

## ACTIVITY REPORT 2020

### **Support to organisations of persons with disabilities in developing countries**

Abilis Foundation, registered in 1998, is a Finnish organisation established to promote the activity, human rights, equal opportunities, and independent living of persons with disabilities in developing countries and in Eastern Europe. To accomplish this mission, the Foundation grants financial support and conducts awareness raising, education, training and counselling programmes. This includes global disability diplomacy on human rights with the aim of helping, directly or indirectly, persons with disabilities in least developed countries. Abilis Consulting, a company established and owned by Abilis Foundation, provides expert services tailored to the needs of various operators, thus complementing the Foundation's work to advance disability inclusion.

Abilis Foundation focuses on funding reliable small-scale, high-quality initiatives designed and implemented by organisations of persons with disabilities in least developed countries. This helps improve the involvement, position and opportunities of persons with disabilities in developing societies. Funding is only granted to states officially classified as LDCs. Individual grants are small – usually between 1,000 and 20,000 euro – the focus being on grassroots-level organisations in the least developed countries of the world. The bulk of the funding comes from the Official Development Assistance administered by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

### **Active work in exceptional circumstances**

While the Foundation's global agenda was carried out as outlined in the 2020 plan, adjustments were necessary after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. An increasing number of aid requests started to flow in in March and April from organisations of persons with disabilities in developing countries. It appeared that they had no adequate access to information about the virus or protective measures, nor access to hygienic products. The lockdowns and precautions imposed by governments in spring led into financial hardship and problems in everyday life. Abilis Foundation twice applied for and was granted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs a special permission to use project funding for COVID-related projects and thus respond to the acute needs of persons with disabilities as the pandemic continued to spread.

In 2020, Abilis funded 76 projects which helped circulate, in an accessible way, information and hygiene products and to provide other kind of aid, including dry food and means of necessities to persons with disabilities. As the pandemic dragged on, the Foundation's projects included support in situations where persons with disabilities had encountered violence. Cooperation with relief agencies was stepped up to encourage them to give more emphasis on persons with disabilities in their programmes. By far the biggest beneficiaries were Nepal and Ethiopia, but even other programme countries received support: Tanzania, Uganda, Myanmar, Vietnam and Tajikistan. Individual COVID-related grants were made to vulnerable contexts in Mozambique, Somalia and Somaliland, DR Congo and Sierra Leone.

The Foundation developed new practices to enable the monitoring of the use of funding in the exceptional situation. Besides partner organisations and country offices, the Foundation's extensive networks in various countries ensured the appropriate use of and reporting on project funding. Regular communication with project-implementing organisations brought peer support – an important asset in the prolonged crisis while being confronted with discrimination experienced by persons with disabilities. Despite the difficult circumstances, Abilis Foundation carried on working in its own characteristic manner – being agile and flexible in recognizing the needs of persons with disabilities and in improving their inclusion.

The Foundation's domestic staff worked mainly remotely from mid-March until the end of the year. Active information and communication continued, as most of the projects launched before the pandemic were carried through in rural circumstances, and the Foundation was able to inform about the reported results extensively. As the pandemic highlighted the fact that persons with disabilities are often left without access to global aid, Abilis Foundation's advocacy was needed at home and abroad to promote their inclusion. The Foundation's extensive networks were of great help.

### **Global agenda to guide the work**

Abilis Foundation's global agenda was managed through a results-based management system. Overall, the Foundation's work helped improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities and ensure that their human rights are promoted. Project funding was channelled through country programmes and through subprogrammes for fragile states focusing on selected themes. Information and development communication as well as advocacy and disability diplomacy were further key elements of the global agenda.

Country programmes were carried out in the Asian states of Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam and Tajikistan, and in the African states of Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda. Mozambique, where the programme had been in the process of phasing out, was added back to the list of beneficiaries. Kyrgyzstan, a country from which the Foundation intends to withdraw in the current funding period, received a grant targeted to women with disabilities. Key actors in the delivery of the country programmes and aid were appointed partnership organisations (Ethiopia, Tajikistan, Mozambique and Kyrgyzstan) or country offices set up by the Foundation (Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Tanzania and Uganda).

