

The survey findings clearly indicate that most Armenian PWDs want to be active and productive citizens and to be accepted and treated as equals by the society at large. Even though they need social support, their priority is to improve their socioeconomic situation primarily through their own efforts. And that explains their focus on the existing opportunities for employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship. PWDs expect a more friendly and proactive stance of the Parliament and the Government, including expansion of economic opportunities for PWDs, provision of economic incentives to employers to hire PWDs, and taking effective measures to improve workplace adjustment, conditions and environment for PWDs. An important role is assigned by all groups of respondents to quotas as an effective instrument for PWDs to obtain and maintain employment and to supported and sheltered employment. Efforts to introduce and maintain effective institutional and legal mechanisms for ensuring PWD job security need to be complemented with promotion of culture of acceptance and equality as a powerful tool to eliminate entrenched negative stereotypes and discriminatory public attitudes. The survey also identified mostly unmet need of special programs of vocational training and professional development for PWDs and highlighted the lack of adequate education and skills as a barrier to PWD employment. As regards the gender dimension of the issues explored by the study, the survey findings demonstrate that women with disabilities are less likely to be employed than men with disabilities, that a higher percentage of them live at or below the poverty level and that they are to a greater extent involved in reproductive economy than their male counterparts.

The survey results helped to formulate concrete recommendations as to how create a favorable legislative and policy environment, what measures should be taken in the economic sphere and what specific awareness-raising activities and interventions in education sphere could better address PWDs' needs and improve their social and economic status.

## Section 17. Assessment and documentation of experience, initiatives and innovations

Another important end-of-the-program research project focusing on PWD employment was conducted in December 2015. Its goal was to document the experience of social enterprises established/enlarged within the framework of the Program<sup>37</sup>. The Report is based on the analysis and assessment of the operation of the social enterprises established within the framework of the LIFE Program and is proposed for subsequent replication and expansion in the Republic of Armenia. It is intended for the RoA Government, international and local organizations, employers and companies with a view to assisting their efforts to integrate PWDs in the workplace and to further promote social entrepreneurship in this country.

A comprehensive SWOT analysis was undertaken on the basis of the qualitative study findings as well as of a desk review, on-site visits and observation of the activities of 18 social enterprises established with support from the LIFE Program in 2013-2015 in Yerevan and 7 regions. Those social enterprises were established through cooperation with businesses, local NGOs, local self-government bodies and TVETs and so far have provided training, capacity-building and long-term jobs to over 200 PWDs.

The qualitative study data for the SWOT analysis were collected through 41 semi-structured interviews with main stakeholders, *viz.* NGO leaders (9), heads of limited liability companies and individual entrepreneurs (9), PWDs (18, including 13 women and 5 men) and employees without disabilities (5) and through an in-depth interview with a representative of the State Employment Agency of the RoA Ministry of Labor and Social Issues.

The questionnaires, which had been drawn up for each category of the respondents, focused on 3 main areas of concern: topicality, social and economic effectiveness and sustainability of social enterprises.

The study findings clearly indicate that social enterprises are a very positive development in more ways than just one. They are more likely than other businesses to provide or promote an integrated working environment, to embrace and put into practice an idea of the workplace adaptation, to encourage training and professional development of PWDs and to boost their self-confidence.

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<sup>37</sup> *Model: Fostering employment for people with disabilities through establishment of social enterprises*. Based on the experience of the Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment (LIFE) for people with disabilities Program. Yerevan: Save the Children, 2016.

Another important finding was that employment in a social enterprise was conducive to PWDs' social integration as well, since a significant proportion of employed PWDs started going out and socializing with people more often and to develop new contacts and make friends.

Social effectiveness of the social enterprises under study was further demonstrated by the fact that they helped to raise community awareness, albeit to a modest degree, about PWDs' rights and issues, especially in the field of employment. It is noteworthy that social enterprises do have a positive impact on PWDs' living standards.

the study also provided quite a detailed discussion of a complex and intricate issue of economic effectiveness of social enterprises. The majority of the social enterprises set up with entrepreneurs is cost-effective and self-sufficient and ensures medium or high productivity, whereas those established in cooperation with NGOs and TVETs are not. Those social enterprises that were created through cooperation with local self-government bodies do not pursue profit-making and are commissioned by municipalities to provide services. In that context, the study has confirmed that the established quotas and privileges granted by State programs aimed to promote PWD employment play an important positive role.

The study was instrumental in identifying macro-, meso- and micro-level problems associated with operation of social enterprises and in showing what problems are or can be resolved.

The findings of the study can be used by policymakers to improve legislative and regulatory frameworks, to draw up, implement and monitor effective programs and to improve social and economic status of PWDs through new employment opportunities.

The study contains a number of recommendations and not only for government entities but also to civil society organizations and to existing and future social enterprises.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The goal of the LIFE Program is to promote equal employment opportunities and access to employment as a basic human right for PWDs so as to facilitate their labor market integration and social inclusion. The Model has been designed to contribute to the creation of such conditions under which labor market integration and social inclusion of PWDs can become a reality.

Five years of application of the Model of Vocational Education and Employment for PWDs developed by the LIFE Program have demonstrated that it is functional, effective, flexible, improvable and, no less importantly, synergetic. The Model seeks to provide a holistic approach

and response to the issues of PWDs' employment and vocational education needs. Furthermore, it is interactive and synergetic because it entails not only much interaction but also feedback and capitalizes on coordinated, concerted and collaborative efforts<sup>38</sup>. The success of the Model is predicated on close collaboration between an entity in charge of the Model implementation and national and international partners (including central and regional public administration bodies and local governments, civil society organizations and private sector) and on close coordination of all the activities undertaken according to the Action Plan.

