

# The Educator



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## HIGHER EDUCATION Special Issue



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**The International Council for Education of  
People with Visual Impairment**

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## CONTENTS

1. Message from the President and CEO	02
2. Message from the Editor	03
3. Chronology of Higher Education Project	04
4. Key Publications	13
5. The Nippon Foundation in the services for persons with disabilities	14
6. Resource Development in STEM Area	16
7. Higher Education Project for Students with Visual Impairment in the Philippines	18
8. Higher Education Project for Students with Visual Impairment in Cambodia	29
9. A Reflection on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Students with Visual Impairments in North America - Tiffany Wild, Tina Herzberg and Danene Fast	39
10. Parent Perspectives - Angelette Akkermans	45

## Our International Partners





## Message from The President & CEO



Dear Readers,

In this issue, we are delighted to showcase the higher education and transition to employment initiative of ICEVI. The issue chronicles the project's development, beginning with a tentative survey in Indonesia in 2005. We pay tribute to our higher education partner organisations, the Nippon Foundation, the Overbrook School for the Blind, and our seven local partner organisations: Krousar Thmey (Cambodia), Pertuni (Indonesian Blind Association, Indonesia), Resources for the Blind, Inc. (Philippines), Sao Mai Vocational and Assistive Technology Center for the Blind (Vietnam), Myanmar National Association of the Blind (Myanmar), National University of Laos (Lao PDR), and the Mongolian National Federation of the Blind (Mongolia). It is with thanks to our collaborative partnerships with these organisations that more than 2500 young men and women with visual impairment have achieved success in their higher education studies, and over 300 higher education graduates have secured employment.

The higher education initiative demonstrates, in practical terms, the United Nations call for higher education as a means of improving the quality of life of individuals through greater knowledge of health practices and services, greater economic stability and security, more stable employment, and greater job satisfaction. The right to higher education is proclaimed in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goal 4, Target 3, which states: *"By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university"*. Progress towards achieving SDG 4 Target 3 is exemplified in the ability of our higher education students with vision impairment to continue their studies online during the COVID-19 lockdowns of their higher education institutes. This issue includes a reflection on the impact of the pandemic on education of students with visual impairments in North America.

In concluding this message, we look forward to sharing details of our 70th anniversary celebrations in future issues of The Educator and the ICEVI E-News.

**Frances Gentle**  
President

**M.N.G. Mani**  
Chief Executive Officer



## Message from **The Editor**

This issue of *The Educator* is a bit overdue, but we're happy to welcome you to a special issue highlighting ICEVI's Higher Education Program. You will learn about the overall project, as well as about its implementation in Cambodia and the Philippines. The project has impacted more than 2800 students and adults so far and is still growing. The project was led by our President Emeritus Larry Campbell (who never seems to reach retirement) and our CEO, M.N.G. Mani. What great work they have done!

We also have a Covid-19 article submitted by university colleagues at The Ohio State University and the University of South Carolina Upstate. They discuss the challenges, unexpected consequences, and future implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the education of students with visual impairment in North America. We appreciate their submission and would like to hear from more of you about your pandemic experiences.

For the next issue, I welcome Nandini Rawal as an Associate Editor. Nandini is known to many of you as the former Treasurer of ICEVI, a position she held for many years, and as Executive Director of the Blind People's Association in India. She is also a gifted teacher and lecturer, particularly on children with visual and additional disabilities. Most importantly, she will bring an East-West balance to *The Educator* that is long overdue.

Future issues of *The Educator* will introduce you to our International Partners and to global issues affecting all of us. Be sure to check out [www.icevi.org](http://www.icevi.org) for submission deadlines for the each topical issue, and then submit your ideas, experiences, teacher research, and practice reports.

**Kay Alicyn Ferrell**

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# Chronology of Higher Education Project

In 2005 ICEVI conducted a simple survey on access to higher education by blind students in our East and West Asia regions. While the results of this survey research revealed no startling new information, it did help us to learn more about the factors that were making access to higher education so difficult and the drop-out rate, particularly at the thesis stage, so high. ICEVI shared those findings with The Nippon Foundation (TNF) knowing of their interest and focus on both higher education and the needs of persons with disabilities. This led Overbrook International and ICEVI to the development of a pilot program in two large cities in West Java, Indonesia in 2007.



International Council for Education of  
People with Visual Impairment

**A STUDY OF THE PRESENT STATUS OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION OF  
PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT  
IN THE ASIA REGION**



The initial objective of the pilot program was to determine whether by working with and through local NGO's (Mitra Netra and PERTUNI) and relevant government ministries we could create more inclusive and welcoming environments at the participating universities, improve the experience of blind students and reduce the drop-out rate. The lack of assistive technology and accessible learning materials were universally identified by project beneficiaries as their number one priority. The project therefore placed immediate attention on those areas by establishing resource centers in key locations and by developing technology training programs and simple public education materials for university staff and students.

At the end of the pilot year, evaluations were conducted at the project sites in Jakarta and Bandung. The results surpassed our most optimistic expectations. The project team, parents, and university faculty observed a marked change in student attitudes and performance. Students spoke of how much less tense and anxious they were with their new ability to access learning materials more independently and to be less dependent on fellow sighted students and family members. The drop-out rate was reduced and we even saw examples of students who had dropped out while attempting to conduct research for their thesis rejoining the university.

The success of the pilot program in Indonesia encouraged Overbrook, ICEVI, and The Nippon Foundation to consider expanding the project to other parts of Indonesia and to other countries in the region. It was at this time that a decision was made by Overbrook and ICEVI to develop a long-term plan that would allow us to collectively achieve the greatest outcomes by most efficiently utilizing available resources. We agreed this would best be achieved by dividing responsibilities. Overbrook through its ON-NET program would focus on the use of technology to expand access to primary and secondary education while ICEVI would focus on tertiary level education.

Initially, our objective was to expand enrollment in tertiary level education, but to do that we needed to identify and address the major barriers that were both limiting access and leading to high drop-out rates.

The project was extended to Philippines and Vietnam in 2008 followed by Cambodia in 2010, Myanmar in 2013, Lao PDR in 2014, and Mongolia in 2017. Larry Campbell, the then President of ICEVI, initiated the project and guided its implementation for more than a decade.

It became apparent that while each country faced its own unique challenges there was a consistent pattern of need that continued to emerge in each of the countries. The areas of greatest need were remarkably similar and always included (a) the need for access to assistive technology and training in its use, (b) the dearth of accessible learning materials, (c) the need for awareness and public education regarding the capabilities of blind learners and (d) the need for public policy changes that supported inclusion.

The next critical step in the process was to create a mechanism for the more effective exchange of information among the participating countries. The Higher Education Regional Advisory Committee became the platform for such exchanges and led to the identification of common challenges that could most efficiently be addressed at a regional level rather than by only repeating parallel actions in each country. This regional/network approach has led to some of the most important recent developments in the project, which have included such areas as (a) access to the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and



Mathematics) areas of the curriculum, (b) developing shared solutions on improving access to mathematics instruction, (c) identifying the need for soft-skills training to improve employment outcomes, (d) developing and adopting a specific training program for soft-skills training based upon a model developed in Indonesia, (e) developing new approaches to reaching out to employers to help them understand that a well-educated blind individual is one of the most overlooked resources in the labor market, and (f) regional collaboration in the development of low-cost open source solutions to a number of remaining technological challenges involving computerized braille production and text-to-speech engines.

The list below indicates the broad areas of work the higher education partners have been addressing over the years. Though not every project is addressing every activity, there are key practices carried out by the partners addressing the following areas.

1. Pre-university preparation training for visually impaired students
2. Awareness programs for higher education faculty members
3. Training of teachers on inclusion of students with visual impairment
4. Development of institution-based resource support centres
5. Counseling to visually impaired persons
6. Preparation and distribution of tactile learning materials
7. Preparation of audio books and digital materials
8. Providing technology training and support to visually impaired students
9. Training of trainers in using technology
10. Establishing online library facilities
11. Lending equipment to visually impaired children for coping with higher education
12. Exhibitions about education of blind students at universities
13. Development of literature on advocacy
14. Working with parents
15. Working with organisations of disabled people
16. Strengthening Mathematics education for effective transition from schools to higher education
17. Seminars on employment opportunities
18. Organising Country Champions programs of blind students
19. Cooperation/networking with Governments



20. Soft skills development for visually impaired persons
21. Text-to-Speech engine development
22. Creation of employment opportunities in formal sectors
23. Facilitating unconventional employment
24. Development of Awareness creation Literature on employment
25. Forming student support groups

The project has enabled the admission of over 2800 students with visual impairment into higher education courses. Most of the earlier activities pertained to education, but the shift in focus to employment commenced in late 2015. The project has also enabled employment opportunities for over 300 persons with visual impairment, and this trust is continuing at present.

### **Key Impacts Created by the Project**

*Following are the impacts created by the higher education project in the region.*

1. Unique program implementation approach: Think globally and act locally
2. Recognizing country specific characteristics in planning
3. Benchmarking – exchange of training
4. Optimum use of local expertise
5. Development of local leaders as key to success
6. Inter-Governmental Linkages
7. NGOs and Civil Societies involvement
8. Advocating for proactive legislations in member countries
9. Ownership to ensure sustainability

### **Focus of the Current Project Cycle 2021-23**

The project partners are aware that the higher education project is an evolution from “creating learning opportunities for visually impaired students” to “empowering them through appropriate employment opportunities.” Most of the recent activities of the projects are geared towards creating positive climates for employment opportunities and preparing the students adequately to succeed in the work environment. Therefore, the current phase of the project is focusing on the following broad priorities:

- *Employer and employment focused activities.*
- *Preparation of visually impaired persons for successful employment.*
- *Advocating for proactive legislations and measures promoting empowerment.*

The project countries are classified into two categories. Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam, which commenced the program in the early years, are currently focusing more on employment related activities, soft skills etc. Though the shift is towards employment and ensuring sustainability, these countries are continuing to provide technical assistance to higher education institutions in strengthening their efforts to educate children with visual impairment and organising appropriate training activities based on needs. The second category includes Cambodia, Laos, and Mongolia, which are still focusing on access to higher education.

