

‘Agents of change’ help entrepreneurs with disabilities build sustainable businesses

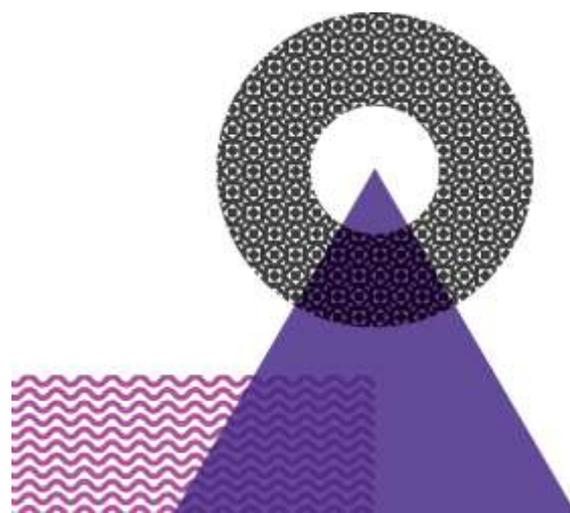
By Andrew Thompson



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Jimmy Febriyadi is a powerful advocate for the rights of disabled people in Indonesia. Nearly three years ago he was one of the co-founders of the [Disability Empowerment Centre \(DEC\)](#) based in Gunungkidul in the province of Yogyakarta, on Indonesia’s densely populated island of Java. DEC started out with only 13 members. Now it has 14 regional groups and just under 300 members. It has a lot to do. The protection and promotion of disabled people is still a neglected area in Indonesia. Jimmy says there is still a lot of stigma and ignorance, with many people thinking disability is a curse. Meanwhile people that are disabled themselves often lack self-confidence about their ability to be productive members of society.

“What we are trying to do”, Jimmy says, “is to address the issues because the disabled are Indonesia’s biggest minority group. Around 10% of the population has some kind of disability. Indonesia has a population of 260m people so 10% of that means that there are around 26m with disabilities. Here in Gunungkidul we are only a small part of the country, but hopefully we can replicate our project to other areas.”



What Jimmy refers to as ‘the project’ took shape over a number of years. He had come across Robert Foster of [Red Ochre](#), a London-based consultancy, at a meeting in Jakarta. They had exchanged ideas about how to help disabled people, going beyond simple advocacy to developing a network of social and creative enterprises. When the British Council issued a call for applications to its DICE Fund, DEC and Red Ochre were able to come up with a detailed approach. They shaped a project called Economic Empowerment for Entrepreneurs with Disability. The central idea is to increase the business capacity of disabled entrepreneurs, focusing initially on training 28 ‘agents of change’.

Robert says one challenge was that DEC is an association of disability groups. “Using British language, it is a cooperative of cooperatives” he notes. With 14 member associations this increases the complexity but also the opportunity for impact and leverage. Up to two representatives from each group are trained, and they cascade their training to their own cooperatives, who cascade it onwards to their own members. “So all the learning and the capacity building trickles down two or three layers” Robert explains. “Even though each training session involved up to 26 people, that then cascaded out to other organisations, and it cascaded out to local villages, so that is quite a big geographical footprint.”

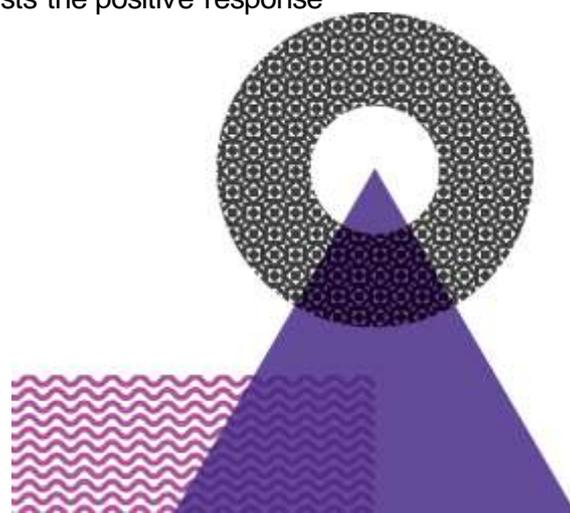
The baseline is that a number of disabled groups already operate small businesses. About 20% of them are producing traditional foodstuffs. The remaining 80% are working on handcrafts like necklaces, wallets, floormats and bedcovers. They have received a relatively low level of artisanal training.

What Jimmy and Robert are trying to do is to take those social enterprises up to the next level. Jimmy says, “We are giving them help on how to manage their businesses, how to manage the financial side, and we are giving them mentoring and curation, because we want the products made by our members to be of good quality. We don’t want them to be bought out of pity. We want them bought because they are useful and of good quality.” Robert adds, “what we are telling them is ‘OK, you can make this one thing; how do you develop this one thing into a better product, into a range of products, how do you advertise it and market it, how do you run a business, how do you engage with your customers, how do you manage money?’” In his words, the project’s aim is to take one product or skill, develop it, and put a “wrapper” around it to turn that one skill into a sustainable business.

Some adjustments have already been made. Market research has prompted something of a switch to producing beds for pets rather than bed covers for humans. And association members are working in a more collaborative fashion, a fundamental shift in mindset. They are placing a greater emphasis on innovative products as well as on environmentally sustainable ones. The disability associations have taken a decision to drop plastics and to promote recycling and the circular economy.

There have been surprises, too. On the negative side Jimmy points to the sheer difficulty of catering for isolated villages with primitive communication links, along with incredibly wide ranges of age, education and types of disabilities. The ‘agents of change’ have proven vital to dealing with these difficulties. On the plus side however, he lists the positive response from local government and media, particularly after there was media coverage of DEC members going on a study visit to London.

Robert, on the other hand says the London visit surprised him for a different reason. He admits to making an implicit assumption that London has best-in-class mobility provision for the disabled. Yet he found out that London buses are in fact not equipped to deal with more than one wheelchair



passenger per bus. “It is incredibly difficult to travel as a group of disabled people, even in somewhere like London with seemingly good infrastructure. It’s shocking! In the end we caught black cabs. They are the best way for disabled people to get around London. It opened my eyes. I never would have thought of it as an issue.”

Both say the project has been very moving. While success will be partly measured in numbers – how many social enterprises are formed, how many new products are sold, whether the enterprises thrive and prosper – it is also about achieving a sense of empowerment, and confidence, and it is about the spiritual and emotional well-being of disabled people. Robert tells the story of meeting a man with no hands who drives a motorbike and how this experience underscored for him how emotionally and physically resilient disabled people can be and that they are marginalised not for a lack of skills but for a lack of opportunity. Jimmy says he was surprised and moved by one of his members who made his first ever sale, for 15,000 rupiah – about £1 – and who cried and bowed down in gratitude.

