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What is Disability?

Definitions of disability:

- **UNCRPD* (2009):** *Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*
- **Lao Disability Decree (2014):** *Persons with disabilities, irrespective of the cause of disability, are persons who have physical, mental or intellectual anomaly or defects including visual, hearing and speaking impairments for a long term, which hinder their daily activities and full and effective participation in society on equality basis with others.*

"Disability" is a word often used in daily conversations and holds different meanings for different people. The concept of disability is complex and the experience of disability unique to each person. However, common factors affect how people with disabilities can lead their lives.

Typically, disability is thought of as a physical or mental impairment limiting or restricting a person's abilities when compared to the abilities of people without disability, resulting in some form of disadvantage or handicap. However, disability is more than this and commonly involves socio-economic disadvantage, denial of rights, limitations of opportunity in terms of an

individual's participation in community life and exclusion from mainstream society.

For these reasons, **disability is a significant human rights issue**. People with disability not only experience inequalities, but also are often subject to violations of dignity and denied autonomy. In lower-middle income countries such as the Lao PDR, many people with disabilities do not know they have the same basic human rights as non-disabled people, including the rights to healthcare, education, vocational training and employment.

Poverty is both a cause and consequence of disability, and people with disabilities worldwide, but particularly in lower-middle income countries, experience poorer socio-economic outcomes than non-disabled people. As a result, **addressing the rights of people with disabilities is a critical development issue**.

*"I don't have a dis-ability, I have a different-ability." Robert M. Hensel
(American wheelchair user, born with Spina Bifida)*

**United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*