### **Support and distribution of grants**

The Foundation processed 500 applications in 2020. 193 applications were approved for funding and 221 were rejected; the rest were put off to be dealt with in the next financial year. The number of British-funded projects was 13; the rest were financed with Finnish government support.

The Foundation's grants were small, geared to the needs of groups of persons with disabilities living in poor rural environments. Project implementation, management and reporting were in line with the capacities of the rural groups. The average grant size was 7,404 euro. This complied with the decision of the Foundation Board to focus on max. 3,500-euro grants to newly founded groups and to small hands-on undertakings (70 projects). Excluding such small handouts, the average size of regular grants, which were in majority (115), was 9,760 euro.

Support funding was targeted at Africa (116 projects, 60 %) and Asia (71 projects, 37 %), where the Foundation's main programmes are operated. Individual funding recipients were in Eastern Europe (six projects, 3 %). The biggest beneficiaries in Africa were Tanzania and Ethiopia. Tanzania received 28 and Ethiopia 21 new project grants (197,306 euro and 163,592 euro, respectively). In Uganda, 18 new projects started (125,481 euro). The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF, UK) funding for the livelihood of persons with disabilities increased the support granted to Tanzania and Uganda. Mozambique received funding for 15 new projects (82,221 euro), which is more than in preceding years. In Asia, most of the funding went to Nepal (23 grants, 165,530 euro) and to Tajikistan (11 grants, 104,738 euro). Active work continued in Vietnam, where 18 projects were funded (96,546 euro). In Myanmar, the Foundation's support reached an increasing number of rural groups in need of a lot of support and guidance. They received funding for 12 new projects (83,481 euro). Four new grants (56,826 euro) were made to Kyrgyzstan.

The subprogramme of fragile states focused on support to job opportunities and livelihood for persons with disabilities in nominated countries. The biggest grant went to DR Congo for 11 new projects (79,262 euro). Somalia received seven (61,825 euro) and Somaliland six

(45,117 euro) new grants. In Sierra Leone, disability group projects were supported with seven new grants (42,164 euro). Of all the support, 79 % (144 grants) went to the least developed countries of the world, and 66 % of the funding was channelled to the Foundation's key programme countries (131 new grants, 936,674 euro).

### **More than a million beneficiaries**

Abilis Foundation approved 177 final reports in 2020. Most of the completed projects (90 %) were carried out as scheduled and properly reported on. Two projects had to be terminated, one after a detected financial fraud, which prompted the Foundation to recover money back (5,767 euro). The other project had to be interrupted because of inappropriate behaviour by the organisation's leadership. As the initial stage of this project had been completed and reported on according to plan and no evidence was found of any administrative misuse of the funds, there was no need for a recovery action.

More than a million persons with disabilities benefited from Abilis Foundation's project funding in 2020. The number is significantly higher than in previous years, because dozens of projects involved extensive Covid-19 information and distribution of related equipment. Indirectly, the number of beneficiaries was manifold. When only conventional, completed projects are reckoned with, the number of active participants was 37,263, well over a half (ca 54 %) being girls or women with disabilities. The projects helped the participants to gain new knowledge and skills and get an opportunity to involvement and empowerment. More than half of the projects offered group members means of livelihood and employment. Most (67 %) of the supported organisations operated in rural areas or small towns. As provided in the Foundation's strategy, support was directed to genuinely grassroots-level groups and organisations, some of which were now officially registered with Abilis' assistance.

### **Evaluation and active development of the Foundation's work**

In the early part of 2020, the work of Abilis Foundation was evaluated together with KIOS Foundation and Siemenpuu Foundation, with the purpose of appraising the relevancy and efficiency of foundation as an operating model. The conclusions confirmed that Abilis Foundation's work is in line with the Finnish government's development policy and sustainable development and is an important resource in strengthening the civil society and in reaching out to discriminated people. The activities of Abilis Foundation were reported to match well the needs and facilities of local disability organisations, though a need was seen for longer-term funding.