*The six implementing partners of the project are as follows:*

### **1. Resources for the Blind, Inc., Philippines**

RBI was started in the Philippines in 1988 with a goal to develop and implement programs that will remove the hindrances, and to provide services, training, materials, and equipment needed in order for those who have visual impairment to reach their fullest potential in life. The main office is in Cubao, Quezon City, with two regional offices in Cebu City and Davao City, which serve the central and southern Philippines, respectively.

Website: [www.blind.org.ph](http://www.blind.org.ph)

### **2. Sao Mai Vocational & Assistive Technology Center for the Blind, Vietnam**

Sao Mai Vocational & Assistive Technology Centre for the Blind was established in 2001 with the main goal of promoting the usage of assistive technology in education and employment of persons with visual impairment. The Centre has also offered consultancy to other organisations in assistive technology.

Website: [www.saomaicenter.org](http://www.saomaicenter.org)

### **3. Pertuni (Indonesian Blind Association), Indonesia**

Pertuni is a national blind member-based organization in Indonesia and it has chapters in 33 provinces and branches in 210 cities/districts throughout Indonesia. The Pertuni plays an important role in lobbying for the rights of persons with visual

impairment. In 2015, Mrs. Aria Indrawati, served as the first female president of Pertuni and she has just been re-elected to serve another term.

Website: <http://pertuni.idp-europe.org>

#### **4. Krousar Thmey, Cambodia**

Created in the refugee camps at the border with Thailand in 1991, Krousar Thmey ("New Family" in Khmer) is the first Cambodian foundation supporting underprivileged children. It is a non-political and non-religious organisation. Since its creation, Krousar Thmey aims to enable the integration of underprivileged and disabled children through education and appropriate support in accordance with their traditions and beliefs.

Website: [www.krousar-thmey.org](http://www.krousar-thmey.org)

#### **5. National University of Laos (NUOL), Lao PDR**

Founded in 1996, the National University of Laos is located in Vientiane. The University has many Faculties specialising in humanities, science, management, etc. The higher education program for persons with visual impairment comes under the Faculty of Letters. The program also collaborates with other organisations of/for the blind, which focus on advocacy, education, networking, etc., to empower persons with visual impairment.

Website: [www.nuol.edu.la](http://www.nuol.edu.la)

#### **6. Mongolian National Federation of the Blind (MNFB), Mongolia**

The Mongolian National Federation of the Blind (MNFB) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in 1978, with the mission to defend the rights of blind people living in Mongolia. The MNFB pays attention to education, employment, social protection, and many other issues related to blind people's interests through all of Mongolia. The federation is functioning for approximately 9,600 people who are blind, have low vision or other kinds of visual impairment through 23 provincial branches and districts, and it has councils on elderly, women, sports, culture and youths.

Website: [www.mnfb.mn](http://www.mnfb.mn)

In Myanmar, the Myanmar National Association of the Blind (MNAB) and the Dagon University served as the ICEVI project partners until 2019..

## **Innovative and Original Aspects of the Project**

ICEVI is glad that the higher education project is owned by the implementing countries, which is a basic criterion for ensuring its sustainability. This could be made possible because of the recognition of the local specific characteristics in the implementing countries. When the project was introduced ICEVI kept the overall objectives and the mission intact, which was to increase enrolment, using technology for enhancing the skills of visually impaired individuals, creating employment opportunities, etc., but the project did not prescribe a uniform method of implementation for countries. Each partner was given the freedom to make an assessment of the needs within the country and match those in line with the overall mission and vision of the project. Therefore, the treatment of each country as a unique implementing entity speaks to the uniqueness of this project.

Secondly, the countries that are implementing the project represent a variety of organizations. In Indonesia and Mongolia the project is implemented by organizations of blind persons, whereas in Philippines and Cambodia the project is implemented by the non-governmental organizations of repute which are involved with the work of disabled persons for many decades. In Vietnam, the program is implemented by a leading NGO where the decision-making rests with visually impaired persons. In Laos, the leading university, which is a government body, is implementing the project. Therefore, the variety of the institutions that are implementing the project bring a lot of unique experiences to it.

The third unique and original aspect of the project is the exchange of expertise among the project partners, who are brought once a year to the annual coordinators meeting where each project is asked to make a presentation particularly highlighting the unique learning experiences. The project partners exchange these learning experiences and expertise in organizing training programs in their own countries. For example, one country is used as a site for a study visit to learn a particular component of higher education, such as soft skill development, adaptation techniques in teaching, curriculum, etc., and another country is used to learn more about employment creation for persons with visual impairment. The local production of software and even assistive devices through the project is also unique. The text-to-speech (TTS) engine being developed in the Burmese language is a classic example for the local initiative and exchange of expertise among partners. The ON-NET (Overbrook-Nippon Network on

Educational Technology) is also implementing project activities in most of these countries and in some cases with the same partners that ICEVI is working with. Therefore, it was decided to have joint meetings of the coordinators of ON-NET and ICEVI to exchange experiences and also to review the activities supported by ON-NET and ICEVI in these countries to avoid any kind of duplication so that the resources of both the organizations can be put to optimum use.



The promotion of the Country Champions Program involving visually impaired individuals emerged as a forum to talk about the barriers they face and the strategies to overcome such barriers, providing a lot of feedback to the higher education and ON-NET Project activities. In summary, the higher education project

follows approaches that complement the work of the partners, and the sharing of expertise and knowledge among them will continue in the future too.

### **Impact and Long Term Effect of the Project**

The higher education project is helping the implementing partners to prepare young leaders among visually impaired persons who are becoming role models for other visually impaired persons in the respective countries. As a result, the higher education graduates in every country have become change agents and role models, and this has motivated many parents of children with visual impairment to send them to schools. In some countries, the organizations of persons with visual impairment are also using the graduates with visual impairment who have successfully completed their education as a result of the ICEVI-Nippon higher education project to work as counsellors to deliver motivational speeches in the parents' bodies and also in the public gatherings to encourage parents of visually impaired students to send their young children to school. Visually impaired individuals are also used by the implementing organizations to talk to employers to instill confidence in them that they can appoint more people with visual



impairment to jobs. Organization of job fairs and using visually impaired persons as change agents also has a profound impact on increasing the employability skills and employment opportunities for persons with visual impairment.



The higher education project has also resulted in policy changes in many countries. The presentation of reports and lobbying at the country level has helped many governments to make higher education inclusive and specific examples can be cited in this regard. The Decree on higher education issued by the Government of Indonesia, the free higher education opportunities initiated by Laos, and the introduction of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) curriculum facilitated by Universities in the Philippines, are some of the classic examples on how the project outcomes have impacted the policy as well as practices in many of these countries.

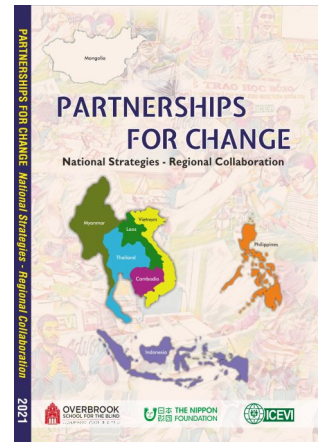
The importance of higher education is propagated by ICEVI through presentation of the higher education project outcomes in International Conferences and publications. As a result, the ICEVI regions are seeking support to replicate the higher education experience of East Asia in the other regions of ICEVI, particularly in the African continent, which has a huge need in the field of higher education for persons with visual impairment. In some of the implementing countries, funding for the higher education sector is reported to have increased, which is a remarkable achievement looking into the long-term impact in the disability sector. The Mathematics project being initiated by ICEVI is in the process of developing instructional videos. Mathematics is one of the neglected areas in the field of visual impairment and these instructional videos will help thousands of teachers to teach mathematics effectively to visually impaired students. These videos are also on the YouTube of ICEVI for public consumption so that any teacher or parent who is interested in teaching Mathematics will be able to refer to these videos.

**Therefore, the higher education project has long-term implications in terms of attitude changes, skills development, policy influences and the educational practices.**

# Key Publications

## Partnerships For Change: National Strategies - Regional Collaboration

An exclusive publication entitled **“Partnerships For Change: National Strategies — Regional Collaboration”** was released at the virtual World Blindness Summit held on 28-30 June 2021, which was attended by more than 3000 delegates from over 150 countries. The book was released by Mr Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman of The Nippon Foundation, and the publication was converted into E-pub format and circulated to over 4000 contacts of ICEVI and also posted on the ICEVI website [www.icevi.org](http://www.icevi.org)



## Transition to Employment: Experiences from Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam

While the publication “Partnerships For Change” has dealt with the area of employment to a reasonable extent, ICEVI and The Nippon Foundation are currently bringing out an exclusive publication on “Transition to Employment,” highlighting the key ingredients that should be in place to expand employment opportunities for persons with visual impairments. A series of deliberations arranged with the project partners, visually impaired individuals, employers, etc., helped the publication team to focus on three areas, namely STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) curriculum as a foundation for employment, soft skill development, accessible materials, and influencing proactive policies for employment. Visually impaired individuals and employees view that it is not the academic qualification alone that facilitates employment, but so many life skills as well as accessible methodologies that serve as springboards for successful employment.

