

Impact Snapshot

Lam is working as a freelance Graphic Designer from his home in Quang Nam, Vietnam. Photo: Caritas Australia.

Vietnam Disability Inclusion Program

Vietnam carries one of the heaviest legacies of disability in South-East Asia, a lasting effect of the war that ended in 1975. There are approximately 6.2 million people living with disabilities across the country above the age of two, accounting for approximately 7% of the population. The highest rates of adult disability are found in the central provinces of Quang Tri (8.85%) and Quang Nam (7.74%). In these areas, families living with disabilities are typically poorer, with few job opportunities; children are far less likely to attend school; and only 2.3% of people with disabilities access rehabilitation services. The Vietnam Disability Program responded to this gap, combining two projects, I-SHINE and Empowering People with Disabilities, to support children, youth and adults with disabilities and their caregivers, by increasing access to education, health services, livelihood opportunities and community life.

Relevance

Vietnam ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014 and made disability inclusion a national priority through its legal and policy framework. The Vietnam Disability Program aligned closely with the Law on Persons with Disabilities, national disability priorities and Quang Tri and Quang Nam's provincial disability plans. Using a community-led, Assets Based Community Development approach, it complemented government welfare support and strengthened local ownership of disability services.

At A Glance

Country: Vietnam

Duration: July 2019 - June 2022

Sectors:



Disability Inclusive Education



Health and Rehabilitation



Livelihoods and Income



Disability Rights and Participation



Disaster Risk Reduction

Total Reach: 2,612 people living with disabilities and their caregivers across 22 communes.

This includes 786 children and youth with disabilities reached through the I-SHINE project and 1,826 people with disabilities and caregivers reached through the Empowering People with Disabilities project.

Funding/donor: Australian Government, through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and Caritas Australia

Project Interventions and Impact

Implemented in 22 communes (10 in Quang Tri and 11 in Quang Nam provinces) through Caritas Australia's local partners Catholic Relief Services and the Center for Sustainable Rural Development, the Vietnam Disability Program combined inclusive education, health and rehabilitation, livelihoods support and community organising to reach children, youth and adults living with disabilities, as well as their caregivers.

Inclusive Education

The Program increased access to quality, inclusive education for children and youth with disabilities. Children and youth with mild or moderate disabilities were supported to attend mainstream preschools, primary and secondary schools, with individualised lesson plans developed for each student. Where a child's disability was too severe for the classroom, community- and home-based classes brought teaching to them instead, complemented by independent living support such as peer support, home consultancy visits, housing upgrades and relevant supplies.

Community educational playgrounds also created more inclusive opportunities for children to learn and participate together. Teachers and school leaders were trained in inclusive teaching methods, with knowledge subsequently shared through existing school cluster networks. A shortage, however, of resource teachers limited how many community- and home-based classes could be opened, leaving some children with severe disabilities still without access. Almost all children with disabilities involved in the program achieved positive results, while parents and teachers reported growing confidence and engagement in learning.

"In previous years, I thought that students with disabilities went to school just for the purpose of showing their presence. Children could do whatever they wanted, as there was no method to help them to learn, and teachers just taught them in the same way as children without disabilities. After attending training, teachers learned what type of disability each student had, and how to apply appropriate teaching methods. Now I know that students with disabilities can achieve a certain level of knowledge, so I give them assignments that are appropriate to their disability." FGD teacher at Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Primary School, Binh Dao Commune, Thang Binh District, Quang Nam Province)



KEY IMPACTS

196 children with disabilities received individualised or home-based educational support over the projects' lifetimes.

120 children with mild or moderate disabilities took part in inclusive classes with individualised lesson plans, achieving positive learning results.

97 children with severe disabilities who could not otherwise attend school were reached through community- and home-based classes.

265 teachers and school managers were trained in inclusive teaching methods, with skills shared through existing school cluster networks and workshops.

District authorities are extending inclusive education models and teacher training to communes beyond the original project sites.

Health and Rehabilitation

Home-based disability screening and medical referrals, delivered through trained commune health staff and community rehabilitation collaborators, helped identify the health and developmental needs of people with disabilities earlier and connect them with appropriate care. Home visits provided rehabilitation and self-care training for people with disabilities and their caregivers, while a network of community-based collaborators supported ongoing assistance with mobility and daily living where therapists were not available. Caregivers and health staff were trained in disability-inclusive health services and rehabilitation, including the use of the Washington Group questions to identify children with intellectual and learning disabilities and refer them for support. Rehabilitation devices and aids were provided to households facing financial hardship, while commune health stations also received assistive equipment. Together, these supports improved participants' health, mobility and confidence and reduced the burden on families. Some setbacks occurred, including COVID-19 restrictions that limited health activities in Thang Binh District for two years. Overall, however, the program strengthened access to more inclusive, community-based health and rehabilitation support.

"I would like to thank the Project for supporting my child in referral. This has helped my family save money on medical examinations, and we have used that money to improve her healthcare and nutrition. My child's health is much better than before."