The provided recommendations were followed by internal reviews in which the size and operational performance of the current grants were surveyed, and the sustainability of the achieved results and changes was assessed from the beneficiary organisations' point of view. This prompted the Board of the Foundation to increase grant sizes from the beginning of 2021. The maximum grants will be raised to 5,000 euro for small projects and to 15,000 euro for regular projects. Apart from these, the Foundation may grant larger and longer-term funding for projects which need more time and money to carry through.

The Foundation published several new guidelines and manuals. Environmental guidelines were updated in the early months of the year, and a Safeguarding manual was prepared to support measures against sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour in all activities of the Foundation. A manual to support work in fragile contexts was published later in the year. Thematic focus areas were set to drive the Foundation's funding in future years. The key theme was disability and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The staff was trained in these subjects throughout the year to ensure successful application of the new guidelines into practice. Remote training in pandemic circumstances established new training practices and resulted in a mechanism for the improvement of staff capabilities.

### **Disability diplomacy and advocacy**

Disability inclusion and genuine participation of persons with disabilities was the focal point of the Foundation's advocacy throughout 2020. Despite the unusual circumstances, the Foundation's representatives actively participated in remote meetings of various networks. Apart from domestic networks, Abilis cooperated with prominent global agencies of the disability sector. Stronger partnerships help create a basis for concrete forms of cooperation to be employed in various programme countries from 2021 onwards.

### **Board work and new strategy**

The Foundation's Board convened six times during the year. In addition to financial decision-making and general administration, the Board contributed actively to the implementation of plans for the financial period and formulated policies to facilitate high-quality and effective programme work. This included a response to the evaluation conducted of the Foundation and to the ensuing recommendations and an updating of the Foundation's risk matrix. In early autumn 2020 the Foundation's strategy was revised to guide the activities in the next few years.

Owing to the nature of the Foundation, no support or financial benefits are granted to related parties; the funding goes solely to support organisations of persons with disabilities in developing countries, as is clearly stated in the Foundation's related-party policy, updated in April. No financial agreements were made with related parties. The Members of the Board were paid regular meeting fees, 6,910 euro in total. The Chair received a monthly remuneration totalling 6,000 euro plus 892 euro for travel expenses including per diem allowance. The Executive Director received 717 euro in expense and per diem allowances. Salaries, fees and remunerations paid to the Foundation's management (Board, Executive Director and the Managing Director of Abilis Consulting) totalled 86,786 euro. Auditor fees amounted to 10,441 euro. Travel expenses were reimbursed for according to the Foundation's travel compensation rules on an actual expense basis.

### **Key resources**

Abilis Foundation employed an average of 12 people, 11 under a permanent contract and three under a temporary contract. Three employees worked part-time throughout the year, two of them for 80 % and one for 60 % of worktime. The staff received remuneration in the form of salary, benefits in kind and per diem allowances, as provided in the regulations applicable in Finland and in compliance with the Foundation's approved payroll system and personnel policy rules. The financial statements were audited by Registered Accountants Kristian Seemer and Anssi Pietiläinen. Authorised Public Accountant Tero Paukku served as deputy auditor. The financial statements were prepared by Administer Oy and the electronic financial management system employed was eFina. The project management tool was the Arkisto database (Salesforce).

### **Abilis Consulting**

Abilis Consulting Limited, owned by Abilis Foundation, carried out 11 assignments in 2020, including a continued joint project with the Finnish Red Cross. Other clients included Save the Children Finland, Fida International, Fairtrade Finland, Fingo and JAMK University of Applied Sciences. Key themes were the promotion of disability inclusion in project and programme work as well as digital and physical accessibility. At the end of the year, two assignments remained to be completed, one with Save the Children and the other with WWF Finland. Abilis Consulting produced a profit of 5,205 euro for the period.

