



An article by DCDD:

Nurturing Inclusion: Friendship Foundation's Journey of Empowerment



In the picturesque landscapes of Sri Lanka, [Friendship Foundation](#) has been silently orchestrating a profound transformation in the lives of individuals with disabilities. For over 17 years, Friendship Foundation has remained steadfast in its commitment to fostering a society that embraces inclusivity and empowers individuals with disabilities. We had the privilege of speaking with Ms Kirsten Giethoorn, the founder of Friendship Foundation and Mr Leon Lawrence, Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation's Interim Country Director, who will share the organisation's inspiring journey, remarkable successes, and future aspirations.

Kirsten: "In the very beginning, the aim was just to uplift the people of Sri Lanka. [The organisation] was not specifically focused on persons with disabilities."

Started in 2005, Friendship Foundation was registered in the Netherlands. After getting recognised as an INGO in Sri Lanka in 2007, and called as Dutch-Lanka Friendship Foundation, the organisation started to support a home for disabled adult women whose parents abandoned them in their youth, and that was when the focus shifted to people with disabilities. In a twist of fate, Friendship Foundation received a desperate plea from a mother struggling to care for her eight-year-old disabled child. The mother didn't want to drop her child in the Home for the disabled. She wanted to keep the child at home but had to go to her job, leaving the child home alone. Recognising the pressing need to support individuals with disabilities, the organisation initiated and collaborated with the government to establish a daycare centre. This haven has since provided a nurturing environment for children with disabilities to learn, grow, and flourish until they turn 25.

With the realisation that education alone might not be enough, Friendship Foundation established a vocational training centre for young adults with disabilities and later expanded its project beyond that. Recognising the crucial role of families, the team initiated a family business training program. This initiative aimed to equip parents with the necessary skills to start businesses at home in collaboration with their disabled adolescents. It remains a steadfast principle of Friendship Foundation to this day, firmly rooted in their mission, to ensure that disabled children are not separated from their families and consigned to spending their lives in a Children's Home. By actively advocating for inclusive support

systems and empowering families, Friendship Foundation strives to create a society where every child with disabilities can thrive within the loving care of their own family.

Reflecting on the incredible journey of Friendship Foundation, it becomes evident that their progress and achievements have been driven by the very individuals they serve. The beneficiaries guided each step forward, with Friendship Foundation adapting and expanding its programs accordingly. The organisation's unwavering focus on keeping individuals with disabilities within their families showcases their deep understanding of the importance of familial bonds in nurturing and supporting those with disabilities. As shared by Kirsten, "[As] our beneficiaries improve, we [adapt] our steps accordingly. [...] Our primary focus is to support individuals with disabilities in maintaining their place within their families."

Overcoming Beliefs and Fostering Inclusion

One of the prevalent beliefs or taboos in Sri Lanka is that disabilities are contagious, bring bad luck, or are considered a curse from God. These beliefs have created a sense of fear and hesitancy among the general population, leading to social isolation and the exclusion of individuals with disabilities in various aspects of life, such as marriage, employment, and public interactions.

Leon: "To reach full inclusion, in terms of [social, economy, education, and full access], we are working to enable everything that could create a modern society for persons with disabilities."

Friendship Foundation has taken a proactive approach to complete social inclusion by addressing four key areas: education, work and income, social inclusion, and accessibility. Providing comprehensive educational programs, vocational training, and family business training empowers individuals with disabilities to acquire skills, gain economic independence, and contribute meaningfully to society.

However, Friendship Foundation's impact extends beyond education and economic empowerment. The organisation is actively creating interaction opportunities and fostering a sense of social inclusion. By facilitating interactions between communities and individuals with disabilities, the organisation aims to break down barriers, dispel misconceptions, and highlight these individuals' remarkable abilities and talents.

Empowering Families: The Inspiring Journey of Rasod and His Family

When asked for a heartwarming tale of success, Kirsten shared the remarkable story of Rasod, a student who joined the Friendship Foundation's daycare centre a decade ago. Rasod, a child with severe disabilities, faced numerous challenges that affected his family's daily life. His parents struggled to find employment as they had to stay home to care for him. Introducing the daycare centre brought a glimmer of hope to their lives.

With Rasod attending the daycare centre during the day, his parents found respite and the opportunity to pursue their careers. They started a small workshop from home, specialising in clothing and fabrics. As time passed, Rasod and his family received extensive support and training from the dedicated team at the centre, learning essential life skills and behaviours that helped them easily navigate their daily routines. As a result, Rasod gradually became more independent, mastering tasks such as eating, using the bathroom and dressing himself.