Though the project partners have focused on these areas, ICEVI worked with specific partners in developing mastery in a particular expertise in order to assist other project partners and this model worked well for inter-regional networking and collaboration, which we had clearly explained in our publication “Partnerships For Change.” While development of technology skills and formulating legislations are crosscutting issues that have been focused on by all project countries, we would like to elaborate the three fundamental areas namely (a) STEM curriculum, (b) soft skills development and (c) accessible materials and employer orientation in this book.

For the STEM curriculum, we will primarily use the good practices of the Resources for the Blind, Philippines. The soft skills model initiated by our project partner Pertuni, Indonesia, is also described in detail followed by accessible materials and employer orientation by our partner Sao Mai Centre for the Blind, Vietnam. The book will be published in July/August 2022 in both print and digital versions.

# The Nippon Foundation in the services for persons with disabilities

Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman, The Nippon Foundation



*The international Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment will be publishing a book “**Transition to Employment: Lessons from the Philippines Vietnam and Indonesia**” and this book highlights Activities for Supporting People with Visual Impairment.*

*While sending a message for the publication, **Mr. Yohei Sasakawa**, Chairman, The Nippon Foundation (TNF), also highlighted the services rendered by the TNF in the disability sector. Following is the interview with Mr. Sasakawa.*

**Question** : Can you tell us about The Nippon Foundation's overseas projects for people with disabilities, including for those with visual impairment?

**Yohei Sasakawa** : For more than 50 years since the establishment of The Nippon Foundation, we have made support for people with disabilities one of the pillars of our activities, with projects in Japan and abroad aimed at helping people with disabilities participate more actively in society. We established scholarship programs at Gallaudet University and Rochester Institute of Technology in the United States to support deaf and hard-of-hearing students from around the world who have a desire to learn. In collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong, we developed a sign-language dictionary that is essential for deaf education. In six Southeast Asian countries, we established schools for training world-class prosthetists and orthotists. For people with visual impairment, in particular, we have for over 30 years worked with ICEVI and Overbrook School for the Blind in the United States to establish a network within Asia, use ICT to expand opportunities for visually impaired students to study at higher education level and improve their environment for study, and to promote projects for employment support.

**Question** : *This would mean that in many Asian countries, you have been training many leaders who have disabilities themselves, doesn't it? We heard that you have also started working with the business world recently. Can you elaborate?*

**Yohei Sasakawa** : We provided support in various countries and trained more than 3,000 leaders who themselves have disabilities. But on the other hand, we know that many people with disabilities, even after graduating from universities, could still not be employed in the jobs they wanted due to their disabilities and, even if they were employed, many could not bring out their full potential and ended up quitting their jobs. While we have provided direct support to persons with disabilities and tried to influence public institutions, that alone is not enough to change society. Unless we can bring about change in the business sector that makes up the mainstream in society, we cannot bring about a major change. With this in mind, we started to support The Valuable 500 (V500) that was launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019 as a network of 500 global companies to promote participation of people with disabilities in society on a global scale. Currently, we work with V500 to promote inclusion of people with disabilities through employment and the development of products and services targeted to customers with disabilities.

**Question** : *What are your expectations for the readers of this book *Transition to Employment*?*

**Yohei Sasakawa** : Right now, the momentum is building to promote greater participation of people with disabilities in society. For those of you students with visual impairment reading this book, I hope that the experiences of your predecessors in overcoming hardships to graduate from universities and become active members of society will serve as a useful reference as you strive to realize your own dreams. At the same time, I hope that you yourselves will also become role models for the future. For those of you in the education and business sectors, I hope that you will again come to understand that people with disabilities have the motivation and capacity to work and if given the right support, they can excel equally with those without disabilities. I strongly hope that you will cooperate actively to increase employment opportunities for people with visual impairment.



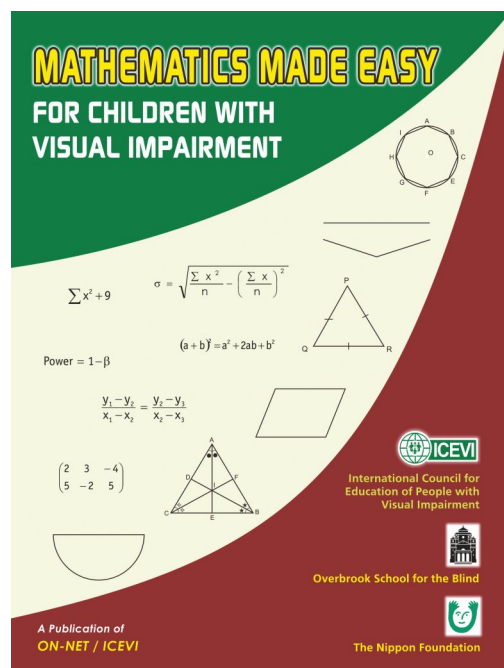
# Resource Development in STEM Areas

During the early years of ICEVI's Higher Education Project, options for selecting diversified courses were limited, as institutions mostly offered only conventional courses such as languages, humanities, education, etc., to visually impaired individuals. The first challenge was to break this barrier proving that visually impaired individuals could learn subjects dealing with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) so that their job



opportunities do not become limited to the traditional areas that have historically been open to visually impaired individuals. The drive of the Higher Education Project was to prepare visually impaired individuals to compete in the open job market and therefore equity in selection of courses became imperative. Brainstorming sessions with project partners, teachers who are visually impaired, learners, etc., clearly revealed the need for venturing into the STEM curricular areas and also highlighted the need for materials as well as training of teachers.

It was realised that the focus on STEM should emerge from schools so that the students coming out of secondary education and entering into higher education have the right mindset to pursue unconventional courses. This brought the first partnership of ICEVI and ON-NET in organising a



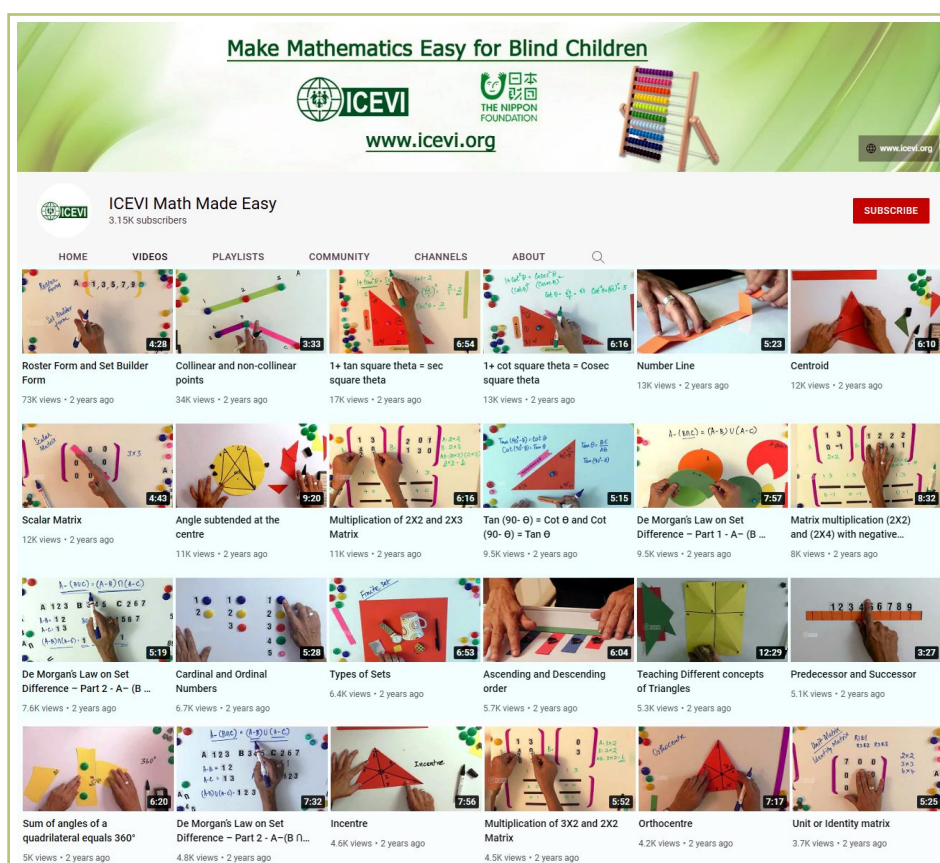
series of workshops on teaching mathematics to visually impaired children and also in the development of a publication titled, **“Mathematics Made Easy For Blind Children with Visual Impairment.”** The Nippon foundation supported the preparation of this publication, which at present is available in different world languages. This publication highlighting the methodology of teaching mathematics, learning techniques, content learning of mathematics, etc., has certainly made an impact and instilled confidence among teachers in taking up mathematics as a subject area in the school level itself. The Higher Education Project conducted many regional workshops involving master trainers from the project countries who took up the task of popularising this area in national and local levels. Not only this, ICEVI and ON-NET,



with the assistance from The Nippon Foundation, also supported the development of guidebooks on adaptation of mathematics and science concepts.

With a view to bring mathematics learning to the doorsteps of the learners, ICEVI also took up the challenge of preparing instructional videos on teaching mathematics and as of early 2022, there are 325 instructional videos describing the methods of teaching content areas in mathematics, learning abacus, concepts in geometry, trigonometry, etc. These videos can also be accessed through a dedicated YouTube channel, **“ICEVI Math Made Easy”** ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrmcpSzNg\\_9EXLbqExtVIAQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrmcpSzNg_9EXLbqExtVIAQ)).

