

HVO's Impact in Viet Nam: Beyond Improving Health Care to Empowering People with Disabilities

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In May 1968, as a young Marine, I was medevaced from Viet Nam with a spinal cord injury received in combat. In August 1996, I returned to Viet Nam as an official in the Clinton Administration. My agency, the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, was working with an NGO (Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped - VNAH) USAID, and the Vietnamese government to assist in bringing law, policy and programs as they relate to people with disabilities to the Vietnamese. After several trips to and from, I realized that, as in the US, without the active political involvement and input of Vietnamese with disabilities, success was unlikely.

On a trip to Hanoi in 1998, I met Larry Wolfe, HVO's Country Director for Viet Nam. To my delight, I learned that Larry, with the support of HVO's home office, had organized a number of international NGOs into a loose coalition called the Disability Forum. They exchanged ideas and suggestions for inclusion of people with disabilities in their programs. Under Larry's leadership, HVO became the home and secretariat for the Disability Forum and Larry hired a couple of local people with disabilities to staff the Forum. Larry and his able assistant Minh mentored these individuals and they are now leaders in Viet Nam's growing disability rights movement.

When I left the Clinton Administration and moved to Hanoi in October 2000 to head VNAH's Hanoi-based policy office, I joined the Disability Forum and supported HVO's work as the able staff there gradually grew the Forum. Under HVO's leadership, we assisted local groups of Vietnamese with disabilities all around the country to form "self-help" groups and to join in the Disability Forum. In late 2004, again with HVO's and Disability Forum support and encouragement, these now numerous "self-help" groups separated from the Disability Forum and formed their own coalition to further the empowerment, rights and services for Vietnamese with disabilities. This network of local organizations thrives today and continues to make a lasting impact on improving their rights and opportunities.

This work of HVO's, beyond its usual health care related support, has had a lasting impact that continues to grow. By directly involving and empowering Vietnamese with disabilities to take control of their own lives and advocacy, HVO has enabled them to grow into an effective social and political force in their own country. They have been able to effectuate profound changes in their access to public facilities and services, education, health care, transportation, recreation and employment. As a result, Viet Nam is one of the leaders in disability rights and services in Southeast Asia. I am proud I got to work with and support HVO. Well-done HVO!

John A. Lancaster recently retired as the Executive Director of the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), the oldest disability grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. NCIL advances the independent living philosophy and advocates for the full integration and participation of people with disabilities in society. Currently, Mr. Lancaster serves as the Treasurer of the Board of Trustees for Handicap International Federation (HI) and serves on the Board of Directors of Handicap International, USA. He also serves as a Board Member of the United States International Council on Disabilities (USICD) as Past President. Mr. Lancaster serves on the Board of the Global Universal Design Commission and the Potsdam (New York) Humane Society.