### **Risks and uncertainty factors**

The major uncertainties affecting the Foundation's overall activities and support work are associated with the availability of continued funding and the appropriate observation of changing procedures required by donors. Even critical perspectives on development aid are a trend that may affect the prospects of future funding and the operating environment. If the pandemic persists, the consequences may be directly or indirectly reflected in the

Foundation's work. Should these risks materialise, it may become impossible to deliver some of the ongoing projects, or parts of them, or to fund new initiatives. Travel restrictions may make it hard to monitor the work.

The highest risks at the programme and project level are corruption or mismanagement of granted funds. Natural disasters, humanitarian crises and unexpected changes in a country's policymaking or in the internal circumstances of an organisation complicate project delivery. The Myanmar coup d'état in early 2021 is an example of political change and risk materialisation. The ensuing public unrest may lead to long-term problems as to how to support disability organisations in Myanmar.

The Foundation continued advocacy work to secure further funding and to lessen criticism of development assistance. Due diligence and risk minimisation continued with technological solutions and the project management mechanisms developed over the years.

### **2020 financial data**

Government support at Abilis Foundation's disposal in 2020 was 2,601,497 euro. This consisted of 1,950,000 euro granted under the government's four-year funding decision (2018 – 2021), 585,000 euro of additional funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and 66,497 euro of government support carried forward from the previous year. The total government support granted by the Foundation amounted to 1,329,437 euro to new projects and 279,770 euro to country programmes. A total of 1,358,079 euro was spent on new initiatives and launches from earlier years. Information expenses were 86,263 euro, project management expenses 500,867 euro and administrative expenses 205,658 euro. The amount used for the initiative Disability Diplomacy on Human Rights was 100,752 euro. The remaining government support to be brought forward to 2021 was 89,991 euro.

A Finnpartnership-sponsored project in Ethiopia was completed in spring with a report published in summer 2020. In the early part of the year, the Foundation used 4,876 euro of partnership support. As in previous years, the Foundation had access to British funding from TNLCF, 215,519 euro in 2020. A total of 62,734 euro was used over the year. The remaining 152,785 euro will be used in 2021 for projects and project administration in Tanzania and Uganda. An E.U. initiative led by a consortium managed by Christian Blind Mission (CBM) was launched in early 2020 to promote disability inclusion in humanitarian aid and volunteering. The Foundation's portion of the E.U. funding is 62,460 euro (including a self-financed share of 9,369 euro). With the COVID-19 pandemic holding up the launch, only 12,553 euro of the E.U. funding could be used. A revised plan will be implemented with the 54,592 euro carried forward to 2021.

The Foundation set up a memorial trust in Kalle and Maija Könkkölä's name and invested 250,000 euro of the bequest in different funds through EVLI Bank. The rest of the money, 51,155 euro, was invested in early 2021. The Threshold Association repaid a short-term loan granted by the Foundation in early 2019. The Foundation's own fund raising produced 58,803 euro.

The Foundation's surplus for the year was 2,551 euro and consolidated surplus was 7,756 euro.

### **Outlook for 2021**

Abilis Foundation is applying for continued funding for 2022 – 2025 in the Foreign Ministry's call to programme support organisations; the second phase of the call to be opened on 17 March 2021. In the first phase in October-November, applicants were appraised for their ability to administer government support. The Foundation's future global agenda will be based on careful country-specific context analyses that have been conducted of all programme countries. The thematic focus areas of the country programmes are linked to a results framework, which is updated within the process of general planning and development

work. Long-standing cooperation with Finnish organisations will be intensified, and national-level advocacy and information in programme countries will be more sensibly intertwined with the work done from Finland. The Foundation will be investing heavily on the triple nexus approach and working with different operators to promote disability inclusion. At the same time, the Foundation will add value to work done in the disability sector through other financial instruments.

If the pandemic endures, the Foundation will be looking for means to support disability organisations in the programme countries and to adjust activities as required. Regular training of programme country representatives and domestic employees will continue. Technological solutions will be used to improve project management, monitoring and evaluation. This is all crucial for the monitoring of support work, notably in a situation where project visits or monitoring trips cannot be safely made even in the latter period of the year.