

worldwards 2008-2009 : Voluntary Service with DPI/AP in Bangkok, Thailand

ฉันนำทำงานเป็นอาสาสมัครที่องค์การคนพิการสากลประจำภูมิภาคเอเชีย-แปซิฟิก

From October 2008 until June 2009, I worked as a worldwards - volunteer with Disabled People's International Asia-Pacific (DPI/AP) in Nonthaburi, Thailand. DPI is a world-crossability, self-help, human rights organisation of and for PWD's, with member organisations in more than 130 countries. DPI was established in 1981 and holds special consultative status for the UNECOSOC and collaborates with UNESCAP, UNESCO, ILO and other international organisations.

The headquarters of DPI are located in Canada, but DPI also has five regional offices; DPI/AP is one of them and therefore responsible for the whole Asia-Pacific region.

DPI/AP has Member National Assemblies in 26 countries and focuses on the following issues:

Human Rights of PWD's; strengthening self-help organizations of PWD's; advocacy; accessibility; Women with Disabilities; Youth Leadership; Independent Living.

Accommodation

The first month of my stay I lived in a condominium where also other staff members had rented an apartment. I lived alone in a flat with air-con, cable-TV, fridge etc. for ca. 5.200 Baht per month. In the beginning of November, somebody burgled my apartment – although it was locked by two doors - during I was at work and my things were combed trough, but luckily nothing was missing. However, after that incident I was not feeling that safe there anymore – I don't think it was an accident that just the apartment of the only foreigner in the condominium was broken into and I was surprised how easily the two doors could have been damaged – so I thought about moving to another place. Tum, DPI/AP staff, offered me to live with her and I gratefully accepted.

Unfortunately, the room owner still wanted to have the full rent for this month, so in November, I had to pay twice (my former apartment and my new room with Tum). Tum lives in a small settlement near the expressway to Bangkok, called Polpattana, where she has rented a two-storey house. Since she uses a wheelchair, she has no access to the first floor, which was completely empty when I arrived. So I stayed there in a small room, unfortunately without air-condition - what can be horrible especially during the hot season - and I also had a small bathroom for myself.

Concerning the rent, I paid the half of the monthly fee, that means 1700 Baht.

Transport to and from the office was provided; DPI/AP has two wheelchair-accessible cars. But since most staff are going home quite late, I often took a motorcycle taxi.

The office

DPI/AP is located in Nonthaburi, a Bangkok suburb, per bus ca. a 30 minutes ride from the capital. As most staff are wheelchair user, an accessible one-storey house is

used as office, complete with two bathrooms, a kitchen and a garden with mango and banana trees. I had my own desk and computer in an office room that I shared with other staff members. The computer was really slow, so sometimes it was annoying to wait for minutes until anything happened on the screen, also internet access was not always provided.

Working hours are from Monday to Friday 9.00 – 17.00, but as mentioned above, it usually gets quite late, until 19.00 or 20.00. If there are conferences, activities etc., it can be that also on the weekend or holiday work has to be done.

Concerning holiday, there hasn't been a fixed amount of free days for me. All in all, I have taken about 12 free days during the voluntary service, some days as sick leave. For lunch, we always ordered something at a nearby shop and ate together at the office.

General remarks

Before I get into details, I would like to mention some general comments concerning my voluntary service:

1. The kindness and openness of all staff members towards me was really amazing; everybody contributed something to make me feel comfortable and at home. The atmosphere at the office wasn't as much as a hierarchic working environment, but like a little family that worked together. Joking, singing, open criticism and creative suggestions were all part of this wonderful office. If I had any problems, somebody would certainly help me. We went to eat dinner together, went shopping, to the cinema, making a weekend trip...I really enjoyed working with all these lovely people at the office and I was really sad that when I had to leave, but I'm sure I will visit again...

2. Furthermore, DPI/AP offered me a lot of opportunities to learn about the disability movement in the region, lobby work, international cooperation, project management etc. I have learned such a lot in these 8 months, it's really amazing!

I have already a lot of work experience with people with mental disabilities, so it was very interesting to learn more about people with physical disabilities and the problems they face in society. Especially living with Tum taught me that PWD's can live completely independent lives like people without disabilities.

I was allowed to take part in many interesting conferences, seminars and activities I otherwise wouldn't have been able to join and to meet a lot of interesting people with and without disabilities from the whole Asia-Pacific region. I'm very grateful for these unbelievable opportunities!

Activities attended

Following the activities I joined during my voluntary service:

October:

Just shortly after my arrival I attended a seminar on the new Beggar Control Act at Thammasart University in Bangkok, where P'Sao joined a podium discussion on behalf of the PWD's community

November:

I attended a disability Equality Training (DET) at APCD for the student volunteers at the CBR Congress (that was finally postponed due to the demonstrations of the Yellow-Shirts, so I had no possibility to attend it). Furthermore, the 12th Anniversary Assistive Technology Congress for Persons with Disabilities by Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn was celebrated at the Miracle Grand Hotel, where P'Sao was awarded a prize for her engagement. I had the pleasure to accompany her to the stage, where she received her award by Princess Sirindhorn.