Therefore, the development of the STEM area by the Higher Education Project took a reasonable time but the base has been solid. The effects are evident from the fact that sizeable numbers of students with visual impairment have started opting for courses related to mathematics, statistics, commerce, computer applications, etc., in contrast to the choices made by them in early 2000. The project countries of Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam, which commenced the higher education project in the early days, have carried out considerable work in the STEM area and also assisted other project partners in organising training for teachers and visually impaired students.



# Higher Education Project for Students with Visual Impairment in the Philippines

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## BACKGROUND

Resources for the Blind, Inc. (RBI) is a non-governmental organization duly licensed, since 1988, to provide programs and services to Filipinos with visual impairment. With over half a million visually impaired in the Philippines, RBI continues to design and implement programs that will enable persons with visual impairment to reach their fullest potential in life and service. With God's guidance and wisdom, we aim to turn darkness into light for thousands of our blind friends in every corner of the country through education, training, eye care and provision of assistive tools and equipment. We are able to provide these services because of the support that we receive from our partners like the Nippon Foundation and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI).

RBI has been in partnership with The Nippon Foundation and ICEVI since 2008 in providing programs to college and university students with visual impairment. Pursuing higher education is one of the challenges that students with visual impairment in the Philippines face, from being denied acceptance in college or university for the reason that there is no



trained teacher to handle students with visual impairment nor a suitable school facility for them. This is one critical area where RBI intervenes. In partnership with The Nippon Foundation and ICEVI, RBI has been providing training and orientation to public school teachers and administrators and at the same time, facilitating the provision of assistive devices to students with visual impairment.

Students nowadays are encouraged to pursue higher education because they have proven that with the different skills that they have learned from RBI, they can independently do their lessons and pursue their studies with limited or almost no

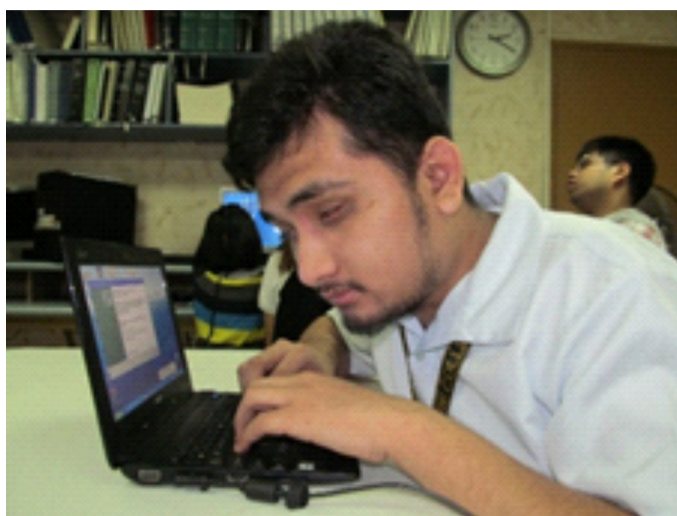
assistance needed. With the funding support from Nippon Foundation through the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), the Higher Education program for Students with Visual Impairment in the Philippines has been enabling students to enroll in college or university. With the goal to increase enrollment of students with visual impairment in post-secondary curriculum, we persuade colleges and universities to accept students with visual impairment in their institutions. We also provide orientation to university instructors or professors so they can appreciate and appropriately deal or assist their students with visual impairment in their classes. We also equip students with various technical skills for them to keep up with their sighted classmates.

The Education Program, which started in 2008, got the support of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). This has translated to the active participation of around 250 colleges and state universities in major cities and provinces of the country. This partnership of RBI and CHED has increased the enrollment of students with visual impairment in various colleges and universities in the Philippines.

***With the support of Nippon Foundation and ICEVI, RBI was able to implement the following programs in the Philippines:***

## **1. LOAN OF ASSISTIVE DEVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

Assistive technology has been a significant factor in making possible the inclusion of students with visual impairment in regular colleges and universities in the Philippines. But with the challenge that these students can't keep up with their sighted classmates because they don't have the assistive devices to do their lessons, RBI started a loan of assistive devices to higher education students with visual impairment. Through this program, the students are able to independently complete their school assignments, do their research, take tests, read the prescribed books and review their lessons, along with their sighted classmates.



RBI is grateful that assistive technology as well as technical skills training are being made available to students with visual impairment in the Philippines.

Since not all the students enrolled in higher education can avail themselves of assistive devices due to their cost and available supply, we have set qualifications for those who can avail of it. Prior to giving the assistive devices, RBI makes sure that the students have the necessary background and knowledge on how to use the assistive device properly. We give them training on the use of the device so they will be proficient in navigating any new program and ensure that they take care of the device properly, maintaining these in good working condition during the term of the loan. Requirements for the use of the assistive tools are also set, such as: (a) only authorized students are allowed to use the device; (b) in case of equipment malfunctioning, they should inform RBI immediately and not bring the device to any repair shop; (c) in case of loss, they need to pay back whatever is the equivalent cost in the market. These conditions allow the students to be responsible for the care of the equipment loaned to them while it is in their custody.

## **2. STUDENT RESOURCE CENTER IN UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES**

Colleges and universities have laboratories designed for their sighted students. So, blind students still have to go to RBI to do their assignments and lessons with the use of the required assistive tools. In 2009, RBI requested some colleges and universities with visually impaired



enrollees to provide a space in their school for a resource center that could be equipped with computer with screenreader, braille embosser, braille translator, and scanner for their students. The students with visual impairment appreciated this project, because they are now able to do their lessons or assignments by just going to the resource center immediately during their free time or after class. The resource center project was established in eight (8) colleges and universities.

Other than the university resource center, the project also established the Student Resource Center (SRC) in the RBI office. The SRC showcases the different assistive



technologies that blind students from different schools can use. The facility is bundled with six (6) desktop computers all installed with screen reading applications, braille translator, and scanning program for the blind. Also installed in the resource center are braille embosser, scanner, and braille display. The students do their lessons in the resource center with limited assistance. They are also able to scan the hard copy of the lesson that their teacher gives them to review using the scanning software program, which scans and displays the text copy immediately after scanning. Since the Resource Center has the different assistive equipment that the blind students need, it serves as a place of demonstration to show to our visitors how the blind students use these tools. Visitors are amazed that such equipment is made available to them. Some of these visitors are from companies who, for the first time, can see how a blind student uses the computer or the braille display or scans his own book. It created awareness and impressed them that a blind person can be on par with his sighted classmates, or even excel if given the break. This amazed reaction of the visitors encourages us to find ways to better serve our clients with visual impairment.

The Resource Center is also used to accommodate college students (sighted or with visual impairment) who are required to produce a project which can be used by persons with visual impairment. When they finish their project, they come back to the center for our blind staff to “see” and evaluate their project.

With all these services that we offer through the Resource Center, we believe that we are able to promote hope, independence and productivity to our blind clients by either leading them to pursue their education or find a better career path. For our sighted clients, it gives them awareness when they see that a blind person is capable of having a productive and meaningful life. We hope to reach out to more clients in every possible way.

### **3. AWARENESS CAMPAIGN**

#### **A. Orientation for University and College Administrators and Key Persons**

In the past years, RBI received a number of complaints about universities and colleges refusing admission to students with visual impairment. The usual reasons given were: (a) the teachers were not ready to handle students with visual impairment and (b) they did not have the special tools they needed to



teach them. This is a serious blatant violation of the Magna Carta for Persons with Disability that says “persons with disability (PWD) must be given full access to quality education,” but many academic institutions are still unaware that such a law exists.



To address the issue, RBI reached out to administrators of schools and universities in partnership with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), which became more assertive in its drive for inclusion of students with visual impairment in higher education.

The orientation program is designed to create an environment in universities and colleges that is more welcoming to all students with disabilities that come to their doors. RBI conducts orientation for administrators and other key persons from universities and colleges. We provide appropriate information and skills on how to accommodate blind and visually impaired students. This activity is important in removing obstacles for students with visual impairment to education and full participation in society. As a result of this, there is now an increase in the enrollment of students with visual impairment in various colleges and universities in the Philippines. The university administrators and faculties have become more receptive and understanding of the needs of students with visual impairment.

RBI works with local CHED offices in conducting training in universities and colleges. With the established partnerships with universities and colleges, more professors and key personnel are now aware of how to assist their students with visual impairment in their school. The activities we conduct also provide us with opportunities to introduce and promote school environments that are inclusive,



barrier-free, and accommodating to students with visual impairment. This program also allowed participants to acknowledge that they have students with visual impairment in their class and at the same time recognize their unique abilities and thus give appropriate accommodation or concern. Interestingly, the participants also cited process to manage supports needed by their students with visual impairment.

## **B. The Marrakesh Treaty**

One of the significant works that the ICEVI project accomplished was the approval of the Marrakesh Treaty in the Philippines. To promote the importance of the Marrakesh Treaty to persons with print disability, RBI conducted



numerous forums in Manila, Cebu and Davao that were participated in by librarians, teachers, government and non-governmental agencies and persons with print disabilities. This project was in collaboration with the Intellectual Property Office of the Philippines (IPOPHL) and other partner agencies and stakeholders like the National Council on Disability Affairs, other government agencies, NGOs, and academe. Others facilitated some activities that aimed to promote the ratification of this treaty in our country.

The accession of the Philippines to the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons who are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled on 12 November 2018 was officially signed by President Duterte and became effective on March 19, 2019. After the country's accession to the Marrakesh treaty, RBI conducted several activities to maintain the momentum of the success of the project.

## **C. Employers Orientation**

The Job Placement program was established to help blind adults obtain employment according to their interest and level of education. It is also designed to dispel hesitations and mis-conceptions on the employer's part in hiring persons with visual impairment.