The Model has a potential to be modified according to lessons learned and to changing circumstances and thus to be replicated with better results. The Model builds on the success stories of and lessons learned from an extensive international experience and has been adapted and localized to specific needs of Armenia, while its underlying philosophy, core principles and basic elements have been retained.

Of course, an in-depth and thorough assessment is needed to provide an impartial, balanced and comprehensive evaluation of the Model, which is beyond the scope and capacity of this paper. Besides, a whole set of quantitative and qualitative indicators have to be designed for that purpose.

An end-of-the-program opinion poll can serve as a useful tool for getting information and perceptions about an impact made by the application of the Model and its constituent components, about the effectiveness of the implementation strategy and process, about the untapped potential of the target groups, stakeholders and the society at large and about ideas how the needs and interests of PWDs could be better served by ensuring equality of opportunity and improved access to vocational education and employment. Another tool could be a database of all the activities, registering implementation, progress, problems and challenges, failures, etc., and thereby keeping track of the Model application-related developments and facilitating efforts aimed to take a corrective action.

However, tangible positive outcomes of the Model implementation are obvious and have been publicly noted by Government officials, experts, representatives of the public and private sectors, donor organizations, PWDs and civil society organizations.

The “quantitative” positive outcomes speak for themselves. To recapitulate some of them:

- At least 900 YWDs, 750 parents and 200 teachers, social workers, psychologists and EC staff members took part in professional orientation meetings. Over 500 of those YWDs

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<sup>38</sup> *Coordination Working Groups (CWGs)* are just but one mechanism. CWGs include representatives of MLSI, regional authorities and SESA, TVETs, Trade Unions, NGOs and partner DPOs as well as employers and PWDs.

subsequently enrolled in TVET institutions and many others took short-term vocational training courses. 670 PWDs beneficiaries of the LIFE Program have graduated from or become students of TVET institutions.

- The capacity of about 1,150 teaching and administrative staff members of 90 TVET institutions was developed for working with PWDs.

- At least 553 PWDs among the LIFE Program's beneficiaries are now gainfully employed.

- More than 500 PWDs have taken the MAST test.

- At least 1,000 PWDs beneficiaries of the LIFE Program took short-term vocational training courses receiving knowledge and skills, which are in demand on the labor market.

- At least 240 LIFE Program beneficiaries completed professional internships.

- Over 150 SEA and EC employees received in-depth training

- 19 social enterprises were established and over 210 PWDs got long-term jobs in social enterprises throughout the country.

More than 400 PWD beneficiaries of the LIFE Program job placement activities were provided with post-placement support.

The “qualitative” positive outcomes include gradual but noticeable changes in the public mentality that are reflected at the levels of legislation, policy, strategic planning, practical actions and public attitudes and perceptions. The Model was instrumental in supporting the shift from medical to social and then to bio-psycho-social model of disability that completely changes the policy vision and perspectives. Indeed, the Model is an important tool that helps to operationalize a policy shift from mere social protection to social inclusion, and that also means transcending de jure equality and attaining substantive equality through equality of opportunity. It is no coincidence that the Armenian Government declared 2016 a year of equal opportunities for PWDs.

The Model embraces a human rights-based approach stressing the priority of respect for PWDs' rights and opportunities. From that perspective and due to its above-mentioned characteristics the Model is an effective tool for achieving the major goal of promoting equal employment opportunities and access to employment for PWDs as a basic human right, through vocational education and job placement of PWDs.

The Model has a potential to demonstrate that PWDs are not a liability but an asset for employers and society and that approach is grounded in a combination of humanitarian and social and economic considerations.

It is important to bear in mind that its research component should be further enhanced because it is an efficient way to identify problems and challenges encountered by PWDs and other stakeholders and to propose well-substantiated solutions.

The Model supports a balance between the traditional “train and place” model and the innovative “place and train” model. It is noteworthy that the Model fits into the logic of the well-known so-called “Value Chain” Employment Framework, which consists of Assessment, Training, Placement and Support components.

The Model can be used in the process of the development of the new National Strategy for social inclusion and integration of PWDs<sup>39</sup>. The earlier, *2006-2015 National Strategy for Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Armenia* was by and large grounded in a “medical” model of disability. The inertia has not been overcome yet, even though the UN Convention was ratified in 2010. The ratification means transition from “medical” to “social” model of disability, from an institution-based to rights-based approach. Therefore, in December 2011 the Armenian Government adopted the *RoA Concept Note on Preserved Workability* that aims to facilitate the said transition and to lay the groundwork for eventually introducing the “bio-psycho-social” model of disability. And it is on this model that the new National Strategy for social inclusion and integration of PWDs should be based.

Finally, the application of the Model confirmed importance of a number of actions that were known to experts and practitioners but most employers, nondisabled employees, decision-makers and large segments of the public were not aware of.

To mention but a few: it confirmed importance of expanding the practice of on-the-job training of PWDs and complementing it, when necessary, with shadowing, and the practice of internships in private sector and in public institutions, and of establishing a Working Group as a liaison between public and private employers, State agencies and civil society organizations, including DPOs. In addition, it also confirmed importance of promoting a non-discriminatory attitude towards PWDs among employers and nondisabled employees.

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<sup>39</sup> The new Strategy should build on the *Action Plan for the National Strategy on Human Rights Protection* (adopted in February 2014), which has a separate section devoted to PWDs (Section XI “Rights of Persons with Disabilities”) that focuses on ensuring equality of opportunity, physical accessibility, safe environment, social integration of PWDs and attention to their special needs. See: RoA Government 27 February 2014 Decree № 303 “For Approval of the Plan of Actions for the National Strategy on Human Rights protection.”

The Model is not set in stone. It is an evolving structure that has yet to be finalized and that needs a lot of adjustments and fine-tuning depending on concrete circumstances as well as on priorities and preferences.