FGD parents/caregivers in Binh Lanh Commune, Thang Binh District, Quang Nam Province)



KEY IMPACTS

1566 children, youth and adults with disabilities have good access to quality health services, with 11 commune health care facilities in Hai Lang and Thang Binh districts implementing disability inclusion in basic health care services.

Home-based rehabilitation collaborators and commune health staff were trained to deliver practical therapy support close to home.

Early disability screening helped identify children with intellectual and learning disabilities and refer them for timely support.

People with disabilities, including stroke survivors, regained mobility and independence through guided home exercise programs.



Lam sits with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) staff where the I-SHINE program is run. This program supported his completion of an IT training course. Photo: Caritas Australia.



Lam standing beside his mother in front of their farmland in Quang Nam, Vietnam.
Photo: Caritas Australia.



KEY IMPACTS



Livelihood development funds and village savings schemes provided 437 people with disabilities and caregivers capital for farming, livestock and small businesses, most of it repaid in full.



Vocational training and on-the-job placements with local businesses helped youth with disabilities move into confident, paid employment.



Non-agricultural livelihoods such as incense making and artificial flower production, proved commercially viable and are being scaled through the creation of stronger market linkages.

13 youth with disabilities gained paid employment through project-supported vocational training and job placements, exceeding the revised target by 86%.

71 people with disabilities/caregivers reported increased income (100% of target); 241 diversified income sources; and 316 accessed VSLA loans through Empowering People with Disabilities project; and

55 households received livelihood initiatives; 56 families ran livelihood small grants (10% above target) through the I-SHINE project.

Livelihoods and Income

Livelihood development funds, village savings and loan groups, and household or group grants provided families with funding to start or expand small businesses. These funding activities were supported by training in proposal writing, financial management and livelihood planning, including disaster risk reduction. Training in sewing, incense-making and artificial flower production, combined with the provision of machines, equipment and tools, enabled participants to develop livelihoods and expand production. Vocational training and on-the-job placements, including with local businesses such as Minh Thien Garment Company, helped youth with disabilities secure paid employment. Agricultural livelihoods proved vulnerable to the severe floods that affected Quang Tri in 2020, and some households needed their loan repayments waived as a result. In contrast, non-agricultural models such as incense-making and artificial flower production fared better, with support to expand markets and facilitate product exchange among clubs and regions helping to generate genuine market interest.



Participants with a disability are displaying their textile work at the I-SHINE program in Vietnam. Photo: Caritas Australia.



KEY IMPACTS

Clubs for people with disabilities and Parents' Associations/Groups became trusted, self-organised spaces for peer support, learning and advocacy. Together, the projects established 22 disability-focused community groups (11 people with disability-led clubs under Empowering People with Disabilities and 11 parent-led associations under I-SHINE) and supported the development of 39 joint action plans with Commune People's Committees and District Departments. These plans helped embed disability inclusion in local government planning and priorities

People with disabilities and their caregivers became more knowledgeable, confident and organised, strengthening their ability to understand their rights, manage activities and advocate for their needs. The projects also increased local authorities' responsiveness to disability and helped foster more positive and inclusive attitudes towards disability in the wider community.

People with disabilities gained the confidence and skills to speak up, with many taking on leadership roles on local committees.

Coordination between health, education and social affairs departments improved as local authorities worked more closely with disability organisations.

Public attitudes shifted from discrimination or indifference toward greater sympathy, respect and everyday inclusion in community life.

Social Inclusion and Community Participation

Clubs for people with disabilities and Parents' Associations were established in every target commune, giving people with disabilities and their caregivers a trusted space to share experiences, access training and organise support for one another. Capacity building covered the Law on People with Disabilities, child protection and safeguarding, as well as practical skills such as social media and photovoice, with members also supported to develop fundraising initiatives and joint action plans. Networking, study visits between clubs and regions as well as social, sports and cultural activities strengthened connections, confidence and peer support among people with disabilities and their families. Many members took on leadership roles in committee meetings and local decision-making. Communes also developed joint disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction plans, with training, drills and response tool kits prepared together with people with disabilities and their organisations. Local authorities improved coordination across Health, Education and Social Affairs Departments as a direct result of working alongside these groups. Public attitudes shifted too, with communities moving from discrimination or indifference towards greater sympathy, respect and everyday inclusion.



Lam standing in the doorway of his home in Quang Nam, Vietnam where he works as a successful freelance Graphic Designer. Photo: Caritas Australia.



KEY IMPACTS

Improved disaster preparedness among people with disabilities and their families. By the end of Year 2, 520 people with disabilities and family members had participated in Disaster Risk Reduction training or drills, and 520 of 540 people with disabilities and their families had prepared their own Disaster Risk Reduction plans.

Disability-inclusive DRR became embedded in local planning. 10 of 11 target communes had developed inclusive disaster preparedness plans, helping ensure that the specific needs of people with disabilities were incorporated into community disaster management.