Part of the Employment Program is to conduct skills development training for students with visual impairment especially students in higher education. This training gives them the technical and soft skills to be able to find and keep a good employment. After conducting the training, we work with the trainees to find suitable employment.



The employer's orientation is conducted to create accessible employment for the blind and visually impaired in the community. This orientation typically removes the fears and concerns of employers in hiring someone with visual impairment. It is also during the Employer's Orientation that we are able to meet and learn about different employers who are willing to accommodate people with visual impairment. Also discussed in the orientation are employment outlook for PWDs in the Philippines, facilitate knowledge sharing and good practices, and build strong relationships among participants to maximize the benefits of networking.

The varied experiences of the respective partner companies are a rich source of information that is worth sharing, not only to the current partner employers, but even to those who are considering hiring the visually impaired.



A significant accomplishment was the partnership that we have with different employers especially to Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) or the call centers that most of our blind and visually impaired graduates are currently working with.



## 4. Capacity Building Activities

### A. College Preparation for Students with Visual Impairment

RBI conducts the College Preparation Training to equip students with visual impairment with the skills and confidence to succeed upon entering higher education. This training is geared towards helping incoming college students with visual impairment to learn practical solutions in meeting the demands of college



life, particularly in a mainstream setting. In particular, the training teaches them the means to improve their memory and communication skills. We also invite currently enrolled college students to talk about their experiences and share their tips on what helps them succeed. Blind professionals are also invited to share their college experiences on how they were able to cope in their studies, especially in their math and science subjects as well as share how assistive technology has helped them in their college life.

A support group called VICNET (Visually Impaired College Students Network) was established among past participants of the College Prep course, and we encourage the current trainees to join as well. VICNET is an avenue for the college student with visual impairment to consult those they know and share resources using their Facebook page. The trainees were also informed about the importance of an office for students with disabilities (OSA). Most colleges and universities with enrollees with disabilities already have an OSA. Others still do not have an OSA. So, we encourage the trainees to advocate with the school officials on the establishment of an OSA in their school to ensure that they receive appropriate and necessary assistance

### B. Soft Skills Training for Higher Education Students

Despite the high turnout of blind and visually impaired college graduates, the percentage of these graduates finding employment in the mainstream labor

market is still very few. A study conducted by the International Council for Education of Children with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) showed that the level of one's soft skills, or the lack thereof, plays a vital role in a blind or visually impaired applicant's employability. Indeed, soft skills are often viewed as even more important than hard or technical skill in work readiness by most employers.



As a form of intervention, RBI came up with a training program that aims to improve the soft skills of blind and visually impaired students. It's a personality and character development training intended for students and college graduates with visual impairment. It focuses on the principal topic that pushes visually impaired persons to live out of their comfort zone doing the traditional work with the blind and find opportunities for better paying jobs in mainstream employment.

### C. Training for Math and Science Teachers

To increase the access and participation of students with visual impairment in STEM programs, RBI designed a training program that aimed to equip math and science receiving and resource teachers on the strategies, technologies, instructional materials, and other resources that are vital in making the curriculum accessible for students with visual impairment. The training was primarily an eye-opener for those who were able to handle students with visual





impairment, but failed to provide the ample and needed amount of instruction and accommodations. It also served as a venue for other regular teachers to open their hearts and accommodate students with visual impairment.

We firmly believe that both the special and general education teachers ought to be provided with the support they need just like for any inclusion to work. In this case, we did not just provide the key information and skills, but also opened their hearts for the opportunity to accommodate a blind or visually impaired student in their math class.

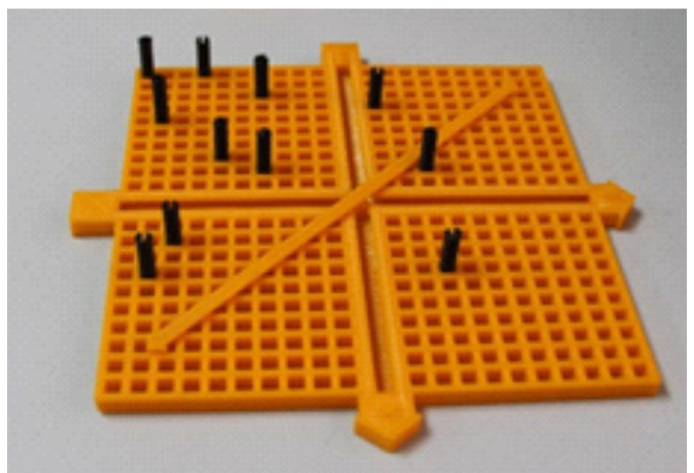
## **5. SUPPORT SERVICES**

### **A. Scholarship for College Students with Visual Impairment**

The dilemma among our students with visual impairment in higher education is on how they will survive being in college. Not all students who are entering higher education have all the means to support their studies. Most of them are less privileged and lack the resources to finish their studies. RBI created the college scholarship program to at least give support to the college students who wish to have a college degree and will pursue employment after graduation, but whose family is not able to provide for their tuition fees, transportation, and other school needs.

### **B. Production of 3D STEM Materials**

RBI is known as a provider of braille, large print and audio reading materials to persons with visual impairment. RBI has the facility and expertise to produce braille materials for mass production. We also convert text materials to audio or DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System). Tactile materials are also



made available in 2D format and this has done for many years now. The newest technology that we are now offering to students, schools, and organizations is

the production of 3D materials for science and math (STEM). We thought of producing these kinds of materials due to the needs of our learners with visual impairment, and we wanted also to provide the most advance and durable materials for the students and make it easy for them to understand the lesson given inside and outside of school, as well as for teachers to be encouraged and more proficient in teaching their students with visual impairment using new innovative materials that are available for them.

Through this project, we have two 3D machines that are used to produce 3D objects that are distributed to teachers who have blind students. The Department of Education and the Department of Science and Technology through its training arm, the Science Education Institute (SEI) Training Unit, has been providing support and interventions for learners with visual impairment through its special education program. The program has been getting several praises for its achievements and successes in providing the 3D STEM materials.

### **C. Youth Advocates Philippines (YAP)**

The Youth as Advocates, Philippines, referred to as YAP, continues to advocate for the sector of youth with visual impairment and seeks to build and empower youth leaders to realize their potentials for personal development and for helping others to do the same. It aims to strengthen youth leaders with visual impairment by allowing them to develop a strong and lasting vision in relation to advocacy in their family, education, employment, and their community. It was in 2017 when the YAP began to conduct seminars for young people and adults with visual impairment to become advocates and future leaders of the community.



# Higher Education Project for Students with Visual Impairment in Cambodia



## I. Krousar Thmey

Krousar Thmey offers a portfolio of cross-cutting programs and projects supporting over **2,000 children** in their development every year: Child welfare, special and inclusive education for deaf or blind children, cultural and artistic development, academic and career counseling, as well as health and hygiene.

Since its creation, Krousar Thmey has always sought to develop its action not only according to the needs of the local communities, but also in accordance with the Cambodian authorities. The aim has always been to ensure the latter eventually take over the organization's programs to guarantee their sustainability. The transfer of the five special schools, made official on July 1, 2019 under the high patronage of Prime Minister HUN Sen, materializes this initial vision of development, which is the guiding principle of the Foundation's strategies.

Since 2010, Krousar Thmey has supported the young people with visual impairment in its programs in building their future, particularly in terms of access to higher education, vocational training or employment with the support of ICEVI.



## **II. Important milestones of the Project**

- 1991 : Founding of Krousar Thmey Organization.
- 1994 : First school for blind students founded in Cambodia by Krousar Thmey.
- 2000 : First admission of blind or children with low vision to public school in Cambodia.
- 2006 : Inception of the project by Krousar Thmey to support blind students in their higher education.
- 2010 : Starting of partnership with ICEVI for higher education support and access to employment for youth with visual impairment.
- 2011 : The first Braille exhibition at Norton University, which is one of the biggest universities in Cambodia.
- 2015 : Mrs. Neang Phalla, former teacher for blind students at Krousar Thmey was nominated top 10 teachers by The Varkey Foundation – Global Teacher Prize.
- 2017 : Setting-up of Resource Center supported by ICEVI Project in University of Battambang province.
- 2018 : Setting-up of 2nd Resource Center supported by ICEVI Project in University of Kamchay Mea in Kampong Cham province.
- 2019 : Successful transfer of 4 special schools for blind students of Krousar Thmey to the Ministry of Education of Cambodia. Building of 1st partnership with National Institute for Special Education newly created by the Ministry of Education.
- 2020 : Challenging adaptation of support to students at University due to Covid-19 crisis.
- 2021 : First participation of blind graduates from Cambodia to World Blindness Summit.

## **III. Key figure of beneficiaries**

In 2006, KT started to facilitate the first visually impaired student to register at higher education (university level) after finishing special high school. Then, as years moved on, more students with visual impairment also gradually continued their higher education at universities. Since 2006 until today, 117 students with visual impairment were facilitated by KT in registering into higher education. Twenty institutes in total have welcomed those students to register and continue learning. To date, a total of 42 students with visual impairment still continue their studies at various universities across the target provinces and city with follow up by project.

Another 13 students in total registered into vocational skill centers, and currently 1 student is still under follow up by project.

Beside facilitation for higher education and/or vocational skill, the project also enhanced access for those students to employment opportunities. In total, 113 students were

facilitated to reach employment in various places, in both the public and private sector. Today, 31 youth are in workplaces and are still being followed up by the project.