Also another DET for the volunteers at the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (Thammasart University) took place at APCD.

December:

In the beginning of December, I joined a DET for UN Staff at UNESCAP, a Taskforce Meeting on Women with Disabilities at APCD and a Preparation meeting for the 2nd Change Your Life by Music and Arts Festival 2008.

On December 3rd, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities was celebrated at Thammasart University, with different lectures, performances and a exhibition.

December 16th was the Day of Persons with Disabilities in Nonthaburi Province; DPI/AP joined the celebrations in a exhibition center with an own information stand..

From December 18th until 21st, the 2nd "Change Your Life by Music & Arts" Festival 2008 took place in Banglamphoo, one of my personal highlights of the voluntary service. DPI/AP co-organized the event. The festival consisted of a big open-air art exhibition, panel discussions and musical performances on two stages on the river.

We were also involved into the frame program for the different artists, coming from all over the Asia-Pacific region. A one-day trip to Rose Gardens and a following dinner in Bangkok were organized. During the whole festival, I assisted an Australian musician with visual impairment, took care of the DPI/AP information stand and conducted interviews with several artists for the DPI/AP newsletter.

January:

For two days, the Friendship Therapy Seminar by NHSO took place in Muang Thong Thani, near our office. DPI/AP had a own information stand and different staff members also joined several panel discussions, lectures and music performances.

In the end of January, P'Sao gave a lecture on advocacy at Sri Nakarintara Viroj University for students of an international study course.

February:

The Barrier-free Education Network Thailand-Japan Building at school in Nonthaburi was opened and celebrated with several dance and music performances.

March:

From March 2nd until 13th, another highlight took place: The Regional Training on WWDs at APCD Training Building, with participants from Thailand, Cambodia,

Vietnam, Laos, Philippines, Malaysia and Kyrgyzstan. My task was it to take note during the different seminar sessions and to write a report. Another DET at UNESCAP took place, I attended a Seminar on the Reproductive Rights of Women with Disabilities at TOT Academy Training Center, the Committee Meeting on Quality of Life of PWDs Development at Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and a Committee Meeting on Children, Women, Elder People and People with Disabilities at the Parliament House. Very interesting was also the General Assembly of the Democrat Party at Miracle Grand Hotel, where we had the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister. We also attended a very interesting Workshop on Disability, Victim Assistance and International Cooperation at Amari Boulevard Hotel, organized by Handicap International.

April:

We attended the Public Hearing for the New Sky Train Extension at Grand In Kham Hotel, where we raised the issue of accessibility for PWD's and elder people. DPI/AP organized an Accessibility Audit at UNESCAP. Besides, I joined the Preparation Meeting for the International Labour Day at the Ministry of Labour. I am really grateful that I was able to attend the 65th Session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations, Bangkok, as representative of DPI/AP – unbelievable! So many interesting people, topics, discussions...

May:

DPI/AP joined the demonstration at the International Labour Day at Royal Plaza with an own group of supporters and had again the chance to meet the Prime Minister. From May 20th until May 22th, I joined DPI/AP staff who co-organized a seminar on Accessible Tourism for Thai tour guides in Pattaya, with emphasis on assisting PWD's and accessibility during an organized trip.

Work

My general work:

1. The task that accompanied me through my whole voluntary service was Information Support. This included manage the DPI/AP network, collecting and forwarding various information and reports members from the DPI/AP network sent to me and answering questions and requests concerning forwarded information and DPI/AP in general.
2. English translation: Checking and correcting drafted reports and translations from Thai into English
3. Typing
4. Report-writing
5. Summarization of news
6. Internet research on several topics
7. General office work

Furthermore:

1. I draw up a comprehensive international donors database of NGOs, foundations, international agencies etc.that work in disability-related fields
2. Checking the new website for spelling mistakes
3. Working together with Alan, the Australian Volunteer, and Tum on two project proposals: typing the draft proposals, finding suitable international donors, documenting the process
4. Together with P'Mai: Drawing up a catalog of assistive devices
5. For a PA exhibition: Collecting pictures and stories of PA's from other countries
6. Drawing up a database for the new website, containing international organizations working in disability-related fields

General recommendations

1. A provided language course, especially at the beginning of the voluntary service, would be really helpful
2. In the agreement for my voluntary service, my task was described as “working in the field of project management for SHG's”, but in reality, the mentioned project was already finished. Clear and concrete tasks should be assigned to the volunteer beforehand