Greater confidence and practical capacity to respond to disasters. Training, drills and response toolkits strengthened practical skills in risk assessment, emergency planning, first aid, preparing supplies and assisting people with disabilities during floods and storms. Participants reported feeling more confident as they knew what to do when disasters occurred.

Stronger recognition of the needs and voices of people with disabilities in disaster response. People with disabilities and their organisations were brought into local Disaster Risk Reduction planning and decision-making, helping shift them from being viewed primarily as vulnerable recipients of assistance towards active participants in preparedness and response.

Disaster Risk Reduction

The project strengthened the ability of people with disabilities, caregivers and local authorities to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Disaster Risk Reduction training, drills and practical response tools equipped people with disabilities and caregivers with skills in risk planning, first aid, preparing emergency supplies, reducing risks and supporting people during floods and storms. By the end of the second year of the program, 10 of the 11 target communes had inclusive disaster preparedness plans in place, while 520 of 540 people with disabilities and their families had developed their own Disaster Risk Reduction plans. The approach also strengthened the integration of disability into existing community disaster management systems, with joint community-based plans involving relevant stakeholders. Participants reported greater confidence in responding to disasters, including knowing how to strengthen homes during storms and assist people with disabilities during floods. The project helped ensure that the needs and voices of people with disabilities were incorporated into local disaster preparedness and response.

Sustainability

There are good prospects for the project's benefits to continue beyond the project period, supported by stronger local ownership, integration into government systems and increased community capacity. District authorities in Hai Lang and Thang Binh have issued formal plans committing state budget and staff time to sustain key results, while district and commune coordination structures are being integrated into existing local government systems. Inclusive education and health screening approaches align closely with national policy and technical knowledge is being retained through school cluster networks and trained local health staff. Livelihood benefits are also well placed to continue, with non-agricultural models such as incense-making and artificial flower production showing stronger market prospects than agricultural activities. Community-based organisations and clubs provide an important foundation for continued peer support, advocacy and local action.

The sustainability of Disabled People's Organisations, however, remains less certain. Their legal status is not yet formally settled, funding sources vary and leadership capacity is uneven. Some organisations have established membership fees or revolving livelihood funds, while others remain reliant on ad hoc fundraising. Continued local government and community support will therefore be important to maintain organisational capacity, funding and the gains achieved through the project.



Lam harvests vegetables, a household responsibility he managed before receiving support from the I-SHINE program and starting his career as a successful graphic designer. Photo: Caritas Australia.

Case Study

Ms Pham Thi Hien, 37, lives in Gio An Commune, Gio Linh District. In 2018, she had a stroke that left her at risk of permanent paralysis. "I felt discouraged because I couldn't do anything. I felt sorry for my husband, who had to work hard," she said.

Through the Club for People with Disabilities, a therapist and project collaborator visited her at home, developed an exercise plan and monitored her progress. She practised for 30 to 60 minutes every day. After two months, she could walk again. The project also helped fund the rebuilding of a toilet adapted to her needs, helping restore her independence.

Her recovery reflects a wider pattern of support under Empowering People with Disabilities. Across the target communes in Gio Linh District, 89 people with disabilities received home visits from trained therapists and collaborators, with 61 also provided with rehabilitation devices.

Ms Hien now walks confidently, cares for her family and takes an active part in club and community activities. ***"The therapist could only help me for a while, no one could help me forever,"*** she said. ***"So I thought that I had to constantly practise to improve."***



Lam visits the training centre in Da Nang city, where, with support from the I-SHINE program and CRS team, he completed a six-month IT technician course that helped launch his career as a freelance graphic designer. Photo: Caritas Australia.

Recommendations / Future Programming

- 1 Continue district and commune coordination structures to sustain integrated support for people living with disabilities.
- 2 Increase the visibility of people with disabilities and their organisations through regular local media and community events.
- 3 Extend inclusive education models and teacher training to communes beyond the original project sites.
- 4 Strengthen Commune Health Stations as the lead providers of ongoing rehabilitation and early disability screening.
- 5 Consolidate and scale successful non-agricultural livelihood models such as incense making and artificial flower production, with stronger market linkages.
- 6 Formalise the legal status and funding base of Disabled People's Organisations to secure their long-term operation.
- 7 Engage local businesses more actively in employing and sourcing from people living with disabilities.
- 8 Develop a combined intervention framework for future programs that gives equal weight to access, economic empowerment and participation for people with disabilities.
- 9 Embed disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction planning into commune governance structures ahead of future climate shocks.

This Impact Snapshot summarises results from the final evaluation of the Vietnam Disability Program (I-SHINE and Empowering People with Disabilities projects), implemented by Catholic Relief Services Vietnam and the Centre for Sustainable Rural Development, and supported by Caritas Australia and the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). The evaluation was conducted by an independent consultancy in FY22.