#### IV. Impact of the project

Since 2011, the Higher Education Project has been fruitful, with many youths successfully completing their academic or vocational training and now finding employment. The project team follows an average of 40 youths with visual impairment per year at their respective university. Thanks to partnerships established with a network of universities, vocational training centers and companies, the young people supported have the opportunity to visit such facilities, meet professionals and expand their future prospects. Thus, despite their difficult past or their disability, they have the opportunity to enter the job market and become independent and responsible adults in Cambodian society.

Through various activities implemented for several years, the government of Cambodia and private sectors expressed their involvement towards supporting students and youth with disabilities to access to higher education, vocational skill, and employment.

The Government of Cambodia showed its support by accepting some graduated students to become staff in special schools and National institute for Special Education (Ministry of Education). They also provide opportunity for some graduated students to become civil servants in different ministries (council of office of ministers, foreign affairs, social affairs, and so forth). Furthermore, they cooperate by sharing job market information (National Employment



Agency under the Ministry of Labor), organizing forums to promote job access for persons with disabilities (Disability Action Council under the Ministry of Social Affairs). At the same time, private sectors have also supported several youths with disabilities with a chance to pursue higher education and employment, ranging from internship, on -ob training, and working.

#### V. Main activities of the project

##### 1. Training

###### a. *Training to relevant staff and teachers/trainers/MoEYS representatives*

The Project provided several training to KT's staff in various topics in order to capacitate staff with more sufficient skill to improve the service of supporting



student in higher education. Various topics in training can be described (i.e., how to use teaching resources to support students with low vision, getting to know some eye diseases, basic use and repair of equipment for printing books in braille, how to develop curriculum for inclusive education, teaching skill for teachers in inclusive classes, pedagogical training to teachers for blind, STEM training for blind, job placement and career planning). These trainings were provided by local and international trainers.

In addition, KT core trainers started to provide trainings on how to teach and orient to higher education for students with visual impairment to teacher-trainers from the National Institute of Education (NIE), as these teacher-trainers will train to pre-service teachers at NIE who then become teachers in schools. Through these trainings, participants learned a lot about the history of Braille, Khmer braille letters, orientation & mobility for blind people, how to use an abacus, and computers' specialised programs for people with visual impairment. Such a similar training was also provided to representatives from partners' vocational training centers in order for these centers to be ready to welcome students with visual impairment whenever it happens.

Additionally, KT relevant teachers participated in training on ICT and how to set up an audio room. The training was provided by Malaysian Foundation for the Blind (MFB). Training helped participants to learn new skills on how to teach computers to students with visual impairment, as well as to know how to set up an audio room (preparation of audio room, audio book production, etc.). The training gave them a chance to share their challenges with the trainer. Before the training, there was also a field visit to Malaysia to learn about teaching computers to blind people and how to approach and convince employers to hire people with visual impairment.

Furthermore, staff from KT received training in Indonesia provided by its partner, Yarsi University, in collaboration with The Indonesia Blind Union and the Mitra Netra Foundation. Training covered several topics such as career planning, goal setting, action plan, time management, self-confidence, verbal and non-verbal communication, resume writing, interview skills, on enhancing counseling capacity toward youngsters and adolescents, and on how to develop curriculum/manuals adapted for training soft skills to support youth with disabilities.

Besides those trainings, there was also a field visit in India for those relevant KT staff to learn more about Low vision.

***b. Training to students with visual impairment for higher education & employment preparation***

To ensure well prepared and ground-ready students with visual impairment for higher education (university, VT skill center) and employment, the project conducted

several trainings; students from the secondary level and or higher level (university/VT skill) were the target in such trainings. The trainings were often conducted by local trainers and sometimes by internal trainers.

The project provided soft skill trainings/workshops to those students by focusing on how to choose the right academic study at the university. The workshops also gave a chance for students to discuss and learn how to prepare themselves to be ready before going to study at university and/or other vocational institutions. Besides such orientation on selection of higher education, trainings also focused on other soft skills – time management, communication, leadership, stress management, problem solving skills, and critical thinking.

Further, trainings on “pre-employment” for those target students (especially the ones graduated, or old age from high schools who tended to involve employment) were also provided in order for them to be more familiar and ready before going into employment service. The topics generally focused on building self-esteem and self-respect, exploring type of communication, how to make it more effectively, how to develop resume and cover letters, and being ready for job interview.



Adding to those trainings, students also joined many relevant workshops/events in order to learn new things. From these events, these students learned a lot on how to prepare themselves to select subjects and continue to higher education, as well as to be ready for the workforce.



## 2. Materials produced

With project support, many visibility tools were produced and distributed to raise awareness. Thousands of leaflets, posters, banners, stickers, flyers, and T-shirts were designed. Those materials were developed to ensure a fit within the Cambodian context that focused on special education for students with visual and hearing impairment from pre-school to higher education and employment and then were printed out for

distribution to different audiences during awareness raising activities (exhibitions at universities, training/workshops, forums, etc.).

The project also received a manual on "Jobs Project Basic Pre-Employment" from RBI which will be useful later. KT also produced a booklet of "Academic Studies and Vocational Skills" which was later used to raise awareness among high school students with visual impairment who wish to continue their studies at university.

### **3. Awareness activity (exhibition at university)**

Several exhibition sessions at universities were conducted all over the main target provinces and cities (Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampong Cham) where existing higher education institutes that may welcome students with disabilities after they finish high school grade. The exhibitions were



organized with the aim of raising awareness regarding education for persons with visual or hearing impairment and were offered to general students, lecturers, and management teams at various universities. Thousands of students, lecturers, university administrators, and management team members were involved in these events.

Generally each university exhibition lasted for one to two days. The first session was dedicated to presenting education for visually impaired students, distributing leaflets, and sharing success stories from students with blindness/low vision, thanks to personal testimonies. Then a KT facilitator accompanied by students with visual impairment, set up stands to display learning materials and other awareness tools and answers questions from participants. Attendees could take part in introduction sessions on the abacus counting system and braille reading/writing. Through these activities, those institutions started to understand the possibilities for students with disabilities, as well as to open the doors to welcome these disabled students.

### **4. Meeting/follow up/counseling with students**

Every year, the project conducted several orientation, job-placement information, and follow up support sessions for visually impaired students. Students from secondary level in Krousar Thmey's special schools – later called special high schools – and students in higher education (university, vocational center) benefitted from these sessions. The purpose of these sessions was to provide students with diverse university, academic information, employment opportunities, and to let the project identify their difficulties during their studies. This was as well an opportunity for students to discuss their future and prepare themselves for higher education requirements. Further, some



youth who had already been in employment service also received follow up by the project in order to ensure that unforeseen or unexpected issues could be solved on time.

These sessions helped facilitators obtain current information from students, to initiate ongoing contact with them in order to share any relevant information, and to support them for future needs when it was appropriate.



## 5. Study visit for students

In addition, the project organized many sessions of study visits for students to learn about various private and public universities located in target city and provinces — Phnom Penh city, Kampong cham, Siem reap, and Battambang province. Hundreds of students joined the university visits. The visits



were conducted to help those students discover the differences between high school and university settings, as well as the new challenges they will have to face. Such visits will help them to be better prepared to pursue their study at the tertiary level. They also received information about available scholarships and related application procedures.

## 6. Setting up of Resources Centers

After the visit to Myanmar in January, the project started the resource center project in University of Battambang in Battambang province in 2017. With co-funding from UNICEF and Lycée Français of Singapore, the resource center was successfully finished in mid of July. Two studio rooms were setup in the resource room to record audio books. Four more computers and two



scanners were also installed for blind students to listen to audio books, search the internet, scan the documents, etc. Along with setting up this center, the project also provided training to 3 relevant teachers from the university regarding how to produce audio books.

In 2018, the project created a recourse center located on the ground floor of Chea Sim University of Kamchaymea in Kampong cham province. It is comprised of one studio room dedicated to recording audiobooks. The location in the resource center inside the Computer lab allowed the students to have access to many computers to consult freely the internet and adapted resources. The university graciously offered the furniture to accommodate the room. After that, there was training for 4 staff of the university (3 teaching staff and 1 office staff). The objective of the training was first to make those people autonomous in the recording of audiobooks and then to empower them to train and monitor other recorders.

Further, to build on the capacity of people involved in managing the resource center in Kg. cham, one 3-day exposure visits in Vietnam was organized. Five people in total — 2 from NISE and 3 from the university in Kampong cham joined this visit. The visit was organized to meet Sao Mai center — a vocational and assistive technology center for the Blind — to be introduced to its accessible books production program, and to see another center, Huong Duong Talking library, about audio books for the blind, and to meet Ho Chi Minh university of pedagogy, a university that welcomes students with disabilities.

## **7. Equipment for students**

From 2014 to 2019, the project supported several computers (one computer for each student, sometimes with recording devices as well) to students with visual impairment who started to study in university. Those computers were provided for their whole studying period at university, generally 4 to 5 years. This was to ensure support during their studies, as students with visual impairment really needed the computers for accessing their research, documenting readings, practicing assignments, etc.

## **8. Production of Case Studies**

A certain number of case studies / testimonies have been produced into video to document student success. In 2019, 6 videos were produced: providing technological support and training, preparation of audiobooks, testimonials from former trainees, employment, unconventional employment, and awareness and advocacy.

Following in 2020, 2 more video case studies were also produced: counseling to students, and the university resource center in Kampong cham province.

And in 2021, 1 video was produced showing 2 students with visual impairment discussing their challenges in distance (online) learning, experience gained, and their own views regarding learning from a distance. All these case studies then became one



of the approaches in showcasing the good experience of students /youth to the general publics (KT also made available in Youtube).

## **9. Other event and cooperation with relevant partners**

Besides various mentioned activities conducted to support students, there were certain activities organized in order to get more involvement from relevant stakeholders to increase awareness as well as to build broader networks.