The positive impact of the centre's assistance extended beyond Rasod's personal development. The family dynamics improved significantly. As his parents gained confidence and expertise in managing Rasod's needs, they were able to expand their business activities. Rasod's father eventually secured a

position as a tailor at a prestigious hotel located 100 kilometres away from their home. This job provided a stable income and lifted the family from poverty, transforming their lives.

Today, as Rasod approaches his 18th birthday, he continues to reside at home with his family and is welcome at the day Care Center afterwards. His younger brother excels in school, achieving impressive results. With newfound stability and financial security, Rasod's mother successfully manages the household, while his father diligently fulfils his role as the hotel's tailor. And even over the age of 18, Rasod may come to the Day Care Center.



Rasod's story is a shining example of success within the Friendship Foundation's endeavours. By empowering him to develop within his capabilities, the foundation enabled his family to thrive. The ripple effect of the Foundation's help resulted in a transformed household, where both parents are gainfully employed, and the family's well-being has significantly improved. It is a testament to the power of providing tailored support and opportunities, ultimately fostering independence, empowerment, and happiness.

Rasod's story is one of many extraordinary narratives of triumph and transformation that the Friendship Foundation has witnessed and carefully documented over the years. It serves as a powerful reminder of their work's profound impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families, inspiring hope and creating a more inclusive society for all.

Navigating Challenges and Embracing Local Leadership

During the interview, Kirsten and Leon also shed light on the challenges faced by Friendship Foundation from both the Dutch and Sri Lankan perspectives. Kirsten highlighted that the Dutch organisation sometimes struggles with predetermined ideas and finds it challenging to fully empower the Sri Lankan teams to develop their own initiatives. Kirsten emphasised the importance of recognising local customs and cultural beliefs, encouraging others to hand over leadership to the local teams and allowing them to shape projects in ways that align with their unique perspectives.

Drawing inspiration from Dutch initiatives, such as a supervised workshop for people with disabilities, Kirsten shared her learnings and experiences with the team in Sri Lanka, nurturing the seed of possibility. Like tending to a growing plant, the team, fueled by their passion and commitment, cultivated a comprehensive plan for an Inclusive Workshop. This transformative endeavour extended beyond the boundaries of its initial inspiration, blossoming into a supervised workshop that not only catered to youngsters with disabilities but also welcomed school drop-outs, fostering a supportive environment where all participants could thrive and unlock their potential. This remarkable achievement vividly exemplifies the power of relinquishing control and empowering local partners to take the reins, ultimately yielding projects that exceed even the grandest of expectations.

Leon echoed Kirsten's sentiments and expanded on the challenges posed by political influences in Sri Lanka. Friendship Foundation must navigate government regulations as an I-NGO, ensuring the right individuals are in the appropriate roles and fostering effective collaboration between the Dutch and Sri Lankan teams. Addressing these challenges requires open communication, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. By valuing the expertise of the local teams, Friendship Foundation can create a collaborative environment that maximises their impact and honours the socio-cultural context of Sri Lanka.

Messages of Empowerment

Leon: "Family plays a crucial part in the development of the [family member, with or without disabilities]. Family matters."

Leon acknowledged the crucial role of families as the initiators of support, emphasising that their involvement is not only significant on a personal level but also contributes to the broader success of the community. He stressed the need for families to understand and support Friendship Foundation's activities and initiatives, recognising the power of their cooperation and participation. This belief can have a transformative impact on the journey and the potential of the family member with disabilities.

Kirsten also brought up the importance of recognising and showcasing one's talents simply by asserting that when individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to express themselves and feel comfortable doing so, they can soar to great heights within their capacity. She firmly believes that every person with a disability possesses unique talents and abilities that deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated. By creating an environment where individuals can confidently showcase their true selves, they can become integral members of society.

Their messages converged on a shared vision: to empower individuals with disabilities and their families, dismantling barriers and misconceptions that hinder their inclusion in society. Kirsten and Leon's impassioned words conveyed the importance of belief in the abilities and potential of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, they emphasised the transformative impact of supportive environments, shared experiences, and global collaboration in creating a society where everyone is valued and embraced for their unique contributions.

In pursuing a more inclusive society, Kirsten and Leon's messages resound as guiding beacons, inspiring families, communities, and organisations to come together and pave the way for a brighter future where the potential of every individual is cherished and nurtured. DCDD is honoured to have Friendship Foundation as a valued member of our coalition, united in our commitment to creating a world where no one is left behind.

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