### ***Employment seminar & National forum on inclusive education***

An employment seminar with the National Employment Agency (NEA) was conducted to present the role of the employer in strengthening employment services and labor market information for people with disabilities. In addition, project also involved in a National Forum on Inclusive Education (NFIE), organized by MoEYS with co-financing by some NGOs (including Krousar Thmey). There was discussion about IE policy implementation with solutions proposed to deal with challenges at a practical level. Results from the forum also became a key follow-up for MoEYS to keep enforcing the implementation of IE policy. The project also conducted continuous meetings with NEA to ensure information sharing regarding the job market.

In addition, the project also organized some meetings with the Disability Action Council (DAC) to discuss finding way to support employment access for person with disabilities as well as to prepare for the National Forum on Employment for Persons with Disabilities. As a result, one National Forum on Employment for Persons with Disabilities (PwD) was conducted in Phnom Penh, organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs with co-facilitation by NISE and its NGO partners.

### ***National Career and Productivity Fair***

Additionally, the project also participated in an event called the “National Career and Productivity Fair” in order to promote to the public about Cambodian braille for blind persons and Cambodian sign language for deaf persons. This event gave Krousar Thmey a chance to present about its activity regarding education for blind or deaf; this event was also freely open to anyone to walk-in and get to know what is called “Education for Disabilities”.

### ***World Blindness Summit***

Especially thanks to ICEVI's generosity, in 2021, five students with visual impairment from the project were able to attend the World Blindness Summit, and M. CHOUR Darong, Krousar Thmey's executive director, was invited as a delegate representing Cambodia. This event also gave participants a chance to learn about technology-based practices, understand disability-rights, employment, higher education, etc. It was also good for participants to see the progress made in other countries in working with people with disabilities.

### ***Orientation Program for Employers***

The project conducted various meetings with employers (private companies, local NGOs) in order to raise awareness of job opportunities for persons with visual or hearing impairment. There was also a former student with visual impairment joining this meeting to share his own experience in dealing with the working environment. After the meeting, all participants understood that persons with visual or hearing impairments were able to perform some tasks based on their skill and knowledge, with some assistive devices where necessary.



# A Reflection on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Students with Visual Impairments in North America

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In the spring of 2020, the world began feeling the impact of the COVID-19 virus. In North America, many schools were shut down with very little notice, and grocery store shelves began to empty as individuals prepared for an unknown future. Little was known about COVID-19, and at that time, many had no experience related directly to this condition. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, rates of infection were over 5,000,000 cases in the US (September 2020) and according to the Canadian government, over 148,000 cases in Canada (September 2020). The changes that were to come to our world and for students with visual impairments were unfathomable. During this initial shutdown, a group of researchers came together to document these changes, with a specific focus on capturing the educational experiences of families with infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged students with visual impairments, including those with additional disabilities and deafblindness, and the professionals who served these students, specifically teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists.

The last pandemic to impact services for students with visual impairments on a large scale was the 1918 H1N1 virus pandemic and, at that time, only a few short paragraphs were written in a Perkins School for the Blind annual report describing outdoor classes and an avoidance of riding the trolley cars in Boston (Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, 1919). Noting the need to document the recent events, L. Penny Rosenblum, Tina Herzberg, and Tiffany Wild developed a survey to capture the changes that were occurring. The initial survey was distributed in April and May of 2020. However, once the researchers realized that the pandemic was not ending, another survey was developed in the fall of 2020 to document the continuing story of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with visual impairments. This article compares similar themes that appeared in the reports of the data from both spring of 2020 and fall of 2020.

## Participants

In the spring of 2020, parents/guardians of 455 children with visual impairments and 1,028 professionals participated in the initial survey (Rosenblum et al., 2020). Of the parents/guardians, 73% represented school-age children, 14% represented early intervention children, and 13% of participants represented preschool children. In the fall of 2020, 662

individuals responded to the second survey, with 481 of these respondents identifying as professionals that work with students with visual impairments (Rosenblum et al., 2021). Lower response rates were attributed to distraction related to the 2020 presidential election coupled with “COVID fatigue” (Rosenblum et al., 2021).

### **Early Childhood Education**

In the spring of 2020, parents/guardians reported that prior to shutdowns associated with COVID-19, 88% of children received services in home and day care settings; however, during initial COVID-19 shutdowns only 48% of those family members received the same level of support (Rosenblum et al., 2020). Twenty-six percent (26%) of the participants reported increased support from educational professionals. Thirty-four percent (34%) of families received online communications and 31% received recommendations for online resources. Furthermore, 24% of participants reported receiving online emails. Parents reported being stressed with all the initial changes.

In the fall of 2020, survey participants reported that their young children received a variety of services including once a week, twice or more a week, once every 2 weeks, once a month, and less than once a month (Rosenblum et al., 2021). The modality of services varied greatly among the respondents, with an increase in the use of online web conferencing tools such as Zoom™ and FaceTime® to provide services, noted by 77% of respondents. Fifty-four percent (54%) of participants reported having meetings with early intervention staff in the same physical space. While 85% of families reported participating in the education of their child, the data showed families were overwhelmed with juggling multiple roles in their lives such as parent, teacher, and caregiver all, while possibly working a job from home or returning to the workplace.

### **Preschool**

Survey data from spring of 2020 showed that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 33% of preschoolers attended classes with peers without disabilities, 23% attended special education classes, 18% attended specialized schools, and 26% attended other settings (Rosenblum et al., 2020). During initial shutdowns not all professionals were able to establish contact with families. Data specific to vision professionals showed that 69% of TVIs and 60% of O&M specialists continued to work with preschoolers amid school closings.

Fast forward to the fall of 2020, participants reported that 32% of children were in preschool classes with children with varying disabilities in a public-school setting (Rosenblum et al., 2021). Additional settings included specialized schools (22%), a preschool class with typically developing peers with TVI or O&M supports (18%), or in a homeschool, faith-based, or other educational setting. Changes from online to hybrid (combination of online or home instruction and face-to-face instruction) were reported as difficult by family participants. Some families raised concerns about regression of skills while others reported their children with visual impairments were gaining skills in technology and/or in the expanded core curriculum (ECC).

## **School-Age**

Changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closings affected school-age children with visual impairments in the spring of 2020 and, like parents with children in preschool settings, many parents expressed concerns. Seventy-five percent of family members who responded to the survey were concerned about their child's progress during the move to online learning, with 13% of respondents indicating their child did not receive educational services during the initial shutdown of schools (Rosenblum et al., 2020). During this time, most students were learning online, with some families reporting the use of supplemental packets of information sent home for learning purposes. Forty-three percent of respondents indicated that changes to online schooling were problematic due to accessibility issues for their students with visual impairments.

Things continued to change in the fall of 2020. More students received services than were reported in the spring (Rosenblum et al., 2021) and many levels of specialized services returned to the pre-pandemic level, as reported by the participants. Ninety-five percent (95%) of students were participating in education through a school district, specialized school, or educational agency. Five percent (5%) were homeschooled. In addition, 92% of participants indicated that their child's IEP had been updated or renewed within the last 12 months. While improvements were noted, there were still concerns about accessibility of digital learning tools, social-emotional well-being, and regression expressed by parents within survey responses (Rosenblum et al., 2021).

## **Access to Materials**

One consistent theme across data from both the spring of 2020 and fall of 2020 was a concern about access to instructional materials. In the spring, TVIs reported having a lack of materials needed to provide educational services (Rosenblum et al., 2020). Fifty-eight percent (58%) reported having at least one issue with classroom accessibility, which included inaccessible websites, apps, digital platforms, videos, and/or instructional materials. There was much concern expressed by both teachers and parents about the need to support pre-braille or braille readers.

In the fall, about half of the participating families indicated they had access to educational learning tools (Rosenblum et al., 2021). However, there were still issues with internet bandwidth and inaccessible content. Some professionals were also concerned that their students were not motivated or connecting with the content as much as they had previously during face-to-face instruction. Assessments typically performed in person, such as functional vision, learning media, and assistive technology, were also challenging.

## **Social-Emotional Impact of the Pandemic**

Stress was a theme that resonated throughout survey responses provided by participants in the spring of 2020 (Rosenblum et al., 2020). There were concerns about the lack of educational opportunities and social interactions with peers. In addition, many family members shared about



the challenges associated with balancing multiple roles in their lives, including that of a parent, teacher, and caregiver to others, all while possibly working another full-time job from home.

By the fall of 2020, data showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had taken a toll on many of the participants. Parents noted the stress of juggling multiple roles, reporting feelings of being overwhelmed, angry, upset, frustrated, and challenged by the circumstances of the pandemic. Many of the parents were concerned about the safety of their children, and others worried about their child's developmental and academic progress. Many professionals expressed feeling equally concerned about their students and their own emotional wellbeing. Words such as “feeling overwhelmed,” “frustrated,” “exhausted,” “depressed,” “confused,” and “stressed” were used to describe professional life (Rosenblum et al., 2021).

### **Vision Professionals**

The stress of the pandemic was evident on all. In the initial stages of the pandemic in spring of 2020, professionals had little time to prepare for school shutdowns. Eighty-one percent (81%) of professionals were given less than one week to prepare to a shift to online learning (Rosenblum et al., 2020). Fifty-two percent (52%) had at least one family they could not get in contact with, and 85% had one or more students experiencing accessibility issues. Regardless, VI professionals continued to support students and their families. Encouragingly, 95% percent of professionals reported that they continued to work on IEP goals to meet the needs of their students.

In the fall of 2020, 52% of professionals reported that they had a delay to the start of the school year as officials determined policies and modes of learning, and 29% reported they were limited in the number of buildings they could enter (Rosenblum et al., 2021). Many experienced changes in safety protocols such as wearing a mask, maintaining social distance, only meeting when an activity had to be in person, wearing face shields, and refraining from working inside. Despite these changes, small improvements were noted in service delivery from the spring of 2020. Sixty-seven percent of professionals reported working to make changes to their students' IEP plans. Changes included transitioning back to direct service, increasing consultative time with other IEP team members, and documenting flexibility to continue making adjustments within educational settings amid on-going changes with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on data collected during the early stages of the pandemic, it was evident that families, students, and professionals were overwhelmed and stressed (Rosenblum et al., 2020; Rosenblum et al., 2021). Several challenges regarding the provision of services for students with visual impairments were uncovered as part of this study. They include policies that impede educational services for students with low vision or blindness; inaccessible websites, apps, digital platforms, and instructional materials; and lack of accessible educational tools. These concerns must be addressed so that educational gaps for students with visual impairments can be eliminated, not widened.

Social media can be used to build community among families and professionals, share resources, and provide an outlet for stress. As a field, we should build more awareness of the unique needs of students with visual impairments. This will promote appropriate services and accommodations in all educational settings, including those that are modified in times of crisis. Professional development opportunities for general education teachers, special education teachers, related service personnel, and administrators is imperative. They must be knowledgeable about the needs of students with visual impairment and the expanded core curriculum, including assistive technology, orientation and mobility, and braille. Furthermore, administrators must ensure accessibility of instructional materials and tools for all students, including students with visual impairment. Specific to VI professionals, more guidance and research should be made available for conducting online evaluations and assessments.

In contrast to the concerns that were amplified during the pandemic, data indicated that there were also positives that occurred because of changes associated with COVID-19. Several instances of increased communication between families and professionals were noted, with opportunities for collaboration that did not necessarily exist pre-pandemic. Creativity in teaching and flexibility in planning became a new norm for professionals. Student gains in technology skills and exposure to real-world experiences with the ECC were also reported by several survey participants.

This research not only documents what was happening in our field during the pandemic, but also may serve to assist in planning for future emergency situations and ensuring educational opportunities for students with visual impairments. In documenting the experiences of families and professionals who lived the COVID-19 pandemic, the unique needs of our students with visual impairments have been exposed, providing opportunities for advocacy and action. Looking ahead, this project provided initial data for future research that examines the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic on development and learning by students with visual impairments. There is still much to learn. As we come to a close of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research acts as the beginning of a story.

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# Parent Perspectives

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*On behalf of the International Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (IAPVI)*

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## Parents can make a world of difference

If you as a parent have a child with a visual impairment, your world initially collapses. It is very understandable and we share that experience with each other in the international parent association, IAPVI. We all recognize that feeling, that gives us a sense of togetherness, which has been there since the year 2000. There is a collaboration between an international group of “experiential expert” parents. This collaboration involves sharing information about possibilities, treatment method, tools, education, work, music hobbies both digitally and every four years an international ICEVI meeting, meeting each other, catching up, exchanging experiences. We all need each other, human contact, being together, seeing each other, hearing, embracing, being able to find a physical outlet, in short people in our vicinity, but unfortunately that is not possible due to covid. However, together we found the opportunity through ZOOM/ teams to keep in touch with each other, so the contribution to the ICEVI Conference in Spain was born. – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7F4Fhgpzug>

The only thing that is necessary is to be able to understand and/or speak English. It is very important for parents to share experiences; parents know what possibilities and opportunities there are for their children. It is also important to work together with the professional. It has to be an interaction. Listening to what the parents bring in and looking as a professional what customization can be offered to provide additional support, to promote cooperation, to mirror and to reflect on: what can be done differently, what can be improved? Do we understand each other, what does someone send out and what does the other person receive? The meaning of communication is not what you mean but what the other person understands. It is about the need, the perception and the mutual feeling to be heard, not only us, because when we talked to other parents, they turned out to have similar experiences! Of course, there were also gems among the professionals, who really listened.

We think that as a parent, you know better than anyone what your child can do and needs. It is nice if you can discuss this with the professional and look at opportunities and possibilities for your child with other parents—and where possible also with the child. Looking together creates trust. You as a parent will “have to do it;” you as a parent are there for your child day and night. It's not a 9-to-7 job. You catch the child or motivate the child if necessary; you are at all the ups and downs. You notice things that the counselor doesn't notice.



It is also important that the child goes through his or her own development and that his or her opportunities are fully exploited through a flexible attitude and equality.

Together with the professional you will get far. Professionals have expertise that complements your expertise as a parent. And vice versa! Reciprocity and service must then be the starting point.

Why make things difficult, when you can work together.

Our advice to all parents is: “Stick to your parent feeling, that's the only right thing. Never doubt, never let someone else change your mind.” Look at the movie “Lorenzo’s Oil,” and you will see what parents are capable of, to go to the highest level achievable for their child.

Believe in your child and his or her abilities. As parents, you know that best. Everyone—parent and professional—must start from the child and his or her abilities. It is essential for you as a parent that you feel that the professional as a human being, cares about your child—and you as a parent—and really working together/cooperating matters. Look together at what is needed and what is still possible. Just ask the child the things you want to know.

Understanding and respect for each other is important. Especially literally and figuratively, continuing to see each other as human beings in the first place. A vulnerable attitude as professionals can mean a lot to parents; every human behavior will be appreciated because people can feel comfortable. That’s the most important thing, being honest with each other, so you don’t have to wonder, “If only I had....”

Trust in each other and build the necessary knowledge together: that is what the relationship between professionals, child, and parents is all about. Also permanent supervisors, must not change too much, this is extremely important.

For a child, any/every treatment, again and again, can be extremely stressful, this turns out afterwards, after many years of undergoing. The child can show social behavior, desirable treaty and hide their real feelings. The child will be giving social answers, to make the other happy, at school, with doctors, at work, etc. What is important is collaboration with supervisors, professionals, care, education work. Also, do not only work according to rules and protocols, look at the child in front of you, what does this “special” specific child need. Personalize your plan of action.

Parents are welcome to share their stories and inspirational thoughts from around the world. Please submit your stories to Susan LaVenture, President of the International Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (IAPVI) at [laventuresusan506@gmail.com](mailto:laventuresusan506@gmail.com).

## International Partner Members



**CBM**  
[www.cbm.org](http://www.cbm.org)



**ONCE**  
[www.once.es](http://www.once.es)



**Overbrook School for the Blind**  
[www.obs.org](http://www.obs.org)



**Perkins School for the Blind**  
[www.perkins.org](http://www.perkins.org)



Advancing 160 years of RIDBC experience.  
**NextSense Institute**  
[www.nextsense.org.au](http://www.nextsense.org.au)

**R N I B**

See differently  
**Royal National Institute of  
Blind People**  
[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)



**Sightsavers**  
[www.sightsavers.org](http://www.sightsavers.org)



The Norwegian Association of the  
**Blind and Partially Sighted**  
[www.blindeforbundet.no](http://www.blindeforbundet.no)



**Royal Dutch Visio**  
[www.visio.org](http://www.visio.org)

## Organisational Members

**American Printing House for the Blind**  
[www.aph.org](http://www.aph.org)

**Canadien National Institute for the Blind**  
[www.cnib.ca](http://www.cnib.ca)

**Federazione Nazionale Delle Istituzioni Pro Ciechi**  
[www.prociechi.it](http://www.prociechi.it)

**Hadley School for the Blind**  
[www.hadley.edu](http://www.hadley.edu)

**LES DOIGTS QUI REVENT (Typhlo & Tactus)**  
[www.tactus.org](http://www.tactus.org)

**Lions Clubs International Foundation**  
[www.lcif.org](http://www.lcif.org)

**Round Table on Information Access for  
People with Print Disabilities**  
[www.printdisability.org](http://www.printdisability.org)

# ICEVI Fact Sheet

## Mission

In recognition of the continuing global challenges in achieving access to quality education for the millions of out-of-school children with blindness and partial sight, the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) is a membership organisation with a mission to promote access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all people with visual impairment.

## Goals

**Goal 1** : Promoting access to quality education for people with visual impairment including those with blindness, partial sight, deafblindness and additional disabilities.

**Goal 2** : Influencing governments' and relevant stakeholders' implementation of the SDGs and UNCRPD in the area of education of people with visual impairment.

**Goal 3** : Improving networking, information sharing and collaboration at national, regional and global levels.

## History of the Organization

Founded in 1952 in the Netherlands, the ICEVI conducted its Golden Jubilee conference in the Netherlands from 28 July to 2 August 2002.

## ICEVI Regions

The 7 regions of ICEVI and their coverage of countries are as follows:

Africa Region	:	52 countries
East Asia Region	:	19 countries
Europe Region	:	49 countries
Latin America Region	:	19 countries
North America and the Caribbean Region	:	15 countries
Pacific Region	:	15 countries
West Asia Region	:	25 countries

Currently, more than 4000 individuals and organizations in over 180 countries are actively involved in ICEVI.

## Networking with other organizations

ICEVI works closely with International Non-Governmental Development Organizations (INGDOs) and UN bodies such as United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN-ECOSOC), UNESCO, UNICEF, and WHO.

## Publications

ICEVI's biannual magazine "The Educator" is available in electronic version in both English and Spanish and is also posted on our website [www.icevi.org](http://www.icevi.org). ICEVI also publishes a biannual electronic newsletter that is currently distributed to more than 4000 individuals and organizations.

## Website of ICEVI

[www.icevi.org](http://www.icevi.org)